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CAN BREXIT BRITAIN STILL BE A GLOBAL PLAYER?

David Landsman

DURING the 2016 referendum campaign, one of the arguments against what has become known as “Brexit” was that, outside the European Union, the United Kingdom would lose substantial international influence. The loss would be far greater than merely absence from internal EU deliberations. If in 1999 Tony Blair was right that the UK had the potential to be “the bridge between Europe and America,” London’s number would move down in Washington’s address book. If the United States were less interested in Britain, the rest of the world would likely follow suit. During the campaign, Prime Minister David Cameron went further, questioning whether peace and stability in Europe were “assured beyond all reasonable doubt,” causing a frenzied media to report that he had claimed that Brexit “could lead to World War III.”

For their part, supporters of Brexit (“Brexiters”) argued that outside the EU Britain would be freed to pursue a more

active “global Britain” policy. This argument was primarily expressed in economic terms, in particular the opportunity to conclude more favorable free trade agreements and benefit from the higher growth potential of Asia and Africa. This explains the decision by Cameron’s successor Theresa May in July 2016 to establish a new Department for International Trade to negotiate such agreements. Brexiters also argued that leaving the EU would prevent the UK coming under pressure to support greater European defense integration at the expense of NATO. But they talked relatively little about specific foreign policy opportunities, not only because the UK had clearly exercised its own foreign policy while an EU member, but also because they did not agree among themselves about the detail of the foreign policy an “independent” Britain should pursue.

In any case, polling provides little evidence that influence or security arguments weighed heavily on voters.

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Photo: Gulliver Image/Getty Images

Prime Minister Boris Johnson taking questions in the House of Commons on “global Britain”

According to one poll, immigration, sovereignty, and money (i.e. freedom from paying contributions to the EU) were the most important drivers for Brexiteers, while for pro-EU “Remainers” the economy, employment rights, and environmental protection along with a sense of commitment to the EU and European neighbors were the main reasons not to leave. Influence is arguably a part of the Remainer argument, but the articulation is clearly different.

Although it may not have often captured the public imagination, influence was clearly important to politicians and commentators, i.e. those (including the

author) with a professional interest in Britain’s role in the world. Many Remainer commentators argued that the UK would be diminished outside the bloc. This view was endorsed by many foreign statesmen and stateswomen from Carl Bildt to Hillary Clinton. When challenged, Brexiteers argued the opposite: that the UK would be freer to pursue its own objectives outside the EU, exercising the influence that its history, economy, military, and other assets enabled it to do.

While influence was discussed in the *Financial Times* and *Economist*, it was not only the relative lack of salience that limited its profile in public

debate. In the context of a universal plebiscite, the argument from influence was arguably rather elitist and therefore problematic, articulated by those who feared for their own professional influence. The Brexiteer campaign understood that many of their supporters (particularly those who did not normally vote in elections because they felt their vote “did not count”) saw Brexit as a way of addressing their perceived lack of influence over their own lives, as when they told pollsters that in voting for Brexit they “[wanted] to teach our own politicians a lesson.” This insight was brilliantly captured in the Brexiteer campaign slogan “take back control” (where *back* has something of the restorationist quality of *again* in “MAGA”). For the Remain campaign, already attacked as a self-serving elite, dwelling on the risk of losing influence was unlikely to provide a winning argument.

INFLUENCE ABROAD

The UK has been *de facto* outside the EU only since the end of the transition period at the beginning of 2021. There has been some evidence of disruption to trade, particularly but not only in Northern Ireland, and vocal complaints from certain groups whose interests have been affected. Even without COVID-19, it was to be expected that once, in Prime

Minister Boris Johnson’s words, Brexit is “done,” the political heat would be reduced. With the main opposition Labour Party, taking a strategic decision not to oppose Johnson’s trade deal with the EU, it seems clear that no major UK-wide

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political party will contest the next General Election (due by late 2024) on a manifesto of pursuing a constitutionally closer relationship with the European Union. Nor, in the hypothetical event of a British volte-face, is the EU likely to be in any hurry to take back its errant former member.

As it has turned out, COVID-19 has significantly eased the domestic political pressure on Brexit, having both dominated the news agenda and caused such economic disruption that Brexit effects are harder (though not impossible) to isolate. In the short term and potentially for longer, the disparity between the EU’s and Britain’s performance in procuring vaccines has provided a graphic example of the benefits of “going it alone,” which has been accepted even by a number of prominent British and European pro-EU commentators. While underlying views on Brexit may not have changed greatly, for the time being discussion of Britain’s place in the world will not include any credible debate about reintegration with the EU.

The “foreign policy establishment” of think tanks, former diplomats (the present author and a few others excepted) and commentators were—and very largely still are—unsympathetic towards Brexit. Nevertheless, almost all, like the business community, agree that the UK still has relatively strengths which can be exploited. A good example is Robin Niblett’s January 2021 Chatham House Research Paper “Global Britain, Global Broker” which argues that the UK can deploy its diplomatic and wider assets in support of international objectives including supporting democracies and combating climate change. No serious commentator argues that post-Brexit Britain should give up and leave the stage.

That is perhaps no surprise: without a credible role for British foreign policy, there wouldn’t be a role for the foreign policy establishment. It is perhaps only of academic—or campaigning—interest to speculate on the counterfactual, i.e. whether Britain’s influence will be greater or smaller than it would have been if Brexit had not taken place. To argue that post-Brexit Britain will be unable to recover lost imperial power is to attack a “straw man” as no serious Brexiteers sought this. The more realistic question is what kind of second-order power the UK can be and whether it

can, and wants, in the words of former Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd to “punch above its weight.”

Before addressing this question, we should first enquire about the *purpose* of influence. There has long been an expectation that Britain should play a significant international role: “Little England” isolationism was always a minority position. But calling for the UK to play a serious role is not the same as agreeing on a strategic or philosophical underpinning for an active foreign policy. While Dean Acheson famously argued in 1962 that “Britain has lost an Empire and failed to find a role,” Suez notwithstanding, the Cold War provided UK foreign policy with a clear role, in support of a U.S.-led Western agenda against Soviet Communism.

Since the end of the Cold War, there has been a strong elite consensus on the need for what former Foreign Secretary William Hague described as an “active and activist” foreign policy. However, there was remarkably little effort to engage the country in a broad strategic debate about the purpose of Britain’s foreign policy and influence. Case-by-case reactive activism (“reactivism”?) to the latest threat or atrocity has often been a substitute for a clear strategy and an effort to secure public acceptance for it.

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For conservatives, these are opportunities to project power; for the liberal left, to right the world's wrongs. Lobbies from defense to development press for higher budgets and more initiatives. Iraq did much to curb support for the military dimension of activism. Even if the British public still wants the country to play an international role, the fact that for too long the political establishment did not trouble sufficiently to argue the case for action has reduced the appetite for difficult trade-offs. Today, when climate change has risen up the political agenda, there is still a big gap between support for action and acceptance of the personal consequences of it.

Brexit was arguably in part a reaction to an establishment which seemed more interested in *elite structures and activities* than in *national interests*. Given that Brexit is a turning point, it provides an important opportunity to change this. One product of Brexit is the creation of the British Foreign Policy Group, a think tank that *inter alia* studies public attitudes to international affairs and promotes discussion among business, civil society, and diaspora groups. In what is—remarkably—a novel departure, the LSE Economic Diplomacy

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Commission has recommended that a domestic policy assessment should be made of the distributional implications of international economic policies. While Brexit was not necessary for either of these innovations, it provides an opportunity to challenge the elite conception of foreign policy. Whether that challenge will be pursued remains an open question.

A strategy is not the same as a wish list. Any strategy needs core objectives and a means of deciding both what to do *and* what *not* to do, as well as how to deploy the available resources in

pursuit of the aim. As this issue was going to press, the UK Government published its *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, which it had described as “the most radical assessment of the UK’s place in the world since the end of the Cold War.” It sets out four “overarching national security and international policy objectives to 2025,” namely: “sustaining strategic advantage through science and technology”; “shaping the open international order of the future”; “strengthening security and defense at home and overseas”; and “building resilience at home and overseas.”

Its publication is timely not only given Brexit but also in the light of other significant changes, from the rise of China and the checks on globalism. The range of threats under the heading of “security” has expanded significantly to include everything from cyber to climate change. While the complexity of the modern world cannot be wished away, a mid-sized power like the UK, even if it seeks to err on the side of ambition, must still focus on strategic priorities and not pretend to be able to “do it all.” And, if it is to secure broad public as well as elite support for its international posture, its selection of objectives must be explicit and avoid the neglect of public buy-in that characterized its predecessors.

CREDIBLE AND SUSTAINABLE POLICY

Looking beyond the document, which projects only to the middle of the decade, one could ask more broadly: what will constitute a credible and sustainable British international policy for the 2020s?

Firstly, any foreign policy should unashamedly reflect a well-articulated sense of national interest. While in almost every country from the superpower U.S. to the smallest island, the importance of national interest as a driver is taken for granted, it is often absent from British elite discussion. This is perhaps a post-imperial legacy with the UK still regarding itself as having a *droit de regard* over

less developed nations and much to offer them in development towards the goal of being more like Britain. If so, this is more a reflection of the evangelical rather than the acquisitive side of Empire. Less attractively, there is a long-standing British elite tendency to regard national sentiment as demeaning, as evinced by George Orwell’s famous quotation “It is a strange fact, but it is unquestionably true, that almost any English intellectual would feel more ashamed of standing to attention during God Save the King than stealing from a poor box.” The contemporary British thinker David Goodhart in his seminal *The Road to Somewhere* (2017) observes unsympathetically an elite tendency to show no greater interest in the wellbeing of one’s own fellow citizens than of people on the other side of the world, which he regards as more narcissistic than disinterestedly altruistic.

One of the more egregious manifestations of this approach was the Foreign and Commonwealth Office under David Miliband, which adopted the slogan “Better World, Better Britain”—as though British foreign policy should be driven by something as un-British as possible. Above all, it is unselective and therefore unstrategic, hardly likely to win friends either at home or abroad. Domestic public opinion, though broadly supportive of “values-based” foreign policy, becomes less so when faced with trade-offs, as reported in British Foreign Policy Group polling. Abroad, an insistence that policy

is based on values rather than interests, especially when it involves a *mission civilisatrice* of one kind or another, is neither convincing nor welcome outside a Western-leaning elite. This is not to say that a foreign policy should be immoral or even amoral, but that a focus on values should not be *carte blanche* for an elite to construct alternative realities. The aim should be *grounded enlightened self-interest*.

Secondly, national interest will be best served by reaffirming Britain's orientation as part of the free democratic world. Early signs suggest that Britain's ability to work with the Biden Administration will be at the upper end of expectations, bolstered by close alignment on major issues such as Russia, China, and climate change as well as experience of managing differences, for example on Iran. There is no reason why this should not endure whoever succeeds Biden in the White House. The UK will always need to work at maintaining the relationship—not least by avoiding the temptation to boast of it as “special”—and the U.S. will as a result continue to see real benefit in working with Britain.

At the same time, the best should not become the enemy of the good in the choice of partners. Values in Western Europe evolve at break-neck pace and we cannot afford to work only with those who keep up with the fastest of the advance guard. Boris Johnson's initiative to launch the D10—the G7 plus South

Korea, India, and Australia—is timely, not least because it brings greater diversity. If we want to advance democracy and freedom, we need to start broadening the coalition, even if that coalition does not agree on every issue or value.

It is likely that taking a firmer line on both Russia and China even at the expense of some economic disadvantage will be attractive to the present British Government. It will appeal to both center-left and center-right. The left—and not only the left—will support taking a stand on human rights. Conservatives will be keen to “teach a lesson” to hostile powers, all the more when Russian agents are caught using nerve agents on British soil or China violates the terms of the Hong Kong settlement. It will bind the UK closer to the policies of the nascent Biden Administration. And, since the EU under pressure from mercantilist French and (especially) German interests is likely to be softer on both China and Russia, it will allow the UK to demonstrate the potential of an “independent” foreign policy in a way that will be attractive to many across the left-right and Brexit divide. The UK's version of the U.S. “Magnitsky Act” is an early example of a broadly popular foreign policy measure which (unlike some other claimed benefits of Brexit) would not have been possible if the UK had remained in the EU.

That said, no second-order (or even first-order) power can afford to work

only with those who share its democratic values. To achieve strategic objectives in 2021 and beyond, Britain and its Western allies should bear in mind that they have no interest in driving Russia into China's arms, and they equally cannot afford (literally) to "contain" China in a way that might once have worked with the Soviet Union. However much is said about values, foreign policy will remain the messy business of dealing with the hostile as well as the friendly. In an age of social media-enhanced campaigning, it would help if national governments made more explicit that engagement is almost always to be preferred to isolation and that dialogue does not imply acceptance or compromise.

Thirdly, foreign policy should be ethical but not moralistic, especially not moralistic with force. Operating to high moral standards around the world should always be the aim. Preaching, bullying, and bombing others to behave like us shouldn't. We celebrate diversity at home and need to be prepared to promote a pluralistic approach abroad. Perhaps less time spent in Brussels committee rooms can wean British diplomats off an excess of "declaratory diplomacy" with hectoring statements on every international development. Sanctions should be used sparingly too: they are better than war, but they are also less effective than patient engagement and often harmful to ordinary citizens. It is time, perhaps, to return to diplomacy

as "jaw jaw" rather than an unrelenting campaigning machine.

Fourthly, diplomacy, development, and international trade should work hand in hand so that we can do well by doing good. The merger of the UK foreign (FCO) and aid (DFID) ministries should translate into an unashamed acceptance that aid policy is in lockstep with foreign policy. When public money is spent, there is no case for "semi-detached" aid sending out mixed signals. A separate "aid" objective, detached from foreign policy, is also at risk of being directed by the producer interests of aid providers, a particular concern in a country such as the UK, which (even after recent reductions) has one of the world's largest aid programs (it now stands at 0.5 percent of GNP). We should also be unashamed in arguing that trade is often the best way of doing good at home and abroad. When the UK adopts policies on climate change or free trade, there should be a clear process linking policy to domestic interests.

Finally, we should continue to be flexible about the best means to achieve foreign policy goals. With a Biden White House, the U.S. pendulum appears to be swinging back towards multilateralism, but only so far. Britain should not be "holier than thou" in supporting blocked or unreformable multilateral mechanisms because we can't bear to keep away. Bilateral, plurilateral, and multilateral

diplomacy all have their place. It always pays to be as inclusive as possible, but it's the result that counts, not the mechanism.

ELEMENTS OF AMBITION

How should an upper-middle power like the UK go about pursuing an ambitious foreign policy in the 2020s? What are the essential elements, domestic, and outward-looking? What effect will Brexit have on these elements?

First, there is a need for a creative rethinking of the UK relationship with the EU. It goes without saying that the UK should aspire to a good relationship with close neighbors with whom it has much in common. This relationship should be neither an attempt—as Theresa May apparently sought—to preserve as much as possible of the old structure and mindset, nor a desire to deviate as a matter of principle.

The UK's absence from the EU will certainly have an impact in one specific sense. One of the main ways in which the EU seeks to maintain its influence in the world is through its regulatory regimes and standards. Outside the room, Britain will not be able to influence their evolution. Traditionally, under multiple governments Britain was successful in steering the EU in a more free-market and less *dirigiste* direction than many of its continental members would naturally have adopted. With the greater use in recent years of qualified majority voting and

the rise in the power of the European Parliament this became more difficult. More trade-offs became necessary, with the consequence that even if the UK did not seem to be “losing votes” more frequently, it had to acquiesce to more decisions that it would not have taken by itself.

Following the conclusion of the EU/UK Free Trade Agreement, the UK will need to make a success of the trade-off between autonomy and access/influence by being prepared to diverge where it makes sense while accepting (and perhaps influencing indirectly) EU regulation in other areas. One of the most important benefits of Brexit is that it will be necessary for Britain to have this debate—for example, whether to adopt lighter regulation on new technologies or tougher animal welfare rules—far more openly than when regulation was decided in Brussels and “parliamentary scrutiny” of EU legislation was an elegant fiction.

This provides an opportunity for the UK to develop a more cordial and functional relationship with its EU neighbors. In some areas, it may be prepared to be more accommodating, once freed from its fear of a “slippery slope” in which compromises on specific policies could lead to pressure for unwelcome institutional change.

Britain's new freedom to conclude trade agreements around the world will bring with it a huge opportunity to

foster wider relationships and strengthen influence for the future. Of course, there may well be areas (e.g. on food standards) in which UK governments prefer a closer relationship with the EU than with, say the United States or India, but if so they will be able to make those choices freely and explicitly, subject to Parliamentary and public accountability.

On foreign policy, the UK will need to work with individual EU member states to pursue shared interests. The most useful foreign policy conversations are likely to be had in Paris, Berlin, Warsaw, and so on rather than in Brussels. Some argue that the UK should aim to channel its engagement through joint institutions in the way envisaged by Theresa May. But there are dangers in this approach. The “institutional EU” is too often focused on building its own power rather than solving the challenges at hand. The UK will on many occasions want to be with the EU, but on others—sometimes with respect to Russia and China, most obviously—we will want to differ, at least on balance and degree. There may be a case for a partnership council on foreign affairs, just as the EU has dialogues with many regional powers. But the last thing UK diplomacy needs is an unending series of EU coordination processes drawing energy and creativity from policymaking, encouraging diplomats to keep their eyes on Brussels rather than the world beyond.

There will be many areas for fruitful cooperation between the UK and the EU. In the Western Balkans the UK will be content to support from a distance the continued EU ambitions of the region, while complementing its engagement with active contributions to a range of reform and development initiatives, both bilaterally and through its membership of NATO and the OSCE. If, as is not inconceivable, the EU integration process stalls, the UK will be in a good position to contribute to finding a durable alternative.

Another practical consequence of Brexit will be that British ministers no longer sit around the Brussels table with their European counterparts. On the one hand, they will need to make more explicit effort to maintain relationships, always difficult in a political system where British ministers’ time for overseas visits competes (more so than for some of their counterparts) with a heavy agenda of Government, Parliamentary, and constituency commitments. Perhaps a post-pandemic world—with what is almost certainly to include a greater emphasis on virtual diplomacy—will come to their aid. But a considered and well-prepared bilateral visit can still have greater impact than a brush-past in Brussels. To realize the opportunities, Britain should follow the French example of investing time and resource in inward and outward bilateral visits.

MEANS TO PURSUE?

Does the UK have the means to pursue this ambitious agenda? This is the essence of influence: a combination of political and economic strength at home and a portfolio of tangible and intangible assets deployed internationally, as well as the creativity to do so effectively.

Domestically, the disruptions of Brexit notwithstanding, the central assumption is that the UK will remain a broadly prosperous economy at the free-trade and sound money end of the Western world, which will presumably as a whole move more in the direction of protectionism and debt-fueled public spending. The long-term effects of COVID-19 on the economy, combined with the fact that Johnson's majority depends on Members of Parliament elected by former Labour Voters (the so-called "Red Wall" constituencies), will lead to an enlarged public sector which will threaten entrepreneurialism, but this should be containable.

The big unknown is the constitutional fallout of Brexit accelerating centrifugal trends within the United Kingdom. Both Scotland and Northern Ireland, in very different ways, look less securely tied to the UK than at any time in modern history. It is quite possible that the Scottish (devolved) Parliamentary elections in May 2021 will give an overall majority to the Scottish National

Party, which would treat such a vote as a mandate to hold another independence referendum, bringing it into loud conflict with Johnson's Government in London. But there is no certainty that a referendum will be held in the medium term or that, if it were, it would lead to independence. Paradoxically, while Brexit may have strengthened pro-independence sentiment in Scotland, it was Britain's status in the EU that made it possible at least to claim that independence could be achieved smoothly with all the benefits and none of the disadvantages. In the event of another referendum, it will now be much harder to provide convincing answers to vital questions, from a "hard border" between Scotland and England and the currency options for an independent Scotland.

In Northern Ireland, pressures for a "border poll" (on the question of unification with the Republic of Ireland, provided for under certain circumstances in the Good Friday Agreement) will grow, but are unlikely to reach a decisive point in the medium term.

An unknown at this stage is how far either challenge will distract the UK from pursuing an active international policy or reduce its credibility in doing so. Clearly if the situation became unstable and outside players were invited in some way to participate—as America did in facilitating the Anglo-Irish Agreement—the UK would risk

becoming an *object* of diplomacy, making it harder to remain an active *subject*. But we are not there yet, if at all.

In seeking to interpret the prospects for constitutional upheaval, it is worth noting that, in addition to the voices of Scottish and Northern Irish nationalists, some strong British pro-EU campaigners are inclined to talk up the risks that the UK will break up as evidence of the folly of Brexit. How Remainers will behave in the event of a real challenge, or what influence they will have, is one of the many unknowns at this early stage of the debate. For now, none of this looks like a major brake on the UK's foreign policy aspirations.

Internationally, influence is about the need for a long-term perspective, building relationships, and making oneself useful to those one wants to influence. The UK can bring breadth through its global diplomatic presence and membership of key international organizations, without the risk of casting a shadow as a “global policeman,” provided of course that it avoids the temptation to resort quickly to declaratory or interventionist activism. It can consciously build on a longer-term and more sensitive approach, while focusing clearly on the enduring pillars of its foreign policy: adherence to Western, liberal, democratic, and free-trading values. Its reputation—mixed, certainly, but still overwhelmingly positive—is there to be leveraged.

The UK's armed forces, diplomatic and intelligence services, along with its membership of the UN Security Council and an aid budget that remains one of the largest in the world, mean that it still has something to say about the world, and can—most often working with others—do something about it. British contribution to science and technology has recently been shown to be disproportionate to its size. While the State has a role, these achievements are significantly private and almost entirely unrelated to the Government of the day. As is so much of what the UK can bring to the party, from the English language (as valuable as ever in international diplomacy) and Shakespeare to the Beatles and the Premier League. “Despite Brexit,” bankers are working hard to stay in the UK and unprecedented numbers of asylum seekers make great efforts to come. At both ends of the spectrum, Britain still has pulling power.

There are many among Britain's friends who believe that it has made the wrong choice in leaving the EU. But they will move on quickly and want to know what, with its new status, it plans to contribute. Brexit is a major change, but it is unlikely either to make or break the UK. Only continued hard work and effective diplomacy can make the difference. And in that respect, in the world of the twenty-first century, Britain is no exception. ●