

# ISAS Brief

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## Two ‘Brexit’ – The First, 70 Years Ago

*The tale of two ‘Brexit’ – the first when imperial Britain retreated from the Indian sub-continent in 1947, and the second when the British electorate has now voted for London’s exit from the portals of the European Union – is replete with similarities and differences. The 2016 Brexit is proving to be as messy as the one from India in 1947. Britain left India divided into two parts. National disintegration may also follow the 2016 move, this time in the United Kingdom. Migration is another parallel. The 1947 Brexit generated a vast wave of migration involving as many as 14 million people; the UK’s move out of the EU now may also result in a migration wave, albeit not on the same scale. In 1947, Britain left the Indian subcontinent in a mess; this time the mess will be in Britain itself.*

Shahid Javed Burki<sup>1</sup>

This is not the first time Britain is exiting from a political arrangement. It had happened before, the first one almost seven decades ago. In his book, *Shameful Flight*, the historian Stanley Wolpert chronicled the earlier exit in 1947 when Britain hurriedly pulled out from the Indian

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sub-continent.<sup>2</sup> There are some similarities and some obvious differences between the earlier exit and the one that has begun after the referendum held on 23 June 2016. Then, Britain was pushed out by the Indian nationalist movement that had consequences not only for British India but across the world in general. Gandhi's "Quit India movement" inspired Martin Luther King Jr., the African-American leader to use non-violence in his campaign for winning equality for his race within his country's highly restricted and exclusive political system. The latest Brexit is also based on nationalism but one that promotes exclusion rather than inclusion. Most of the inspiration for it came from those who were worried about the cultural dilution, through immigration, of what were seen as British values. This was also one form of nationalist expression.

British colonialism in India began with the entry into the country of the East India Company that had been given a charter by the government in London to have the exclusive rights to trade with India. The sub-continent then was ruled by the Moghuls. The company brought its own army, and slowly overcame resistance from a variety of native rulers to found what came to be known as the jewel in Britain's colonial crown. The Indian effort to push the British out, in fact, began even before Gandhi's "swadeshi movement" or "Quit India movement". In 1857 some soldiers in the fledgling East India Army rebelled against their British commanders, thus staging what the Indian historians have called the War of Independence but their British counterparts refer to as the Great Indian Mutiny. Some analysts such as Shekhar Gupta, a former editor-in-chief of *The Indian Express* have traced their country's abiding suspicion of foreign enterprises to the fact that Britain entered India via a company. "We were colonized by a multi-national company so we were suspicious of foreign capital", he says.

The current Brexit is the result of a referendum; the one from India was the consequence of a combination of several factors. Among them was the costly participation of Britain in the Second World War which economically weakened London. Also contributing was Gandhi's campaign that increased his peoples' distrust of Britain and its representatives in New Delhi and dozens of provincial capitals. "If you had a referendum back then, India would have been 100 percent for Brexit out of India", Sanjaya Baru, a one-time spokesman for India's former Prime Minister

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<sup>2</sup> Stanley Wolpert, *Shameful Flight: The Last Years of the British Empire in India*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2006.

Manmohan Singh told *The New York Times*. “It is true the British detest the dour bureaucrats sitting in Brussels but that is nothing compared to the anger back then against the white man in India”.<sup>3</sup>

The 2016 Brexit is proving to be as messy as the one from India in 1947. There are two parallels between the two moves. In 1947, Britain left India divided into two parts. Less than a quarter century later these two became three when in 1971 Bangladesh gained independence from Pakistan. National disintegration may also follow the 2016 move. Nicola Sturgeon, Scotland’s first minister, raised the prospect of a Scottish veto on Britain’s departure. Scotland voted with a 62 percent majority in favour of remaining in the European Union; Ms Sturgeon affirmed that Scotland should stay in the EU even if that meant leaving the United Kingdom. She said she would call another referendum in Scotland to determine its political future. Northern Ireland, another part of the United Kingdom, also voted against leaving the EU. The June 2016 vote, therefore, may result in split of the UK into its constituent parts.

Migration is another parallel between the two moves. The 1947 Brexit generated a vast wave of migration involving as many as 14 million people; eight million moved into Pakistan from India and six million went in the opposite direction.<sup>4</sup> The UK’s move out of the EU now may also result in a migration wave as those from other European nations who had gone to Britain may decide to move back. The scale of this move, however, will not be as large as the one in 1947.

In 1947, Britain left the Indian subcontinent in a mess; this time the mess will be in Britain itself. The first series of actions by London following the referendum suggest that the British Government is in no great hurry to leave the EU. To do so it must invoke Article 50 of the Treaty of Rome, the EU’s governing instrument. Its guidelines for severing ties provide a two-year window for deliberations. But nothing in the Treaty requires Britain to invoke this Article until it chooses to do so, since it remains a full member with all privileges until it quits. But London at first seemed inclined to drag its feet which caused some irritation among other members of the EU. The Union’s six founding States – Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands – called an emergency meeting of foreign ministers and sent a tough message to

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<sup>3</sup> Geeta Anand, “Indians recall the tougher ‘Brexit’” *The New York Times*, June 26, 2016, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> These estimates were made by the author while he was a graduate student at Harvard University, and were presented by Shahid Javed Burki in his *Pakistan Under Bhutto, 1971-77*, London Macmillan, 1980.

London. “I do not understand why the British Government needs until October [2016] to decide whether to send the divorce letter to Brussels”, wondered Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission. “I would like it immediately. It is not an amicable divorce, but it was not an intimate love affair”.

The European leaders wanted the separation process to begin quickly and to be concluded with some speed. Prolonged, it would encourage other EU-doubters to gain political strength in their own nations. According to one assessment, the British decision to leave could “lead to the destruction of the most ambitious political projects since the Holy Roman Empire. Euroskeptics across the continent are salivating at the prospect of Britain’s departure, hoping to sever their own territories from a map that stretches from the sunny coasts of Portugal to the frigid taiga of Finland. With populist parties urging across the continent, the Brits could be only the first to leave”.<sup>5</sup> Doubts were being raised even among the original six. An Ispos Mori poll conducted in May 2016 had found that 55 percent of the French voters and 58 percent of Italian voters wanted referenda of their own. A survey by the Pew Research Center found that 61 percent French people had negative views on the EU compared with only 48 percent in Britain.

Many European leaders wanted to impose tough divorce terms, in part because they feared that making it too easy would embolden their own Eurosceptic voices. “In is in, out is out”, German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schauble told the newsmagazine *Der Spiegel*. He seemed to rule out the possibility that Britain could retain tariff-free access to EU nations following its exit. Bringing tariffs back would cause great hurt to several sectors of Britain’s economy. For instance, almost a third of all cars sold in Britain – or 810,000 – were manufactured in Germany. And of the almost 1.6 million cars manufactured in Britain in 2015, 1.2 million were exported, many to Europe. Soon after the British voters had left the polling booths, it was clear that they had, in fact, launched a move that could devastate their country and seriously hurt the world economy.

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Birnbaum and Anthony Farolo, “If Britain leaves E.U., is a Frexit to follow,” *The Washington Post*, June 21, 2016, pp. A1 and A7.