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British Foreign Policy after Brexit

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How to read the future for Britain's external relations after the vote to leave the EU? All change, as familiar engagement with and through the European Common Foreign and Security Policy ends? Or no real change, applying the dictum that a country's essential interests remain the same, whatever the politics of the time may be? It depends on your perspective.

It used to be a commonplace when describing Britain's place in the world to emphasise how many “circles” the country belonged to, each one usefully overlapping the rest: the UN (with a permanent seat in the Security Council), the Commonwealth, NATO, the G7 and – famously – the European Union. The last one only for the past forty-three years, a mere blink of the eye if you are taking the long view.

In imagining Britain's place in each, we have to think of how the country's relative weight has itself changed over the years. No longer the weakening post-imperial giant, Britain has found stable rankings as a medium economic and military power, anchored in the European sphere, better connected than most with the world, but dwarfed in terms of size by the US and China, by India and by other developing countries. Britain was a founder member of all its circles other than the EU, and over the past one hundred years has worked hard to embed the favourable status quo of a rules-based world order, compensating for its steady loss of relative influence in the world.

Virtually all that underlying inheritance remains intact after the decision to leave the EU. But Britain's absence from the top table of the Union, where policies crucial to the country's interests will continue to be decided, signals a sharp drop in power in certain areas that have become the bread and butter of British foreign policy: regulation and standards in the entire extent of trade in goods and services. Departure from the comforting collectivity of the Common Foreign and Security Policy will itself expose the bareness of Britain's pretensions to having an independent foreign policy of its own. What until now has been a respectable membership of a consensus will become a slightly humiliating stance of “me too”, not unlike the perception of poodle status with the US that Britain has struggled to deny. Britain's adherence to a collective policy has given it and its European partners a weight which would not have existed otherwise: the careful, principled, slow-moving but solid common positions on such questions as Cyprus and Israel/Palestine are good examples, and the collective response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine, or the patient negotiations with Iran on its nuclear programme, are others.

And what of soft power, the fashionable alternative to a robust foreign policy? This, too, has been much invoked by those arguing that Britain continues to “punch above its weight” in the world. But what if that soft power is often a fleeting perception, a manufactured myth, that governments claim the credit for, but do not control and cannot protect if the hard realities begin to go wrong? Until the referendum,

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Britain – and above all London - basked in a reputation for relaxed, modern, cosmopolitan supra-nationalism, a beacon for progressive society in a world increasingly splintered by regressive identity politics. And overnight, Britain itself became the exemplar of nativist reaction and intolerance. These perceptions are overdone, in either direction, but nonetheless count for a great deal in the prestige or the image that a country seeks to project through soft power. The case for unorthodox “digital diplomacy”, brilliantly argued by Tom Fletcher in his recent book *The Naked Diplomat*, is right to show that global influence has become so diffused among non-state actors that governments barely get a look-in. Digital communications are essential to reach the generations now entering active political life. But an unending 24/7 skirmish in the twitter-sphere – about as far removed from the hard-power realities of foreign policy as you can get – does not exactly recall the achievements of a Metternich or a Bismarck.

What Britain needs above all at this stage, having been shaken out of the cocoon of EU membership, is principled, hard-nosed and visionary leadership, in foreign policy as much as in the debate on the United Kingdom's identity itself. Less spin, less self-delusion would help. More learning from history. There is time to get it right. But probably only one chance to do so.

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