



Conservative Group for Europe

Factsheet 9: Britain, the European Union and Projecting Global Influence

Summary

- Britain has a unique place in global affairs: a permanent seat on the UN Security Council; a key member of NATO, one of the Big Three in the EU and a leading member of the Commonwealth. Britain delivers on its commitments - to spend 0.7% of GNI on international development and 2% of GDP on defence.
- Britain's combination of political, military and 'soft' power enables it to leverage its influence in world affairs especially through its membership of the EU, of the UN Security Council; NATO; and the Commonwealth. Each of these roles is complementary and reinforcing.
- The European Union is a widely respected international actor. Member states share many interests and can promote them more effectively through working together. In matters of foreign policy Britain and France are clear leaders within the EU.
- The EU and its member states can bring to bear significant leverage through its development aid and network of trade deals and special trading arrangements for many emerging economies. It has specific strategies for seeking to stabilise countries close to the EU's borders including in North Africa and the Balkans which might otherwise become much bigger sources of migrants and instability.
- Whilst the 'special relationship' with the US is important, Britain will lose influence in Washington if it is no longer seen to matter in Europe. Imagine how badly weakened the Western world would be if the US were to be led by President Trump whilst Britain is embroiled in an acrimonious divorce from its European allies!
- The Commonwealth is a good exemplar of 'soft power' but its members have very different political and economic interests and priorities from Britain's.
- If Britain were to leave, the balance of power within the EU would change in favour of greater protectionism and towards a less robust approach to Putin's Russia. This would weaken Western (and Britain's) economic and political interests.

United Nations (the P-5)

Britain was a founding member of the UN in 1945. Britain is one of five Permanent Members of the UN Security Council. The Security Council is composed of 15 countries: five permanent members (the P-5) and 10 non-permanent members elected for two-year terms by the General Assembly. The Security Council can impose sanctions or authorise the use of force to maintain or restore international peace and security. The General Assembly consists of all 193 member states. When the EU has a common position, because of the respect it commands internationally and its unique network, other countries often default to the EU position, assuring 50 votes before any EU lobbying. Such is the scope for informal leadership, and UK initiative lies at the heart of this.

The EU on the international stage

The EU's member states share many strategic, political and economic interests and common cultural values. It makes sense to work together to promote them in a world where political and economic power is becoming more diffuse. The EU is the world's largest trading bloc and by far the largest donor to the developing world. Combined, EU member states enjoy unrivalled cultural links with many parts of the world. Britain's unique set of diplomatic and cultural connections underpin its political and military clout.

The EU is an “objectives multiplier” - it helps member states secure foreign policy goals more effectively together than they could on their own. In a multi-polar and interconnected world, none can be as consistently influential alone in tackling issues that require a global response. EU foreign policy is steered by the European Council (Heads of State/Government) and defined by the Foreign Affairs Council, which brings member states’ Foreign Ministers together. The High Representative chairs these meetings. Once policy is determined by the Council, it is up to the European External Action Service (EEAS) to carry it out. Substantive foreign policy decisions are taken by consensus. Britain retains the ability to pursue its interests unilaterally where necessary.

The EEAS cooperates with the European Commission on many issues so as to ensure a comprehensive approach to the EU’s foreign policy. This is the case, for example, when it comes to the EU’s assistance to developing countries (‘development aid’) or trade negotiations. The Service is structurally and financially independent from the Commission. The High Representative reports periodically to the European Parliament on the EEAS’s activities.

The EU played a key role in brokering the ‘E3 + Agreement’ with Iran in November 2013. The then Vice President of the European Commission and head of the European External Action Service (EEAS) was Britain’s Catherine Ashton. The purpose of the negotiations was to avoid the possibility of Iran attaining a nuclear weapons capability and seriously de-stabilising the Middle East. In 2015 the EU responded decisively - under British influence - to the Russian seizure of Crimea and meddling in Eastern Ukraine by imposing tough economic sanctions.

The EU has played a key role in stabilising the Balkans in the aftermath of the ethnic conflicts that attended the break-up of Yugoslavia - its democratic values are continuing to act as a motivator for reform and respect for human rights and the rule of law. Although there is often co-operation between the EU and the US their interests and perspectives diverge on issues such as climate change and aspects of the Middle East. When the EU acts together it has a greater chance of influencing US policy.

The EU is able to negotiate within the World Trade Organisation and bilaterally as the world’s biggest economy and leading trade bloc. It is generally seen as a bulwark against protectionism. If Britain were to leave, it would change the balance within the EU in favour of protectionism and towards a less robust line with the aggressive objectives of Putin’s Russia. Britain would lose its ability to influence the behaviour of one of the key players in the international system and would reduce its ability to achieve its foreign policy objectives.

NATO

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation is the bedrock of Britain’s defence. NATO has 28 member states which are committed to the principle that an attack on one or several members is an attack against all. This commitment to ‘collective defence’ whereby there is an automatic commitment to come to each other’s aid represents a significant sharing of sovereignty but is clearly in the national interest of those countries who bind themselves to this principle. NATO and the EU play a complementary role in pursuing security objectives in Europe.

The Commonwealth

Britain is a leading member of the Commonwealth which has 53 member countries. It is home to 2.2 billion citizens. However, many Commonwealth states have an ambivalent relationship with Britain because of what they see as the legacy of colonialism. Commonwealth countries typically have very different political and economic interests. UK diplomacy through the UN and the EU often assists smaller Commonwealth island states on trade and development issues. The Commonwealth’s leading states, such as Australia, Canada and India, support Britain’s continued membership of the EU. The Commonwealth does not operate as a bloc, and does not represent an alternative ‘power base’ through which Britain could project its objectives if we left the EU.

‘Soft Power’

In July 2015 a survey by Portland, a London based PR firm, published the results of an online survey which ranked Britain at the top of its global index of ‘soft power’. Soft power is the ability to coax and persuade. The survey rated Britain highly in terms of its “engagement” with its citizens enjoying visa-free travel to 174 countries, the joint highest of any country. Britain’s universities are second only to the US in attracting foreign students. The BBC remains the world’s leading international broadcaster, with a weekly reach of 256 million, including 192 million watching or listening to the World Service.



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