

# Benjamin Freeland

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On February 1, 2020 the United Kingdom officially parted ways with the European Union — exactly one year after the EU signed a historic free trade agreement with Japan. Could it be that since the UK announced its intention to divorce from Europe in mid-2016 that Brussels has been on the dating scene with a very specific “type” in mind: a large, economically prosperous island nation with a checkered imperialist past and an awkward relationship with “the continent”?

If so, it most definitely found one — one with better manners and decidedly superior food to boot. Which is why I think Europe should “go all the way” with Japan and invite it to take the UK’s place in the European Union, and that Japan should accept this offer.

First, a disclosure. This writer, for personal reasons, has been profoundly annoyed with the British people over Brexit since their stupid June 2016 vote. Thanks to my freak birth in New England (in South Kingstown, Rhode Island to be specific) and my father’s origins in Olde England, I have the odd distinction of having triple citizenship. My US citizenship has never been of much consequence to me other than giving me an extra jolt on September 11, 2001 when upon seeing the planes strike the Twin Towers on television I immediately began worrying about being drafted.

My UK citizenship is another matter. I used to be the proud owner of a beautiful crimson European Union passport, which I happily deployed on several occasions at Heathrow Airport customs and immigration, and I once had every intention of leveraging my “European citizenship” to take a teaching position in Spain or Denmark or somewhere else equally enticing on the continent.

That dream officially ended on February 1 of this year when the United Kingdom formally walked out of Brussels without wiping its feet.

Geopolitical separations are almost always awful. I remember when Canada came within a hair of divorce in 1995 when Québec nearly voted to go its own way, a subject I’ve written about at great length elsewhere. The dissolution of Yugoslavia culminated in a human tragedy unseen in Europe since the defeat of the Third Reich, while Czechoslovakia’s “Velvet Divorce”, while nowhere near as disastrous as the Balkan mess, led to the decade-long retrograde autocracy of Slovak Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar and a developmental lag behind the Czech Republic that Slovakia has yet to fully overcome, although both countries are now together again within the EU family.

Going further back in history, Japan’s withdrawal from the League of Nations over the former’s full annexation of Manchuria in 1931 set the stage for the Pacific War. In Japan’s defence, the western powers at the heart of the League were being more than tad hypocritical in their excoriation of Japan given their own stubborn commitment to occupying stolen real estate in India, Algeria, Indochina and elsewhere, and as the primary “nonwhite” player in the League (together with Ethiopia) Japan was effectively as a second-class member of the predecessor to the United Nations. Nevertheless, Tokyo’s decision to pull out of the League was the latter’s downfall, setting the stage not only for war in the Pacific but for World War II generally.

Then in 1947 we had the mother of all messy geopolitical divorces: the partition of India. As horrible as the various wars that gripped the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s were, these were mere squabbles compared to the renting asunder of South Asia, which resulted in the deaths of between 200,000 and 2 million people—and that’s not including the similarly catastrophic death toll that resulted from former East Pakistan’s war of independence in the early 1970s to become the now-independent Bangladesh, which was a direct result of the initial India-Pakistan split. In an apocryphal tale I once read, Joseph Stalin supposedly opined on his deathbed that if history were truly fair, the late British prime minister Clement Attlee would go down in it as a greater murderer than the Soviet leader given his central role in the mass genocides that resulted from Partition.

The one exception to this rule of geopolitical divorces being uniformly bad is the one other case where a country pulled out of the European Union: Greenland, or Kalaallit Nunaat as it is known to its Indigenous population. While still technically a territory of the Kingdom of Denmark, Greenland achieved Home Rule in 1979 and was granted further autonomy in 2009, making its current status comparable to pre-1982 Canada in its relationship with Westminster. As Greenland was never geographically or culturally European (its people sharing a close kinship with Canada’s Inuit), its departure in 1985 from the European Economic Community (as the EU was then called) made perfect sense, and as this was well before the adoption of the euro as common currency, its departure from the fold was far less disruptive than it might otherwise have been. (Donald Trump has since tried to purchase Greenland, of course, and while the offer was ridiculous for any number of reasons, it would have been fun to hear him try to pronounce Inuit names like “Kalaallit Nunaat”, “Kangerlussuaq”, and so on.)

The United Kingdom’s breakup with the EU, by contrast, still seems pointless and heartbreaking, not the least of which because it may yet set the stage for another divorce, namely that of the staunchly pro-EU Scotland from the kingdom of which it has been part since 1603 when James VI of Scotland moved into Buckingham and became James I of “Great Britain and Ireland”. Europe, we were told (by people like Bono on the *Achtung Baby* and *Zooropa* albums) was coming together as a big party, and as a twenty-something in the era of a happily united Europe, I was excited to be a potential invitee to that party. Now that dream is over.

Of course I didn’t end up going to Europe. As someone who reliably takes the harder, less well paved road, I ended up eschewing the express lineup at Heathrow in favour of the slow-moving *gaikokujin* lineup at Narita and a six-year sojourn in Japan, a country that still feels like my second home. Despite my triple citizenship, I ended up settling in a country where I was not only not a citizen but one where it is notoriously difficult to *become* a citizen. I do know several non-Japanese migrants to the country who have become officially Japanese (including one friend who is now an elected public official), but this is a commitment akin to doing a PhD and not something I was prepared to do.

I am now back on the frozen *terra firma* of Canada, and, thanks to ascendancy Boris and Butthead, I truly no longer have any interest in being British or American. In fact I have never felt more patriotic as a Canadian, and have no desire for any passport other than my bilingual navy blue Canadian passport. As of February 1, I felt I was now exclusively Canadian, and while I realize my republican yearnings make me a minority in my own country, I do dream of a day where we Canadians formally do away with the Queen (or King) of England as official head of state.

That said, there's something about the European Union that I find a bit unsettling. Over 60 years have passed since the Treaty of Rome brought the European Economic Community into effect in 1958 and we're still left with the question of what exactly Europe is. While Turkey's exclusion from the Union seems increasingly reasonable given its current leader's dictatorial tendencies, in the past the EU's resistance to the Turkish candidacy seemed more a product of cultural and religious bigotry and a sense that the country wasn't truly "European", while Greece—an economic basket case at the time of its accession—was fast-tracked to membership.

## What the hell is Europe anyway?

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Where does Europe end and Asia begin? The Russians draw the line at the Ural Mountains while the Turks do so at the Bosphorus Strait. The former Soviet republics of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Kazakhstan are, like Russia and Turkey, considered "transcontinental" countries spanning the Europe-Asia divide, while France, Portugal, the Netherlands, Spain, and the United Kingdom, by virtue of their overseas "dependencies" are also technically transcontinental.

(If you really want to stump your friends at geographical trivia, ask them about Brazil's land border with France, which technically exists in the form of the former's border with French Guiana — which remains to this day a full-fledged *département* of the French Republic.)

If we're talking about Europe as a racial or ethnic homeland for "white people" (an increasingly problematic concept), one would have to draw the boundaries much further than this so as to include Afghanistan and northern Pakistan, whose indigenous Dardic and Nuristani ethnicities are unambiguously "Caucasian" in appearance. In terms of language, Europe's predominantly Indo-European-speaking population shares common linguistic roots with the Iranian and Indo-Aryan languages, making the likes of Nepal and Bangladesh "European" while excluding the Hungarians, Finns, Estonians, Maltese, and the Basque minority of Spain and France, all of whom speak non-Indo-European languages.

If one counts Russia, whose population is over 80 percent Slavic, as a European country, Europe stretches all the way to East Asia and beyond, while sharing land borders with China, Mongolia, and North Korea and being visible from parts of northern Japan. Cities like Khabarovsk and Vladivostok, while unquestionably Asian geographically, are every bit as culturally European as Moscow or St. Petersburg, while parts of western "European" Russia are home to decidedly non-European ethnic minorities like the Kalmyks, a distinctly Asiatic minority in southwestern Russia who speak a Mongolic language and practice Tibetan-style Buddhism.

European Russia is also home to other ethnic minorities who, while definitely European "looking", are thoroughly Islamic culturally, such as the Chechens, Ingush, and Adyghe, making them seem more "foreign" to most Europeans than the Slavic-speaking, predominantly Orthodox Christian Russians living in the Russian Far East. If nothing else, this complicated cultural, religious, and geopolitical picture makes the distinction between Europe and Asia seem all the more arbitrary and meaningless.

Furthermore, how "European" is Europe itself these days? If Christianity is a defining benchmark for European identity, then countries like France, Denmark, Finland, and Estonia are barely European anymore given the low levels of religious observance in these countries, while countries like France,

Germany, the Netherlands, and others continue to become less white by the decade. German youths today are rather more likely to be listening to hip hop and reggae than to Bach or Wagner, while France is now home to the world's second-largest hip hop music industry after the United States.

Meanwhile, countries adjacent to Europe in North Africa and elsewhere are arguably becoming more European in their identity. If *café* culture, soccer, and boisterous multiparty democracy are the heart and soul of European identity, then Israel, Lebanon, and Tunisia would have to be included, and once Iran tosses off its awful corrupt theocracy, it too could make a case for European family inclusion — especially given the Persian Empire's massive imprint on Greco-Roman civilization.

Given that the line between Europe and Not Europe is so ambiguous as to be practically meaningless, wouldn't it be fun if a country like Japan were to try to take the UK's place in the EU? Why should Japan be excluded given that its land area sits a stone's throw from Russia, whose people are close ethnic and linguistic kin of the Poles, Czechs, Bulgarians, and other relatively new EU entrants from the Slavic-speaking former Eastern Bloc?

Here are my ten reasons why a Japanese campaign to join the EU would be a great thing—for Japan, for Europe, and for the world:

### **1) It would make it the “Eurasian Union”.**

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Europe is not a continent; it's a cultural construct. Every elementary school kid in geography class has pointed out that Europe and Asia are the same landmass. So why not invite Japan into the EU fold and make it a bit old Eurasian family? You wouldn't even have to change the abbreviation EU.

### **2) It would embarrass the UK.**

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Inviting Japan to join the EU would be the geopolitical equivalent of a person who's just been broken up with getting back at their ex by getting straight out there and dating again, and posting happy couple photos all over social media. Prime Minister Abe could have a field day posting chummy photos of him and Merkel, Macron, and others in Brussels and rub it in the British people's faces.

### **3) It would be a great rebuke against Putin, Xi, and Erdoğan.**

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Russia, China, and Turkey all fancy themselves as the great Eurasian powers. They are also profoundly undemocratic, with even EU-aspiring Turkey moving further and further away from European-style liberal democracy. Japan, on the other hand, is a *bona fide* liberal democracy (despite some of Abe's autocratic tendencies) and such a move would be a bulwark against today's creeping authoritarianism.

### **4) It would more than compensate for the loss of the UK — and make the EU truly badass.**

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Japan may look a lot like the UK physically but it also has double the UK's population and nearly double its GDP. Nobody would miss the British with the Japanese economy in the fold, although with a domestic debt larger than Greece, there would be some worries about how to keep that little issue contained.

## **5) It would solve Japan's labour shortage.**

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Japan needs people. The UK now has a legion of Polish plumbers, Latvian electricians, and Romanian cab drivers who would probably jump at the opportunity to go work in Tokyo. Hell, there are already lots of Eastern Europeans in Japan—mostly on student visas. Japan needs blue collar people, nurses, senior care workers, and others, and EU membership would give them an immediate source of such workers.

## **6) It would send a strong message to the racists in the EU — and in Japan.**

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See point number one about Europe not being a real thing. The same is true with Asia. This time maybe Japan and Germany could collaborate for good rather than for evil. There are also lots of bigots in both Europe and Japan who believe in ridiculous notions of racial purity. Japan's accession to the EU would screw with all their minds.

## **7) South Korea and others would likely follow suit.**

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The Republic of Korea would also make an attractive EU member, with its thriving economy, its growing global cultural clout, and its healthy democracy. Also, anything Japan does South Korea has to do, so you can be pretty sure they won't let Japan have all the fun. Plus it would no doubt have interesting effects on Korea's geopolitical quandaries, and possibly ease the way for eventual Korean unification.

## **8) It would pressure Japan to abolish the death penalty.**

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The EU has long been adamant in its anti-capital punishment stance. Japan doesn't execute people at the same rate the US or China does, but its government still does kill people and it would be nice to have some additional pressure on Japan to stop doing so, and an extra level of support for the country's long frustrated death penalty abolitionist movement.

## **9) It would be a boon for tourism.**

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The last decade or so has seen Japan embrace global tourism like never before, and EU membership would further bolster this. It would also be a coup for Europhilic Japanese tourists who, in addition to visiting their usual haunts in Paris, Rome, and Barcelona would also get to discover the castles of Lithuania, the Black Sea resorts of Bulgaria, and the vampire lore of Transylvania.

## **10) It would be fun.**

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The Japanese have always loved European culture, and vice versa. Having Japan in the EU would be a weird and wonderful thing. There would be *kanji* on the currency. Hello Kitty and Pikachu would compete with Tintin and Astérix for EU mascot supremacy. Ryuichi Sakamoto would spend more time hanging out in Paris with the Daft Punk guys. Akihabara would be full of Germans, and Japanese kids would crowd out the obnoxious Americans in Montmartre. It would be the mother of all cultural mixing, and anyone who doesn't think this sounds like fun has no idea what the word "fun" means.

So what are you waiting for, Japan? The Eurasian Union awaits!

