

The British Presence in the Mediterranean Post-Brexit

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When the then UK Minister of Defence Geoff Hoon attended the tercentenary celebrations of British rule over Gibraltar in the summer of 2004, the Spanish Foreign Secretary objected to London's insensitivity towards Madrid's sovereign claim in blunt terms: "It turns out to be very strange that in this 21st century, the military occupation of part of an EU Member State's territory is commemorated by another Member State."² Although a Downing Street spokesman downplayed the incident, affirming that Britain and Spain enjoyed "a good relationship (...) They are an EU and NATO partner,"³ the commemorations came in the wake of the 2002 referendum on the Rock which saw nearly 99% of Gibraltarians reject shared British-Spanish sovereignty. Fourteen years later, Gibraltar voted once again near unanimously (96%) in favour of Remain in the EU referendum of 2016, but this time the self-governing British Overseas Territory, one of two in the Mediterranean, alongside the sovereign bases of Cyprus, which share land borders with EU Member States, found itself at odds with the majority of UK voters who voted by a 4% margin in favour of Leave, albeit with the

notable divergence of Scotland and Northern Ireland. Today, as the transition period for the United Kingdom and European Union to reach an agreement on their future trade and security relationship is fast approaching, Gibraltar epitomizes the challenges facing British diplomacy in the Mediterranean, now that it can no longer appeal to EU partnership with the riparian countries of southern Europe to leaven its strategic presence.

That presence has been uninterrupted since the end of the 18th century, and while even a no-deal exit would fall short of sounding like a British withdrawal from the Straits of Gibraltar or the Levantine Sea, there is little doubt that turning the page on almost half a century of British agency in continental European politics will deeply impact the UK's influence in the Mediterranean, turning the clock back to a bygone era when British foreign policy sought to play "the keyboard of Europe" from the southern margins of "The Midland Sea,"⁴ though now in more straitened circumstances. While future relations still depend upon the outcome of negotiations underway between Brussels and London, there is a compelling argument to be made that leaving the EU makes a Mediterranean policy more necessary than ever for the United Kingdom as three convergent crises narrow its options for life outside the bloc. These are: the crisis in the special relationship which has seen the Trump Administration spurn its NATO allies, with-

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² Miguel Angel Moratinos quoted in HOLLAND, Robert. *Blue-Water Empire: The British in the Mediterranean since 1880*. London: Penguin, 2013, p. 348.

³ "Hoon in Gibraltar despite protest." BBC News, 4 August 2004: gf

⁴ The expression of British historian and geostrategist Julian Corbett (cited by Robert Holland) to describe how British naval power guaranteed the stability of the European system, in *England in the Mediterranean: A Study of the Rise and Influence of British Power within the Straits, 1603-1713*. London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1904, p. 188, 315.

draw into trade protectionism and undermine the international rules-based system; the crisis in globalization precipitated by accelerating global warming and the Covid-19 pandemic; and the global economic crisis in the making, as the planetary lockdown of 2020 takes its toll with the most precipitous decline in GDP in three centuries, mass business closures, rising unemployment and ballooning government expenditure. A recent LSE study finds that Brexit will exacerbate the impact of the recession on the UK by hitting hardest those very industries in the manufacturing sector that have escaped the worst of the pandemic. The report's co-author Dr Swati Dhingra warns that "the large negative hit from the pandemic has reduced the capacity of the UK economy to take further shocks"⁵ and the former head of DExEU, Dr Philip Rycroft, points out that manufacturing is concentrated in England's north and Midlands and the devolved nations, the regions least resilient to recession.⁶ The UK's ability to successfully navigate its departure from the EU hangs on the resistance of its economy to the twin shocks of a hard Brexit and Covid-19.

To reformulate Dean Acheson's observation: Great Britain has lost Europe and is yet to find a world role, but it is not for want of ambition.⁷ Before the 2016 referendum, the Cameron government committed, under the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review, to projecting Britain's presence as a global power by opening a permanent naval base in Bahrain⁸ along with the establishment of new British Defence Staff in the Middle East, Africa and the Asia Pacific,⁹ in a move widely touted as a "return to east of Suez," with strategic implications for the Mediterranean waystations of Gibraltar, Cyprus and residually Malta.¹⁰ The Johnson government's Project Defend to reduce the UK's reliance on imports

of medical and strategic supplies from China in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic has given new impetus to the "pivot east," reminding us that Britain's Mediterranean presence post-EU leans heavily on the posture of a "Global Britain." The National Security Capability Review of March 2018, hastily commissioned in response to the Brexit vote, resolved the SDSR into two strands: a new national security "Fusion doctrine" for an integrated defence of national interests against potential state and non-state threats, combining soft and hard power resources, and a bilateral network of free trade agreements to replace the European framework, while working to preserve "a deep and special partnership between the UK the EU."¹¹

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The British deployment in the Mediterranean post-Brexit will continue to be structured around the three strategic nodes that have dominated its history: Gibraltar, Cyprus and Malta. One of two remaining members of the Commonwealth in the European Union, Malta's intercession in initial post-referendum negotiations between London and Brussels petered out long before the resignation of Prime Minister Muscat over the Daphne Caruna Galizia affair. Yet, Valletta continues to be a port of call for Royal Navy

⁵ In DE LYON, Josh and Swati DHINGRA, "COVID-19 and Brexit: Real-time updates on business performance in the United Kingdom." LSE, 29 July 2020. URL: www.lse.ac.uk/News/Latest-news-from-LSE/2020/g-July-20/Brexit-hit-looms-for-industries-that-escaped-worst-of-pandemic, consulted 29 July 2020.

⁶ In ROSS, Matt, "Rebalancing the UK: Levelling-up in the era of COVID-19." Global Government Forum. URL: www.globalgovernmentforum.com/how-to-rebalance-the-uk-levelling-up-in-the-era-of-covid-19/, consulted 29 July 2020.

⁷ BRINKLEY, Douglas, "Dean Acheson and the 'Special Relationship': The West Point Speech of December 1962." *The Historical Journal*, September 1990, Vol. 33, No. 3, pp. 599-608. URL: www.jstor.com/stable/2639732, consulted 2 August 2020.

⁸ HMS Juffair, the UK Naval Support Facility in Bahrain, was officially opened on 5 April 2018.

⁹ In BROOKE-HOLLAND, Louisa and Claire MILLS, "The 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review." *Briefing Paper* n° 7462, House of Commons Library, 22 January 2016, p. 8.

¹⁰ STANSFIELD, Gareth and Saul KELLY, "A Return to East of Suez? UK military deployment to the Gulf." *Royal United Services Institute Briefing Paper*, April 2013, consulted 29 July 2020. The authors suggest that the UK never really left the Gulf, making the so-called 'return' "more evolutionary than revolutionary and transformational." p. 4.

¹¹ "National Security Capability Review." HM Government, 2018, p. 30-33.

patrols in transit from and to the Gulf, the Horn of Africa and the Indo-Pacific; Malta is a frontline actor in the EU response to the migrant crisis; and, as the host to the Commonwealth Small States Centre of Excellence, it has a stake in developing resilience to climate change and global financial crisis among the Small Island Developing States, which has become a policy focus of the Commonwealth's reorientation since the 2015 Valletta Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM). London's decision to host the 25th CHOGM in 2018 in lieu of Vanuatu, devastated by a tropical cyclone in 2017, signalled its intention to foreground a revived Commonwealth as a conduit for its "Global Britain" ambitions.¹²

In the eastern reaches of the Mediterranean, the relevance of the UK sovereign bases on Cyprus to its new national security doctrine has been reinforced by the ongoing conflicts in Syria and Iraq, just as civil war in Libya, Russia's challenge to NATO in Syria, and the chilling of relations with Turkey, have underscored the utility of its GCHQ intelligence gathering facilities on the island. While sharing base facilities with NATO allies, the US and France in particular, is a continuing feature of defence cooperation, Brexit has made the prospects of an EU-brokered agreement on reunification of Greek and Turkish Cyprus more remote. The rights of EU citizens resident on the bases during the transition period became a sticking point before the signing of the UK-EU withdrawal agreement resolved the issue.

The resurgence of Russian influence in the Near East and the void left by the retreat of US foreign policy across the region plead in favour of maintaining the British presence at each end of the Mediterranean, reviving the strategic significance of the Straits of Gibraltar just as tensions with Spain and with the Gibraltarian government have come to a head over Brexit: the incursion of a Spanish naval vessel into Gibraltar's territorial waters in late July was seen as a response to the quarantine imposed by the UK and Gibraltar on returning holidaymakers from Spain in late July.¹³ In this respect, the timing

of the MoD's order for two new fast patrol boats to reinforce the Gibraltar squadron is a statement of both the strategic and symbolic importance of the Rock for Westminster and Whitehall. Pre-Brexit, Gibraltar was held up in the City as a small jurisdiction laboratory for the development of its e-commerce, financial services and investment fund management, and it remains to be seen how Covid-19 will impact that model, but it is the BOT's proximity to Britons' favourite holiday destinations on the Mediterranean rim that points to the importance of the tourist industry in bilateral relations, and its vulnerability to external shocks, be it the financial crisis of 2008, the consequences of the 2016 referendum or the 2020 pandemic.

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Spain remains the principal destination of British holidaymakers in the world, with nearly 16 million visitors in 2019, well ahead of second-place France with just over 7 million, followed by Italy and Greece, making up a Mediterranean top four with nearly 30 million visits annually between them.¹⁴ Brexit has yet to fully impact that market since the freedom of movement of people is set to continue until the end of the transition period on 31st December 2020, but the Covid-19 pandemic has drastically curtailed this strategic sector of the Spanish economy, which provides 12.3% of its GDP and 12.7% of its employment. The OECD predicts a 60-80% decline in international tourism depending on the duration of

¹² The 26th CHOGM due to be held in Rwanda, the Commonwealth's newest member state, in June 2020 has been postponed indefinitely due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

¹³ "Impact of COVID-19 in Spain." Interpretive note for the Industrial Sector on the application of Royal Decree Law 10/2020, of 29 March", Spanish Ministry of Industry, Trade and Tourism, www.mincotur.gob.es/en-us/COVID-19/Paginas/COVID-19.aspx, consulted 2 August 2020.

¹⁴ According to the 20

the crisis.¹⁵ The future of British tourism in the Mediterranean has been thrown into doubt by successive lockdown and quarantine measures, causing a drastic reduction in traffic for airlines, including among low-cost carriers.

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The Mediterranean rim countries also have significant expatriate communities, accounting for roughly half of the 1.3 million Britons permanently resident in the EU, chiefly in Spain, France and Italy.¹⁶ Whereas the host countries' procedures for naturalizing or granting residence permits to expatriates have been slowed by Covid-19 restrictions, there is mounting evidence of a "brain drain" of Britons leaving for continental EU countries since the 2016 referendum. According to Daniel Auer, co-author of

the Oxford in Berlin/WZB British migration study, "these increases in numbers are of a magnitude that you would expect when a country is hit by a major economic or political crisis."¹⁷ As the British diaspora in the region is steadily absorbed post-Brexit through the acquisition of EU Member State passports and dual nationality, Greece has moved to attract British retirees with a flat income tax rate on pensions of 7%.¹⁸

Over the past half century, the UK's membership of the European Union has been an integral part of its Mediterranean presence. Since 1 January, its departure has already seen several diplomatic grievances, long held in abeyance, revived, from the retrocession of Gibraltar to Spain, to the evacuation of the sovereign bases of Cyprus, and the return of the Elgin Marbles to Greece. Maintaining that presence beyond 31 December 2020 in the context of the economic crisis driven by Covid-19 will test to the limit the capacity of the British government to reconcile its aspirations for a post-Brexit global trading and security role with the budgetary imperatives of post-pandemic national reconstruction. The geopolitical fallout from three concurrent crises – in the international rules-based system, in globalization and in the global economy – has, paradoxically, created an unprecedented need for European political coordination and economic solidarity at the very moment the United Kingdom has chosen to turn its back on the community.

¹⁵ "Tourism Policy Responses to the Coronavirus (COVID-19)." OECD: www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/tourism-policy-responses-to-the-coronavirus-covid-19-6466aa20/, consulted 2 August 2020.

¹⁶ "Brits Abroad: how many people from the UK live in other European countries?" Full Fact, 1 Feb 2018: <https://fullfact.org/europe/how-many-uk-citizens-live-other-eu-countries/>, consulted 2 August 2020.

¹⁷ Quoted in HELM, Toby. "Brexit fuels brain drain as skilled Britons head for the EU." *The Observer*, 2 August 2020: www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/02/brexit-fuels-brain-drain-as-skilled-britons-head-to-the-eu, consulted 2 August 2020.

¹⁸ SMITH, Helena. "Sun, sea, safety: Greece woos Europe's pensioners with 7% income tax rate." *The Observer*, 19 July 2020: www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/19/sun-sea-safety-greece-woos-british-pensioners-with-7-income-tax-rate, consulted 28 July 2020.