

# **British Foreign Policy Post-Brexit: Global Actor or Isolated Former Power?**

## **A Review of the Academic Literature**

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### ***Abstract***

*The withdrawal of the United Kingdom (UK) from the European Union (EU) has led to what many scholars have identified as a foreign policy 'identity-crisis', with the debate centred around what role the UK will play in the post-Brexit world. While there is considerable evidence that British policymakers are looking to construct a foreign policy based on the premise of 'Global Britain', the most realistic scenario outlined in the academic literature is one in which the UK becomes more isolated post-Brexit. To avoid such an outcome, some scholars propose that the UK must instead become a pragmatic and helpful problem-solver, coordinating with its European neighbours in matters related to security, whilst ensuring continuity rather than rupture when it comes to trade and foreign aid policy. This role, this paper concludes, provides the most feasible alternative to the prospect of isolation.*

### **Introduction**

In the academic literature, there is currently a debate around what role the UK will play in the post-Brexit world. This debate revolves around a few key questions. Will there emerge, from the embers of Brexit, a new global actor: a 'Global Britain'? Or will the UK become a fallen power, an isolate in global politics? Or does the reality lie somewhere in between? Will the UK co-operate with the EU and its former European partners? Or will it try to disentangle itself from the EU: the de-Europeanisation of British foreign policy, if you like? In order to assess these questions and provide an overview of what the literature argues, I will look at sources published from a range of disciplines – from international relations, to international law, to international political economy. As will be shown, there is real evidence that British policymakers will try to pursue a 'Global Britain' strategy. However, in order to avoid the likely outcome of becoming isolated, the most feasible alternative involves the UK as a helpful problem-solver, continuing to mirror the EU in many areas of foreign policy. In the first part of this paper, I will frame the debate on Britain's future role in the world, and how its foreign policy will be constructed accordingly. Then, in the second and third parts, I will look at accounts that focus on specific sectors, namely trade, aid and future international agreements, as well as foreign, defence and security policy, in order to draw some conclusions on how they fit into the role debate. The body of literature examined here is composed of academic articles and books published between January 2020 and February 2021, on the topic of British foreign policy.

## The Search for a Role

A lot of the recent scholarship on Brexit has identified a foreign policy ‘identity-crisis’, as the rupture with its main partner has left the UK searching for a role in the world. The most important analysis in this regard is that of Oppermann, Beasley and Kaarbo (2020), who identify the distinct roles that Britain might play in the post-Brexit world, and how British foreign policy will be re-oriented accordingly. This article can be seen as framing the general debate that the other scholarship, either implicitly or explicitly, looks to address. Oppermann et al. argue that, pre-2016, “Britain’s role orientation as an influential actor on the world stage was anchored in its EU membership”. However, the rupture caused by Brexit requires “the largest rewiring of British foreign policy since World War II” (p.134); it has led to Britain ‘casting for’ five broad roles. The first is that of ‘Global Britain’: “an outward-looking, liberal and internationalist leader on global free trade” (p.138). The second is that of “Great Power”, broadly similar to ‘Global Britain’ but with an emphasis on “superior military, economic and institutional resources”, conferred by its defence budget, its soft power assets and its leading role within NATO (pp.140-141). They then identify that Britain has also cast for the role of “regional partner to the EU”. This role sees Britain and the EU developing a special economic and security partnership (p.141) – however, it is important to note that the UK’s recent departure from the single market and the customs union detracts from the possibility of this role becoming a reality, although a deep security partnership is still possible. The fourth role sees Britain as “leader of the Commonwealth”, reviving the ‘Anglosphere’ as “a hub for Britain’s wider diplomatic and economic relations”, and the fifth is a “power by proxy strategy”: becoming a “faithful ally to the United States” (pp.142-144). However, apart from the last one, all of these roles have either been rejected or, at best, met with a lukewarm reception. The international reaction to ‘Global Britain’ has been “largely sceptical”, the EU has cast Britain more as a supplicant than a regional partner, and the Commonwealth have objected to the “neocolonial overtones of Britain’s ambition” (pp.139-143). Only the US, they argue, have reciprocated, making the final role “the path of least resistance” (although this conclusion may have been premised on Trump remaining in power) (p.145). Their conclusion, however, sees one outcome as the most feasible: an “unwanted drift towards greater isolationism”, revealing “the central irony that the one role Britain has tried to prevent since the referendum – that of isolate – might emerge as precisely the role it is socialised into” (pp.134-135).

David McCourt (2020) – using British foreign policy post-Brexit as a ‘plausibility probe’ to highlight challenges to the use of role theory in FPA – endorses the findings of Oppermann et al. He hones in on the ‘Global Britain’ role, arguing that British foreign policy makers do actually conceive of this as Britain’s future role in the world. Nevertheless, he comes to broadly the same conclusion, cautioning that “performing such a role might be impossible unless conferred by important others like America, China, and the remaining EU states, which after Brexit, their leaders may be unwilling to do” (p.11). Anand Menon and Alan Wager (2020), like McCourt, support the idea that the one true role the UK is casting for is that of ‘Global Britain’. In their assessment on the importance of

‘sovereignty’ in British politics, they identify that “the policy goal for the majority of Conservative Eurosceptics...is the pursuit of a neo-liberal globalist trajectory of low taxes, deregulation and a minimal state outside the logic of European integration” (p.281).

Srdjan Vucetic’s new book *Greatness and Decline* (2021) gives ‘Global Britain’ a different interpretation. Situating British foreign policy orientations “in everyday discourses of national identity circulating in society as a whole”, rather than merely a product of elite beliefs, the book shows that ‘Global Britain’ is grounded in Britain’s modern history as a former colonial power, even though it is “delusional and deluding”. While the body of the text is dedicated to understanding the societal forces that have shaped British policymaking in the post-war, post-imperial era, it arrives at some important conclusions for foreign policy post-Brexit. Through a constructivist and historical perspective, he highlights the English exceptionalism that is central to ‘Global Britain’, concluding that “British, and specifically English, society will press on for a global foreign policy”, even if a Scottish referendum results in the disintegration of the Union. For him, the ‘Global Britain’ strategy is very real: it is not just the product of rhetoric coming from the elite, but is rooted in (white) English society as a whole. His more general prediction broadly aligns with that of Oppermann, Beasley and Kaarbo. He is expecting a foreign policy orientation “that positions the UK as a state that is close to the EU but closer to the US”, while warning that the pursuit of a ‘Global Britain’ strategy risks the fate of “an isolated UK spinning in the vortex of global governance contestations between Washington, Beijing and Brussels”.

Similarly, Emidio Diodato and Serena Giusti (2020) identify the ‘Global Britain’ role as the most relevant through an approach that synthesises discourse analysis, role theory and critical geopolitics. In agreement with Vucetic’s interpretation, they argue that ‘Global Britain’ is not an imminently realisable goal, but rather “a discursive ‘event’,” that “has been nourished by popular and appealing narratives”, and is “prevalently connected to the nostalgic project of the Commonwealth” (pp.93-94). Moreover, they explain, it emerged out of the combination of a “free market vision”, the idea of Britain as central to “the maintenance of world stability”, and Britain’s “support for the rules-based international system”. As such, the ‘Global Britain’ role essentially combines three of the roles that Oppermann et al. outlined: “leader on global free trade”, “great power” and “leader of the Commonwealth”. In my opinion, this a useful way of thinking about it, as the three roles are very clearly intertwined and fit nicely under the wider umbrella of ‘Global Britain’. In a similar interpretation, Lawrence Freedman’s (2020) reading of ‘Global Britain’ involves the UK as both a “force for good in the world” as well as “a ‘superhero champion’ of free trade” (quoting Boris Johnson). Nevertheless, he does not spend much time assessing the feasibility of the narrative (which I assume he sees as too unrealistic for actual consideration) and instead urges for “a realistic assessment of the United Kingdom's foreign policy options”, centred on international engagement (p.129). He argues, perhaps more optimistically, that Brexit might affect British foreign policy less

than is commonly supposed, as the EU never lived up to its foreign policy potential, and relied instead on cooperation among states rather than the institution itself (p.126). While Diodato and Giusti, again, echo Oppermann et al. – declaring ‘Global Britain’ to be “far-fetched” and asserting that it “does not meet the expectations...of those actors that would be primarily involved in the project” (Diodato and Giusti, 2020, pp.95, 101) – Freedman offers a potential solution to the risk of isolation: the UK must abandon “the quest for a unique, exceptional role” and, instead, become a pragmatic “problem-solving and burden-sharing nation”. He sees Britain’s future in none of the roles prescribed by Oppermann et al, but instead poses a new one: a “helpful problem solver”, “a rule taker as much as its own rule maker”, flexible and adaptable, committed to working with others to deal with the challenges of the digital age, the climate crisis, international terrorism and more (Freedman, 2020, pp.128-130).

Indeed, this new role proposed by Freedman, of a rule taker as much as its own rule maker, provides a more realistic counterpoint to the gloomy prediction of isolation than does the ‘Global Britain’ strategy. It offers a synthesis to these two opposing scenarios, although, as the scholars above display, there is no guarantee that policymakers will accept such a prescription, given their evident determination to orient foreign policy around the ‘Global Britain’ narrative. I will now keep these possible roles in mind as I outline the scholarship on trade, aid and foreign, defence and security policy, looking to draw out ways in which they contribute to this debate through their specific empirical analyses.

### **Trade and International Aid**

The direction of British trade policy, and its commitment to aid and development spending, can tell us a lot about the extent of its global aspirations. The scholarship on trade, however, is not totally in agreement over how, or in fact whether, the ‘Global Britain’ strategy is being translated into policy. Panos Koutrakos and Adam Łazowski, both contributing to *The Routledge Handbook on the International Dimension of Brexit*, provide a legal perspective to conclude that, despite the bold rhetoric of ‘Global Britain’, there will be the practice of continuity in UK trade policy. For Koutrakos (2020/21), the “rhetoric of rupture” central to the ‘Global Britain’ narrative has been “ignorant, delusional or disingenuous” (p.76). This is backed up by Łazowski (2020/21), who shows that post-Brexit trade agreements with third countries has involved “more copy-pasting or cross-referencing than negotiating”. That the majority of existing EU agreements are just being rolled over leaves Łazowski to conclude that “there is scarce evidence” that ‘Global Britain’ desires are “turning into reality” (p.117).

Other analyses of trade policy are predicting decline rather than continuity. Marie Stack and Martin Bliss (2020), an economist with the help of an engineer, use a statistical model to predict bilateral trade policy, offering a pointer to the UK’s future place in the world. According to their model, in the case of a hard Brexit (which materialised, with the UK leaving the customs union and

single market), “the UK’s trade with all three country groups (the EU, the FTAs and regional EPAs) would decline substantially, approximately by one-third”, while UK bilateral trade is predicted to decline by somewhere between 6% to 13% (p.446). In other words, Brexit will leave the UK more isolated than global.

Christopher Dent (2020) takes a novel approach to predicting Britain’s post-Brexit role in the world through looking at historical parallels in the nineteenth century, what he sees as the first wave of globalization, to draw conclusions that can be applied today. He argues that Brexit “represents a significant withdrawal from European affairs similar to Britain’s ‘splendid isolation’ foreign policy of the late 19th century” (p.344) – a clear insinuation that the UK faces the role of the isolated country. His historical comparison offers an alternative solution: “Just as over a century ago, Britain’s more open exposure to a new global order of turbulent geopolitics may eventually compel a ‘return to Europe’ and re-embrace of European partnerships” (p.352). To avoid isolation, the UK may eventually assume the role of regional partner to the EU, as “the EU’s commercial gravitational pull” will force the UK – “in pursuit of its national economic interests – to re-engage with its by far largest trade partner” (p.347).

Joris Larik (2020) looks at British international treaty-making post-Brexit, evaluating the feasibility of “the vision of an unleashed ‘Global Britain’, which boldly sets out to strike trade deals around the world”, from an international law perspective (p.444). In the article, he makes an important interjection to the role conflict debate: “A close future relationship between the EU and UK on the one hand, and the UK’s flexibility for concluding new international agreements as ‘Global Britain’, on the other, are inversely related” (p.459). This adds credibility to the argument that Britain will pursue a foreign policy oriented around the ‘Global Britain’ narrative, as the UK’s departure from the single market can be conceived as an attempt to improve its flexibility when it comes to concluding new trade agreements. Whether this will succeed is, of course, an entirely different question.

In the final chapter of his book on British foreign policy in East Asia, former diplomat Michael Reilly (2020) looks ahead to the UK’s future relationship with the region. He sees scope for a growing trade relationship with Japan, in particular, citing their leadership in resurrecting the TPP agreement, now the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). Importantly, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has made it clear that “post-Brexit Britain would be welcome ‘with open arms’”. However, that such a partnership will fulfil the UK’s aspirations of becoming a global leader of free trade “seems fanciful, not least because geography, combined with the relatively small size of most of the 11 CPTPP members’ economies, means that it would never be a substitute for the EU market for UK businesses” (p.164). Instead, he recommends, British trade policy should focus on building a new relationship with the countries of East Asia through an

engagement in patient negotiations and multilateral agreements – that is, Britain as a rule-taker rather than a rule-maker, as Freedman suggests.

Iliana Olivié and Aitor Pérez (2020) examine the impact of Brexit on British aid policy. Through an analysis of “the most recent data available from the OECD creditor reporting system”, as well as “recent political events, official documents and political statements”, this article concludes that aid policy will be “more closely linked to national interests”. This means that “the UK will follow a realist approach in which a strong budget of bilateral ODA is required to sustain the Truly Global Britain” (pp.207-209). The realist approach, they explain, involves Britain moving away from the EU and other multilateral institutions but maintaining its current aid spending, channelling more aid through public-private partnerships. This scenario is in contrast to the nationalist approach, which would involve cuts of up to 30% in aid, and the cosmopolitan one, which would see aid funds diverted towards other multilateral institutions whilst maintaining co-operation with the EU. All this would suggest that, with regards to international aid, the UK will attempt to project an image of a ‘Global Britain’, which will be backed up with a substantial material contribution.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, the scholarship on trade and aid policy generally suggests that ‘Global Britain’ is not just empty rhetoric, and is grounded in a real desire to pursue an internationalist path. However, in line with the interpretations and the empirical evidence outlined above, fulfilling such a goal seems at the moment largely unrealistic and it might be more likely that, to avoid the dreaded fate of isolation, British decision makers will end up looking at new forms of multilateral agreements, and a close future relationship with its European neighbours and its former largest trading partner. This would strengthen the hypothesis of the UK as a pragmatic problem-solver, as proposed by Freedman, and suggests that Brexit has not led to a full de-Europeanisation of British trade policy.

### **Foreign, Defence and Security Policy**

The scholarship on British defence and security policy post-Brexit is more divided, especially when it comes to the future level of cooperation between the UK and its former European partners. Richard Whitman (2020) predicts that the UK will take an approach of “muddling through”, citing the lack of formal agreement on EU-UK foreign, security and defence policy. He highlights that the UK has not formally negotiated with the EU, nor established any agreement for cooperation, and sees this as a deliberate effort from the UK to loosen its relationship with the EU, driven by antipathy towards the EU within the Conservative party. Instead, the UK will look to seek “ad hoc arrangements for cooperation where judged to be appropriate and necessary” (p.227). Similarly, Simon Sweeney and

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<sup>1</sup> This is despite the fact that the aid budget has been cut to 0.5% of the national income during the coronavirus pandemic. In line with the prediction of Olivié and Pérez, however, the UK government has vowed that it “will return to 0.7% when the fiscal situation allows” (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 2020).

Neil Winn (2020) argue that “the conflictive and adversarial tone of EU/UK relations that has characterised the ‘negotiations’ between London and Brussels since the referendum does not augur well for future security and defence cooperation, not even between Britain and France” (p.225). They are notably pessimistic, predicting that the “tetchy atmosphere” that surrounded negotiations, and the resulting ‘hard Brexit’, has undermined the scope for consensus (p.240). They even warn that the “USA may refer more to Paris than to London, as UK global influence declines”, clearly suggesting that the UK will become isolated (p.237). In a more recent article, they assert once again that “the UK will experience a loss of international influence” post-Brexit, with its relationships with both Europe and the US at risk (Sweeney & Winn, 2021). Nevertheless, they do concede that “strategic irrelevance” can be avoided, and sign off on a slightly more optimistic note, saying: “perhaps in the end pragmatism will prevail in both the trade and security spheres. We can but hope” (p.242). Here, again, Freedman’s recommendation seems most apt: Britain adopting the role of pragmatic problem-solver to avoid isolation.

Ramses Wessel, Sara Poli, and Scarlett McArdle, writing in *The Routledge Handbook on the International Dimension of Brexit*, generally disagree with these predictions, concluding that the UK will probably remain committed to the objectives of the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) after Brexit. They foresee many areas of convergence between the approaches of the EU and the UK. One such area, according to Poli (2020/21), will be with sanctions. “Although the UK will regain sovereignty in imposing sanctions”, she explains, “this does not mean that it will have a very different policy from that of the EU on the substantive aspects of the sanctions regimes”. She points out that the House of Lords has expressed an explicit desire to remain aligned with the EU, and that “close coordination” is likely, as “sanctions are most effective when imposed in concert with international partners” (pp.216-217). Another likely area of convergence is that of crisis management where, as McArdle (2020/21) outlines, the initial “indications are that the UK will continue to engage” with the EU, “with both sides agreed from the outset on the need for continued cooperation” (p.241). Wessel (2020/21) explains how the intergovernmental nature of the CFSP “renders it logical for the UK to continue participating”, and that the UK will be allowed to participate on a “case-by-case basis”: what he amusingly calls a “friends with benefits” relationship, similar to the current EU-Norway relationship (pp.199-200). However, for such cooperation to work, the UK would have to accept a foreign policy role as a rule taker rather than as a rule maker, and as a follower rather than as a leader. (Wessel, 2020/21, p.207; Poli, 2020/21, p.218) These scholars thus envisage Britain acting, once again, in the helpful problem-solver role envisaged by Freedman, through close cooperation with the EU on matters related to security.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This prediction is supported by the findings of Anna Ayers, Leonardo De Agostini and Magnus Obermann, in their papers on British foreign policy towards Belarus, Russia and China respectively. They outline, in general, how cooperation between the UK and the EU is likely – with a potential 27+1 co-implementation framework adopted for sanctions – despite signs that the UK is trying to align more closely with other global actors, such as the US and Canada.

This is echoed by Cornelia Baciú (2020) who, using a game theoretical approach, concludes that there might be “significant potential for strategic coordination” between EU member states and the UK “based on the estimated degree of overlap” between their respective security and defence policy strategies” (p.554). However, the EU will be “less central in UK’s next national security strategy”, who will look instead to “novel alliances and partnerships”, while participating in EU missions “on a selective basis” (pp.554, 559). Significantly, she also notes that “Washington might see a decreased utility in a weakened post Brexit UK” (p.556) – suggesting that the role of partner to the US, in terms of security policy, is no more likely than that of regional partner to the EU. Ramon Loik (2020), in a similar vein, foresees legal “difficulties in building a suitable post-Brexit co-operation model” between the UK and the EU, but still sees a large degree of bilateral cooperation between the UK and its traditional European partners (pp.13-14). This is corroborated by Baciú, who envisages France, traditionally a close security and defence partner, to continue to be so. “A high level of mutual trust between these two countries is very likely to persist in the new decade”, she argues, highlighting that France is still keen to maintain close cooperation with the only other European nuclear power (Baciú, 2020, p.555). Jonas Driedger (2021) also sets out to “contradict the prominent views that the Brexit process has negatively affected security cooperation” between the UK and Europe’s major powers (p.87). He argues “against the pessimists” and affirms that British-German security cooperation will continue due to the common threat of Russia, and a shared sense of mutual reliability and utility built up by the Ukraine crisis and the UK’s influence in NATO combined with Germany’s increased post-Brexit influence in the EU (p.90).

Michael Reilly (2020) also provides useful insight on British foreign, defence and security policy towards East Asia, and China in particular. He warns that the UK risks becoming a “pawn in other countries’ fights”, and references the way in which British policy on the use of Huawei changed so radically in early 2020 as an indication of this (p.166). This is a point which resembles the role of the isolated former power, and is echoed by Vucetic especially (above). To avoid this fate, he argues, the UK “should seek to build lasting relationships based on shared values, mutual respect and understanding and a willingness to learn” (p.167). Here, he comes to the same solution as does Freedman, encouraging Britain to play the role of a humble, “burden-sharing” nation.

In general, there seems to be a growing, more optimistic, consensus on the UK’s future defence and security policy role. Despite the doubts harbored by Whitman and Sweeney and Winn, many of the scholars here hopefully predict the emergence of a collaborative United Kingdom post-Brexit. Whether or not this level of cooperation exists with the EU as an institution, there does seem to be a good chance of a strong security and defence relationship developing with their European neighbours, France and Germany specifically. Based off the evidence provided, this does seem far more realistic than the ‘Global Britain’ or ‘great power’ role. Indeed, the UK as a collaborator,



playing the problem-solver role, can allow for security agreements and positive relationships around the world, a sure way to avoid the outcome of isolation.

## **Conclusion**

As Srdjan Vucetic points out in his new book, “finding a role” has been an ambition that has pre-occupied British foreign policy makers and scholars alike for decades. In 1990 alone, David Sanders published the British foreign policy textbook *Losing an Empire, Finding a Role*, while William Wallace gave a speech at Chatham House, in which he agreed that Britain needed to define a new role for itself in the post-Cold War era (Vucetic, 2021). For many years, the EU provided this role, as the UK could act as a bridge between Europe and the rest of the Anglophone world. It is logical, therefore, that much of the scholarship on British foreign policy in 2020-2021 has focused on the role that the UK will play in the post-Brexit world. What seems to be evident is that, perhaps due to the legacy of empire, British policymakers are intent on forging a foreign policy grounded in the concept of a ‘Global Britain’ – it is not just rhetoric alone. However, as much of the scholarship attests, pursuing such a strategy may instead lead to the likely scenario of isolation. Perhaps aware of this possibility, in practice the UK continues to actually mirror the EU in many foreign policy matters. There are signs of continued cooperation with their European partners, especially in the sphere of defence and security, which points to the fact that a hard Brexit has not led to a hard de-Europeanisation of foreign policy. In light of the findings presented above, I would argue that the UK faces the real prospect of becoming isolated post-Brexit and that, in order to avoid this fate, its best bet is to become the helpful, problem-solving nation that Freedman suggests, working with countries in Europe and around the world to maintain the rules-based international order and combat the global challenges of the 21st century.

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