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The UK's self-sufficient DNA and its consequences for the European Union

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Abstract:

The particular and unique idiosyncrasy that has characterized the United Kingdom vision regarding Europe has marked the relationship of the island nation with the continent for centuries, at the same time that it has sculpted a unique DNA in British politics and society, especially, since the emergence of the European project until Brexit. London and its divergent participation have marked the evolution of the relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union until the country left the European project. Now the continental union faces the challenge of global competitiveness with a new competitor next to its borders, which never finished sharing a common interest or even rowed in the same direction as the rest of the countries of the continent belonging to the EU.

Keywords:

European Union, United Kingdom, Brexit, United States, China, insularity.

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Introduction

The Brexit consummation and United Kingdom (UK) exit from European Union (EU) is the beginning of a new stage in a relationship of common interests and disagreements that has marked the relationship between the island nation and Europe since the beginning of time.

Chronology of two visions and interests is developed through a long history that for centuries has sculpted the DNA of British national sentiment, its politics and his particular approach to international relationships, has not been indifferent to decades of coexistence within the European Economic Community and later the European Union.

Continental Europe and the United Kingdom have lived for hundreds of years within a geopolitical paradox, which is perfectly described from a geographical analogy like the one held in the early twentieth century by Sir Halford Mackinder.

The English geographer and renowned geopolitical, has gone down in history for his expression: "Britain is part of Europe, but not really in it" ¹, which perfectly defines a relationship that transcends geographical observation to identify a pattern of behavior of an entire political and economic relationship, between the United Kingdom and the continental countries of Europe throughout history.

One of the best ways to understand the psychology that has conditioned the history of love and heartbreak that has conditioned the British-European relationship since the creation of the single European market, recalls the critical analysis of the English geographer.

Geographical insularity and history with more global than continental look has marked the future of its policies and strategies in the last 150 years, as a result of the trade and expansionist point of view of the British crown across the oceans, has conditioned relations with continental nations marked by an union always disconnected.

The difference in UK views, in terms of political strategy and geoeconomics throughout recent history, including the nearest and closest ones, shows the distance of the British mindset from Europe in a forceful way.

¹ MACKINDER, Halford. "Britain and The British Seas", William Heimann, London, 1902.

At the heart of its relationship with the continent, the UK has never sought full integration, unlike other continental nations during the second half of the 20th century. Their own idiosyncrasy has prevailed unlike other European countries looking for harmonization that seeks equality characteristics of a single market that guarantees a standard that breaks down cultural, ideological, political, social and economic barriers, in pursuit of development as a group.

Despite their integration into the European Union, the British have always maintained a marked differentiation as the axis of their policy towards Europe.

A DNA of its own and differentiator

Again, DNA forged by history and its insular position marked a divergent way of understanding the future that was proposed in a post-war continent. An example of this behavior was experienced in the early 1950s, when the United Kingdom considers itself as old times world power nation, and not a middle-sized European nation. The consequence of this mentality and way of acting pictured Europe as a mere object of transactional exchange.

In words of The Economist editor John Peet: "Great Britain is by nature and by political inclination a country reluctant to the idea of a united Europe, and in this sense it is quite different from the rest of the members of the European Union."²

But what is truly relevant is the transposition of these elements, identified almost as a national heritage, in aspects that do affect political and economic relations at the highest level.

Strong denial to entry into the Monetary Union from which Euro was born, the maintenance of border control, with the express reluctance to joining the Schengen Area and much more, are unequivocal signs of the extension of the interests and positions of the 1950's adapted to the format of the 21st century.

² PEET, John. "El Reino Unido y Europa", en La búsqueda de Europa. Visiones en contraste, Madrid, BBVA, 2015.

The United Kingdom and Europe background of a story of love and hate

The imperialist vocation that has characterized the British world's vision for centuries has helped to suspect every offer, opportunity or situation regarding continental countries.

Rivalry over hundreds of years for conquering new territories and trade routes following the discovery of America by the Catholic Kings served as a kick-off for a dispute over global hegemony that involved major European powers.

The history of the United Kingdom and continental Europe runs hand in hand, but at the same time, they have independent identities.

Looking back to Napoleonic Wars, going through the design and construction of an empire that made its power felt on the European stage, until it reached the prominence reserved for its role during World War II, where the seal of insularity strengthened national identity, the suspicion of Europe enhanced by the security of feeling impregnable, forged the bond as a society of diversity and autonomy respect to the continent, all of this has characterized the idiosyncrasies of British society and geopolitics during the twentieth century.

Historically Britain has competed with European countries for the same territories and trade routes, which has deeply marked the UK's DNA with suspicions and rivalries during a long history of relationships with the old continent. This competitive mentality has never been abandoned in pursuit of a pan-European project.

After two World Wars, the advent of the Cold War left German rivalry behind to confront the island country against another European nation: Russia. Throughout its long history the UK has had a rival to its coast, be it the Spanish Crown (with the problem of Gibraltar still kicking centuries later), France, Germany or Russia.

UK's exit from the European Union opens a new front for the latter by narrowing its margin of maneuver and credibility, as a great player on the international scene, now that it has lost a country that together with Germany and France was the group of the three most important nations by GDP and population of the Union.

The origins of the European Union starts from the end of World War II, where an idea was born to prevent a repeat of events as atrocious as those that marked the first half of the twentieth century.

Despite statements of full support by Winston Churchill supporting the idea of a united

Europe that would avoid future confrontations in his 1946 Zurich statement, "We have to build a kind of United States of Europe,"³ during this speech the British leader proposed "a structure under which he can live in peace, security and freedom."

In 1951, as the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) emerged, the British preferred to stand aside, watch and wait.

But when the first efforts to unify the concept of Europe were put in motion to initiate the European construction project, the United Kingdom avoided his good words, remained expectant and on the lookout, waiting to see how events evolved.

Subsequently the invitation to join the European Economic Community fell deaf ears and the historical Treaty of Rome of 1957 was not signed by London.

Once again, the insular suspicion, distrust and the innate spirit of rivalry of the British idiosyncrasy, prevailed over the will to create a different and inclusive future that avoided the mistakes of the past.

The old mentality of the empire and the victorious nation's halo may have conditioned the UK's decision to say no to the ECSC, through a mirage in which they thought everything could remain the same as in the late 19th century.

Jean Monnet himself, the architect of the creation of the idea of a united Europe and a diplomat recognized as the founding father of the European Union, commented on precisely this idea when he declared: "I never understood why the British did not unite", reaching the conclusion that "it must have been because it was the price of victory: the illusion that you could keep what you had, unchanged."⁴

Watch and wait

The strategy of being without being, which defines a large part of British policy towards Europe, materialized again once the economic situation and the fear of being left behind

³ CHURCHILL, Winston. "I wish to speak to you today about the tragedy of Europe". Winston Churchill's speech in Zurich on September 19, 1946, September 1946, available at <http://churchill-society-london.org.uk/astonish.html>. Date of consultation 18.2.2021.

⁴ MONNET, Jean. "Is Britain more European than it Thinks?". History Today, February 2012, available at <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/britain-more-european-it-thinks>. Date of consultation 18.2.2021.

drove a current of rapprochement in the British Isles, seeing that the economies Germany, France, and other nations prospered in the postwar period while British loneliness slowed their economic recovery.

Knowing yourself wanted is an advantage served to ensure Europe would open the door, to a nation that had not contributed to the initial success of the recovery experienced by European nations.

British double game was identified by Charles de Gaulle. The French leader set distances, aware that British interests did not share the mentality of the union and reflected the ties and private agenda of United States of America.

Finally, in the mid-1970s, the United Kingdom joined the European family once de Gaulle left office. But from the beginning of its incorporation to Europe, within parliament and various parties of the British country including the Labour Party, with Michael Foot in first place, spoke out demanding the exit of the European Economic Community.

Barely ten years after the British connection, the story of disagreements between the EU and London was a reality. Margaret Thatcher's words showed the true position of the United Kingdom on the plan for an increasingly united Europe, which had in the Maastricht Treaty a necessary driving force for a pan-European future.

Fear to lose sovereignty with which to maintain the hegemony of moral, economic and political self-sufficiency demonstrated the incorrigible British attitude that puts its national interests before any other entity, supranational and Community, as the case of the European Union.

Thatcher was emphatic in his famous Bruges speech, which revealed the British fear of "a European super-state exercising new dominance from Brussels."⁵ Displaying this true feeling and political position towards anything that results in a loss of self-government on the part of London, shows how deep and ingrained British historical DNA are in his leaders.

The instinct for survival and self-sufficiency caused the United Kingdom not to join the

⁵ THATCHER, Margaret. "Speech to the College of Europe (The Bruges Speech), Margaret Thatcher Foundation, September 1988, available at <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/107332>. Date of consultation 18.2.2021.

project in the same terms, despite signing the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, once the Iron Lady had left office, lengthening the discrepancies and delaying the progress of all Europe again.

Despite the signing, once again the exclusivity that has marked Euro-British relations, the island country was allowed to obtain exclusions that kept it away from the single currency and in various social chapters. Once again, the UNITED Kingdom was Europe, but in a different way from the rest.

All these movements have set a precedent that has spread on different occasions by creating a multi-speed Europe with rebel states that follow the example of the British exception to achieve their ends, highlighting Europe's internal gaps in the eyes of outside competitors, ready to benefit from each weakness for their own benefit.

The attitude of the Anglo-Saxon country is the best example of the "*my country first*" policy, a pioneer even of Donald J Trump's "America First" and the policies of other countries of the present European Union.

The United Kingdom has come to Europe with distrust and with the net ready to fish for the best opportunities for its economy, while erecting walls and barriers for anything that would provide greater integration into a project in which more than build, it has preferred to infer and exploit for its own unique benefit, as well as contribute to the agendas of third nations with positions not always aligned with those of Brussels.

A harmful situation for Europe

Despite bad gestures and a particular way of belonging to the EU for decades staged by the United Kingdom, European Union has suffered a severe blow in its internal cohesion and global projection as an alternative to economic powers like China and United States of America, with the loss of the third economy of the community bloc and a country with strategic importance in multiple senses as the United Kingdom.

European union position of strength may have been questioned as a result of losing a member state, the United Kingdom, which, although it has not been a model of integration and commitment of the European project since its early days, represents a significant loss

in multiple sectors.

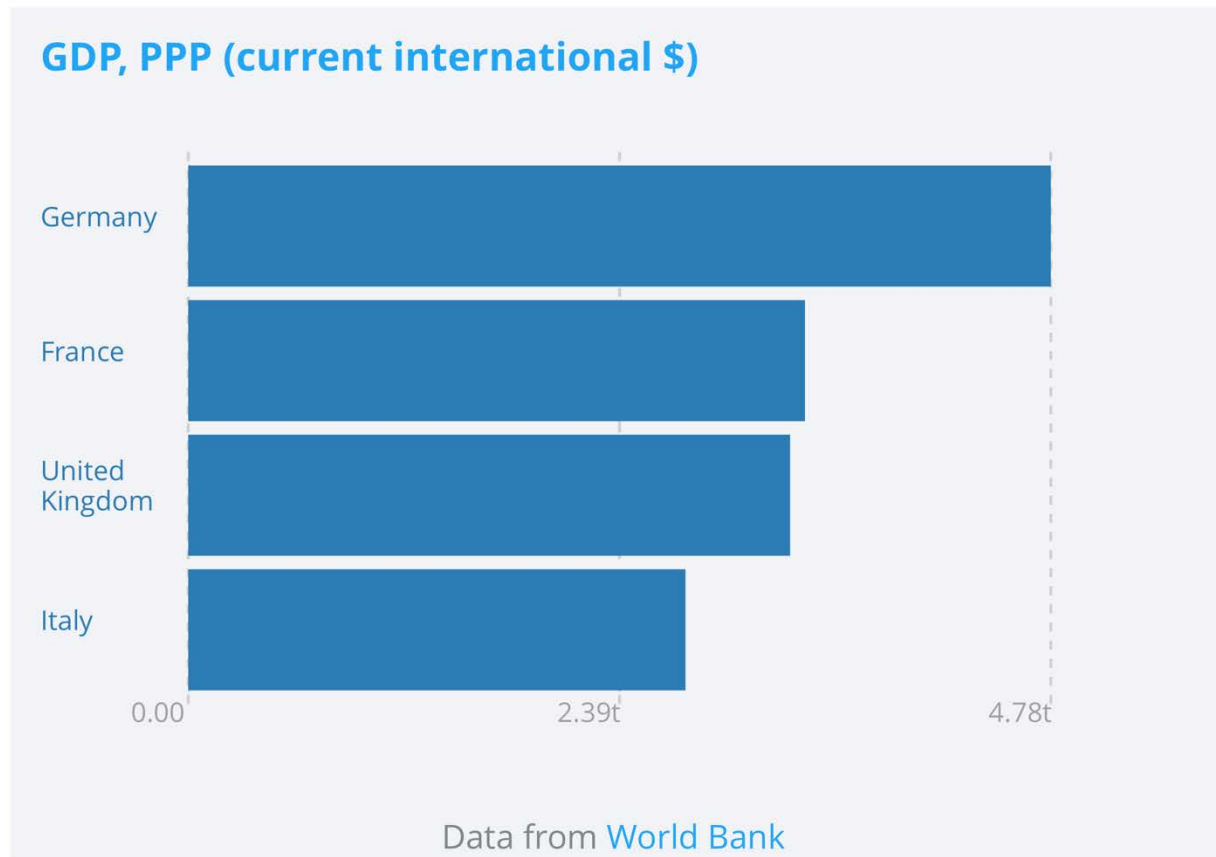


Illustration 1. Gross Domestic Product (PPP) of Germany, France, the United Kingdom and Italy. Source: The World Bank

UK's exit means losing overnight an economy with a GDP of \$3,337.149 million⁶, to for the European Union. This is equivalent to France's and, at the same time, 66.7 million people have ceased to belong to the common European project⁷ overnight.

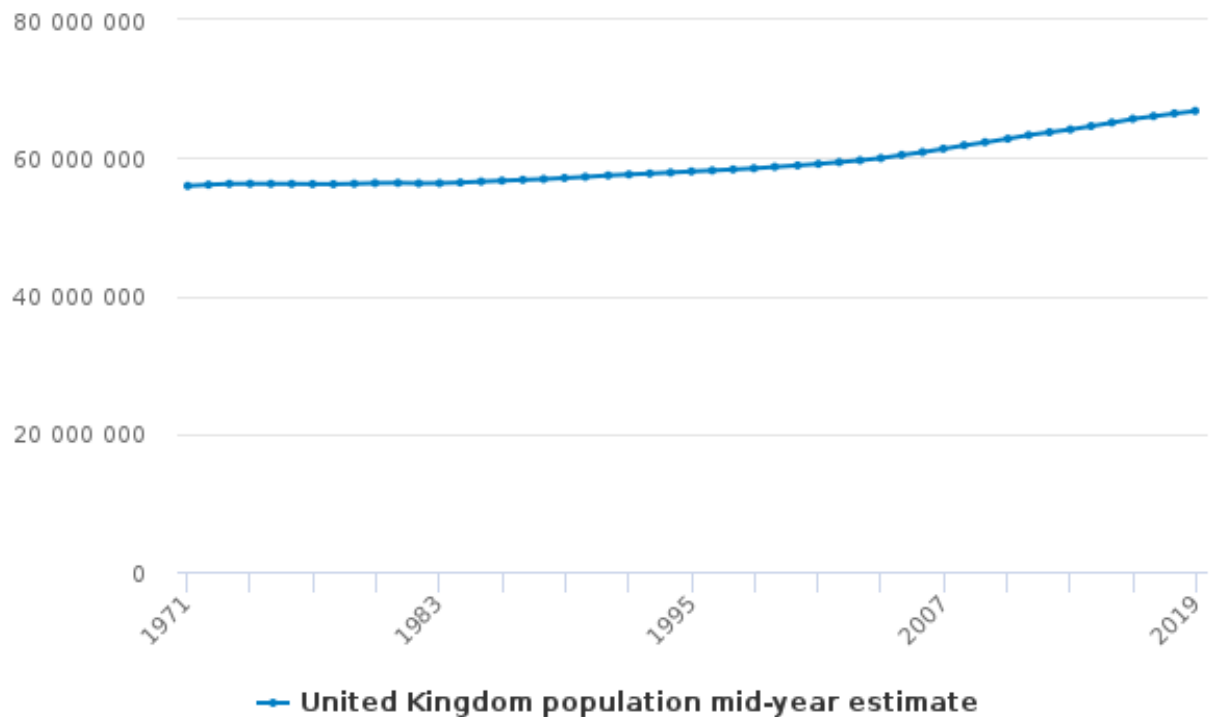
⁶ World Bank, "World Development Indicators database". The World Bank, International Comparison Program, World Bank Available In

<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.PP.CD?end=2019&locations=GB-DE-FR-IT&start=2019&view=bar&year=2019>. Date of consultation 18.02.2021.

⁷ Office for National Statistics, "United Kingdom population mid-year estimate", US, June 2020, available at

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/timeseries/ukpop/pop>. Date of consultation 18.02.2021.

United Kingdom population mid-year estimate



Source:

Illustration 2. Mid-year estimate of the UK population. Source: Office for National Statistics

Throughout its history English trade, before being Atlantic was essentially European, in fact, once launched into its adventure beyond the European confines, the trade relationship with the continent maintained an important weight for the English and Scots as well.

With the end of the colonial and imperial era, British trade was redirected back to Europe, but diversifying its transoceanic sources and links that promoted London City concept under an internationalization process that made the city of Thames prosper under a global vocation with a marked international character.

The United Kingdom has been in and out of Europe at the same time, since they decided to join a European economic project, they were suspicious of, but did not want to miss the opportunity to influence and determine based on their own interests that, on many occasions, have not been alienated by the same goal of the common continental spirit.

The British have wanted to participate in the banquet but without helping to set the table, they have wanted to contribute to the choice of the menu, without going shopping and

have wanted to sit in the best place because they are British, waiting for other nations serve them the dishes.

During all this time UK's influence and participation in European institutions and decision-making, has made it possible to strategically infer third-party interests on internal decisions in Brussels.

The British alignment with American interests is part of London's way of think of international politics, which needs the umbrella of power that the White House exercises globally, to extend its alleged status as an international power and key nation, by putting aside Europe, Brussels and the EU institutions, when addressing global geopolitical challenges.

The British brake on the development of Europe as an alternative power to the United States or China, in the world economy has been constant since its first day in European institutions.

The current situation as a result of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, highlights the effects that British politics has left on Europe, since European Union lacks health competences in 2021.

This situation is the direct result of the UK's absolute blockade to the establishment of a fully competed European Medicines Agency. Today we have such an agency but lacking any real power to impose coordinated action on members states, while the dead are numbered by hundreds of thousands at European level.

The British trip has helped to ensure that today the European Union does not have the tools to deal with a pandemic, which has generated the greatest health crisis in history and brings the continent's economy to its knees.

The tug-of-war over production and supplies of the Coronavirus vaccine with the United Kingdom is a clear and clear example of what awaits the European Union in its future negotiations.

The former member of the Union has gone from being a stone in the shoe to becoming a rock that blocks and hinders the passage from Europe to the global geopolitical scene.

London has been in Europe without accepting the single currency or the free movement of its citizens, the last few decades perfectly reflect the duality of the British position towards Europe, a continent to which they belong by geography, but which they see as a

peripheral and distant element, characterized by a double personality of union and separation that have determined a split that opens up an entire era full of challenges and new shadows for European Union.

Now, the Eurogroup is smaller and weaker than ever, precisely at a key moment that will mark the evolution of the balances of power of the first half of the 21st century.

The challenge facing the European Union will mark its position in a world that evolves, economically, socially and politically, towards a future where Europe lacks the strength to compete equally with two powers such as China and the United States.

The United Kingdom has been a stone in the shoe of European politics in empowering the Union as a supranational entity, capable of reaffirming its position on the international scene.

Now with Brexit completed, London needs no mask to hide its distant interests with Brussels. The breach of Ireland protocol, included in the agreements signed on December 24, 2020, between the European Union and the United Kingdom is a preamble to the future of the relationship between Brussels and London.

Europe faces, more than a trading partner, a new challenge when it comes to weaving a network of international alliances and strategies to address the geoeconomical and geopolitical challenges of the 20's of the 21st century.

Conclusions

Perhaps one of the best terms that define the United Kingdom and the European Union love-hate relationship is the concept of blocks, since more than countries united in a common project, at times, the turbulent relationship has been more similar to a blocks politics than nations. At the end of the day, as de Gaulle pointed out, the United Kingdom in its actions has not always responded to its own interests, being, at times, an executing arm or an accomplice of US policies on international politics and security.

The British strategic approach has been predominantly aligned with Washington, both in its military capabilities and in its diplomatic efforts. Its objectives for implementing this

policy have been⁸:

Take advantage of North American power as a guarantor of its two traditional geostrategic axes.

Serve as an indispensable bridge between Europe and United States of America (the so-called transatlantic link), (Pontijas, 2019, p. 6).

London has sold to the European Union as a rival, almost hostile, who threatened his country's interests.

This has been one of the arguments of Eurosceptics when it comes to playing and reaching the psyche of citizenship that has fallen into an old trick of older populism, exacerbating nationalism and a British identity engraved on fire in the DNA of citizenship and political class.

Neither the digital age, nor social networks, much less globalization has managed to extinguish the national sentiment and the imperial reminiscence of the British character.

As if it were Vladimir Putin's Russia, the United Kingdom has sold a Brexit as a solution and a return to a glorious past, precisely the same strategy that from the Kremlin is exercised to justify certain actions and sacrifices in pursuit of a return of the symbolic greatness of the defunct Soviet Union, with respect to its world position and influence.

The UK's exit from the European Union creates an uncertain future for both London and Brussels, affecting the entire European project, amid the pandemic crisis that defies the EU's internal and international balances arising from the health and economic crisis.

But the most negative aspect of this situation, despite the exit agreement and trade arrangements that allow some momentary normality in economic exchanges and the flow of goods and business, goes through the geopolitics that Brexit leaves behind to Europe (that without the United Kingdom).

⁸ PONTIJAS CALDERÓN, Jose Luis. *The Union's Strategic Autonomy European Union and America's vision*. IEEE 29/2019 Analysis Document. Available at http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2019/DIEEEA29_2019JOSPON_EEUU.pdf. Date of consultation 18.2.2021.

The UK's departure from the European Union comes at the worst possible time and in the midst of a pandemic.

This decade Europe is facing a technological revolution for which the sum counts more than splits, especially when they bring with them a new and uncomfortable competitor a few kilometers from your borders.

The European challenge is greater if possible than the era of industrialization, the future will be dominated by new technologies, the 4.0 economy and the decarbonization of the economy, which will mark the post-covid economy.

If the European Union does not show its strength to those who do not want it to emerge, it will be difficult for the EU to resist global competition on a global scale, where China, India, the United States and Russia, are, in certain killings and technologies, more advanced and better prepared than the countries of the European bloc.

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