

# Images of a Divorce. External Perceptions of Brexit in the USA and their Influence on Transatlantic Relations

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# Images of a Divorce. External Perceptions of Brexit in the USA and their Influence on Transatlantic Relations

Johanna Speyer / Arne Niemann

## Abstract

The European Union (EU) takes pride in having promoted integration, peace and democracy among its member states. This European success story, as perceived by third states interacting with the EU, has a huge bearing on the Union's soft power and thus on the effectiveness of its Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). The British decision to leave the EU however tarnishes this image and might stir fears and resistance, but also hopes. Nevertheless, thus far, neither the scholarly nor the public debate has paid sufficient attention to third countries' reactions to the Brexit.

Following a constructivist approach to Foreign Policy Analysis, our paper posits that the EU's leadership capacity is not only determined by the EU itself, but crucially depends on external actors' perceptions of the EU. Brexit is likely to have altered these perceptions and has thus restricted the range of motion for EU external action. This paper investigates the perception of Brexit and the "newEU-27" among the present US administration of Donald Trump by analysing remarks of the president himself as well as commentaries commissioned by the Heritage Foundation, a think tank ideologically close to the President. It finds that Brexit is understood as a confirmation of a realistic worldview that prefers national sovereignty to cooperation and sees the EU as a competitor in a zero-sum game.

**Keywords:** Brexit EU, USA, external perceptions, foreign policy analysis

## 1. Introduction

The morning of the 24th June 2016, shock and incredulity were palpable across Europe and in capitals around the world. By a narrow majority of 51.89%, the British citizens had voted for their country's exit from the European Union (EU). While the referendum represents the climax of a relationship that has long been described as "awkward" (George, 1998), it raised more questions than it answered and left the United Kingdom (UK) as well as the EU in turmoil and uncertainty. Prime Minister Theresa May's enigmatic statement that "Brexit means Brexit" (May, 2016) and the dragging Article 50 TEU negotiations have done nothing to dispel the trepidation about the difficulties of this unprecedented challenge.

Brexit has encouraged navel-gazing in both the EU and the UK, as both entities grapple to find answers to the myriad of challenges now up for negotiation. The academic world, taken largely by surprise by the referendum result, has so far focused on analysing and explaining the British decision as well as its possible internal consequences for both the EU and the UK (Kroll and Leuffen, 2016; Menon and Salter, 2016; Oliver, 2017; Outhwaite, 2017). Yet, with Brexit, the EU not only loses its second largest economy and its third largest member state measured by population size, but also one of its two military powers occupying permanent membership in the UN Security Council. Furthermore, the strong diplomatic corps and special relationships to the Commonwealth and, most importantly, the United States (USA) is lost as well (Adler-Nissen et al., 2017: 581; Henökl, 2017: 2). Therefore, Brexit will clearly have important repercussions on European foreign

policy in general and transatlantic relations in particular which have escaped the Eurocentric focus of the academic debate so far.

Moreover, as “Brexit is full of ‘unknowns’” (Henökl, 2017: 2), the present academic debate, and even more so the few papers on EU foreign policy after the British divorce, are quite speculative in nature and light on theory (Adler-Nissen et al., 2017; Henökl, 2017; Oliver, 2015: 1325, 2016: 689). Naturally, the EU’s internal and external constitution will depend heavily on the outcome of the present negotiations. The future relations of Great Britain and the EU with each other as well as with external partners will depend crucially on whether the UK severs all (or most of) its ties with the EU in a “hard Brexit” or remains within the single market after a “soft Brexit”. However, the room for manoeuvre in as well as the effectiveness of the EU’s foreign policy is also influenced by the image that external actors hold of it (Chaban et al., 2006; Bretherton and Vogler, 2006; Jervis, 1976: 28). These images are sure to have already been influenced by the announcement of the British exit and the present uncertainty. Hence, a study of external perceptions of Brexit and the EU after Brexit promises insights into the effect the UK referendum will have on EU foreign policy and the role of the Union in the world.

The USA are arguably the EU’s most important partner. Together, the EU and the US have played a crucial role in designing, strengthening and spreading the liberal world order. Studying the influence of Brexit on transatlantic relations is therefore top of the list for anyone trying to understand the worldwide effect of an instance of European disintegration. The present paper turns to this challenge by asking, how Brexit and the EU in times of Brexit have been perceived by US-American elites. In how far do they expect Brexit to alter transatlantic relations? And, looking at the other side of the Atlantic, what do these perceptions imply for European foreign policy?

The analysis of external perceptions of the EU has become increasingly popular in recent years and has helped to overcome the rather surprising Eurocentric bias in research on European foreign policy (Lucarelli, 2014: 2). It is based on role and identity theory (Lucarelli, 2014: 6) and maintains that the EU’s external perception impacts the EU’s self-identification and its international role as well as the effectiveness of EU foreign policy (Elgström, 2007: 952; Elgström and Chaban, 2015: 20). This last aspect crucially depends on whether the EU is perceived as legitimate, credible and coherent (Elgström and Chaban, 2015: 17). Perceptions can be understood as mental pictures, formed by experience and knowledge about appropriate behaviour (Vertzberger, 1990: 114–127) which then partially form the ‘psychological milieu’ of policy-makers. Such images shape the basis of decision-making as they help politicians reduce complexity in order to make sense of the world (Elgström and Chaban, 2015: 18–19; Jervis, 1976: 28). While public perceptions, by way of transmission by the media, may also influence policy-making, previous research has shown that the public image of the EU is rather generic around the world, given that knowledge about it is scarce and the EU is not a visible media topic (Elgström and Chaban, 2015: 29; Lucarelli, 2014: 7). By contrast, elites are expected to be more likely socialized by external actors as well as more motivated and able to influence foreign policy. It is for these reasons that the present paper, in line with much of the previous literature, focuses on elite perceptions of Brexit and the EU.

Namely, we will scrutinize the perception of Brexit, the EU and future transatlantic relations among the Trump administration. To this end, we will analyse both remarks of President Trump himself as well as the views purported by the Heritage Foundation, the think tank allegedly closest to the present US-American government. President Trump spoke about Brexit specifically at his Press Conference with British Prime Minister May on January 27th, 2018 (The White House, 2017). The conservative think tank Heritage Foundation published 11 articles and commentaries on Brexit in the first year of the Trump presidency (January 2017-January 2018). Predicate analysis as proposed by Jennifer Milliken (1999) offers a particularly fruitful tool for such an analysis of perceptions, as it focuses on the attributes and connotations attached to certain key terms.

The article proceeds as follows: In the subsequent section, this paper briefly focuses on why Brexit should influence foreign policy and external perceptions. Section three then explains the theoretical link between external perceptions and foreign policy. Section four is dedicated to the analysis of the remarks of President Trump as well as analysis and pronouncements commissioned by the think tank close to the Trump administration. Thereafter, section five will try to formulate policy recommendations for the EU emanating from the Trump administration’s perception of Brexit and the EU. Section six concludes.

## 2. Brexit and European Foreign Policy

In the run up to the British referendum, a wide range of international voices, not least then-US president Barack Obama warned of the detrimental effects of Brexit both for the EU and the UK (Oliver, 2016: 694). Its potential exit from the EU raised questions over “Britain’s broader role and position within international relations and the international political economy” (Whitman, 2016: 523). In fact, Brexit influences geopolitics, security and the economic order. In economic terms, the EU and, most likely the European Single market, loses its second largest economy. External trading partners will also be hit by the walk-out of one of the largest national markets which for some represented a “gateway into Europe” while many less-developed countries relied on preferential trading arrangements with the EU to gain access to the British market (Adler-Nissen et al., 2017: 581, 585; Henökl, 2017: 2). Moreover, Brexit has sown the fear that the EU, caught up in internal problems, will “turn inwards and away from an outward looking liberal economic agenda” (Oliver, 2015: 1325). In fact, hyper-liberals in the UK campaigned for Brexit on the assertion that the EU constitutes an impediment to a truly free market (Finlayson, 2016). This contrast is mirrored in transatlantic perceptions of Brexit’s economic ramifications: Brexit is either understood as disruptive of the progressive integration of the EU and US economies, a liberal order that is deemed essential to resist the rise of new economic powers. This scenario fears that with the UK, the EU loses its most important advocate of liberalism and free trade (Whitman, 2016: 526). Quite differently, other economic actors as well as the present US government understand transatlanticism in primarily Anglo-American terms in competition with the EU. The EU is caricatured as “an interventionist bulwark that prevents the realisation of a market society” (Adler-Nissen et al., 2017: 583–584).

Thus far, the EU is most widely perceived as an economic giant by its external partners (Holden and Warren, 2015: 58; Lucarelli, 2014: 7). This perception confers legitimacy upon it and backs its leadership aspirations and normative agenda. However, even prior to Brexit, the EU’s economic and financial crisis had raised doubts over the Union’s economic and political future. “The [extra-European; our addition] public at large tends not to regard the EU as a world power today, and even less so for the future” (Lucarelli, 2014: 8). This perception is likely to have been reinforced by Britain’s divorce.

Along with France, Britain is one of the EU’s military powers. The two countries are nuclear powers and permanent members of the UN Security Council. Additionally, they make substantial contributions to the EU’s military missions (Henökl, 2017: 2). The outcome of the referendum now raises doubts over Britain’s future international engagement and the appropriateness of the country’s membership in key international bodies, such as the UN Security Council (Chalmers et al., 2018: 15-19; Whitman, 2016: 523). Although the EU has never striven to be a military power, the loss of the British military will, on the one hand, further constrain the EU’s influence on Security Council decisions and deal a blow to the EU’s aspiration for its own permanent seat in the UN’s highest committee. On the other hand, external perceptions already point to a “gap between potential and actual leadership” (Lucarelli, 2014: 8) of the EU. The further drop in military power and resources inflicted by Brexit is likely to decrease the EU’s perceived potential leadership, raise doubts concerning the EU’s future leadership capacity and reduce the credibility of an EU styling itself as an international leader.

All of the above will have geopolitical ramifications as it further diminishes the EU’s perceived importance in the world and questions its power to (normatively) influence the world order. Additionally, on a more immediate, material level, Brexit leaves a budget hole of roughly €10-11 billion, thus constraining the Union’s engagement in development aid and its neighbourhood policy (Henökl, 2017: 8). A recent impact study commissioned by the European Parliament’s Directorate General for External Policies, the Union’s financial engagement in its neighbourhood will decrease by up to 4% (Olivíe and Pérez, 2017: 1). A comparable drop in development aid would end the EU’s position as the world’s leading donor (Henökl, 2017: 8). Likewise, the Union’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) will suffer financial losses while being bereaved of highly-trained diplomats and expertise. As part of the EU, the UK has formed a bridgehead to the USA and the Commonwealth states, which historically maintain special relationships with the UK. After the Brexit vote, foreign minister Boris Johnson (Johnson, 2016) has presented plans for a new “Global

Britain”, returning to its historical position of strength at the heart of an “Empire 2.0”. Even though these plans have been strongly rejected by most of the Commonwealth (The Commonwealth, 2016a, 2016b), they foreshadow considerable geopolitical reconfigurations.

A key element to the EU’s self-image as well as a crucial prerequisite to its soft power is the ‘European success story’ of peace and integration. “Its success in creating peace and stability in Europe is emphasised in many countries” (Elgström and Chaban, 2015: 31–32). However, if the European project is continuously associated with political, economic and social crisis rather than seen as a prosperous model worth striving for, this will certainly diminish the Union’s attractiveness and its possibility to effectively ‘lead by example’. Within the EU, the Brexit’s blow to its integrational success story threatens to precipitate “a severe and painful identity crisis” (Elgström and Chaban, 2015: 32). Many arguments of the pro-leave campaigners in the UK as well as rising populist parties in European member states can be seen as an antithesis to the worldview and values embodied in the EU (Adler-Nissen et al., 2017: 582). These voices pitted national sovereignty and the wish to ‘take back control’ against uncontrolled globalisation and the rule of foreign and technocratic elites (Menon and Salter, 2016: 1314). As such, they nurtured an emerging international cleavage between cosmopolitans and nationals (Delanty, 2017: 112) with the latter group strongly opposing supranational rule.

Overall, Brexit threatens to add “to perceptions of the EU as a declining and fragmenting power” (Oliver, 2016: 701), thus reducing the EU’s negotiating clout and soft power. Brexit will have immediate repercussions on the EU’s market power (Damro, 2012) and its resources for international civil and military engagement (Henökl, 2017: 4). Yet, “what Brexit means depends not only on who you are but also from where you see it” (Adler-Nissen et al., 2017: 578). Changes in perceptual patterns will be regional and in some cases even issue specific (Chaban et al., 2013). Moreover, given the myriad of open questions related to Brexit, the EU might still be able to influence its external perceptions by its internal and external actions. In any case, it is crucial to study how Brexit has influenced external perceptions of the EU in order to understand how Brexit will affect the room for manoeuvre of European foreign policy and to design adequate actions for the “new EU 27”.

### **3. Perceptions and Foreign Policy Analysis**

Ever since the end of the Cold War, the concepts of identity and role have become increasingly important in International Relations (IR) in general and Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) in particular. According to constructivist thought, states act towards one another based on their conception of self and the meaning that other actors have for them (Wendt, 1992). “Identity, as the primary source of the distinction between ‘home and abroad’, ‘inside and outside’, can thus be considered an (if not *the*) essential ideational foundation of foreign policy actorhood” (Stark Urrestarazu, 2015: 140). According to role theory (Elgström, 2008; Harnisch et al., 2011; Holsti, 1970), states strive to act externally according to certain roles, which emerge from the interaction of an ego, namely a state’s self-conception, and an alter part, which consists of what other actors expect of said state. Such expectations and role prescriptions are “often chiselled out in processes of negotiation with other actors” (Elgström and Chaban, 2015: 20). Thus, external perceptions influence foreign policy by affecting the identity of foreign policy actors such as states or the EU.

Besides, external perceptions determine how a certain foreign policy is received, understood and responded to by other actors (Elgström and Chaban, 2015: 17). Whether a certain foreign policy is effective therefore depends crucially on how the acting entity is perceived. To lead in foreign policy, a country “also has to be constructed as a leader by the actors in its negotiation environment” (Elgström, 2007: 952). The more an actor’s actions are seen as legitimate, credible and coherent, the more other actors will be inclined to follow (Elgström and Chaban, 2015: 21–23). Such positive perceptions are particularly important when it comes to an actor’s ‘soft power’ (Nye, 2004), his ‘normative power’ (Manners, 2002) or his ability to ‘lead by example’ (Elgström, 2007: 952). As the EU shies away from using tangible military power, it follows that external perceptions are a particularly noteworthy factor in the effectiveness of its foreign policy.

Perceptions can be conceptualised as mental pictures formed by experience and knowledge about appropriate behaviour but also featuring an important affective component (Elgström and

Chaban, 2015: 18–19; Vertzberger, 1990: 114–127). Robert Jervis (Jervis, 1976: 28) noted that “it is often impossible to explain crucial decisions and policies without reference to the decision-makers’ beliefs about the world and their images of others”, as these pictures are the frame through which policy makers make sense of and judge the world. Hence, perception research focuses its attention particularly on the perceptions held by policy-making elites. Such perceptions are tapped via interviews, official documents and speeches (Lucarelli, 2014: 2–6). Following the so-called cascade model, these external perceptions and foreign policy identities “activate and spread from the top level [...] to the network of non-administration elites, and on to news organizations, their texts, and the public” (Entman, 2003: 415). Interestingly, this identity cascade may also work in reverse with the news media constituting the decisive transmission belt for communicating identity conceptions in both the top-down and bottom-up directions (Entman, 2003: 420). However, as in the case of the EU, media coverage tends to be very slim, even in times of crisis, the analysis of speeches and official documents promises to be more fruitful than media analyses (Elgström and Chaban, 2015: 25–28; Lucarelli, 2007).

In a nutshell, external perceptions are theorized to impact upon foreign policy in two different ways: (1) As the alter part, they are a constitutive component of an actor’s role in foreign policy, which also has repercussions on his identity and (2) they constrain an actor’s room for manoeuvre in foreign policy as the policies this actor can effectively pursue depend on whether he is perceived as legitimate, credible and coherent. Concerning the EU, these perceptions are most pronounced and multifaceted in foreign policy elites. Thus, with regard to transatlantic relations, the following analysis will scrutinize perceptions of Brexit and the ‘new EU-27’ among the present US administration. Do US-American government elites construct the EU as a legitimate entity with legitimate goals pursuing them in coherent and credible ways? In how far do they judge Brexit to blemish the EU’s legitimacy, credibility and coherence? How could the EU gain in US-American esteem? The results of our analysis will on the one hand, give an impression of the current and future international role that the Trump administration foresees vis-à-vis the EU and, on the other, suggest which foreign policy the EU can and should effectively pursue. This will in turn, inform policy recommendations for European internal and external policy that would enhance its external perception in the USA.

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## 4. Analysis

“[...] [A] discourse analysis should be based upon a set of texts by different people presumed [...] to be authorized speakers/writers of a dominant discourse or to think and act within alternative discourses.” (Milliken, 1999: 233). To gauge the Trump administration’s image of Brexit and the EU, this paper therefore analyses a statement by President Trump himself as well as by the Heritage Foundation, the right-wing, Washington-based think tank that is allegedly “responsible for helping to craft Trump’s agenda [...]” (Shephard, 2017).

President Donald Trump specifically addressed Brexit, the UK and the EU on the official visit of British PM May to the US in January 2017. Therefore, the following section will firstly analyse Trumps remarks at the joint press conference of the two leaders on 27 January 2017 (UK Government, 2017). Secondly, the analysis turns to policy analysis and advice issued by the Heritage Foundation. More precisely, it takes into account all commentaries published by the think tank’s researchers in the first year of the Trump administration (January 2017-January 2018) which contain the words Brexit, Britain, UK or Europe in their titles (The Heritage Foundation, 2018).

The analysis will be carried out as a predicate analysis. This form of discourse analyses is particularly suitable for “the study of language practices in texts” (Milliken 1999: 231) such as speeches, diplomatic documents or commentaries and may be used for “analysing the social construction of space and political reasoning” (Milliken 1999: 232). Since discourses are systems of signification constructing social realities, the relationship in which terms are placed as well as the use of binary oppositions matter: They establish relations of power or hierarchies, confer actorness and order a person’s knowledge about the world (Milliken, 1999: 229–231; Weldes and Saco, 1996: 373). In this context, the language practices of predication, “the verbs, adverbs and

adjectives that attach to nouns” (Milliken, 1999: 232) are crucial as they construct the meaning, capabilities or character of the ‘things’ in the discourse. Moreover, “[...] in implicit or explicit parallels and contrasts, other things (other subjects) will also be labelled [...]. A set of predicate constructs defines a *space of objects* differentiated from, while being related to, one another” (Milliken, 1999: 232).

As Brexit fundamentally upsets the relationship between the UK and Europe, but also transatlantic relations, predicate analyses is a particularly promising tool for investigating the image of Brexit, the ‘new EU-27’ and transatlantic relations among the Trump administration. The following sections will investigate how President Trump and researchers from the Heritage Foundation as the think tank closest to the Trump administration connote the terms Brexit, Britain/UK and EU/Europe.

## 4.1. Trump

During the whole press conference with Prime Minister May (UK Government, 2017), President Trump mentions Europe only once, while he talks extensively about Brexit and the US’s special relationship with Britain. He maintains that the bond between Britain and the US “has never been stronger” and he sees “[g]reat days [...] ahead for our 2 peoples and our 2 countries”. To him, Brexit is a “wonderful thing” which allows Britain “to have your own identity”. Through Brexit, Britain becomes “free and independent” which is “a blessing to the world”. In Donald Trump’s view, Brexit was to be expected because “people want to know who’s coming into their country and they want to control their own trade and various other things”. He praises the British government as well as his own administration for being “responsive to everyday working people” and “represent[ing] their own citizens”.

This construction of Brexit and Britain however is revealing of Trump’s image of the EU. To him, Brexit is a forward-looking decision that any sensible nation must take to regain its identity and sovereignty. He thereby suggests that the EU is an anachronistic and all-powerful hegemon that commands her member states’ every action, subjugates them against their interest and the popular will and prohibits them to develop their own identity. In fact, the EU is treating its member states like children, watching over their every move. Britain, through the Brexit decision, has finally grown up and broken free of this domination. Generally, the EU is not responsive of “working people”, which Trump uses to signify the vast majority of the population, but an elite project that benefits few while subjugating the masses. In line with his populist ideology, he contrast the bad politicians “up there” in the EU, who are only concerned with themselves and who pursue their interests disregarding the majority to the good population as well as the good governments of the US and Britain who serve these people.

Moreover, the EU is an impediment on free trade, as it is bureaucratic and slow:

“getting the approvals from Europe was very, very tough. Getting the approvals from the country was fast, easy and efficient. Getting the approvals from the group – I call them the consortium – was very, very tough”

Especially his description of the EU as “the Consortium” captures our interest. A consortium is a *temporal* or even *short-term* association of companies who “pool their financial and human resources to undertake a large project that benefits all members of the group” (Business Dictionary, o.J.). By likening the EU to a Consortium, Donald Trump seems to express the view that the EU will not (and maybe was never meant to) endure long term. States, just as companies must always pursue their own interest, therefore the EU can only exist if it serves the interests of all the states that make up the European integration project. As the EU does not do this, the “Consortium” seems likely to disintegrate. In this perspective, Brexit “was an example of what was to come”: The exit of more and more member states and finally the end of the EU are to be expected.

All in all, Trump thus views the EU as a moribund project in agony which hinders national self-determination and free trade. The British vote to leave the EU can only have reinforced this impression and is used by Donald Trump as proof for his world-view. However, while it still exists, the EU also acts as a bully, both towards its members and in international trade. Its illiberal, expertocratic nature is alien to the freedom-loving, self-determined people of the USA and Trump’s



administration which styles itself as especially responsive and directed against political elites. Hence, the current US President holds a thoroughly negative picture of the EU which has been bolstered by the British exit from the Union.

## 4.2. Heritage Foundation

All eleven comments that the Heritage Foundation published on Europe, the UK and Brexit in the first year of Donald Trump's presidency underline and substantiate the EU image that we derived from Trump's press conference with Prime Minister May. Just as in Trump's remarks, the emphasis of most commentaries lies on Brexit and its positive effect on the UK-US relationship, however, the EU is always implicitly present as a foil from which the US and the UK are distanced. Those passages that refer directly to the EU reinforce this image.

While Brexit is repeatedly praised as a "tremendous opportunity" (Gardiner, 2017a; Bromund, 2017a, 2017b) and a development that will reinforce the special relationship between the EU and the UK (Bromund, 2017a), the authors invoke several negative images with regard to the EU. The Union is portrayed as (1) economically anti-liberal, (2) a subjugating power or even an oppressor, (3) an anti-democratic elite project, (4) a hypocrite, and (5) a status-quo, backward-looking power.

(1) The EU is portrayed as an impediment to free trade in two ways. Internally, it burdens its member states with "unnecessary regulatory impediments" (Abbot, 2017), thereby constraining these countries' economic vitality. Moreover, these externally imposed rules make it impossible for Britain and other European states to adopt their economies to future demands such as digitalization (Bromund, 2017b). Hence, the EU is "a hidebound, anti-growth body" (Gonzalez and Clark, 2018). Thus far, the UK, as a staunch defender of free trade, had improved the "most intrusive regulatory proposals handed down by EU bureaucrats in Brussels" (Abbot, 2017). With the Brexit decision, the UK has finally broken free of these bonds to "advance the cause of economic freedom" (Abbot, 2017). Externally, the EU hinders and discredits free trade when it presents itself as a promoter of a free market but in reality, maintains a highly protectionist policy in different areas, most strikingly in its agricultural policy. As a result, the EU is seen as an unfair player in world trade whom many Americans would like to give "one in the eye by doing a [free trade] deal with Britain" (Bromund, 2017a). Such a deal would be based on fairness, sovereignty and national interest and thus would benefit both the USA and the UK. By contrast, the economic relationship with the EU seems to be marked by dire competition and zero-sum games.

(2) However, the rules that the EU is alleged to impose on its member states extend well beyond the economy. The supranational body shackles its member states and denies them their sovereignty (Gardiner, 2017d). Theodore Bromund (Bromund, 2017b) alleges that the EU "has forced itself into every nook and cranny" of life in its member states, thereby giving the Union an almost totalitarian appeal. To be able to "lead again" (Gardiner, 2017b), Britain has to "extricate" (Gardiner, 2017a) itself from the EU's clutches. However, the EU, displaying a continued depreciation for national sovereignty (and democratic decisions, see 3 below), is trying with all her might to impede the realization of Brexit. The EU's bad faith, according to Nile Gardiner (Gardiner, 2017a), is easily apparent in the Brexit negotiations, where the European Commission has made "unacceptable demands". Interestingly, this representation suggests that it is solely the bureaucratic Commission, not the remaining member states, which is equated with the EU and held responsible for the EU's stance in the negotiations.

(3) It is the "centralized bureaucrats in Brussels" (Gonzalez and Clark, 2018), who, according to the image invoked by the Heritage Foundation, make the EU rules in an essentially anti-democratic fashion. Together with companies and the "political and media elite" (Gardiner, 2017b), they are the ones to profit from European integration. This small group of Europhiles egoistically promotes their private interest in the EU to the detriment of the "working class", which is to mean the vast majority. In that sense, the result of the British referendum was not surprising. If they were given the chance, Bromund (Bromund, 2017c) intimates, all sensible European peoples would opt for national sovereignty and control, i.e. for an exit from the EU. In an attempt to discredit the truly democratic British decision, the EU establishment, together with left-wing elites in the UK, portray Brexit as an outpour of narrow-mindedness, nationalism and populism. This image of the EU as an

irresponsible elite project which is a parasite on the hard working people of Europe, ties in perfectly with the populist ideology advanced by the Trump regime populist ideology (Mudde, 2004: 543). Trump has styled himself as a “man of the people” and promised to “drain the swamp” of political elites in Washington D.C. By its strong support for Brexit, the US administration claims to strengthen other peoples in driving out the elites that dominate and exploit them.

(4) Even with this blatant disregard for the popular will, the EU claims to be democratic. Just as the EU pays lip-service to free trade while implementing protectionist measures, it heralds democracy while being essentially anti-democratic, bureaucratic and elitist. Gonzalez and Clark invoke the example of Hungary to claim that the EU is even interfering with sovereign-democratic decisions taken by the people in a member state (Gonzalez and Clark, 2018). Yet, the EU’s alleged hypocrisy extends beyond democracy and trade and also applies to the EU’s commitment to internationalism and the fight against populism. On the one hand, as Bromund (Bromund, 2017c) maintains, the EU is herself responsible for the developments that she discredits as populism. These popular backlashes against it were to be expected, not least because the EU denies the vital power of a sovereign nation. On the other hand, European elites present themselves as internationalists morally superior to nationalists, while undertaking protectionist policies. “Being in favor of the EU is a way of virtue signaling that you are open-minded and liberal, even if in practice the EU is not” (Bromund, 2017b)

(5) Lastly, the texts contrast the optimistic, forward-looking and vitalizing decision of the British people with what they see as a statist and rigid EU (Bromund, 2017b). While Britain took a courageous and self-determined decision, the European elites fearfully cling to the status-quo, which they value more highly than freedom. As such, the EU manages decline and is essentially moribund: Brexit precipitates an “exciting new era” (Bromund, 2017a) of vital nation states that claim their sovereignty and free themselves from anachronistic shackles that have subdued them all these years and prevented the countries to pursue their legitimate national interest (Gardiner, 2017a). Indeed, Poland’s and Hungary’s recourse to their sovereignty and their respective stand-offs against the EU are taken as signs of this same development (Gardiner, 2017d; Gonzalez and Clark, 2018). Brexit shows “what’s right with” the West today (Bromund, 2017c).

Interestingly, the EU herself is never portrayed as a partner, but as a competitor, both in economic, political and military terms. The “development of an EU defense identity [... would] ultimately undermine NATO”, which is intergovernmental and therefore strongly supported by the USA (Gardiner and Kochis, 2017). The European states, according to the impression conveyed by Gonzalez and Clark (Gonzalez and Clark, 2018) or Gardiner (Gardiner, 2017c), must choose between subordination under and restraint by the EU or cooperation and friendship with the USA, which is based on national interest and freedom. Only the latter allows European states to realize their self-determination and to become leaders (Gardiner, 2017b, 2017c). As “[s]tronger European countries mean stronger allies for the U.S.”, the US must have an interest in the decline and disintegration of the EU (Gonzalez and Clark, 2018).

Taken together, these perceptions reveal a strongly Manichean view of the World: While ISIS is referred to as a common enemy only in passing, the emphasis is on dividing “the West” into a good and a bad part. The good part, comprising the US as “leader of the free world” and a post-Brexit Britain, cherishes sovereignty, democracy self-determination and freedom. The other part, namely the EU has perverted Western values. It preaches common interest and democracy, but in reality, it only serves a narrow elite while subjugating the population and sapping them of their vitality. The EU is the complete opposite of the US, while both compete for supremacy in the West. Their relations are essentially realistic, zero-sum power competitions.

## 5. Policy recommendations

How then should the EU react to such a negative and competitive perception of herself and the world? Seeing the realist conviction underlying the image of the EU held by Trump and his advisors of the Heritage foundation, any effort on the EU’s part to please the US seems to be in vain. It would even put her identity and her very existence in jeopardy. As has become clear from the analysis above, the US supports European disintegration, as it perceives this development to strengthen its own position in the world. While this perspective cherishes a prospective US-UK trade deal as

mutually beneficial, this preference for bilateral trade with individual European states rather than with the EU is certainly also motivated by the calculation that the US will have far greater bargaining power vis-à-vis individual states than the EU as a whole. In a competitive world of zero-sum games, where the US administration expects to gain when the EU loses, the Union must even beware of subversive action by the USA.

Although the EU does not share the realist convictions of the US administrations, it should thus be prepared for a US following a confrontational strategy. It should embrace this as an opportunity to develop its own foreign policy and a defence strategy less dependent on the US. Nevertheless, it should take some of the allegations of hypocrisy levelled by the US administration seriously (especially in the realms of economic policy, trade and human rights) as they present an Achilles heel which allows the US administration to campaign against the EU and to discredit the Union both with European states and around the world.

With regard to the Brexit negotiations in particular, the EU should negotiate in good faith, but not lose sight of its own vital interests. It should not be compelled to make a warning example of the UK in the hope of dissuading other member states from pursuing a similar course as this would bolster European and US-American resentments against the EU as an imperial power and would further alienate the member states from the European project. However, the EU should likewise avoid the impression that Brexit allows the UK to “cherry-pick” by continuing to profit from the EU’s (economic) opportunities while avoiding all the duties.

## **6. Conclusion**

For US President Donald Trump as well as the Heritage Foundation, Brexit confirms a worldview that abounds with clear black and white distinctions and allows for few areas of grey: In this world, the EU is the USA’s opposite number inside the West, a dire competitor whose losses and disintegration benefit the US. European states can choose between the fair leader of the free world who respects sovereignty and national interest and the unfair subjugation by the EU. The EU is anachronistic and moribund, because it is economically anti-liberal, an oppressor, an anti-democratic elite project, a hypocrite, and a status-quo, backward-looking power. It tries, with all its might, to suppress the natural strive to sovereignty which is awakening in the European states, by discrediting and bullying those who promote a renewed focus on national interest.

The US administration’s discourse as we gauged it in this paper expects Brexit to alter transatlantic relations by renewing and further strengthening the special relationship of the US and the UK. While much reference is made to the ability of these two states to lead the world, it has also become apparent that the US envisions a common adversary for this transatlantic bond: the EU. With Britain as its bridgehead in Europe, the US sees his position crucially strengthened and expects to entice more European states to turn their back on the European Union and to reorient themselves towards the US.

While the above analysis has thus been able to generate tangible insights into the perception of Brexit and the “new EU-27” in the US, from which recommendations for EU foreign policy could be derived, it remains narrow and tentative. The exclusive focus on President Trump’s remarks and the comments issued by “his” think tank (Kopan, 2016) not only excludes the images held by his political opponents, it also does not take into account a possible plurality of images within Trump’s cabinet. Further research should aim to tap these perceptions by analyzing statements of individual ministers or officials from the state department. Yet, due to the fact that Donald Trump has so far largely refrained from staffing central state department offices, including most ambassador positions, this last source might not be very fruitful.

Moreover, a differentiated analysis of perceptual patterns of US foreign policy elites would have to take into account remarks by foreign policy experts from the oppositional political and ideological camp, which is to say statements by Democrats in Congress as well as by democratic think tanks. Additionally, a study of economic elites would be interesting, given the great economic power of the EU and the intensive US-EU trade relationship. As the “cascade model” indicates, the media is a significant transmitter of foreign policy perceptions. Hence, future research should also

turn to news reporting both in the press and on TV to refine this analysis and to substantiate the EU foreign policy recommendations that flow from it.

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