

Europe safer with Britain at its heart

Brexit would deprive EU of UK's diplomatic advocacy

by John Davie in London

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If Britain remains in the European Union, the likelihood of major crises or conflicts on the continent is greatly reduced. In a perilous world, Britain is safer in the EU, and Europe is safer with Britain at the heart of the continent's diplomatic and foreign policy.

The British are masters of understatement rather than effusive language. As a person connected with the world of business, rather than a journalist or a politician, I rather like this low-key way of approaching matters. This influences my position on Britain and the EU.

I look at the issue from an unashamedly Anglo-Saxon perspective. The UK government supports staying in a reformed EU under the 'special status' Prime Minister David Cameron says he secured for the UK. While my Anglo-Saxon heart tugs at saying 'leave', my common-sense head tells me we will be better off staying and playing a part, with other countries, in further reforming the EU.

I am in favour of looking at all these issues based, as far as possible, on facts rather than emotions. I was in Glasgow the week before the September 2014 Scottish referendum for a family occasion, nothing to do with that referendum. I was appalled by the aggression of the Yes campaign. I hope, on the EU, we have a more civilised discussion.

The rhetoric from politicians indicates they are all trying to hoodwink us, and the media is sensationalising things. I have heard very few facts. You need a quantifiable measure if you want to use measurements. Neither side spells out the metrics they are deploying. For example, claims that 75% of our legislation comes from Brussels remain unconfirmed. Does it? Reliable figures to support that are missing. Even if it were true, is that so bad?

Let's dwell on another concern: sovereignty.

I have visited a large number of sovereign nations this year, all failed or failing. Supreme political authority alone has not helped them. We all know the EU has much about it that is not admired, but it has kept Europe from repeating past excesses. The conditions that led to constant wars, including religious, social and economic rivalries, have been largely eliminated.

The excesses of both right and left have been tempered. The 'unelected' European Commission has, over the decades, contributed to inhibiting the growth of ideologues. Europe's crises often become Britain's crises: two major European wars last century testify to that. We have not had a repeat since the EU was formed. That is due to much more than simply Nato.

Britain is a member of many international organisations, all of which impose binding rules upon us. There are numerous international bodies created by treaties adjudicating on legal issues where they have jurisdiction. We need some of them. These are undoubtedly a diminution of sovereignty. But I don't see any major problem here.

The Brexit debate has been inflamed by the volatile and fluctuating state of European politics, reflected in gains for anti-European parties in elections in several countries over the past year. However, much wider issues are at stake.

For Europe as a whole, Britain provides a stabilising political and diplomatic influence to counterbalance the differing weights of France and Germany. UK departure would deprive the EU of Britain's diplomatic advocacy and counsel. Britain's own national security, and that of Europe as a whole, would suffer as a result.

John Davie is Chairman of Altra Capital. This is No.23 in the series.

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