

Rebelling against bipartisanship

Britain's battle in the Washington echo chamber

by Darrell Delamaide in Washington

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The US national security establishment really, really does not want Britain to leave the European Union. This is a foreign policy issue that, somewhat astonishingly in fractious Washington, enjoys solid bipartisan backing.

'It would mean a weaker UK, a weaker EU,' said Stephen Hadley, national security adviser for President George W. Bush in his second term, in a discussion at the Atlantic Council this week. 'It may actually precipitate an unraveling of the EU.' Tom Donilon, in the same position for nearly three years under Barack Obama, echoed his remarks. 'I have seen no analysis that does not conclude the UK would be weaker economically... The US wants a strong UK in Europe.'

The one-sided discussion – backing the line of Obama, who urged British voters to affirm EU membership in London last month – was couched in pure binary terms. Leaving means weakness. Staying spells strength. But harmony can be deceptive. When the establishment unites, voters can rebel.

The Atlantic Council released an open letter signed by 13 former secretaries of state and defence as well as national security advisers from both parties. 'We are concerned that, should the UK choose to leave the European Union, the UK's place and influence in the world would be diminished and Europe would be dangerously weakened.'

Hanley and Donilon suggested that British departure would embolden half a dozen other countries to demand their own referendum. That would stiffen the spines of EU negotiators on British exit terms, as they would need 'to send a deterrent message that leaving was not so easy and not so beneficial'.

The two geopolitical experts said British exit would cripple transatlantic co-operation on counterterrorism and military preparedness, strengthening the aggressive stance of Russian President Vladimir Putin in central and eastern Europe. 'There could not be a worse time to do this,' Donilon said. 'An express aim of Putin's is the fragmentation of Europe.'

The Washington discussion missed some complexities. When Donilon breezily suggests that the US doesn't want an inward-looking, insular UK, his assumption (unchallenged) is that this is the only alternative for Britain outside the EU. Brexit supporters, by contrast, think leaving would liberate the UK and allow it to pursue a more flexible, open policy on trade and investment – the very opposite of insular.

Yet clearly, on the UK-EU conundrum, the foreign policy establishment in Washington speaks with one voice. If Hillary Clinton clinches the Democratic nomination and goes on to win the election, Obama's former secretary of state would probably select advisers from this close-knit community.

Donald Trump, her probable Republican opponent, has been saying he thinks the UK is better off without the EU. He has been a fierce critic of US foreign policy, not only in the Obama administration but also going back to the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq.

Trump's stand against the bipartisan consensus displays important lessons. The more the establishment – whether in the Republican party, the media, or the Washington think-tanks – attacks Trump, the stronger he seems to become among voters. This countervailing political current was absent from the echo chamber discussion at the Atlantic Council.

There may be a wider lesson here. Too many Washington conferences where everyone agrees can breed dissent elsewhere. As the UK referendum campaign moves into its closing stages, there is plenty of opportunity for decidedly non-mainstream voices to prevail.

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