“Thatcher’s Legacy Is Britain’s Isolation”
Anne-Marie Slaughter

I started at Oxford University in October of 1980, 17 months after Margaret Thatcher became Britain’s prime minister. It was a grey, dark autumn and the mood was as bleak as the weather. Across the street from my college was a bench where desperate-looking homeless men spent the day; an acute, local reminder of a chronic, national unemployment crisis. Businesses were failing, poverty was spreading and the middle class was sinking. Even among my Conservative friends, I could not find anyone who thought Thatcher would win a second general election.

Then came the Falklands. Suddenly “Maggie” Thatcher was Winston Churchill reincarnated; a British lion roaring across the Atlantic, albeit in a rather smaller arena. When Ronald Reagan declared US neutrality with regard to whether Britain or Argentina held sovereignty over the islands and Alexander Haig, his secretary of state, tried to negotiate a settlement that would have given ultimate sovereignty to Buenos Aires, we Americans at Oxford were suddenly personae non gratae, citizens of a faithless ally that could not find the courage to take a stand. Thatcher’s domestic slogan, “The lady’s not for turning”, suddenly appeared in a very different light to a country nostalgic for imperial glory.

She burnished this reputation with her fierce anti-communism, standing with Reagan for the introduction of nuclear missiles in Germany in the early 1980s and facing down the Soviet Union at every turn. She was equally resolute in her determination to use force to push Saddam Hussein back out of Kuwait in 1991, leading to the famous exchange with George H.W. Bush in which she is reported to have said: “Don’t go wobbly on us, George.”

So there she is. The Iron Lady, the leader who had no time for diplomatic niceties, who was not afraid to stand up for the truth, who would not back down on the global stage. But the starry-eyed supporters of Thatcher who have filled the opinion pages over the past week are themselves besotted with a vision of Britain in the world that is both deeply anachronistic and dangerous. Nowhere is the folly of this view more apparent than in Thatcher’s attitude towards Europe, a view that was less a throwback to Churchill than to her 19th-century predecessors. Like them, Thatcher saw the European continent as a stage for balance-of-power politics, with Britain holding the balance. In the 21st century, however, that view is likely to leave Britain outside global power circles altogether.

Thatcher is venerated by today’s Tories for standing up to the EU to “get our money back”, but her underlying view of Europe is best revealed in her fierce and deeply misguided opposition to German reunification after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Chancellor Helmut Kohl recalls in his memoirs that Thatcher told a gathering of European leaders: “We beat the Germans twice and now they are back.” French diplomatic notes reveal conversations with President François Mitterrand in which both leaders envisioned a united Germany that would exercise more influence in Europe than Hitler ever had. Although both Thatcher and Mitterrand ultimately came around, and Thatcher stood firmly for the expansion of the European Community to former
Soviet states in eastern and central Europe, her instincts were completely out of touch with modern Europe.

Thatcher supported the European Community, an economic union, but described the more political EU as “perhaps the greatest folly of the modern era”. That is the legacy she has bequeathed to her party. Prime Minister David Cameron’s pledge to hold a referendum on British membership in the EU and his plan to renegotiate the terms of that membership risk relegating Britain to the status of little more than a bit player in global politics.

It is not just Maggie who is gone; her entire era is fading away. It is the era of three world wars – two hot and one cold – in which Britain and the US had a special relationship forged out of their alliance during those wars, and in which the Atlantic was the most important economic and political theatre in the world. Today the US needs not Britain but Europe, the largest global economy, with a growing political and military role. In a world in which the US sees the rise of Asia as the most important geopolitical trend, it does not imagine partnering with Britain but with Europe as a whole.

In the 21st century it will be possible for London to remain one of the great cities in a world where cities will become ever more important. However, London cannot carry Britain. Unless Britain decisively casts its fortunes with Europe it risks becoming another Singapore – a global financial centre and a useful diplomatic partner in navigating complicated regional politics but hardly a global power. Indeed, should this part of Thatcher’s legacy triumph, she will have done her nation a disservice of millennial proportions.

I cannot conclude without commenting on Thatcher’s legacy not just as a prime minister but as the UK’s first and only woman prime minister, placing Britain firmly ahead of the US. All week long women have been debating her impact as a feminist role model who was also a staunch antifeminist. She hated the idea that she had got anywhere because of her sex, even though she rose through the ranks in part because by the 1970s all-male cabinets were increasingly perceived as antiquated. She proudly set herself up as a “merit woman” rather than a “quota woman” and refused to mentor and promote women or adopt policies that would help women across Britain.

I think Thatcher’s view of feminism was wrong, and I disagree with many of her other domestic and foreign policies. But I admire her as a woman who achieved power at the highest levels and demonstrated that she could wield it as well, or as ill, as any man.