



# The iSPER Brexit Series

**PAPER I:**

**The potential impact of Brexit on our  
national security at a strategic level**

Dr G H Bennett

## ABOUT THE iSPER BREXIT SERIES

Since the British public voted to leave the European Union, there has been widespread conjecture as governments across Europe and beyond try to assess the political and social ramifications of the result. There is no question that Brexit has the potential to impact on all aspects of our day-to-day lives, from education to the economy, health and housing, trade and travel, and much more besides.

As such, policy makers face a number of challenges in light of the increased responsibility placed on them – as areas of legislation previously under EU competence may soon be decided nationally – at the same time as preserving our global position, links and security.

In a new project led by the Institute for Social, Policy and Enterprise Research (iSPER) at the University of Plymouth, leading academics across a range of fields will attempt to shed light on how the referendum result might affect their areas of expertise.

If you would like any more information about The iSPER Brexit Series, or any of the academics involved, please email [isper@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:isper@plymouth.ac.uk)

## ABOUT THE INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL, POLICY AND ENTERPRISE RESEARCH (iSPER)

iSPER has been established to promote interdisciplinary research and develop external collaboration in the areas of social research, policy development and business.

iSPER brings together academics from a number of different disciplines including: accounting and finance; business management; criminology; economics; human resources; law; logistics; marketing; politics and international relations; sociology; and tourism and hospitality in order to pursue excellent research which makes a real impact on businesses, communities and public policy.

For more information please go to <https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/research/institutes/social-policy-enterprise>



## 1. Summary

The UK public's decision to vote to leave the European Union (Brexit), and Her Majesty's Government's response to that vote, raises profound issues about the nation's future and its security. The situation continues to evolve and it will take time for some of the uncertainties to be settled. There is, however, a serious possibility that the political and economic fallout from Brexit may help to sharpen escalating international tensions, and could lead to increased social and political volatility within the UK itself. The inauguration of a new administration in the United States, and questions over the policy of the United States Government towards NATO, Russia, the Middle East and China add to the cocktail of uncertainties and potential dangers facing the United Kingdom. Russia's military build-up - together with suggestions of Russian involvement in cyber-espionage, false news, election influencing (possibly including the Brexit vote itself) and surveillance of the UK's nuclear deterrent – call for urgent improvements to safeguard national security. National Security and Defence (which forms a separate paper in this series) is the first duty of government.

In order to ensure that both the security and internal cohesion of the UK is conserved this paper puts forward the following key recommendations:

- Immediate further investment is made in the UK's defence sector in order to improve national security, to raise the country's profile and importance, to create jobs and prosperity and to provide a much needed boost to its manufacturing industry.
- To act to improve UK social cohesion through the use of education and cultural institutions, with the aim of rebuilding the UK as a national project in which all must be involved.

## 2. Purpose of Paper

This paper attempts to outline, at the strategic level, some of the emergent issues, potential threats and likely outcomes for national security from the outcome of the Brexit referendum. To some extent Brexit as an issue in national security has been overtaken by issues surrounding Russian policy and the advent of the Trump administration in the United States.

## 3. Unknown Issues

The implications of the Brexit vote will take years to be fully understood and addressed, and there remain a large number of issues that will take some time to clarify. These include:

- The precise future relationship of Britain with the European Union;
- Future political relationships between the constituent parts of the UK, and overseas territories;
- The impact of Brexit on the UK economy, public finances, cross-European partnerships;
- The impact of Brexit on UK society and social cohesion/terrorism;

- The impact of Brexit on EU and world economies, national finances and policies;
- The impact of Brexit on relations within the EU, and the policy of other powers (including Russia and China) towards the region and the UK;
- The impact of the outcome of the US presidential race on trans-Atlantic relations with Britain and EU states.

#### 4. Continuities for the UK

It is important to recognise that while the Brexit vote changes much there is considerable continuity in terms of the UK's strategic position. These include:

- NATO Membership and security framework;
- Membership of UN Security Council and international framework;
- The strategic geography of the UK as a small island nation in the North Atlantic, and its overseas territories scattered around the world;
- The structural deficit UK/high level of national debt to GDP ratio;
- The critical condition of key strategic industries and the weakness of the manufacturing base/over-reliance on consumer sector for economic performance;
- The strength of some UK businesses that are globally focussed (e.g. JCB, Bibby Line);
- The critical shortage of skills in some areas relevant to UK manufacturing and science (STEM, human resources);
- The economic geography of a heavily populated island that relies on its ports and sealines of communication for its capacity to import and export primarily (e.g. some 90% of the UK's exports rely on our ports);
- The physical geography of a state with a maritime border, together with potentially problematic/vulnerable land borders.

#### 5. UK Possible Outcomes from Brexit

Several months after the Brexit vote, there remains considerable uncertainty over the future lines of UK policy and what the outcomes might be. Possible outcomes include:

- UK remains part of EU, or at least the European Economic Area, or customs union in some form;
- UK completes Brexit, but continues to co-operate with EU on good and friendly terms;
- UK fragments with Scotland remaining an EU member while the UK moves towards a more federal structure with co-operation/commonality on defence and economic matters;
- UK fragments with Scotland becoming a free and fully independent nation while remaining an EU member;
- Ongoing political instability at Westminster as the Brexit vote continues to impact on party unity shaping political debate along pro and anti-EU lines;

- As a result of the financial and economic difficulties caused by Brexit, and the political questions it raises, there could be social unrest and disorder (including anti-immigrant sentiment and violence against foreign born nationals resident in the UK).

## 6. EU Possible Outcomes from Brexit

The Brexit vote raises profound questions over the medium and long term future for the European Union. Possible implications include:

- The EU rolls back in an ordered manner with independent nations working together on economic and trading matters;
- The EU moves towards closer collaboration with greater political, economic and financial integration;
- The EU collapses in a disordered manner (slowly or relatively quickly) as more states break away potentially leading to financial collapse, political crisis and potential for military conflict.

Having taken those items into consideration, the most likely outcomes in the medium term could comprise:

- Further states leave the EU but a core move towards closer collaboration with greater political, military, economic and financial integration;
- In the departing EU states financial problems lead to political volatility, expansionist foreign policies (including by those states on the fringes of the EU) and potential for military conflict on the European continent;
- A financially weakened UK remains together in ever looser form, and is forced to undertake more wide-ranging austerity measures while trying to restructure its economy, and play a more global role, while facing increased potential threats in Europe and to the UK's overseas territories;
- The financial fallout from the outcome of the Brexit vote, together with dissatisfaction at its outcome/failure to deliver on promises feeds social unrest, outbreaks of disorder and increased terrorist threat, while the problems of the world economy continue to feed back into the UK economy;
- The financial fallout from Brexit vote sharpens international tensions beyond the EU with the UK's need to strengthen its international trading links requiring closer UK involvement in problems well beyond Europe and the Mediterranean.

## 8. Recommendations

- Remain on the best possible terms (diplomatically, militarily, culturally, trade etc) with the EU and the states of Europe;
- Introduce further cuts to spending by the UK Exchequer in order to manage the financial and economic fallout from the Brexit vote resulting from the concerns of international markets, the fall in the value of the pound, and

- questions over the investment and relocation decisions of companies requiring access to the European single market;
- Invest in UK manufacturing, defence, infrastructure, intelligence and cyber security as a means to:
    - a. Improve national security from conventional and emergent threats.
    - b. Raise Britain's profile and importance within bodies such as NATO and the United Nations, and to reinforce the existing frameworks of international relations and security.
    - c. Reinforce some of the links between Scotland and the rest of the UK emphasising the importance of common defence and the role of UK Government expenditure in the health of Scottish manufacturing, jobs and economy.
    - d. Insure against some of the international threats to the UK emerging from the policies of the Russian state and the potential ramifications of the election of President Trump.
    - e. Give a vital push to UK manufacturing and the STEM sector.
    - f. Create jobs and prosperity in some of the more deprived areas of the UK where social tensions are most likely to become more manifest;
  - Address, by whatever remaining means, and through government policy (education and cultural institutions including the BBC), UK social cohesion and common values at all levels and all ages, establishing the rebuilding of the UK as national project in which all must be involved.

## Key Sources

George Allison, "Scottish Economy 'Cannot do without' UK Shipbuilding Contracts", 2 September 2016. <https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/scottish-economy-cannot-without-uk-shipbuilding-contracts/>

G.H. Bennett, *The Royal Navy in the Age of Austerity: Naval and Foreign Policy Under Lloyd George 1919-1922*, Bloomsbury, London, 2016.

"Protecting our Economy" <http://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/what-we-do/protecting-our-economy>

Nicholas Kitchen, "Do Nations Need Strategies?" <http://www.lse.ac.uk/IDEAS/publications/Analysis-Archive/ideasToday/06/bigIdea.pdf>

John Springford and Simon Tilford, 'The Great British Trade Off: The Impact of Leaving the EU on the UK's Trade and Investment, Centre for European Reform (January, 2014) [https://www.cer.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/pdf/2014/pb\\_britishtrade\\_16jan14-8285.pdf](https://www.cer.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/pdf/2014/pb_britishtrade_16jan14-8285.pdf)

"The Royal Navy's Role: Global Trade and Security" [http://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/About-the-Royal-Navy/~/\\_media/Files/Navy-PDFs/About-the-Royal-Navy/RN%20and%20Global%20Trade%20Security.pdf](http://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/About-the-Royal-Navy/~/_media/Files/Navy-PDFs/About-the-Royal-Navy/RN%20and%20Global%20Trade%20Security.pdf)

"World Trade: Possible Futures", [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/307636/09-1636-world-trade-possible-futures.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/307636/09-1636-world-trade-possible-futures.pdf)



## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

G H Bennett is Associate Professor (Reader) of History at the University of Plymouth where he has taught international history for 24 years. Author of over 20 books, his research has focussed on diplomatic, military and political history in the mid-twentieth century. His latest book 'The Royal Navy in the Age of Austerity 1919-22: Naval and Foreign Policy under Lloyd George' is published by Bloomsbury.

**For more information about the contents of this paper,  
please contact Dr Harry Bennett**

**Email : [h1bennett@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:h1bennett@plymouth.ac.uk)**

**Tel: 07955072504**

The views expressed within this paper are those of the academics and are not necessarily representative of the University of Plymouth.