Diplomacy post-Brexit: the UK sidelined and Nato damaged

We joined the EEC to give Britain more heft in a post-Empire world, says **Sir Brian Crowe***: it was never simply a trade project. If we leave now, we would lose not just the influence that comes with EU membership, but would risk damaging Nato by reigniting tensions over the Common Security and Defence Policy.*

As a nation we have not just forgotten why we joined the then EEC: we have substituted a false memory, which gets in the way of understanding why we need to remain.

It is not the case that we all thought Britain was merely joining a trading arrangement, a free trade area or even a customs union (which of course enshrined from the start common rules, common enforcement and common negotiations with third countries). It was always the case that, although the means were to be economic, the EEC's objective was political. It was for that reason that the Macmillan government tried, in the late 1950s, to persuade our European neighbours to go for a free trade area instead, refused to take part in the negotiations leading up to the Treaty of Rome and established our own competing free trade area in an effort to undermine the new common market. Then we changed our minds, applied (unsuccessfully) to join and maintained our application over successive governments of both parties for more than a decade until we succeeded. We became determined to join. Why?

The situation was analogous to the end of "splendid isolation" in a difficult, dangerous and friendless world after the Boer War. By the end of the 1950s, as Dean Acheson put it famously in 1962, Britain had lost an empire and not yet found a role. The winds of change were sweeping across Africa, transforming the Empire into a Commonwealth which, while becoming a useful association of largely like-minded countries, had their own interests and agendas. The US had parted ways with Britain over Suez. Our attempt to forge the kind of Europe that suited us through non-political free trade had failed and a new Europe was coming together without us. Successive British governments looked at the options and decided that joining Europe was our best option.

Harold Macmillan entirely understood that it was a political, not just an economic choice, writing in September 1962: "it is true of course that political unity is the central aim of those European countries and we would naturally accept that ultimate goal". Economic and Monetary Union by 1980, adopted in 1970, two years before our accession treaty in 1972, was a political as well as an economic decision. The present EU is indeed a different animal to the one we joined in 1973, but the main change, the single currency, was hardly out of the blue. We knowingly signed up to the aim of Economic and Monetary Union. While not achieved by 1980, it was the start of a foreseeable road to the euro.

As Foreign Secretary Alec Douglas Home told the House of Commons in June 1971:

> *On two counts I am in full agreement with the most vocal opponents of our entry into Europe. The first is that our application is a step of the utmost political significance, and the second is that there is a danger of its political importance being overlooked in the public debate on the economic issues. That, I think, is very natural. The Treaty of Rome is only indirectly about politics; it is about economic and commercial and possibly financial integration.*

Our accession negotiations inevitably centred on trade and market access issues, notably agriculture and the customs union established by 1968, because that was the largest, and most technical, part of what we were signing up to. But that EC's impetus was in large part political was never any secret – indeed was inherent in our earlier

rejection of it at Messina in 1956. And our change of heart was also in large part political, as Britain sought to find Dean Acheson's missing role.

Margaret Thatcher expressed it succinctly to the House of Commons in the 1975 referendum campaign: "The paramount case for being in is the political case for peace and security. The Community opens windows on the world for us that since the war have been closing."

What then would be the effects of a Brexit on this political case?

We should be in no doubt that a Brexit would be an event of major politico-strategic importance. The departure from the EU of its second largest country, the world's fifth largest economy, (with France) the only EU country with effective armed forces, and a major force in the EU with outward looking economic, trade and foreign policies could not fail to seriously weaken the remaining EU. In a world of rising big battalions alongside the US, China, India and other emerging powers, it would reduce the voice in the world of Europe as a whole, including Britain.

While we could, and presumably would, still try to work in cooperation with the EU in areas of shared interest, we would no longer have an inside track in European policy making in areas of great concern to us: Russia, Ukraine, the Balkans, the Middle East and Turkey, to name only the most obvious.

No longer shaping EU decisions and policies, we would lose importance to and weight with third countries, not least the United States. Without the combined weight and resources of the EU as a whole in support of our policies, we would contribute less to international affairs and be paid less attention to by others.

An RAF Odiham Chinook helicopter load training during Exercise AGILE SPEAR 15. Photo: Defence Images via a Creative Commons 2.0 Generic licence

We would also risk damaging another of our core groupings, Nato. We, with the French, founded the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy at St Malo in 1998. Our formative participation has ensured that, although it has not lived up to its early hopes, it has focused on capability and effectiveness, avoiding chocolate soldiery. Our departure would reverse that and reignite competitive tensions over the respective roles of Nato and the CSDP which we have been instrumental in keeping under control. Post-Brexit, the UK – excluded from European defence policy – can be expected to try and build up a European identity in Nato at the expense of the CSDP; the French and others can be expected to resist this and try and build up the role of CSDP. The Americans, watching from the sidelines, would become even more frustrated and impatient with European failure to agree among themselves…

In sum, in a networked world we would lose the advantage that we, with our history, now have of still influential membership in many international groupings. If now we press buttons in any of them, people at least pay attention. Outside one of the most important of these groupings, we would find increasingly that when we pressed buttons, nothing much would happen – certainly in the EU, but in other organisations too.

Beyond the political consequences of a Brexit, there would be all the trade consequences which are the narrow-minded focus of the current pre-referendum debate. The Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond dealt with these in his speech to Chatham House on 2 March, and they are important, as are the EU/eurozone governance issue (addressed by David Cameron in his renegotiation) and the migration crisis in the Schengen area (although it is amazing double-think that fences between Greece and Macedonia are somehow an EU failure while the French – in a triumph of British policy – man just such fences for us at Calais). All of these are legitimate subjects for discussion and decision by the British people. But let us not forget why we joined in the first place, and consider also whether those reasons do not still apply.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of BrexitVote, nor the LSE.

*Between 1994 and 2002 **Sir Brian Crowe** was Director-General for External and (latterly) Politico-Military Affairs in the Council of the European Union, with responsibility for developing the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and, from its inception in 1999, the creation of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) and the mechanisms to deliver it. From 2004 to 2009 he was Vice-Chairman of the Royal Institute of International Affairs, Chatham House.*