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Brexit: Global Perspectives

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METTE EILSTRUP-SANGIOVANNI, DEC 3 2016

The June 2016 referendum on British EU membership has unleashed a passionate debate in UK scholarly, political and media circles about the likely implications of 'Brexit'. So far, this debate has predominantly focused on the potential costs and benefits of Brexit for Britain. Commentators have been quick to sort themselves into an 'optimist' versus a 'pessimist' camp, depicting Brexit either as a herculean challenge that will inevitably carry great costs and few benefits or as an opportunity for Britain to carve out a new role in international politics. Comparatively less attention has been given to analyzing the likely impact of Brexit on the rest of the EU and on the wider global community. Undoubtedly, Brexit most directly affects Britain. However, Brexit is not just a British phenomenon. The UK's decision to leave the EU is likely to have implications for cooperation and economic growth elsewhere in the world. These implications may be profound in countries that trade with the EU and Britain, that seek to advance security and environmental goals in cooperation with European states (including Britain), that depend on the UK/EU for diplomatic support, or—more broadly—that look to the EU as a model for international cooperation and liberal values. When considering the effects of Brexit, it is therefore necessary to look beyond the British Isles.

There is another sense, too, in which debate on Brexit has been too 'inward-looking'. Much commentary has focused on expounding the grievances of segments of the British electorate that voted 'no' to EU membership, on the effects of repeated austerity measures, on growing anti-establishment and anti-immigration sentiments, on Britain's long history of Euro-skepticism, on party-political infighting and the negative role of British media. These are all important factors. But when seeking to understand what caused the no-vote on June 23rd it is equally important to recognize that the factors which led to Brexit are not unique to Britain but can be observed around the world. Opinion polls across Europe report similarly low levels of public support for the EU as they did in Britain in the weeks leading up to the referendum. The surge in populism, which may have led some British voters to reject EU membership is fueling right-wing parties from France and the Netherlands to Poland, Hungary and the United States. Populism is also thriving in Latin America on the left of the political spectrum. What's more, insofar as Brexit constitutes an existential challenge for the EU, the Union is not alone in facing a challenging time. Other major multilateral organizations—including the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty regime, the International Criminal Court, the UN Security Council and NATO, to name just a few—are increasingly struggling to convince their members that they constitute effective, legitimate, or even necessary features of today's global system.

These observations raise a fundamental question: "Of what is Brexit an instance?" When viewed from a wider global perspective, what general phenomenon or set of phenomena can Brexit be seen to constitute an example of? We can imagine several possible answers to this question, among which we might include rising global populism, a manifestation of the general crisis of multilateralism, a reassertion of sovereign statehood based on cultural and ethno-nationalism, or the first wave of 'de-globalization'. One might also seek to understand Brexit in a broader historical perspective. Historically, surges in European populism and ethno-nationalism, and rejections of institutional frameworks for multilateral cooperation have been associated with growing inter-state conflict. However, since 1945, the members of the European Communities have often responded to major crises in multilateral cooperation by drawing closer together. Could Britain's departure provide an impetus for the remaining member states to take a bold step forward toward a more federal structure that might reduce political gridlock and make future 'secessions' less probable? However one answers these questions, it is clear that the repercussions of Brexit are likely to extend well beyond a new relationship between Britain and the EU.

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Written by Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni

This blog aims to steer current debate on Brexit beyond a narrow British perspective and to focus attention on longer-term geopolitical implications of Britain's decision to leave the EU. The aim is to create an open forum for critical analysis and discussion of diverse global issues and outlooks on Brexit. In order to kick-start the discussion, I have asked a number of prominent scholars to contribute pieces on various aspects of Brexit—*from a global perspective*. However, the blog is open to everyone, and I very much welcome contributions from doctoral students, scholars and practitioners from around the world. Information on submissions can be found [here](#).

The blog will have two regular features:

1) *Brexit—the view from...* will feature a series of 'country spotlights' where experts from inside and outside the EU are invited to offer their national perspectives on the consequences of Brexit. This blog feature will also invite views from officials in leading international institutions (such as NATO, EFTA and the WTO) where an impact of Brexit is likely to be felt.

2) The second feature will be thematic *Symposia* where a small group of contributors are invited to reflect on a specific question with the aim of stimulating critical debate on the longer-term geopolitical implications of Brexit—from both a theoretical and empirical perspective.

The first **symposium** running as part of this blog will ask: *What Future for European Security and Defense Cooperation after Brexit?* This symposium will feature contributions by Christopher Hill, Jolyon Howorth, Anand Menon, Sven Bishop, Sten Rynning and Alexander Mattelaer, looking at the future of CSDP/NATO relations, the continued dominance of ad hoc/informal cooperation outside CSDP/NATO, East/West defense and détente and Europe's strategic retrenchment post Brexit.

Stay tuned!

About the author:

Dr. Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni is Senior Lecturer in International Studies at Cambridge University. Her research interests include international organization, international non-proliferation regimes, transgovernmental networks, international environmental advocacy and European security and defense policy.