

Assessment of the Issues and Challenges that Prompted Britain's Exit from the European Union

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Abstract

Series of events and developments in the complex relationship between the European Union (EU) and the United Kingdom (UK) led to the 2016 Brexit referendum which ushered Britain's official withdrawal from the EU on 30th January, 2020. The study explores the issues and challenges that triggered Britain's departure from the European Union. The study used secondary data from books, articles, policy documents and bilateral briefings. Content analysis was used to analyze the data. The study is guided by the Integration Theory of international relations. The findings of the study showed that Brexit was driven by numerous issues, including disparities in development, sovereignty, inequality, anti-immigration movement, populism, and British national identity. Additionally, the paper presents various challenges the United Kingdom encountered during Brexit's negotiation process and in its post-Brexit journey. Based on the findings, the study recommends that EU should review its existing laws to prevent unnecessary exit by any member state, and as well encourage member countries to retain peculiar priorities to ensure unity in diversity in order to strengthen the European integration project.

Keywords: Assessment, Brexit, challenges, European Union & issues.

Introduction

European Union is not a sovereign state with organized army and police for internal and external protection, yet it is one of the global economic powerhouses with colossal influence in international politics and global security. The enormous power exercised by the organization has elicited debate among academics, political commentators, and analysts in describing whether the EU is an international organization, a supranational entity, confederal union or a nation-state. In the midst of this dilemma, Egenhofer, Kurpas, Kaczynski and Schaik (2011, p.11) stated that "the EU is more than a regular international organization, but less than a nation state". This suggests that the EU as a supranational organization has strong and effective institutions that resembles contemporary state institutions and organs of government, with varying functions and responsibilities in promoting and advancing European integration project which constituted the fundamental goal of both the old and today's EU (Bitrus, 2022; Hassan, 2022).

In its origin and evolution, European union has undergone different phases of development. Each phase has its own distinctive periodization, nomenclature, legal framework, treaties and institutions as captured in the table below:

Table 1. Phases of the European Integration

| Phase | period | Developments/Events | legal form & treaty Based (as amended) |
|-------|-----------|---|---|
| 1 | 1950-1970 | from its origin to the end of Bretton wood systems (1950-1970) | ECSC, Euratom, EEC Treaty of Rome |
| 2 | 1970-1992 | from Euro sclerosis to revitalization through EC 1992 | EEC Single European Act, Treaty of Rome |
| 3 | 1992-2001 | Post-Maastricht and beyond: Monetary union and step towards political union | EC & EU Treaty of Maastricht Treaty of Amsterdam Treaty of Nice (in Force 2003) |
| 4 | 2001-2010 | Post-Nice: Failure of the constitutional treaty Treaty of Lisbon | EU Treaty of Lisbon |

Source: (Egenhofer et al, 2011)

Deducing from the table 1, the evolution and growth of the European Union since 1950s was through numerous treaties leading to the inclusion of foreign, security and defense policies in the affairs of the EU. The aftermath of World War II, witnessed the emergence of European integration movement in its fullest form. The ugly picture of the post war European economies, politics and security caused by the war, necessitated the need for cooperation and integration among the European countries to avoid the reoccurrence of devastating war. This effort culminated to the European integration project. A major landmark towards post war European integration process is the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in the early 1950s. Then, coal was the major source of energy and a critical raw material for the production of arms and ammunitions. The establishment of ECSC ushered an economic cooperation between the European countries which fueled the growth of European iron and steel industries (Berend, 2016). In the earlier phase of European integration, the signatory members were concerned with the integration process that would strengthen economic peace among them. The establishment of European Economic Community in 1958, further demonstrated the seriousness of member states in promoting the European integration project (Bitrus, 2022).

The creation of both ECSC and EEC in the formative years of the European Union integration project was to promote economic cooperation, common market, and peace among member states towards a broader and wider European politics. Somai and Biederman (2016, p: 6) opined that the reason for the establishments is:

aimed at developing a common market for all economic sectors through an intermediary step, the creation of a customs union. In practical terms internal quotas and border tariffs among member states were abolished and replaced by a common external tariff. These steps changed the business environment in Europe once and for all. The common external tariff also marked an important shift in international relations, since it implied that it was no longer possible for individual member states to conclude bilateral trade agreements in the areas covered by the EEC, an important aspect of external relations. A common commercial policy on trade was formulated, for which the High Authority (now the European Commission) was

given the prerogative to represent the Community externally (usually on the basis of a mandate approved by the member states).

Stemming from the above, it is pertinent to state that the European union was initially established to promote economic cooperation, peace and development in Europe. Some important developments led to some changes in policies and enlargement of the European Union. However, from 1990s to date, European Union has become a major global power and served as constituent of the governance of Europe's international relations. Through the processes of membership enlargement, the expansion of the scope of European integration to include monetary union (through the creation of the euro), the abolition of border controls through the Schengen Agreement, and the quest to further deepen the rules and regulation of the single market, the EU has become the fulcrum of Europe's political economy (Smith, 2019). Through membership conditionality, enlargement negotiations, a role in the Western Balkans and neighborhood policies to cover European non-member states, the EU has also become an increasingly significant European diplomatic actor (Whiteman, 2019; Hassan, 2022).

Despite Britain's exit from the European Union in 2021, EU still remain a significant actor in European and international politics that operates a uniform and free market which allows free movement of goods, capital, services and people among and between member states. The organization has an encompassing and broad membership that include: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Republic of Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, and Ireland. Others include, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherland, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden respectively (<https://www.gov.uk/eu-eea>). Thus, European union is an economic and political union of 27 countries as portrayed in the figure 1 below:



Figure 1. current EU member States after Brexit

Source: Authors adaption taken from https://european-union.europa.eu/easy-read_en

The study is categorized into four major sections: section one is the introduction, theoretical framework, and methodology. Section two deals with Britain's participation in the European Union; while section three is concerned with issues that prompted Britain to leave the European Union; and finally, section four covered Britain and the challenges of exit from the European union as well as the conclusion and recommendations.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by the Integration Theory of international relations. The proponent of the Integration Theory is Mitrany (1943). The Integration Theory of international relations seeks to explore the relevance and implications of regional integration among states. It is concerned with various forms of cooperation, including economic, political, security, environmental, social, and cultural among state actors within the international system (Johari,2011). The Integration Theory assumes that, conflict and war emerge as a result of division of the world into separate and competing nation states, and that cooperation play the function of enhancing mutual beneficial outcome among states and reducing tendency for conflict (Dougherty & Pfaltzgraff, 1971). Mitrany (1943) is of the view that a gradual creation of transnational web of economic and social organizations that would prevent wars and make people more attached to international integration. Despite the diversity of its perspectives, such as intergovernmentalism, supranationalism, neo-functionalism; Integration Theory holds that international organizations and institutions play a significant role in preventing inter-state conflicts and promotion of world peace. This is because institutions and supranational organizations provide a framework for negotiation, dispute resolution, and coordination of policies. The Integration Theory focused not only on supranational integration; community method; economic policies; market integration; monetary integration; and the common agricultural policy, but also the development of supranational identity and socialization within supranational organization (Schimmelfennig, 2010).

The European Union (EU) with shared policies, common market, and common currency among its members, have made substantial contribution to broader European integration and the maintenance of peaceful coexistence in Europe. Since the beginning of the European integration process, EU member states have pooled their sovereignty on several issues including economic, trade, commerce, environment, currency, and culture, with the goal of achieving, economic development, peace and cooperation among European countries. This cooperative approach triggered the growth of the integration process and stability in their immediate environment and the world at large. Consequently, the relevance of integration in enhancing global peace and stability is concretized (Smith, 2019; Bitrus, 2022).

Methodology

The study relied on secondary data, which was gathered from various sources such as books, journal articles, policy documents and bilateral briefings. The data generated from the secondary sources were discussed, analyzed and interpreted using qualitative approach, through content analysis. In this method, the words and information generated from books, journals, policy documents and bilateral briefings were explained and interpreted.

Britain's Participation in the European Union

Britain was not a founding member of the European Union, the reasons for British refusal to join the European integration movement during its formative years were said to be economic and political in nature. Economically, Britain produce more coal than the entire founding members of ECSC. On the political reason, the French insistence of supranationalism is anti-thesis to British idea of parliamentary sovereignty (Keep, 2021). However, since it joined the European Union, Britain has developed the approach of shaping the security of Europe as a continent; leading a diplomatic push in managing the international relations of Europe; and maximizing British trade and investment opportunities, broadening and deepening of Europe as an economically liberal part of the global political economy (Whiteman,2016). Over the years, Britain has participated in the

formation and implementation of wide range of policies and institutional frameworks that guide her relations with other EU members, national actors, and international organizations. This participation and involvement in EU activities was multidimensional and covered wide range of issues including foreign economic policy, foreign and security policy, environmental policy, international development policy, cultural and broader foreign policy issues (Keep, 2022).

In the area of EU Policy, Britain was described as a distinctive and influential partner that played a key role in shaping European Union policies. Britain is a country with sophisticated military prowess as well as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, which gives it an edge to exercise influence in the organization (European Commission, 2019). The late 1990s witnessed the establishment of EU Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP). UK along with other EU members particularly France was instrumental in actualizing this security framework (European Commission, 2019). Britain participated fully in EU military activities and security policies. This distinctive role buttressed UK's commitment in the promotion of global peace and stability.

Since the United Kingdom's accession to the European Community, successive governments in Britain have devoted some of portion of British funds in financing the activities of the European Union. By comparison, Britain is among the few EU members that contributed huge financial and non-financial resources towards the development of the European Union. For instance, in 2019 EU budget, UK provided 11.93% of the EU annual budget after rebate which is the highest contribution from a member after Germany with 20.83% and France 15.45% (HM Treasury, 2020). Similarly, in the 2018 EU budget, the UK share is almost the same with what it contributed in 2019 which equals 11.88%, making her the third largest contributor after Germany 20.78% and France 15.58% (HM Treasury, 2018). Thus, UK has been among the biggest contributors to the EU budget since it joined the community in 1973.

The United Kingdom's gross contribution to the EU budget from 2013-2019 stood at € 18, 135 million in 2013; € 18,778 million in 2014; € 19,560 million in 2015; € 16,996 million in 2016; € 18,625 million in 2017; € 17,445 million in 2018; and €18.946 million in 2019 respectively. These figures on UK financial contribution to the EU successive annual budget buttressed its role and massive participation in financing the economic activities of the Union (HM Treasury, 2020). Although UK formally left EU on 31 January of 2020, it participated fully in funding EU 2020 budget. Britain made an estimated gross contribution of £17.0 million which is far above Spain and Italy's contribution. Britain on the other hand, received £4.5 billion of public sector receipts from the EU, so the UK's net public sector contribution to the EU was an estimated £12.6 billion (Keep, 2022; HM Treasury, 2018).

Britain is among the key players in global economy, with sophisticated technology and strong economic base. Britain's participation in European integration played an important role in shaping the dynamics and status of EU as a global player in international political economy and security issues. However, with its recent departure from the European Union, Britain was described as a "dysfunctional and destructive partner" (Oliver, 2015, P. 1). This implies that British disengagement from the EU is unhealthy to the goal of the union and the broader European integration project.

Issues that Prompted Britain to Leave the European Union

Issues that triggered Britain to withdraw its EU membership were complex and multiple. Issues that prompted its exit were centered on the economy, immigration, sovereignty, fears of

globalization, anti-establishment sentiments and uneven development (Archick, 2019; Oliver, 2015; Jessop, 2018; Gordon, 2016; Keep, 2022). The post-cold war agenda of globalized world that emphasized on free movement of capital, ideas, as well as free movement of people across national boundaries has declined since 2008-2009 global recession. Citizens in Britain challenged the massive intrusion of foreign nationals and capital in their country as a result of the European Union free trade, and free movement of people among its members. The decline in support of free movement of ideas, capital, and fear of globalization led to the emergence of populist parties in Europe and Britain in particular that intensified the agitation for Britain to control its economy and territory as against EU policy of free trade and free movement of people. Populism and Euroscepticism became more formidable in United Kingdom championed by populist parties and anti-EU politicians across all political parties in the UK (Keep, 2022).

Sovereignty is one of the non-negotiable features of states but European Union is more than a group of cooperating countries, its members sacrificed a significant part of their sovereignty to the union, but Britain was only concerned in being a member and not jeopardizing its sovereignty to the union. Therefore, arguments over sovereignty played a significant role in driving the agitation for Britain to leave the European Union (Oliver, 2015). Apart from sovereignty, another fundamental factor leading to Brexit is the British political culture that rejected absolutism and uphold democratic accountability and fairness as enshrined in British common law. The British approach to the rule of law conflicts with the continental tradition, in which the executive arm is expected to issue legally binding decrees, creating subordinate legislation. The British people's adherence to the tradition of democratic accountability was probably the most important argument against the maintenance of membership in an ever more integrated EU (Keep, 2022). British ego and national pride were said to be a critical component of its political culture that both the elites and general public adhered so much and respect. Anything contrary to this established national symbol received huge criticism and rejection. This factor facilitated Britain's exit from the European Union.

Uneven development in the United Kingdom as a result of the crisis of neoliberal reforms espoused in the EU common market policy generated tensions and agitations by the large part of Britain citizenry advocating for individuals' equality and even development across all regions of Britain. Jessop (2018, p.1735) captured it succinctly as follows:

Regions and third-tier cities and towns outside London and the rest of the South East, especially where the decline or closure of traditional industries has not been countered by the rise of new sectors and where public services have suffered from withdrawn subsidies and other neoliberal austerity measures. Overall, this has generated far more job losses in manufacturing (both in absolute and relative terms) in the 'north' of England and the provinces than in the 'south'. The resulting divergent set of regional economies with marked differences in economic structure, sectoral composition and trade performance continues to constrain efforts to 'take back control' of the British economy.

The situation created a polarization of wealth and income disparity among the British citizens, where the gap between the rich and the poor is high. Some regions in Britain are far better than the others in term of economic performance and infrastructural development resulting from the integration of British economic space into the corridor of international financial capital which promoted the consolidation of profit-producing capital than the welfare and wellbeing of the

British population. This generated a discontent and dissatisfaction over continued EU membership as manifested in the Brexit votes (Jessop, 2018).

Furthermore, conflict in some parts of Asia led to many migrants from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and even from Africa moving to European countries looking for job and better life. Some of these migrants are not even refugees as opined below:

Among the millions of migrants who crossed the Mediterranean Sea and marched throughout the Balkans, targeting the most prosperous countries of the EU, hundreds of thousands were not endangered refugees, but wanted to find jobs, a better life, and lucrative welfare institutions. An uncontrollable, chaotic invasion of the EU by mostly Muslim migrants generated the most dangerous cracks in solidarity and cooperation in Europe. The building of the EU was severely damaged (Berend, 2016, p.234).

Based on this development, anti-immigration movements in some European countries and Britain in particular emerged which further strengthened the existing anti-integration, anti-common currency, right-wing nationalist, and populist forces in some of the counties, coupled with the European skepticism in Britain further triggered Britain's exit from the union.

Additionally, Britain's contribution to the European community is also another source of contestation and debate among British politicians as well as a striking issue in Britain's national politics. This is because it was discovered that UK's contributions did not tally with the expected gain. Therefore, United Kingdom received less from the community budget compared to its bigger annual contribution to the European Community budget. It is on this note that Spence (2012, p.1240) asserted that:

The British government's calculations on its future contributions showed a significant imbalance to the UK's disadvantage. They were based on revenue to be contributed by the UK and less estimates of expenditure received by the UK, rather than an estimate including the indirect effects of membership, that is, on a book-keeper's approach. Customs duties and agricultural levies were assumed to 'belong' to the member state levying them, rather than to the Community through which and within whose tariff walls the goods moved.

Thus, this obvious marginalization led to the series of renegotiation for a balance and acceptable contributions and rebates among the members of the community. Equally this issue generated contestation and debate between and among British politicians, political parties and elites which eventually paved way for the initial 1975 referendum that supported the country to remain as EC member and the recent 2016 referendum that voted in favour of the withdrawal (Spence, 2012).

Britain and the Challenges of Exit from the European Union

The immediate challenge encountered by Britain in its post Brexit journey was the complex and prolonged negotiation process associated with Brexit. The negotiations extended over some period before final resolution. Although the Article 50 of the Treaty of the European Union provided 2 years' negotiation period for exit, it ultimately took both the EU and the UK 4 years to reach a withdrawal agreement. The negotiations commenced in June 2017, triggered by European Union's release of a position paper entitled "Essential Principle on Financial Settlement" outlining the EU's expectation on the financial settlement (European Commission, 2017). The first phase of Brexit negotiations unfolded between June and November 2017. Apart from financial settlement, other

special issues like citizen's rights, and Northern Ireland border were addressed during the negotiation process, in line with the Commission's position paper. This phase produced a joint report from the negotiators of the United Kingdom and the European Union on the progress made during this stage which was released on 8th December, 2017. In November 2018, withdrawal agreement was reached between UK and the EU. However, a new British government under the leadership of Boris Johnson renegotiated and presented a revised withdrawal agreement in October, 2019. Lastly, in January, 2020, the European Union Parliament granted consent to the withdrawal agreement, making it legally binding for both parties (Keep, 2021). This lengthy process presented a significant challenge for UK Brexiteers who initially advocated a swift withdrawal from the European Union immediately after the 2016 referendum (European Commission, 2019).

The withdrawal agreement Act mandated both the European Union and the United Kingdom to have a new codified agreement to define their future relationship under the umbrella of Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA). However, an additional challenge for the UK may emerge from other countries and non-state actors that are signatories to the EU treaties. A pertinent question to ask at this juncture, is UK going to embark on individual negotiations with some certain nations and non-state actors that currently maintain some form of trade arrangements with European Union, in order to have an encompassing and independent trade agreement? Or the United Kingdom might have remained exclusive since it achieved its main goal of exit from the EU? Furthermore, another obvious challenge that faced UK in post Brexit context is the loss of solidarity and political economies of scale precipitated by the Britain's exit. This is because there is no any guarantee that the withdrawal agreement will be able to secure renewed special relationships with other sovereign and non-sovereign actors that can meet the needs and yearnings of the British citizenry especially Brexiteers, particularly on issues that may bring economic benefits to the British population (Keep, 2021).

It is also revealed that from 2007 to 2013, United Kingdom received large share of European Research funding compared to both EU member states and non-members countries. Specifically, United Kingdom got €8.8 billion out of the total €107 billion EU expenditure research, development and innovation (European Commission, 2019). However, since Britain is now out of the European community, it can be argued that UK may face challenges in accessing huge research funds from the EU with the absence of bilateral agreement between the EU and UK on the issue. Such situation could affect British research and development initiatives, especially in this century where research and innovation play a significant role in driving economic growth.

Another major source of concern and a pressing issue awaiting Britain in the aftermath of Brexit is the uncertainty surrounding its existing international agreements established during its EU membership. It now remains unclear how Britain is going to progress and work with its trading, economic, political, security and developmental partners following its departure from the European Union.

Conclusion

Issues surrounding Britain's departure from the European Union were multifaceted and intricate both in nature and structure. It is therefore, inadequate to attribute Brexit entirely on a single factor like sovereignty, skepticism or migration crisis. It is worth to note that plethora of issues and

factors, as rightly captured in this study, contributed to the decision by Britain to withdraw from its European Union membership

Despite the fact that Britain played a significant role not only in European integration process but also in broader European politics, it has over the years developed a deep-seated skepticism towards European integration. This historical distrust manifested even before the 2016 referendum on Britain's exit from the EU and its eventual departure in 2021. The study concludes that the UK's departure from the EU had a disrupting impact not only on the EU itself, but on its remaining 27 Member States, non-EU European countries, and Europe's political economy.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are put forward;

- i. The EU should embark on a project of rapprochement to lure Britain to return back to the organization because of its strategic position in European and global affairs.
- ii. The EU should encourage member countries to retain peculiar priorities to ensure unity in diversity in order to strengthen the European integration project.
- iii. The EU should have a mechanism of receiving and addressing critical complaints from member countries in order to forestall the possibility of exit by any country in the future.

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