

UK Prime Minister May silent on war threats against Spain over Gibraltar

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Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May has refused to condemn the comments by Michael Howard that her government would be prepared to go to war with Spain over Gibraltar.

Howard, a former Conservative Party leader, was responding to the European Union's (EU) stipulation that any deal reached by the British government over the terms of its withdrawal from the EU, would not apply to Gibraltar—a British Overseas Territory—without Spain's agreement.

Invoking Margaret Thatcher's 1982 war against Argentina over the Malvinas/Falkland Islands—another British Overseas Territory—Howard said, “Thirty-five years ago this week another woman Prime Minister sent a taskforce half way across the world to defend the freedom of another small group of British people against another Spanish-speaking country, and I am absolutely certain our current Prime Minister will show the same resolve in standing by the people of Gibraltar.”

His statement was made just four days after May triggered Article 50, officially beginning Britain's two years of negotiations on the terms of its withdrawal from the EU. Asked later if he was “seriously suggesting” going to war with Spain, Howard said, “Of course not,” but added, “I can see no harm in reminding them what kind of people we are.”

Upping the ante, Rear Admiral Chris Parry, a former director of operational capability at the Ministry of Defence, threatened, “We could cripple Spain in the medium term and I think the Americans would probably support us too.”

“Spain should learn from history that it is never worth taking us on and that we could still singe the King of Spain's beard.”

Gibraltar, a 6.7 square kilometre territory on the

southern tip of Spain, was seized by Britain in 1704. With just 30,000 residents, it is an important military base controlling the entrance and exit to the Mediterranean and a tax haven that is home to 500 financial services companies.

At a lobby briefing Monday morning, a spokesperson for May—who was en route to Jordan for trade talks—said that while the dispatch of a British taskforce to Gibraltar “isn't going to happen,” Howard had been trying to prove the UK's “resolve” on the issue. Speaking to journalists later, May herself attempted to laugh off questions as to whether the UK was prepared to declare war on Spain. The UK was “sitting down and talking” to the EU about the “best possible deal” over Brexit that would apply to its overseas territories.

At the meeting of EU Foreign Ministers in Luxembourg, Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson—who had said the UK would stand by Gibraltar “like a rock”—stressed again the British commitment to its “sovereignty.”

Statements by Gibraltar's chief minister, Fabian Picardo, made clear that it is not sovereignty that is at issue, but the territory's demand that it must not be excluded from any terms finally agreed between the EU and the UK. Writing in the pro-Brexit *Daily Express*, Picardo thundered that the EU's decision to give Spain a veto over Gibraltar's “participation in any future UK/EU trade deal is a betrayal of historic proportions...”

Spain's Foreign Minister, Alfonso Dastis, said that the minority conservative Popular Party government was “a little surprised by the tone of comments coming out of Britain, a country known for its composure,” and that “someone in the UK is losing their cool and there's no need for it.”

Gibraltar's border with Spain would not be closed

after Britain quit the EU, he said. Spain's government sought only "a balanced, reasonable and thorough deal," regarding workers' rights and immigration. London is demanding an end to free movement as one of the terms of its divorce, under conditions in which more than 13,000 Spaniards cross Gibraltar's border to work each day—representing 40 percent of the workforce.

The European Commission has traditionally maintained a neutral position on conflicting Spanish/UK claims to Gibraltar. However, with Britain leaving the EU a diplomat told the *Guardian*, "Now we are going to support the member state."

Several Tories, including prominent supporters of the Leave campaign during the referendum have called for calm. Conservative Member of the European Parliament Daniel Hannan tweeted, "Spain is a NATO ally, for Heaven's sake." But a faction of the pro-Brexit campaign are pressing for an even harder line from May in the EU negotiations, using Britain's military and intelligence capabilities as a weapon. May's letter triggering Article 50 warned that if the UK did not get its demands, it "would mean our co-operation in the fight against crime and terrorism would be weakened."

Should this fail, they insist that Britain should end all negotiations with the EU. As Parry's statements make clear, they calculate that, in doing so, they would have the support of US President Donald Trump, who backed Brexit and has spoken in favour of the EU's break-up as a German-dominated economic competitor to the US.

Breitbart London carried an op-ed by Ted Malloch under the heading, "Brexit Is a Fait Accompli and Europe's Acrimonious Attitude Should Be Toned Down." Malloch, touted as a leading candidate to be Trump's ambassador to the EU, backed Brexit, has supported referendums in other EU countries to quit, has said the euro will collapse and, equating the bloc with the Soviet Union, described it as "another union that needs a little taming."

Brexit "is no longer up for discussion," he wrote, and, as Britain is a "sovereign, democratic country," it alone should decide its future. In contrast, "The European Union is not a cohesive sovereign state. These are matters of fact, not politics.

"Transforming the current international organization

known as the European Union into a proper sovereign entity is the declared aim of many figures in the European institutions ... it remains to be seen whether it can garner democratic support as an idea among the countries they wish to turn into sub-sovereign entities."

Writing in the *Telegraph*, Norman Tebbit, an arch Thatcherite, warned that Gibraltar is a "vital Western strategic interest" and he doubted "President Trump would see it as in the interests of the US for 'the Rock' to fall out of British hands. Already the Trump administration is questioning for how long it can maintain its commitment to the Nato guarantee that an attack on any one member state would be regarded as an attack on all while only the Americans and British are willing to fulfil their commitment to spend 2 percent of GDP on defence. We might therefore not be without allies in this matter."

Responding to Spain's suggestion that it would not block Scotland's application for membership of the EU, should a second referendum on its independence from the UK prove successful, Tebbit suggested "inviting leaders of the Catalan independence movement to London, or even to raising their desire for independence at the United Nations." The "Catalans are different from the Spanish," he wrote, as they "are an outward-looking Atlanticist people..."

Two years ago, Spain signed an agreement with the US making permanent its military base in the southwest of the country. The air and naval base is considered a strategic hub for NATO, and is playing a key role in Trump's declared war against Islamic State, especially in Iraq and Libya.

Earlier this month, Spain's defence minister, Maria Dolores de Cospedal, pledged to meet Trump's demands that all European countries contribute to spending 2 percent of their GDP on defence. However, this would not be until 2024. A possible factor in the bellicose statements emanating from London is to thwart any possibility of Spain, following Brexit, replacing the UK as a key ally of the US in Europe.



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