

Brexit Is Here, and It's a Texas-Size Defeat for the E.U.

The loss of such a rich, sizable, powerful member state will weaken the European Union's momentum and its diplomatic weight.



A pro-Brexit rally in London last September. Britain will officially withdrawal from the European Union on Friday.Credit...Andrew Testa for The New York Times

The European Parliament voted in Brussels on Wednesday to ratify the withdrawal agreement that governs Britain's withdrawal from the European Union, which will formally happen on Friday at midnight Brussels time.

The occasion was marked by speechifying and the singing of "Auld Lang Syne." Some European legislators put up a sign reading, hopefully: "It's not goodbye, it's au revoir" — an "until we meet again."

The vote — something of a relieved whimper rather than a bang, as its result was expected — brings to an end three and a half years of confusion, political division and missed deadlines. The vote passed by 621 to 49, with 13 abstentions.

But for the European Union, the loss of Britain is a significant defeat. It represents a loss of size, reach, momentum and permanence, comparable to Texas deciding to break away from the United States.

"Brexit is a defeat, a rebellion against the concept that working together makes Europeans stronger," said Rosa Balfour, a senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund.

It also gives the bloc potentially less clout. "Any room the E.U. walks into, it will carry less weight than when the U.K. was a member — on trade, climate, defense," said Paul Taylor, a senior fellow at Friends of Europe, a research institution.

At the same time, the shock of Brexit has produced a unity among the remaining

27 nations that is hard to find on any other issue — neither migration nor Russia, the budget or even the supposedly common currency, the euro. As they have negotiated with Britain, at least, the 27 have stayed together, much to London's disappointment, and talk of other countries' leaving the bloc has disappeared.



Outside the European Parliament in Brussels. Credit...Francisco Seco/Associated Press

While Brexit originally caused panic in Brussels, it has turned out to be less of an epidemic than a vaccine, noted Josep Borrell Fontelles, the bloc's foreign-policy chief. The process has been so chaotic and painful for Britain that even Europe's populists have stopped talking about the likes of "Frexit," "Nexit" or "Italexit," referring to France, the Netherlands and Italy.

Because the European official who led the talks on the bloc's behalf so far is now in charge of negotiating its future relationship with Britain, similar unity is to be expected. But it will have a defensive character, with Brussels intent on maintaining the integrity of the single market despite the desire to keep its large neighbor close.

The negotiations will be both complicated and limited, given the timing. The transition period, during which little changes despite the formal Brexit, runs only until the end of the year.

European Union leaders like the Commission's president, Ursula von der Leyen, have pledged, as she did this month in London, to "work day and night" to forge a close future relationship with Britain.

But the loss will ripple outward for years to come.

"It's a defeat for everyone — for the European project, for Britain's position in the world and for American interests, since the U.S. was the beneficiary of Britain in the E.U.," said Ian Lesser, a former American diplomat who is now the director of the German Marshall Fund's Brussels office.



British members of the European Parliament before the vote about Brexit on

Britain acted as a sort of pragmatic balance between the more statist countries like France and the more frugal, federal ones, like Germany, Mr. Lesser noted. "So Brexit will make some of the divisions in the E.U. more stark and difficult to manage."

Britain's departure "changes the balance within the E.U. and creates a power vacuum," said Mark Leonard, the director of the European Council on Foreign Relations. "The absence of Britain will make the relationship between France and Germany even more toxic," he said.

"But it also destabilizes a lot of the countries, like the Dutch and the Nordics, on issues like the free market, anti-Russia policy and trans-Atlanticism," Mr. Leonard added. "And it will further the imbalance between the eurozone and non-eurozone countries, leaving those like Poland, Sweden and Denmark more exposed."

Central European countries, Turkey and countries hoping to join the bloc may also feel Britain's absence.

"The Turks are quite concerned, because Britain has been a friend in terms of Turkish integration, even if accession is not on the cards," Mr. Lesser said.

The European Council, made up of European governments, has already approved the deal, but will make a final, pro forma vote in writing on Thursday.

Britain's economy is roughly the size of France's, the second-largest in the European Union, and is an important security player, a nuclear power with a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. Britain has a close relationship with Washington and, even after its famous rebate, is the second-largest net contributor to the bloc's budget, putting in nearly 12 percent.

Already, as European governments debate the next seven-year budget — always a sour process — there are angry disagreements on how large it should be, given the need to fill the hole the British will leave behind when the transition period ends in December.

The port in Dover, England. The European Union is Britain's largest trading partner.Credit...Andrew Testa for The New York Times

And given proximity, two-way trade is enormous. The European Union is Britain's largest trading partner, taking 45 percent of all British exports and providing 53 percent of all British imports in 2018, the latest figures from the House of Commons Library according to a report issued last month.

If Britain chooses to diverge significantly from European regulations, the hit to trade will be serious for both sides, if not equally shared. Britain matters far less to the European Union, accounting for less than 10 percent of its overall trade.

A lot will depend on where Britain ends up landing. With Washington dangling a separate trade deal, "there are powerful forces shaping the Brexit debate in favor of de-aligning with the European Union and moving more toward the United States," Ms. Balfour said.

"That could have a devastating impact on Europe and where it stands in the world," she continued. "It could push Europe closer to Russia, undermine Europe's ability to pursue an independent foreign policy and hurt Europe's ability to shape the international world of multilateralism and the rule of law, the basis on which the E.U. was built."

Britain will be important to Europe on military matters and foreign policy regardless, Mr. Leonard said, pointing to so far common positions on Iran and the 2015 nuclear deal, Russia, sanctions policies and Huawei, where Washington is often in disagreement with Europe.

"Iran, in particular, is seen as a test case in Paris and Berlin," he said. "The U.K. is trying to balance, but pressure from Washington is being ramped up."

Despite President Trump's apparent admiration for British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, "I don't see the U.K. becoming Trump's poodle," Mr. Taylor said. He noted important disagreements "on Iran, Israel-Palestine, northern Syria, Turkey, climate, trade, the World Trade Organization, and Huawei," where Britain has remained aligned with Europe against Washington.



Sailors from Britain's Royal Navy during a NATO exercise in Norway in 2018. Britain is an important security player for Europe. Credit...Laura Boushnak for The New York Times

Britain, too, has an interest, post-Brexit, in demonstrating its importance as a vital regional power in military and intelligence, and in continuing to play an important role in NATO and European security.

In the end, the European Union, and especially France, the other major military power, "will have an interest in creating a functional relationship with Britain, to take advantage of Britain's assets as it tries to present a more active role in the world, especially in defense," Mr. Lesser said. "But it won't be easy."

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