

Could Brexit Leave the UK Vulnerable to Pressure from U.S. Hawks? Titanic Shift in Global Alliances

It's supposed to make Britain more independent. But it might put her at the mercy of Mike Pompeo's Iran policy.

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By unyoking London from Europe, a no deal Brexit would unleash a titanic shift in global alliances that could strengthen Washington's hand and help it achieve its "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran.

That's an ironic turn of events for populists in the United Kingdom, who support Brexit because it will allow the British people to determine their own fate.

But for some in Washington, Brexit represents a golden opportunity to negotiate with a United Kingdom unencumbered by Europe. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo admitted as much when he was asked whether our relationship with the UK will be strengthened by Brexit.

"I think it's the case," Pompeo said Thursday on the Hugh Hewitt Show. "We'll have a clear line with [the UK]. We won't have the EU as a middleman that has put constraints on our capacity to do lots of good things across not only the economic sector but the security sector and the diplomatic sector as well. ... I'm confident that that very special relationship will continue to grow."

Note that Pompeo specifically mentioned "the security sector" when listing how Brexit will help the U.S. That's of particular importance now because the Trump administration has been pressuring European nations to back its withdrawal from the Iran deal and reimpose sanctions on Iran. So far, they have been reluctant to do so.

In recent months, the [U.S. has claimed that Iran was responsible](#) for attacks on oil tankers in the Gulf of Oman and the Strait of Hormuz and the downing of an American surveillance drone. At [Washington's urging](#), the British Royal Navy seized an Iranian oil tanker entering the Mediterranean. The U.S. then unsuccessfully [maneuvered to prevent the UK from releasing the vessel](#).

After the government of then-prime minister Theresa May missed two deadlines to negotiate an exit deal with the EU, Prime Minister Boris Johnson was elected on a promise that he would finally deliver on the June 2016 referendum and withdraw the UK from the European Union, deal or no deal.

Johnson's [decision to suspend Parliament](#) last Wednesday makes the current Brexit deadline of October 31 look inevitable, because he has effectively reduced his opponents' ability to reverse the referendum via legislation by running out the clock.

Brexiters have long argued that London will have far greater freedom to negotiate its own trade pacts after it leaves the 28-nation European Union. But they may be in for a surprise: if Britain leaves the EU without a deal, it will likely find itself more susceptible to American leverage.

That's because, without an agreement, the UK will need to quickly secure a trade deal with the U.S. That deal is likely to come with strings attached—Washington may request that Britain take a harder line against Iran, or cooperates with efforts to squeeze Chinese telecom giant Huawei, which the U.S. deems a national security risk.

While it's still unclear how Johnson will navigate foreign policy, there are early indications that London will toe Washington's line.

In early August, Johnson's government agreed to join the U.S. in Operation Sentinel, a mission that's supposed to provide freedom of navigation for commercial shipping and "deter provocations" in the Strait of Hormuz, according to U.S. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper.

"The UK is determined to ensure her shipping is protected from unlawful threats and for that reason we have today joined the new maritime security mission in the Gulf," British Defense Minister Ben Wallace [told](#) reporters.

"The mission will see the Royal Navy working alongside the U.S. Navy to accompany merchant vessels through the Strait of Hormuz," the British government claimed in a statement, adding that British forces will play a "leading role" in the operation.

The UK also called for other governments to cooperate, labeling it a "truly international problem." In a sign that may presage trouble, the mission is already being "[rebranded](#)" in the hopes of encouraging more participation. So far, only Australia and Bahrain have joined in support.

The [possibility](#) that Brexit will force London will give in to Washington on foreign policy is being seriously considered by multiple European diplomats, British politicians, and foreign policy experts at the core of Brexit and Iran policymaking.

Undoubtedly aware of how Brexit will increase Washington's leverage, notorious Iran war hawk and Trump national security advisor John Bolton voiced the administration's full-throated support of even a no-deal Brexit, adding that "we are prepared to proceed as rapidly as the Brits are."

While Parliament is recessed, there is a [small window wherein Johnson's government could assist](#) in deescalating tensions with Iran. The UK could attempt to convince the Islamic Republic not to drastically exceed their agreed-upon uranium enrichment levels. That's what France and Germany are urging.

But if there's an irreparable break in talks with the EU, it's much more likely that Britain will find herself even more deeply wedded to the "special relationship" with the United

States—with all that entails for foreign policy.

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