

## FIVE YEARS LATER, BREXIT CONTINUES TO DIVIDE

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

The [British referendum five years ago](#) was supposed to settle the United Kingdom's historical love-hate relationship with Europe, but while the full consequences of Brexit will not be analysed for decades, the U.K. remains as divided as ever, and [the way people voted in 2016](#) forms a large part of their identity. The referendum dominates British politics as the most significant event since the Second World War, resulting in two general elections, ousting two premiers and threatening the political geography of the U.K.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson needed a rapid departure from the European Union (EU), and the Withdrawal and Trade and Cooperation Agreements of December 2020 were rushed through. Problems were soon apparent. The U.K. imports 70% of the fish it consumes; [the industry only contributes 0.12% of GDP and employs 0.1% of the workforce](#), but has political traction. In May, after 60 French fishing boats massed to blockade Jersey over fishing rights, naval units from both Britain and France deployed off Jersey, a farcical reminder of the loose ends of Britain's exit from the EU.

The quagmire that is Brexit

Northern Ireland, part of the U.K. but in the EU's single market, and therefore obliged to follow EU rules, is another case in point. The EU's external border would be in the Irish Sea between Britain and Northern Ireland, and goods for Northern Ireland would need to be inspected there, which is politically untenable for the U.K. The alternative would be that the EU would itself impose inspections to protect its single market and structure a border either on the island of Ireland or between Ireland and the EU, which are both equally unfeasible.

Tensions predictably arose between Britain and the EU over the import of chilled meat products from Britain to Northern Ireland, with Britain seeking an extension of the transition arrangements from June 30 by three months. No one believes that this can be a lasting solution. It seems Britain is questioning Brexit agreements rather than following them, while boasting about its COVID-19 immunisation compared to the EU and the success of the City of London in maintaining its status against hostile EU legislation and incentives for banks to move to European capitals. To supporters of Brexit, it looked as if the EU wanted to punish Britain for leaving, if only to discourage its other members from doing the same. Thus, after membership of the EU for almost 50 years, mutual trust is lacking, and two versions of a rules-based order are colliding. This was apparent during the G-7 summit, when bilateral meetings between Mr. Johnson and EU leaders lacked warmth. The EU conceded the Northern Ireland postponement and persuaded its member States, especially France and Germany that are losing patience with Britain, to avoid a trade war over British sausages. Such recriminations may become a permanent feature of U.K.-EU relations as a small nation plays a poor hand against the world's largest trading bloc while seeking trade deals with distant countries, which even official forecasts suggest will produce negligible benefits.

In Scotland, the National Party, which seeks an exit from the U.K., has grown in popularity since the Brexit vote. Scots voted in the referendum by 62% against 38% to remain in the EU, but were dragged out by the overall result. For many Scots, leaving the U.K. is the clearest path back to the EU, and anticipate that among other benefits, the EU will grant Scotland least developed status and subventions on the scale enjoyed by the Irish Republic. This is as much an anti-Westminster stance as an effort to join the EU since the chances of an independent

Scotland jumping the queue of EU applicants and of all member States approving Scottish membership are not great. Nevertheless, the prospect of a break-up of the United Kingdom is of grave concern to London. Meanwhile, a vote on reunification in Ireland seems more probable now than at any time since the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 which brought an uneasy peace to fratricidal factions in the North.

The Hindu Explains | What is in store for Britain and the European Union after the Brexit deal?

The International Monetary Fund warned that the [British economy faced a 10% GDP decline in 2020](#) In first quarter 2021, [food and drink exports to the EU declined by nearly 50%](#) and export of services also shrank. At least 500 British companies have [relocated to Europe](#). The Brexiteers who forecast a clean break with the EU either underestimated or ignored the practical inconveniences of leaving, including the vast paperwork involved in exporting and importing with the EU, but the success of British COVID-19 vaccination compared with the EU's bungled efforts has enabled Brexiteers to claw back some ground.

In sum, most people have accepted Brexit though few are satisfied with the divorce settlement. No version of Brexit will satisfy everyone, and it has left the United Kingdom less united.

*Krishnan Srinivasan is a former Foreign Secretary. Julius Fein is a British historian*

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