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Headaches of Empire: Brexit's Effect on the United States

By Binoy Kampmark
June 27, 2016

President Barack Obama, like other leaders who were taking the gruel of Brexit for his breakfast serving, did not react well to the referendum result. Over time, he has been unduly chiding in his manner, reproachful about the affairs of another country in how it would vote on its relationship with the European Union.

In April, Obama warned British voters that a trade deal with the United States would be a rather tough thing from outside the European Union. “It could be five years from now, 10 years from now before we’re actually able to get something done.”[1]

Whatever pretence the United States maintains about the equal order of states, sovereignty and its “special relationships,” traditional imperial values are powerful. Much of this has seeped sufficiently into the body politic of the US to make anything that seems like rebellious fracture in Europe seem dangerous.

The case for Britain’s exit from Europe has been treated as a dramatic blow against the imperium’s three main concerns on the continent: its own, fragile economic recovery, the broader trade agenda spearheaded with the EU, and matters of security.

The economic aspect got a jolt when the collaring markets, ever the deities to be worshipped by major capitals of the globe, did their stuff in wiping off \$2 trillion in value on Friday. “I must

say,” conceded Vice President Joe Biden, “we had looked for a different outcome. We would have preferred a different outcome.” Never spook the markets, especially with daft notions of democratic practice.

Another spoiler for the Obama administration lies in the chances to get the much vaunted yet problematic Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership Act between the EU and the United States done by January. Things already seemed rather mucked given the growing hostility to the deal on both sides of the pond. It has dawned on some European lawmakers that the TTIP is less a citizen’s charter than that of a corporation’s.

Obama’s insistence here has been to keep stand by previous statements that Brexit would lead to a banishment of Britain to the back of the negotiating queue. White House spokesman Eric Schultz reiterated the point immediately after the vote. “Obviously, the president stands by what he said and I don’t have an update of our position.”[2] Bad children who openly disregard the wishes of their teachers tend to find themselves at the back of the classroom.

As for the security agenda, Britain’s suggested exit is being treated as the disengagement of a valuable, pro-US partner on the continent. Fanciful observations have been made that Washington will look with keener interest to Berlin and Paris. Senator Ben Cardin of Maryland on the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations urged that, “We... maintain our trans-Atlantic consensus on how to deal with a resurgent Russia and the growing threat of ISIS.”[3]

For decades, having Britain in European arrangements was tantamount to Rome having faithful Greeks in its foreign policy. The point had been made by former British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan during the North African campaigns of the Second World War.

Britons would become the modern Greeks of future US administrations. “We are Greeks in this American empire... We must run the Allied Forces HQ as the Greeks ran the operations of the Emperor Claudius” (*Sunday Telegraph*, Feb 9, 1964).

Sensing an aspect of this facet unravelling, the Mayor of Moscow Sergei Sobyenin suggested that Britain’s exit from European arrangements meant one less voice on the anti-Russia bandwagon. “Without the UK, there will be nobody in the EU to defend sanctions against Russia so zealously.”[4] Other European countries had been less than enthusiastic to impose sanctions on the Kremlin. Not Britain, egged on Washington.

Andrei Klepach, deputy chairman of the Russian State Development Bank Vneshekonombank (VEB), went so far as to make a prediction at this detachment from the European bloc. Brexit might well provide changes for “good potential for growth in the value of securities” that would benefit the Russian economy.[5]

There remains a conspicuous fear in the US Republic that civilization must be a centralising endeavour. Smaller states only matter if they are wedged into a series of agreements and arrangements with an overseeing hegemon. The hegemon dictates the measures to be taken, even if they may be cushioned by promises of good relations and a false sense of autonomy.

While Donald Trump has been dismissed as a lunatic on this subject, amongst others, his statements about the way Obama behaved on Britain's referendum were relevant. Was it the business of a US president to tell the British voter how to go about his or her business? No. A close ally of empire, and the US project in Europe, had flown the coop.

Notes.

[1] <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/apr/24/leave-campaign-obama-trade-warning-eu-referendum>

[2] <http://www.euronews.com/2016/06/25/obama-stands-by-back-of-queue-warning-on-post-brex-it-uk-trade-deal/>

[3] <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-britain-eu-usa-biden-idUSKCN0ZA24G>

[4] <https://twitter.com/@MosSobyanin>

[5] http://www.themoscowtimes.com/arts_n_ideas/news/article/russia-reacts-to-brex-it-referendum/573389.html