

Exit the EU? What Britain should be asking

A June referendum on whether Britain should stay in the European Union has focused mainly on the economic impact

Britain will decide in a June 23 referendum if it should stay in the European Union. The coming vote has stirred a debate mainly focused on whether a British exit ("Brexit") would affect its economic interests, such as London's global financial prowess or a sizable trade with the Continent.

Largely left out of the debate so far is whether Britain would be better able to contribute more to the world by being outside the EU rather than in it.

The country may no longer be the great power it once was. But Britain cannot ignore the influence for good it still commands, whether in culture or as an international hub for innovation, commerce, and travel. It must choose wisely which of the many "clubs" of nations now available will help expand its influence in shaping global values.

Focusing only on narrow na-

tional interests in the debate is to ignore how much the rest of the world expects Britain to lead as a moral force.

Leaving the EU

Prime Minister David Cameron, whose Conservative Party is split on the issue, used the threat of leaving the EU to negotiate better terms for Britain within the bloc, such as fewer benefits for migrants from other EU countries. He now favors a "yes" vote on staying in the Union.

And he asks voters to consider how their strategic choice will bring the "most influence on the rules that shape the global economy and affect us."

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Such attraction is often called "soft power."

At least two global surveys have ranked Britain, along with Germany and the United States, as the highest in such influence. The measures range from democratic institutions to quality of universities to cultural icons.

For Britain, the latter ranges from Shakespeare to "Downton Abbey" to Adele.

Most international groupings of nations are defined along shared interests.

Established institutions

To compete with the established institutions, such as NATO or the International Monetary Fund, China and Russia have tried to form new clubs, usually with other regimes.

China has just started the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Russia has the Eurasian Customs

Union. Then there is the BRICS, a loose club that includes Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, which is trying to define a non-Western approach to global governance.

In today's world of shifting alliances and pacts, Britain has never had so many choices for partners, some united mostly by interests, others aimed to promote values.

The EU is just one club, and one beset with problems of economic growth, mass migration, and high debt.

Yet it is also very open to reform, as Britain itself has shown in negotiating a new deal.

As it prepares to vote on leaving the EU, Britain must ask where it can do the most good as well as ask which "club" can do the most good for it.

(Source: The CSIS)

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