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
- 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 , 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,

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

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

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

Neil Winn (2020) argue that "the

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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