



# FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Published by the Council on Foreign Relations

[Home](#) > Pulling the Trigger on Brexit

Wednesday, March 29, 2017  
Pulling the Trigger on Brexit  
And Passing the Point of No Return  
Matthias Matthijs

MATTHIAS MATTHIJS is Assistant Professor in International Political Economy at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies

Today, the two-year Brexit clock began its countdown. Now that the British government has formally notified the European Council of its intention to leave the European Union [1], the United Kingdom has passed the point of no return [2]. It could well turn out to be the biggest act of self-sabotage in modern political history.

Despite what British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson has promised, the United Kingdom will not be able to have its cake and eat it, too [3]. The rest of the EU is determined to show that leaving the club has negative consequences. And in that sense, by triggering Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty, the United Kingdom has chosen to relinquish significant control over its own economic future. New trade deals are uncertain and the centrifugal forces of renewed jingoism are beginning to challenge the historic union between England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. As a result, the United Kingdom is bound to lose influence [4] on the world stage.

And so, rather than “taking back control,” as Brexit supporters have argued, the United Kingdom will lose some autonomy in economic and financial affairs. After all, the biggest barriers to a truly “global Britain” [5] are not trade tariffs but non-tariff regulatory barriers, which require either harmonization across trade partners or, at the very least, mutual recognition. From that point of view, the EU single market was the most ambitious free market experiment in economic history. By leaving it, the United Kingdom is giving up its seat at the European table and will therefore no longer be able to influence future decision-making in its largest market, let alone shape future global regulatory standards. And, by turning its back on the EU Customs Union, it is bound to introduce new barriers to trade.

By leaving the EU, meanwhile, the United Kingdom will also lose influence over European foreign policy and thereby see its global clout wane further. Its so-called special relationship with the United States [6] was sustained only by the illusion that the country served as a bridge between Washington and the rest of Europe. Now, even that illusion has been shattered. The Brexiteers’ dream of the United Kingdom reclaiming its rightful place as leader of the Commonwealth or the English-speaking nations—what officials of the country’s new Department of International Trade call, without any trace of irony, “Empire 2.0” [7]—is delusional for the simple reason that there is absolutely no demand for it. The United Kingdom will continue to try to punch above its weight in international affairs through an outsize role in NATO, but open hostility of U.S. President Donald Trump and his administration toward the Atlantic alliance makes even that a rather precarious proposition.

Finally, by opting for a “hard” Brexit—meaning leaving both the EU Customs Union and the single market—against the explicit wishes of the people of Scotland and Northern Ireland, British voters have put a dark cloud over the immediate future of the United Kingdom itself. Scottish independence is now more likely than in 2014, and the possible return of a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland has made the dream of a united Ireland—as

envisioned by the Irish republican party Sinn Fein—less far-fetched than it once seemed. The United Kingdom in a few years may well exist as the “former United Kingdom of England and Wales,” with the unfortunate acronym of FUKIEW.

A few years ago, David Cameron expressed his hope that he would go down as the British prime minister who would have settled his country’s two major existential questions: that of EU membership and that of Scotland’s future in the United Kingdom. It is fair to say that he has fallen short of his own objective. Now Prime Minister Theresa May has an even more difficult task before her—healing a divided nation while seeking to steer the country out of the EU unscathed. The idea that she will succeed where Cameron failed seems naïve at best.

Copyright © 2017 by the Council on Foreign Relations, Inc.

All rights reserved. To request permission to distribute or reprint this article, please fill out and submit a [Permissions Request Form](#). If you plan to use this article in a coursepack or academic website, visit [Copyright Clearance Center](#) to clear permission.

**Source URL:** <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-kingdom/2017-03-29/pulling-trigger-brexit>

#### **Links**

[1] <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/tags/brexit>

[2] <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/2016-12-12/europe-after-brexit>

[3] <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/interviews/2016-07-26/economic-consequences-brexit>

[4] <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/interviews/2016-07-10/remainder-s-lament>

[5] [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/20/opinion/theresa-mays-global-britain-is-baloney.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/20/opinion/theresa-mays-global-britain-is-baloney.html?_r=0)

[6] <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/feb/14/will-trump-presidency-finally-kill-myth-of-special-relationship>

[7] <https://www.ft.com/content/bc29987e-034e-11e7-ace0-1ce02ef0def9>