



Living Up to a New Role in the World: The Challenges of “Global Britain”

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Abstract: Theresa May promised a new role for the United Kingdom in the world, dubbed “Global Britain.” But what challenges arise from supposedly being more open to the world while decoupling from the European Union? This article explores how much the UK can meet the expectations stemming from a new, unabashedly global posture. Examining the rhetoric of British foreign policy since 1945 is juxtaposed against the emerging language of global openness after Brexit to illustrate what the UK’s partners might expect for trade, security, and global governance. In evaluating the strategic benefits of using the rhetoric of globalism after EU withdrawal, this article examines the British state’s capacity to find the administrative resources, public expenditure, and elite consensus necessary to redefine the country’s position in world affairs. While the political expediency of devising a new role cannot be faulted, the strategic value of “Global Britain” appears limited in light of this analysis.

For more than 50 years, both the United Kingdom’s major political parties agreed on the strategic value of European Union membership to British foreign policy. European integration—a process various U.S. administrations wanted the UK to participate in—was seen as a core means by which Britain’s political and economic clout could be magnified. Support for the EU was, though, hardly unwavering as successive UK governments, often alone among their European peers, sought to limit the constraints of integration on British sovereignty. Consensus over EU membership unraveled completely in 2016, when Cabinet ministers such as Boris Johnson and Michael Gove defied the Prime Minister by leading the campaign to leave the EU. Their contribution—alongside the lukewarm enthusiasm for remaining of Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn—proved decisive in mobilizing a majority in support of Brexit. Conscious of the fundamental realignment of the UK’s international role that Brexit entails, Prime Minister Theresa May proposed the term “Global Britain” in her first major speech on the UK’s post-Brexit posture. In fact, Labour emulated the

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Conservatives’ rhetoric by devoting a section of its 2017 General Election manifesto to articulating a vision of global Britain. But will the UK be able to live up to this putative new role in world affairs? That is, what challenges and contradictions face the British government now and in the future from being more open to the world while decoupling from the EU?

This question naturally arises after Brexit because of “status anxiety” regarding the nature of the UK’s interactions with the international system. The existing scholarly debate occasioned by the 2016 referendum reflects these concerns by virtue of its focus on billiard-ball geopolitical considerations about Brexit’s impact on alliances,¹ as well as on what the bargaining logic of how to leave the EU implies for British influence in the world.² However, the approach taken here complements such work by examining whether the UK can live up to the expectations stemming from the move to celebrate a new, unabashedly global posture.

To assess the potential strategic success of using the rhetoric of globalism in a post-Brexit environment, this article scrutinizes the British state’s capacity to find the combination of administrative resources, public expenditure, and elite consensus necessary to live up to the new label the government wishes to give its foreign policy stance. We first consider the rhetoric of British foreign policy since 1945 and juxtapose it with the emerging language of global openness after Brexit. This process illustrates what change in expectations this move is likely to create among the UK’s partners for trade, security, and global governance. Overall, this role-expectations approach reveals numerous challenges for meeting what major partners will come to expect from the new framing of Britain’s role in international politics. Equally, the analysis highlights serious contradictions involving the language of domestic politics during and after the EU referendum. It is very much at odds with the spirit of globalism. The political expediency of devising a new role given the upheaval caused by leaving the EU cannot be faulted, but the strategic value of “Global Britain” ultimately appears limited.

Brexit and Meeting the Expectations Stemming from Britain’s “Role in the World”

Brexit marks an interruption in British foreign policy precisely because it jettisons the existing set of expectations surrounding Britain’s role in the world after World War II. Entry into the then-European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973 was meant to assuage the long-standing status anxiety in British foreign policy which former U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson identified a decade earlier, when he

¹ See, for example, Tim Oliver, “The world after Brexit: from British referendum, to global adventure,” *International Politics*, Sept. 2016, pp. 689–707; and David Blagden, “Britain and the world after Brexit,” *International Politics*, Feb. 2017, pp. 1–25.

² See, for example, Robin Nisbett, “Preparing for the UK’s Brexit negotiations,” *The World Today*, Aug.–Sept. 2016, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/twt/preparing-uks-brexit-negotiation>; and Jean Pisani-Ferry, Norbert Röttgen, André Sapir, Paul Tucker and Guntram B Wolff, “Europe after Brexit. A proposal for a continental partnership,” <http://bruegel.org/2016/08/europe-after-brexit-a-proposal-for-a-continental-partnership>.

claimed that Britain had “lost an empire and not yet found a role.”³ By participating in European integration the UK found another policy instrument to “punch above its weight,” alongside other features of global leadership, notably a permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council and a key role in North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Indeed, the rhetorical edifice of post-imperial UK foreign policy is key to understanding what other countries will come to expect from an attempt to devise a new global role. This is because Britain’s place in the world historically has been laden with clichés that have served a special function in pushing certain behaviors for fear of not fulfilling others’ expectations.

Notions like the “special relationship,” which at times extends to the broader “anglosphere,” “little Englandism,” and “punching above our weight” are part of UK foreign policy rather than neutral descriptions or explanations of it. In other words, since 1945 ideas like these have constituted—not merely reflected—Britain’s role in the world.⁴ More provocatively, Kenneth Waltz declared that “as Britain has declined in the world, Englishmen have devoted more and more attention to defining her role.”⁵

Scholars of role theory in international relations similarly highlight the instability surrounding the strategic assumption of roles by key states.⁶ Yet, the introspective nature of assuming a certain role masks the importance that living up to a particular understanding of the UK’s place in the world has played in Britain’s domestic policy debates and international affairs.

Of course, the UK is not unique in having a trope-filled foreign policy lexicon that promotes certain kinds of state behavior. The foreign policy debate in the United States traditionally has revolved around the debate between “isolationism” and “internationalism,” together with various exceptionalist tropes such as the ‘Shining City upon a Hill,’ and more recently “the indispensable nation.” France meanwhile has the notion of “grandeur,” which echoes the imperial idea of a mission *civilisatrice* or colonization. Europe too refers to “normative” or “civilian” power. The tropic nature of Britain’s foreign policy language is therefore a quantitative, not qualitative, distinction with its international partners.

Pointing out the prominence of clichés in UK foreign policy language is thus not tantamount to discounting their importance. The idea of Britain having a prominent part to play on the international stage has buttressed high defense spending relative to other European states and a more interventionist and internationalist mindset on the part of policymakers. Social roles are made up of sets of expectations about

³ On the significance of Acheson’s speech, see Douglas Brinkley, “Dean Acheson and the ‘special relationship’: the West Point speech of December 1962,” *Historical Journal*, Sept. 1990, pp. 599–608.

⁴ See, David M. McCourt, “Rethinking Britain’s role in the world for a new decade: the limits of discursive therapy and the promise of field,” *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, May 2011, pp. 145–64.

⁵ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), p. 241.

⁶ See, for instance, Christian Cantir and Juliete Kaarbo, “Contested Roles and Domestic Politics: Reflections on Role Theory in Foreign Policy Analysis and IR Theory,” *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Jan. 2012, pp. 5–24.

an individual’s—or here a nation-state’s—appropriate behavior in specific contexts. Importantly, such roles are mutually constituted. They are meaningful so long as the parties to particular interactions behave in ways that conform to role expectations. Britain’s maintenance of a prominent role on the international stage in its post-imperial period was made possible by other states such as the United States and France, which supported Britain’s view of itself as an important global player through their foreign policies. In doing so, they helped make the clichés of British foreign policy meaningful. Consider in this regard, the importance placed on the specific words that U.S. presidents have used at different times regarding the “special relationship” with Britain. UK politicians are drawn inevitably to parsing the specialness of the special relationship, including when praise is showered on other allies, as Britain’s global relevance is so crucially dependent on support from the U.S. alliance. In the context of EU membership, UK policymakers specifically sought to forestall a weakening of the Anglo-American relationship by offering to be a transatlantic bridge between American and European interests.

Hence the foremost strategic problem that Brexit poses is that it unsettles other countries’ expectations about the UK’s role in the world. This is what makes finding a new posture so vital to the government and why Brexit analysts must evaluate the role-based dynamics of British foreign policy after leaving the EU. Until the referendum result, Britain’s role in the world was communicated through a language of worldwide interests, as well as a strong diplomatic and military presence linked to EU membership. Theresa May decided to reconfigure expectations about UK foreign policy by promoting the idea of Global Britain, even though the slogan itself is not new. Gordon Brown used the concept during his time as Chancellor of the Exchequer. He invoked the UK’s global outlook as the model for making the EU itself more globally oriented when the UK assumed the rotating Council Presidency back in 2005.⁷ This forgotten episode was in keeping with the UK’s former “multipronged European diplomatic strategy” that consisted of treating EU relations as “a subset of its broader international diplomatic strategy.”⁸

The ambition behind Global Britain today is just as great, if not more so, because the government’s overarching message is that Brexit will unlock hitherto untapped potential. In particular, the UK will be able to “shape decisions across the globe and work to make the world a safer place as we stand up for British values and interests in every part of the world.”⁹ Boris Johnson, when setting out his agenda as newly-appointed Foreign Secretary in July 2016, announced a reassuring vision of Britain as a “great global player.”¹⁰ Brexit, Johnson noted, “did not mean Britain would

⁷ Gordon Brown, “Global Britain, global Europe: a presidency founded on pro-European realism,” speech given at the Mansion House, London, June 22, 2005, http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/newsroom_and_speeches/press/2005/press_57_05.cfm.

⁸ Richard G. Whitman, “Brexit or Bremain: what future for the UK’s European diplomatic strategy?,” *International Affairs*, May 2016, pp. 509–29; pp. 509-10.

⁹ “Plan for Britain,” <https://www.planforbritain.gov.uk/a-global-britain/>, Aug. 15, 2017.

¹⁰ BBC News Online, “Boris Johnson Sets Out Post-Brexit Foreign Policy Vision,” July 14, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-36789125>.

be leaving Europe, just leaving the EU.” Most strikingly, Theresa May spoke of the “opportunity ahead,” namely that of building a “truly Global Britain. A country that reaches out to old friends and new allies alike. A great, global, trading nation.”¹¹ These promises are intended to convince a variety of international and domestic audiences, and in so doing they establish a set of expectations among Britain’s key international partners about the future of British foreign policy.

In keeping with the fact that role-based conduct is mutually constituted, the ability to fulfill a new international role is not the prerogative of the British government alone. Consider the connection between trade and immigration. In the brave new world of post-Brexit deal-making, the UK could sign a raft of free trade agreements (FTAs). (This is why Theresa May indicated at the start of withdrawal talks with the EU that she wanted to leave the EU customs union.) It was more than coincidental that less than six months after the referendum, the Prime Minister led a major trade delegation to India in what was her first official visit outside Europe. There is a compelling case to increase UK trade with the fastest-growing large economy in the world. However, subsequent briefings from Indian officials made clear that there was a major obstacle to any FTA. Delhi explained that “we cannot separate free movement of people from the free flow of goods, services and investments.”¹² This logic flies in the face of the UK government’s desire to cut net migration in response to the referendum verdict, which was strongly related to popular demands to reduce immigration.¹³ May herself as Home Secretary (2010-2016) implemented cuts to the number of visas for international students,¹⁴ greatly reducing the amount of Indian students coming to Britain, to the displeasure of the Indian government.

Another thorny aspect of raising expectations that Brexit might allow Britain to play an enhanced global role is the need to avoid disappointing allies in the realm of security. In her 2017 speech at Lancaster House, Theresa May indicated that security cooperation would remain a central pillar of UK foreign policy—a reflection, she claims, of the country’s “profoundly internationalist” history and culture. But however welcome that internationalism is at the United Nations Security Council or NATO, the actual content of this international orientation remains highly unclear. There is clear press hostility to the UK’s sizeable foreign aid budget as it increased during recent years

¹¹ “The government’s negotiating objectives for exiting the EU: PM speech,” <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-governments-negotiating-objectives-for-exiting-the-eu-pm-speech>.

¹² “UK post-Brexit trade deal with India threatened by Theresa May’s visa crackdown,” *Independent*, Jan. 18, 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/brexit-uk-britain-india-trade-deal-freedom-of-movement-delhi-boris-johnson-a7534026.html>.

¹³ See Anand Menon and John-Paul Salter, “Brexit; initial reflections,” *International Affairs*, Nov. 2016, pp. 1297–1318.

¹⁴ From a peak of more than 300,000 in 2009, the number of student visas issued was reduced to just under 210,000 by 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/general-election-2015/politics-blog/11602078/Immigration-how-will-the-Conservatives-tackle-it.html>.

of official government austerity, for example.¹⁵ More importantly, public fatigue over wars of choice, such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan, and earlier in Kosovo, suggests that domestic support for an interventionist Global Britain cannot be taken for granted.¹⁶

The Liberal Democrat and Labour manifestos in 2017 explicitly advocated for orienting UK foreign policy away from military intervention. This realization serves as a reminder that public backing for Britain’s various engagements during the so-called 1990s “golden era” of humanitarian intervention was more contingent than it might appear. Acquiescence was gained due to the domestic popularity of New Labour and its leader Tony Blair, as well as a turnaround in U.S. domestic politics that pushed a reluctant hegemon towards an increasingly unilateralist posture on military action for humanitarian ends.¹⁷ Moreover, the House of Commons refusal in 2013 to sanction military action against President Bashar al-Assad in Syria sets the precedent for greater parliamentary involvement in decisions over military intervention, and thus enhanced power for the public to express its own views of what Britain’s role requires in military terms.

Blair and Cameron’s difficulties when seeking to provide leadership in foreign policy reflect the broader problem of trust in political elites that now characterizes British politics. The Brexit vote itself, as well as the hung parliament produced by the 2017 General Election, demonstrated that voters increasingly are loath to follow the government’s cues. Uncertainty over public trust in elites’ foreign policy preferences is thus the context in which the challenges of finding a new global posture for the UK will occur.

Challenges Facing a Global Britain Posture

The principal difficulty of crafting a new foreign policy role for the UK is thus one of finding a language that allows the ensuing expectations to be fulfilled. How friends and rivals will judge the UK is on whether it can back up assertions of a global posture with appropriate action. To that end, state capacity is a crucial factor in how the country can develop its intended post-Brexit international relations. Based on the precedent of the UK’s post-imperial posture, such capacity can be defined as a combination of administrative resources, public finances and elite consensus over the country’s position in world affairs.

At the administrative level, the 2016 referendum result placed the UK in uncharted waters. The civil service was explicitly forbidden by then Prime Minister David Cameron to plan for the contingency of the UK leaving the EU even though the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) routinely plans for different electoral

¹⁵ See, Simon Lightfoot, Graeme A. M. Davies and Robert Johns, “Needs and interests; understanding the British public’s balancing of aid priorities,” forthcoming. Preview at <http://ncgg-new.princeton.edu/sites/ncgg/files/lightfootdaviesjohnsneedsandinterests.pdf>.

¹⁶ See Rachael Gribble, Simon Wessley, Susan Klein, David A. Alexander, Christopher Dandeker and Nicola T. Fear, “British public opinion after a decade of war: attitudes to Iraq and Afghanistan,” *Politics*, vol. 3: no. 2, (June 2015), pp. 128–50.

¹⁷ McCourt, “Rethinking Britain’s role.”

scenarios in the case of general elections. This decision was called “regrettable” by the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee prior to the referendum itself. In addition, the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy labelled the lack of planning indicative of a “prioritization of political interests above national security.”¹⁸

The need to prepare for Brexit was only the beginning of the challenges facing Whitehall following the referendum result. The Cabinet Secretary described the scale of the task as “the biggest, most complex challenges facing the civil service in our peacetime history.”¹⁹ The administrative personnel of the British state shrank by 20 percent over six years after the 2010 coalition government embarked on its austerity cure, which also resulted in the FCO losing a quarter of its budget.²⁰ Lacking adequate human resources, Chancellor Philip Hammond, in his Autumn Statement of 2016, earmarked up to £412m for the Department for Exiting the European Union, the Department for International Trade and the Foreign & Commonwealth Office to support Brexit-related work. Much of this funding was designed to add trade negotiation expertise, which is in very short supply given that since upon joining the EEC in 1973 the UK has relied on the European Commission for negotiating third-country trade deals. Indeed, a former government official claimed that in the immediate aftermath of the vote the UK had no trade negotiators to call upon.

However, other departments also have a strong claim for extra resources. The looming return of competences to Westminster regarding fisheries and support for farmers notably increased the workload at the Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs. Also affected is the Office for Nuclear Responsibility as the UK government has indicated its intention to withdraw from Euratom, the EU-wide system for, among other things, non-proliferation inspections. These actions mean that the British government must either find a new form of cooperation with the EU on atomic energy or be prepared to design and implement new safeguard mechanisms in line with the framework of the International Atomic Energy Agency. Yet the most impacted departments of state are bound to be the Home Office and HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC). Immigration and customs are the areas where new rules and IT systems undoubtedly will need to be introduced to cover the UK’s changing web of international agreements. Originally, these departments were scheduled to lose more funding on the basis of the pre-referendum Spending Review, but in spring of

¹⁸ See <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/public-administration-and-constitutional-affairs-committee/inquiries/parliament/https://www.nao.org.uk/press-release/capability-in-the-civil-service/t-2015/lessons-learned-from-the-eu-referendum-16-17/>, Aug. 2017.

¹⁹ “Capability in the civil service,” <https://www.nao.org.uk/press-release/capability-in-the-civil-service/>.

²⁰ James Black, Alexander Hall, Kate Cox, Marta Kepe and Erik Silfversten, “Defence and security after Brexit: understanding the possible implications of the UK’s decision to leave the EU—Overview report,” Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017, http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1786z1.html.

2018 the government announced an extra £1.5 billion would be spent by the EU departure date of March 30, 2019.²¹

HMRC—the second biggest recipient of the funding announced in 2018, after the Home Office—is in a particular bind. It is in the process of replacing the 25-year-old customs declaration service with a new IT system intended to be operational from early 2019. Whereas the original design brief was based on doubling the existing volume for declarations of non-EU goods, the whole system now needs to be upgraded in light of the referendum result. This must happen to handle the estimated four-fold increase in declarations that would accompany the UK’s withdrawal from the EU Customs Union, which is a precondition for new UK FTAs.²² The quality of customs services in the UK is not just a domestic consideration. A crucial component of FTAs is the ability to comply with rules of origin stipulations, as well as collection of duties and enforcement of bans on prohibited goods. All of these components depend on the effectiveness of customs processes, something that has been questioned in the UK case. The EU’s anti-fraud agency, the *Office européen de lutte antifraude* (OLAF), investigated UK customs for “continuous negligence” in allowing textile goods from China into the EU without collecting an estimated €2 billion of tariff duties. Once outside the single market, the UK will need to prioritize customs efficiency to deliver on the Prime Minister’s promise to make UK-EU trade as “frictionless as possible.” Hence, this area is one where the UK particularly needs to have a global reputation for quality in order to make the most of its new-found ability to sign FTAs.

The resources available for government departments to manage the transition to Global Britain are partially a function of the country’s fiscal position. Brexit’s impact on public finances was the source of great speculation during the referendum campaign. The government’s official pro-EU message was to play up the risks an EU exit posed to growth and prosperity, although both the Bank of England and the Treasury’s forecasts about immediate negative effects failed to materialize. Nevertheless, Brexit takes place in a context where since the financial crisis of 2007-2008 deficit reduction remains problematic for the UK government. Despite the immediate resilience of the economy, after the independent Office for Budget Responsibility expects the deficit to continue into the next decade even without assuming EU-related costs such as exit liabilities (the UK and EU agreed in late 2017 to a mechanism for calculating these) and a slowdown in immigration.

Yet the relationship between spending on policy priorities and the state of public finances is far from deterministic. Making Global Britain a reality implies a high degree of political consensus in order to commit resources come what may. After all, the previous outsized UK role in the world—involving far greater defense spending relative to a wealthier Germany for instance—survived the end of the Cold War and changes of government under Conservative or Labour leaders. Hence the chief difficulty relating to sustaining the spending commitments that come with an ambitious

²¹ See Lewis Lloyd, “Whitehall steps up a Brexit gear,” blog, Institute for Government, May 25, 2018, www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/blog/whitehall-steps-brexite-gear-spring-statement.

²² See “UK trade sector warns of Brexit customs disruption at borders,” *Financial Times*, Oct. 24, 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/3876648e-9905-11e6-8f9b-70e3cabccfae>.

new foreign policy agenda is actually the risk of a breakdown in political support. The reason such consensus cannot be taken for granted after Brexit is that European integration has become a key cleavage in British politics. Euroscepticism after Maastricht began life as a back-bench issue that gradually consolidated its place in the Conservative Party and even more so in the media, where the lack of pro-EU actors left the field open for hard Eurosceptic voices to dominate. The ingrained nature of political opposition to the EU poses a problem even as a non-member-state because a host of major foreign policy issues depend on a close UK-EU working relationship. The most important of these are security cooperation, notably covering terrorism and international crime, and global trade, which will be reliant on an unknown and untested institutional architecture.

Shared interests stemming from the gains involved in cooperating in these areas is not a sufficient condition for the stability of an eventual agreement. Arrangements for maintaining information-sharing over terrorist activities and financing are as desirable as a close trading relationship. Yet the details for devising these specific mechanisms are likely to be at the mercy of politicization on both sides of the new EU-UK divide. This is not however a problem for non-institutionalized, military cooperation under a letter of intent such as that covering the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force that builds high readiness capacity in conjunction with Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden, or the Anglo-French Combined Joint Expeditionary Force set in motion by the 2010 Lancaster House Treaties. These inter-governmental agreements do not bring with them justiciable rights or create problems of arbitration and enforcement.

Promising a high degree of cooperation is very different from committing to a legally binding framework for achieving that end in other areas. Once again, this issue will generate considerable work for the British civil service. There are 33 EU regulatory bodies and agencies for which, in the words of the House of Commons' Foreign Affairs Committee, the "UK will need to be prepared to expand the capacity of UK regulatory bodies in the [relevant] fields and to establish new UK-only regulatory bodies in some cases."²³ Additionally, after Brexit, EU-UK agreements will fall under the framework of international law and not EU law, which covers the exercise of delegated powers by EU regulatory agencies. Outside the old framework in which the UK could pursue judicial review via the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU), legal agreements covering regulatory equivalence might fall apart if one party considers the other side is not meeting its obligations.

For instance, in the field of data sharing it is the prerogative of the CJEU to review the legality of any EU agreement, including in the event that a third country changes relevant domestic legislation in a manner that undermines the original agreement. In 2015 the CJEU invalidated Safe Harbor, the EU-U.S. agreement for

²³ House of Commons, Foreign Affairs Committee, "Key implications of 'no deal,'" paragraph 48, <https://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmfaff/1077/107706.htm>.

sharing commercial data, because of concerns about how U.S. companies store personal information about EU-based clients. To avoid any such interference in UK sovereignty that is incompatible with Theresa May’s pledge to escape the jurisdiction of the EU’s legal system—presupposes two things. Firstly, that the British government can persuade the EU to accept the adequacy of UK data gathering protocols, which could be re-evaluated as a result of legislative change from one side or the other and, secondly, that European leaders are willing to accept an alternative form of dispute resolution bypassing the CJEU. Such adaptation to UK preferences is at odds with May’s own depiction of the EU as “bend[ing] towards uniformity, not flexibility.”²⁴

Consequently, forging political agreement with Brussels will be a recurring topic in British politics. Political parties and their MPs are not going to be able to forget about the EU after Article 50 negotiations are concluded. Instead, unleashing the potential of Global Britain is contingent in many ways on the goodwill of European partners. This form of post-Brexit dependency is most evident in the field of trade relations. From the perspective of Global Britain, the EU is in theory just one among multiple partners with which to have as open a trading relationship as possible. In practice, the first step towards making the UK a more globally-oriented champion of free trade is an agreement (again assuming a departure from the Customs Union) over parceling out World Trade Organization (WTO) schedules that currently cover the EU as a whole. Here, EU cooperation would make this change a much smoother process and minimize the likelihood of compensation claims by third countries.

As Brexit becomes a reality, UK-EU relations in numerous policy domains are bound to be re-evaluated as a result of legislative change from one side or the other. The EU negotiator and former European Commissioner Michel Barnier has talked about the need to prepare for the problem of “regulatory divergence.”²⁵ This term is a reference to the fact that treaties or other legal instruments that provide for frictionless trade based on mutual recognition of regulatory regimes in areas such as financial regulation, civil aviation, chemicals manufacturing, or environmental standards could in theory be repudiated unilaterally by either party. An arbitration mechanism, as outlined in the government’s 2017 Brexit White Paper, could well be created to avoid such a disruptive outcome, but the existence of such a system necessarily limits the UK’s ability to regain full sovereignty over these areas of regulatory decision-making.

Moreover, arbitration cannot remove the economic power differential between the two sides. The EU-27 have a combined GDP six times that of the UK, which provides leverage if Brussels wanted to bypass or ignore arbitration. A case in point is the EU’s reaction to the Swiss referendum in 2014 on restricting free movement rights of EU nationals. Switzerland’s unilateral repudiation of one of the legal bases for access to the single market resulted in the European Commission

²⁴ Theresa May, “The government’s negotiating objectives for exiting the EU,” Speech delivered at Lancaster House, Jan. 2017, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-governments-negotiating-objectives-for-exiting-the-eu-pm-speech>.

²⁵ See Michel Barnier, “The conditions for reaching an agreement in the negotiations with the United Kingdom,” speech at the plenary session of the European Committee of the Regions, Brussels, March 22, 2017, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-17-723_en.htm.

suspending Swiss participation in EU research and education projects.²⁶ This move immediately forced policymakers in Bern to rethink introducing quantitative limits on EU migrants.

Enacting Brexit in UK law is the domain of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act that first came before parliament in 2017. This piece of legislation transposes all EU law into domestic legislation, but at the same time gives Parliament the ability to rework rules that formerly only could have been changed via EU legislation. A key challenge when Parliament debates or enacts such reforms after EU withdrawal (and any transition or standstill period where EU law would still apply) is their impact on regulatory equivalence with Brussels. In other words, the political cleavage over European integration will morph from the overarching, binary In/Out referendum debate to an underlying, if episodic, question of whether UK legislation needs to take account of EU preferences. Since Brexit was premised on the need or desire for the UK to decide for itself on a range of policies, Eurosceptics in Parliament and in the media will no doubt rail against continued EU interference. Only a strong political consensus can prevent the Global Britain agenda from being checked at times by such forces of residual EU opposition. However, the contradictions inherent in promoting Brexit militate against such consensus.

The Inherent Contradictions between Brexit and Global Britain

In her first major speech as Prime Minister on how to approach the UK's withdrawal from the EU, Theresa May made a point of addressing the issues of belonging and identity that proved so emotive during the referendum. She did so in part by declaring that "if you believe you're a citizen of the world, you're a citizen of nowhere."²⁷ Her comment demonstrated the way the campaign had been defined by many voters in terms of an exclusive British identity and associated preference for self-rule, which necessarily rejected free movement of people or shared sovereignty with Brussels. This desire to regain control of important policy levers to serve British interests better is the political lodestar of May's Brexit strategy. Yet the pull of this exclusionary sentiment is fundamentally at odds with the Global Britain message about openness and engagement with a plethora of international partners.

This incompatibility is already a domestic problem in light of the multinational composition of the British state. The constitutional bricolage holding together devolved legislatures in Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales alongside the Westminster Parliament was intended to reconcile overlapping political identities. After 1997, Prime Minister Tony Blair devolved power away from Westminster in recognition of the multiple definitions of who the people are within the UK. But this ad hoc arrangement might have reached the limits of its usefulness following the EU referendum. This is because the result foists an English (and Welsh) constitutional

²⁶ See Andrew Glencross, "Why a British referendum on EU membership will not solve the Europe question," *International Affairs*, March 2015, pp. 303–317.

²⁷ May, Lancaster House speech.

preference upon Scotland and Northern Ireland. The non-English parts of the UK that voted to remain in the EU face an ongoing struggle to come to terms with the basic issue of whether Westminster can continue to speak on their behalf to the outside world. Anticipating this dilemma, Scotland’s First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, prior to the referendum had called for each devolved legislature to have a veto on an English-majority vote to leave the EU.



UK Prime Minister Theresa May

If the double-helix of Scottish and British exceptionalism unravels because of a successful independence referendum in Scotland, the damage to the Global Britain agenda would be considerable. As a historically anti-nuclear party, the Scottish National Party (SNP) has long vituperated against the stationing of the UK’s nuclear deterrent on the River Clyde. The White Paper on Scotland’s Future prepared by the SNP government before the 2014 referendum contained a pledge to negotiate for removing UK nuclear weapons in the event of independence. However, the options for relocating both the submarine base and the nearby warhead storage and loading facility are extremely limited. The costs of doing so have been estimated in a paper for the Royal United Services Institute at “£2.5 and £3.5 billion, not including the additional costs involved in land acquisition and clearance.”²⁸ The implications for the

²⁸ Hugh Chalmers and Malcolm Chalmers, “Relocation, relocation, relocation: could the UK’s nuclear force be removed after Scottish independence?” occasional paper, Royal United

public purse are relatively slim compared with the sums required to upgrade the nuclear deterrent for future decades. Shortly after the referendum, the House of Commons passed a motion supporting the construction of four Dreadnought-class submarines to maintain the deterrent at an estimated capital cost of £31 billion. However, the inevitable politicization of the UK's atomic warfare capability that would follow its relocation from Scotland could undermine public support for Trident's successor. The need to establish new nuclear-capable facilities within a more densely-populated England would serve to highlight the spending commitments at stake and add environmental objections to the equation. Any delays in establishing equivalent facilities to those used in Scotland would inevitably adversely affect the international credibility of the deterrent.

Beyond the strategic implications, a disunited kingdom flies in the face of Theresa May's invocation of a state "respected around the world and strong, confident and united at home."²⁹ The significant diaspora of Britons, which former Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson noted is larger than in any corresponding developed country, has a large contingent of Scottish descent. In the event of Scottish independence, therefore, another state would have a rival claim to a significant amount of the British diaspora members. The instrumentalization of expatriates for commercial or cultural exchanges would in this scenario become a zero-sum game as both states jostled for their allegiance. It is easy to imagine a competing 'Global Scotland' initiative for which Westminster would have to contend. Indeed, Brexit laid bare the torn identity many UK voters wrestle with and which could easily become more polarized if there is no longer an overlapping British framework of political identity. For while polls conducted six months after the referendum revealed a majority of UK voters support the union with Scotland, they also indicated that a majority believed Brexit should happen even at the cost of a break-up of the UK.³⁰ The same logic also applies to Northern Ireland, as polls show a strong majority in the rest of the UK among those who favor Brexit not to compromise autonomy on customs or trade rules for the sake of minimizing border friction with Ireland.³¹

The cracks in Britain's constitutional edifice are compounded by the strain Brexit has placed on the stability of the UK's political economy. This is not to say that the EU as a whole is a bastion of stability in this regard; on the contrary, the creation of the Euro amplified the crisis of neoliberalism on the continent as illustrated by the rise of populist Eurosceptic parties such as the Front National in France or M5S in Italy. However, having stayed aloof from pooled sovereignty in monetary policy, the

Services Institute, Aug. 2014, p. 13, https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/201408_op_relocation_relocation_relocation.pdf.

²⁹ May, Lancaster House speech.

³⁰ "Brexit more important than keeping the UK together, public say in poll for the Telegraph," *Telegraph*, March 17, 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/03/17/brexit-important-keeping-uk-together-public-say-poll-telegraph/>.

³¹ Michael Ashcroft, "Leave voters would rather lose Northern Ireland than give up benefits of Brexit," *The Telegraph*, June 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2018/06/19/leave-voters-would-rather-lose-northern-ireland-give-benefits/>.

UK consensus since the Maastricht Treaty was to profit from the single market while trying to stymie over-regulation of financial services provided by the City of London. Cameron’s renegotiation, in fact, underscored the pursuit of this goal as the UK government succeeded in securing legal protection for countries not in the single currency or participating in the new banking union to keep their own rules for supervision of the financial sector.³² There was also a formal agreement that countries outside the Eurozone would not be obliged to contribute to bailouts.

Brexit thus shattered the pro-EU-but-anti-Euro accommodation between business and politics, leaving the future of the country’s political economy open to question. Indeed, the Leave campaign’s economic argument against EU membership was in many ways the culmination of the gradual construction of what has been dubbed “a Eurosceptic political economy,”³³ distinguishing the UK from the continent. The profound rupture this entails with the economic orthodoxy of the Blair and Cameron years is reflected by George Osborne’s comment, after his departure as Chancellor, that “the government has chosen—and I respect this decision—not to make the economy the priority.”³⁴ Outside the single market, there are certainly two options that can potentially compete with the former consensus and which chime with the founding Brexit mantra of taking back control. The first involves pursuing a radical pro-business agenda based on cutting regulatory standards and corporate tax rates. Osborne’s replacement, Philip Hammond, fired a warning shot to the EU about the structural pressure to follow such a course in the event of having no satisfactory trade agreement after Brexit: “In this case, we could be forced to change our economic model and we will have to change our model to regain competitiveness. And you can be sure we will do whatever we have to do.”³⁵ The other alternative—more associated, but not exclusively so, with the Labour Party of Jeremy Corbyn—is for a revived Keynesian-inspired industrial policy. This strategy would become attractive if an EU-UK FTA did not include provisions for curbing state aid. The European Council’s negotiating brief expresses the desire for trade relations with the UK to be based on safeguards against unfair competition. However, recent precedents send a mixed message on this topic: the EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) does not cover the grant of subsidies, which was also true of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) negotiations, while the EU-Ukraine FTA does require a domestic and independent system of state aid control from Kiev.

Pursuing either option would be hard to reconcile with Global Britain’s stated aims and would thus risk isolating the UK among its peer group of developed

³² Andrew Glencross, *David Cameron’s Great Miscalculation: Why the UK Voted for Brexit* (Basinstoke: Palgrave, 2016).

³³ Chris Gifford, “The United Kingdom’s Eurosceptic Political Economy,” *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 18: no. 4, (2016), pp. 779-794.

³⁴ “George Osborne: Brexit plans do not prioritise the economy,” *The Guardian*, Feb. 1, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/feb/01/george-osborne-uk-brexit-plans-do-not-prioritise-the-economy>.

³⁵ “Brexit: UK could ‘change economic model’ if single market access denied,” *BBC News*, Jan. 15, 2017, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-38628428>.

countries. Protecting industries from outside competition is inimical to a serious free trade agenda. The consequences here include the possibility of retaliation from larger economic powers using the WTO dispute resolution mechanism and delays in replicating trade deals with third countries (e.g. South Korea or Canada) that used to cover the UK as an EU member state. Abandoning reciprocal state aid controls when trading with the EU could also allow the latter to distort trade to the detriment of UK exports to its largest market. A doubling down on neoliberalism, however attractive for certain powerful economic interests such as the hedge fund backers of the Leave campaign, would put the UK on a collision course with the EU. Any profound deregulation of finance, environmental, and labor standards would undermine the stability of regulatory equivalence agreements and potentially encourage EU protectionism vis-à-vis the UK.

The probability that Brexit could alter the EU's attitude to global trade regardless of what economic policies are implemented in the UK is already far from trivial. Both Labour and Conservative governments sought to uphold free trade principles within the EU, notably by stymying efforts to protect against Chinese imports in sectors such as steel. In the absence of a UK presence at the decision-making table, EU trade and regulation policy are more likely to take into account the protectionist instincts of French governments of both left and right. Whichever model of political economy takes root in the UK after Brexit, leaving the EU will have negative repercussions for the EU's openness to international trade at a time when populist parties have put protectionism back on the political agenda in the West. Historically, free trade was a key component of the integration of UK global and European diplomacy as EU membership was a highly efficient way to advocate for reducing trade barriers. Consequently, the benefits of Global Britain's ability to carry the torch for free trade might be outweighed by the costs of a subsequent recalibration of EU trade policy.

Conclusion: Anti-Globalism and Brexit

Uncertainty over which path the UK economy will take, as well as what the EU's response will consist of, points to the final and perhaps most fundamental contradiction inherent in Brexit. That is, the forces that helped persuade voters in the UK to leave the EU include a virulent anti-globalist sentiment that is further associated with low confidence in elites. The strong preference of Londoners to stay in the EU contrasts with the core Northern English and Welsh vote to leave, mirroring the structural divide between cosmopolitan, metropolitan liberals and globalization's left-behinds in the provinces. These tendencies are by no means confined to the UK, as evidenced by the election of Donald J. Trump or opposition within the EU to TTIP and CETA. As Henry Kissinger reflected after the referendum, "The impact of the

British vote is so profound because the emotions it reflects are not confined to Britain or even Europe.”³⁶

Yet the predicament for the UK’s future global role is that the EU membership referendum exacerbated this particular form of polarization. UK foreign policy elites are tasked with making a series of new trade deals, security treaties, and immigration arrangements. This workload and its saliency have increased tremendously at a time of sedimented mistrust of politicians and associated experts vaunting the merits of globalization. Each deal under discussion thus faces running the gauntlet of anti-globalism; there will be constant scrutiny over whether a treaty is compatible with preserving British sovereignty and enhancing national interests. After all, the ability to deliver Brexit without compromising these principles is exactly what the UK government—taking its cue from the campaign to leave the EU—has promised. That leaves any coherent foreign policy a hostage to fortune, but especially one that is explicitly framed around globalism and an openness to the world.

The objective behind this article’s role-based analysis of UK foreign policy after Brexit was to look beyond geopolitics or bargaining outcomes and focus instead on what it would take to live up to the rhetoric of Global Britain. This undertaking involved showing the political power of language in terms of how crucial tropes have been to post-war UK international commitments by providing a certain self-image that underpins numerous policies and practices. Now that a new role needs to be fashioned, the accompanying policies that could make Global Britain a reality accepted by key international partners were also scrutinized. This approach demonstrates that global engagement without compromising sovereignty or accommodating other national interests is a posture built on an oxymoron. Seen in this light, Global Britain is a patently unstable role to assume as it will either disappoint a domestic audience or else a foreign one.



³⁶ Henry Kissinger, “Out of the Brexit turmoil: opportunity,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 28, 2016, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/out-of-the-brex-it-turmoil-opportunity-1467151419>.