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# Introduction:

## The European question, ten years on

Anton Spisak on the decade that has reshaped Britain but left its place in Europe unsettled.

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When David Cameron promised “a straight in-out referendum” on Britain’s membership of the EU in his 2013 Bloomberg speech, he said it would be “a time to settle the European question in British politics” once and for all. Three years later, on June 23<sup>rd</sup> 2016, the British people voted narrowly to leave the EU. It was a decision taken in a particular political moment: after the financial and eurozone crises, amidst anxiety over austerity politics and immigration, and against a backdrop of deepening public distrust in Westminster. Its consequences have outlasted the moment. Brexit has reshaped Britain’s economy, politics, constitution and place in Europe and the wider world.

This collection of short essays, written by our staff, members of our advisory board and friends of the CER, asks what leaving the EU means a decade after the divisive referendum – for Britain, for the EU and for the relationship between them. The answer is neither simple nor settled. Brexit has not produced the national renewal promised by its advocates. Nor has it caused a sudden rupture in Britain’s diplomatic and economic relationship with the EU. Its effects have been more cumulative, more structural and more difficult to reverse. They appear in the trade that has not happened, the investment that has not been made, the political attention that has been diverted from other issues, the constitutional tensions that have deepened, and the influence that Britain has lost as the rules-based world order has begun to fracture.

John Springford and I begin by looking at the economic costs. Brexit has not ruined the British economy, but it has lowered its growth path and reduced trade openness. Perhaps the most uncomfortable lesson is that, although the costs of separation have been substantial, recovering lost ground would require Britain to re-open difficult political debates about the meaning of sovereignty and the value of migration. David Lidington, a former cabinet minister who took part in the Brexit negotiations, widens

the lens to British politics. He argues that Brexit absorbed a decade of ministerial and parliamentary time without addressing the grievances that helped produce it. The vote to leave channelled popular anger at economic insecurity, democratic disconnection and immigration into the referendum outcome, but it did not resolve those underlying pressures. If anything, it deepened public frustration by consuming political energy that might otherwise have been used to confront Britain’s more acute social and economic problems.

Philip Rycroft and Catherine Barnard then turn to the constitutional and legal consequences of Brexit. Rycroft, former permanent secretary at the Department for Exiting the EU, shows how Brexit made the UK union more fragile while also making its break-up more complicated. Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to remain, yet were taken out of the EU; Northern Ireland became the place where the contradictions of Brexit had to be managed on the ground. Barnard, a leading scholar of EU law, shows that the UK may have recovered some formal autonomy from Brussels, but Brexit has not ended its relationship with EU law. Any closer future relationship will require renewed forms of alignment to EU rules. Sovereignty, as Barnard shows, has proved less absolute than was promised.

Peter Kellner, a leading pollster, examines the changing public mood. British voters increasingly regard Brexit as a mistake. But regret is not the same as a desire to rejoin, especially if re-entry would come on different terms than those of the UK's pre-2016 membership. The politics of Brexit have shifted, but they have not shifted far enough to revisit the fundamentals of Britain's post-Brexit settlement.

The next essays turn to security, defence and energy. Julian King, former EU commissioner and chair of the CER's board, shows how reduced security links since Brexit have made it harder to tackle terrorism and organised crime. Ian Bond, deputy director of the CER, argues that the external threats facing Britain and the EU have not diverged since 2016 – but being outside the room has reduced Britain's institutional access and ability to work effectively with its European allies. Nick Butler, an energy expert and former chair of the CER, makes a similar argument on climate and energy co-operation: physical interdependence and shared climate goals create a powerful case for closer partnership, even with Britain outside the EU. The challenge, across all these areas, is not whether closer ties are desirable – it is how to bring Britain closer to an institution that is not accustomed to accommodating a large country on its doorstep, let alone a former member-state.

The wider European and global context has changed too. David Miliband, former British foreign secretary, argues that Brexit weakened Britain, Europe and the West at precisely the wrong time: before Trump, before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and before today's more disorderly, transactional world had fully emerged. Nicolai von Ondarza, of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, shows that, for the EU, Brexit became one crisis among many. It did not lead to disintegration, and the EU has proved more resilient than many expected, even as Britain's absence has altered the balance of power within it.

The final essays look ahead. Nathalie Tocci, a leading Italian political scientist, warns that the

current 'reset' in relations may have reached its limits: not because it rests on wrong instincts, but because it lacks a clear political destination. Daniela Schwarzer, of the Bertelsmann Stiftung, argues for a more practical agenda focused on resilience and economic security as the starting point for a deeper partnership. Catherine Day, former secretary-general of the European Commission, supplies the necessary corrective to the British assumption that pragmatism alone can dissolve the asymmetry between a single country and a 27-member union. If Britain wants closer ties, Day argues, the EU will expect corresponding obligations; it will not weaken the logic of membership for the benefit of a country that chose to leave.

Charles Grant, director of the CER, closes by asking whether the immediate 'reset' in UK-EU relations can become something more than a modest exercise in repair. His essay cuts through easy optimism about closer ties: the EU has little incentive to offer Britain a bespoke deal, and Britain has not yet decided what it is prepared to accept in return. Without a clearer political choice, the closer relationship will remain out of reach.

The common thread running through these essays is that, a decade after the referendum that promised to settle Britain's 'European question', that question is anything but settled. Brexit has changed its form, not made it disappear. The old Leave-Remain argument may have lost its political force, but the grievances and strategic dilemmas behind it have not gone away. British politicians still need to rebuild trust in democratic politics, revive growth in a stagnant economy, defend their country's interests in a more hostile world and decide how much influence they are prepared to trade for autonomy. None of these issues can be answered by Europe alone. But none can be answered sensibly while treating Europe as peripheral in today's political and policy debates.

Proponents of leaving the EU offered 'control' as the answer to those questions in 2016. But control is not an end in itself – it is only useful if it enlarges a country's capacity to act.

The irrefutable lesson of the past ten years is that sovereignty is neither absolute nor costless. For a medium-sized economy next to a far larger market, it is constrained by geography, economic gravity and political necessity. Sovereignty is worth less when it is bought at the expense of economic uncertainty, political bandwidth and strategic influence.

A decade on, the task is not to replay the referendum, nor to pretend that the pre-2016 settlement can simply be restored. It is to accept that Britain has not yet settled what kind of European relationship it needs for the world it now inhabits. Britain's long-term interest may ultimately lie in rejoining the EU. But in the current political climate, that debate would risk reigniting old divisions and diverting attention from the more immediate challenges facing the country. What is needed now is a more honest assessment of the choices that lie between the status quo and membership: where closer alignment with EU rules is worth

the trade-offs, where autonomy still matters, and whether Britain can accept greater mobility with EU countries. British political leaders need to show their European partners that London understands the price of a closer relationship, and is prepared to make a serious case for it.

The EU, too, must draw a lesson from the past decade. If it is serious about becoming a geopolitical actor, it has a strategic and long-term interest in bringing the UK closer, even if that requires greater institutional flexibility. Defining the contours of a different, more ambitious partnership will require genuine political leadership and imagination – in London, in Brussels and across European capitals. That, surely, is the task for the decade ahead.

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