

The 5 routes a British exit from the EU could take

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The dispute between Britain and most of the rest of the EU about the [appointment of Jean-Claude Juncker](#) as President of the European Commission has once again raised the question of whether Britain will leave the EU, AKA a 'Brexit'. While most discussion focuses on whether or not Britain will leave the EU, less attention has been paid to how a Brexit might happen in practice. There are five ways it could come to pass. They (...) raise questions about what exactly being 'out' of the EU means.

First, the most commonly assumed route a Brexit is expected to take is via a nation-wide referendum that ends with a result supporting withdrawal.

Following the result the British government and EU would spend no more than two years negotiating Britain's withdrawal and the framework for a new post-withdrawal EU-UK relationship.

Whether a referendum can settle the Europe question in British politics [is another matter](#). The issue of Europe is about more than whether or not Britain should be in the EU.

The second option open to the UK is for the British Government to take the leap of a unilateral withdrawal backed only by a vote of the House of Commons.

Under international law there is nothing - in theory - to stop Britain unilaterally withdrawing from an international organisation such as the EU.

This, however, is a [largely academic exercise](#). Refusing to negotiate, or denying the British people a say on such a momentous decision, would lead to an avalanche of political, legal and economic problems.

A unilateral leap is, however, more plausible than the third possibility which is the EU expelling Britain. There is [next to nothing](#) the EU can do to expel a member. Any attempt at expulsion would also require unanimous agreement by the rest of the EU, no easy feat in itself.

Fourth, rather than directly expelling Britain the rest of the EU could resort to trying to [freeze Britain out](#) by making its life in the EU suitably uncomfortable. Just as confrontation with an unwanted and unhappy guest can be avoided by making them feel so uncomfortable that they leave of their own accord, so too might the rest of the EU feel it would be easier to make things so uncomfortable that Britain leaves the EU of its own accord.

Freezing Britain out would lead to Britain going down the route of either a referendum or a unilateral withdrawal.

Finally, a Brexit could come about thanks to a divide between the UK and EU opening up as parts of the latter - mainly the Eurozone - develop in ways that leave Britain isolated in some outer tier. In this case it is not Britain that leaves the EU, but the EU that leaves Britain behind.

These five possibilities, each complex and unprecedented, all beg the question of what being 'outside' the EU means. However Britain or the EU were to part company, they cannot then pretend the other does not exist. Britain will remain a major European power, its population expected to overtake Germany's in the next 20-30 years. Similarly, unless there is some catastrophic failing of the Eurozone and disintegration of the Union, the EU will remain Europe's predominant political organisation. Brussels will be the lodestar for much of pan-European politics, economics and security (if not military security). Britain will spend a large amount of its time looking towards the EU star.

A referendum or unilateral withdrawal cannot compel the EU to give Britain what it wants beyond an official withdrawal.

At the same time, expulsion or exclusion would not solve the longer-term problem for the EU of how to deal with Britain.