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Observatoire des Relations Extérieures du Monde Anglophone : géopolitique et diplomatie

The British presence in the Mediterranean: memory footprints and present-day challenges. La présence britannique en Méditerranée : traces mémorielles, défis actuels

🕒 5 juin 2018 📁 Billets, euroméditerranée/moyen-orient

The British presence in the Mediterranean: memory footprints and present-day challenges.

La présence britannique en Méditerranée : traces mémorielles, défis actuels

Valérie André and Matthew Graves (OREMA – LERMA, Aix-Marseille Université)

The resetting of the United Kingdom's relations with Europe in the aftermath of the June 2016 referendum is a time to reassess Britain's place on the southern seaboard of the continent, in the Mediterranean world past and present, viewed through the lens of critical geopolitics and geographies of memory. Taking its cue from Braudel's invitation to "see the Mediterranean as the window onto an alternative view of history" (1986, p.14), our research brief is to examine the vestiges of British cultural, diplomatic and strategic engagement in the region and assess their continuing (or diminishing) relevance in the 21st century in the context of the post-Cold War power shift to the East, the conflicts in the Near and Middle East, the Brexit process and the foreign policy ambitions of "Global Britain". We shall be asking what are the geopolitical perspectives for the post-Brexit British presence in the region and what are the foreseeable impacts on those countries within its traditional sphere of influence? Does Brexit herald a 'West of Suez' moment, a British retreat from the liquid continent on Europe's southern borders, or a re-engagement on new terms?

In his acclaimed trilogy *The Liquid Continent* (2010), the travel writer Nicholas Woodsworth perceives the Mediterranean not as "an empty space surrounded by Europe, Asia and Africa, [but] as a single entity, a place from whose coastlines people look not outwards, to this country or that capital, but inwards over the water to each other" (p.29). From that perspective, the United Kingdom may be said to be 'in' but not 'of' the Euro-Mediterranean region today. The vestiges of its imperial presence are to be found in the British Overseas Territories of Gibraltar and the sovereign bases of Cyprus, Akrotiri and Dhekelia, which bear witness to a perennial strategic interest in the Suez Canal that has far outlived the British Protectorate in Egypt, the British Mandate in Palestine, the crisis of 1956 and the retreat from 'East of Suez'. If the century-long British colony of Minorca is a forgotten detail of 18th century history, the Commonwealth War Graves cemeteries and memorials which stretch in an arc across the southern and eastern Mediterranean basin, from Algeria and Tunisia, Israel

and the Gaza strip, to the Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, mainland Greece and the Greek islands, are the footprints of First and Second World War memory. In 2015, the centennial of the Battle of Gallipoli became one of the keynotes of British and Commonwealth First World War centenary programmes and a multilateral venue for the 'soft' diplomacy of shared memory.

Today, the two other Commonwealth members of the European Union – The Republic of Cyprus and Malta – maintain close relations with Britain, and not just diplomatically: their citizens living in the UK are entitled to vote in British elections. The Mediterranean continues to be a preferred destination for British tourists (with some 15 million visits a year to Spain alone, 34 million to the Sunshine Seven), and there are substantial expatriate communities living in the countries along its northern coastline (notably Spain and France), part of the 1.3 million strong British EU diaspora that was partly and controversially denied a vote in the 2016 referendum and whose citizenship status is at stake in the Brexit negotiations alongside the rights of the 3 million EU citizens resident in the UK.

In the wake of the Eurozone debt crisis, the UK sought to distance itself from the region and the financial fallout from the failing "PIIGS", but in *Blue Water Empire: the British in the Mediterranean since 1800* (2012) Robert Holland argues that the Mediterranean as we know it is a British geopolitical construct: « If there has in modern times been a predominant instrument for integrating the Mediterranean as a single theatre, it was the British (...) It was the British presence (...) and the stability it provided, which made the region what an eminent historian in 1904 encapsulated as the 'keyboard of Europe' » (p.6). Is that presence still integrative, or is its displacement a factor of instability? Viewed from the North, the 'human flow' of the migrant crisis and the refugee crisis triggered by the wars in Syria, Iraq and Libya, and the trajectories of international terrorism with which populist European politics has been prompt to amalgamate them, point to the Mediterranean Sea as a southern 'gateway of risk' to the EU, far removed from its image as a tourist mecca. However, viewed from the South the liquid continent is a turnstile for the cross-border movement of goods, people and capital, from the visible flows of tourism and trade, to the invisible flows of international finance to and from the offshore centres of Cyprus, Gibraltar, and Malta. These low franchise zones have been contested as quasi-tax havens and magnets for money laundering which deserve to feature on the EU black or grey lists, while their offshore banking sectors have come under scrutiny for their public-private 'passports for investment' schemes and as alleged conduits of illicit campaign finance for the 2016 US presidential election and Brexit referendum. Yet, they feature in the Eurosceptic vision of a free-trading, tax friendly post-Brexit Britain, the so-called "Singapore of the North", as stepping stones on the Silk Road to the emerging markets of the Asian subcontinent, South East Asia and China.

The "Global Britain" narrative can be retraced to Margaret Thatcher's Bruges speech of 1992, long before it was adopted as a Foreign and Commonwealth Office policy brand, but its relentless promotion over two and a half decades of the Commonwealth as a viable economic and political alternative to the European Union, culminating in the organisation in 2015 of the Commonwealth Heads of Government summit in Valletta, has trained a spotlight on the place of the residual Commonwealth EU members and the Mediterranean BOTs in the brave new 'networked world' of a "truly Global Britain"; a country that aspires to be "the best friend and partner to our European neighbours, but a country that reaches beyond the borders of Europe too" (May, 2017). It is, perhaps, nowhere better illustrated than in Maltese PM Joseph Muscat's promotion of Commonwealth reform ahead of the 2015 Valletta Commonwealth Heads of Government summit (Muscat, 2014) and Malta's mediation in the Brexit negotiations between Britain and the European Commission, before the limits of the good offices of the then Commonwealth chair-in-office were exposed by the assassination on 16 October 2017 of the Panama Papers journalist and anti-corruption campaigner Daphne Caruana Galizia, raising "serious concerns" in the European Parliament over the rule of law, democracy and civil and political rights in Malta. Whether the passing of the chair to N°10 Downing Street at the rescheduled London CHOGM (16th-20th April 2018) will allow Teresa May's Conservative government to reboot the stalled reform agenda

and flesh out ‘the Commonwealth alternative’ to EU membership remains to be seen.

Some of the ambivalence over Brexit of the Commonwealth-EU states of the Mediterranean is mirrored in the BOTs of the region. EU-member Gibraltar is still a vital maritime base for the Royal Navy and NATO squadrons guarding the Straits, yet the UK’s decision to leave the EU has revived Spanish claims to sovereignty, while the 33,000 BOT citizens of the Rock voted by an overwhelming 95% majority to Remain. The prospects of the return of a hard border following the British exit are not restricted to Northern Ireland: Spain has already stepped up border controls and will have a say over whether any post-Brexit trade agreement applies to Gibraltar. If Gibraltarians voted 99% against shared sovereignty with Spain in 2002, the 2016 Brexit referendum has revived Spanish claims (and created a de facto community of interest between Gibraltar and the devolved governments of the UK – Scotland and Northern Ireland to the fore – in staying within the single market or the softest possible default option, including a second referendum (Benwell & Pinkerton, 2016). Herein lies the paradox of “taking back control”: if Brexit, like Devolution, is seen as a process rather than an event, involving political variables and national equations whose outcomes are uncertain, then the prospect of the erosion of the territorial integrity of the United Kingdom and its BOTs cannot be excluded.

In the eastern Mediterranean, the UK sovereign bases in Cyprus are legacies of the British colonial presence and the Cold War which have become forward air command centres for NATO forces engaged in the conflicts of the Near and Middle East in a resurgence of the Great Game involving powers old – Britain, France, the USA and Russia – and new: Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey. Against the backdrop of regional conflict and looming Brexit, the resolution of the continuing partition of Cyprus seems ever more remote (Dodds et al., 2015). That is unless the UK’s departure from the EU were to signal a more than rhetorical re-engagement in the region through the strengthening of traditional soft and hard power ties. The question then becomes whether by placing itself on the margins of Europe and redrawing its borders, while withholding support for EU maritime border control, Britain will be constrained to strategically reinvest the spaces of the *Mare Europaeum* and reverse the pattern of withdrawal since the later twentieth century?

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The day conference “The British presence in the Mediterranean: memory footprints and present-day challenges” was organised at Aix-Marseille University on 9 March 2018 by Valérie André and Matthew Graves for the OREMA and Critical Geographies seminars under the auspices of the LERMA research centre. Publication of the conference papers is pending.

