The UK's Global Role Post-Brexit: What is Worth Researching?

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Whatever challenges face the UK's government after leaving the European Union, a shortage of advice is not one of them. An enormous amount has been written about the UK's future foreign policy (Policy Exchange, 2019; Chatham House, 2021). This article summarises some of the key debates and points towards areas that might be fruitful to research. The UK's power as a state is difficult to write about in a balanced way. There is a jingoistic element in British media and within the Brexit movement that grossly overstates its power in Europe and beyond. However, in debunking these delusions, many go too far and by any normal measure the UK – even since the loss of its empire – has been an extraordinarily important country: culturally, economically, financially, politically and militarily.

In a sense, the theme at hand – the UK's relationship with European powers, the US and the broader world – is not new. Since 1945, scholars have analysed the UK's foreign policy based on Churchill's famous paradigm of the three circles: America, Europe and the Commonwealth (Gaskarth, 2014). In recent times, the latter has been reduced to the Anglosphere (the CANZUK idea) or expanded to include all of the world. The question of Britain's foreign policy posture has been framed more critically in the famous quip of former US Secretary of State Dean Acheson, that Britain had lost an empire but had not yet found a role (Sanders, Houghton, 2017). The notion of the UK being a "bridge" between the US and the UK has also been popular but this was always problematic. Writing in 2005, after the Iraq war had started, William Wallace wrote that this position had crumbled as the UK had been reduced to being a vassal of George W. Bush's America.

Any country claiming to be a bridge should always be viewed with healthy scepticism and this is true in the UK's case. The implication that, for example, Germany needed the UK as an interlocutor with the US stretches credulity. The UK's relative marginalisation in recent disputes such as the Ukraine crisis was noteworthy, and Brexit has surely put the lid on the coffin of the "bridge" ideal. The UK was very useful to the US as a powerful, assertive country in the EU that could be counted on to support its core policies and NATO centrality. Its interest for the US will surely have diminished. Some new paradigm or framing is needed, but the phrase "Global Britain" is not propitious in this case, as it formed a part of the pro-Brexit movement (Daddow, 2019), and given the reality of Brexit, appears contradictory. The UK's situation offers a fascinating real-time case study for constructivist scholars of a major country trying to (re)construct its global role (Daddow, 2019).

Northern Irish historian John Bew has been leading the UK government's ambitious policy review entitled "The integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy," due to be released in early 2021 (Cooper, 2021). The involvement of a historian is viewed by many as a good thing, as it should instil a sober analysis of the UK's prospects. However, Britain's history has been extraordinary and some historians have come up with extravagant visions of the UK's power outside the EU, failing to distinguish adequately between the UK and the US or between the UK's historical role and current power structures in Europe (Simms, 2017). It is likely that this new, post-withdrawal, document will be more realistic. It is being billed as the most important strategic document in decades but it will do well to keep pace with such a fast-moving world. Whether any kind of "grand strategy" (as opposed to a set of principles) is still feasible in the 21st century is questionable. This last point does not just apply to the UK by any means.

One of the key issues is the extent to which the UK's future foreign policy can be disentangled from Brexit (which is now a reality) and the associated angst. To understand the UK's future role, we first have to look at Brexit, what it tells us about the UK and the prospects for future UK–EU relations. There can be little doubt that the withdrawal process was humbling for the UK's pretensions as a major power, and that the EU very much dominated proceedings. The Withdrawal Agreement of 2019 placed a trade border within the UK, committed the UK to paying tens of billions of pounds to the EU and placed it in a transition period during which it had to implement all EU law with no representation. This was all in return for the opportunity to negotiate a trade deal. The Trade and Cooperation Agreement of late 2020 avoids tariffs but offers relatively poor market access for the UK (albeit this was mostly the UK government's choice), leaving key future decisions about financial services and data in the hands of the EU. It did not even succeed in the symbolic ("easy win") task of recovering complete control over its fishing territories.

Could it then be said that the Brexit process "revealed" the UK to be a weaker power than thought? No. Here, the distinction between a rationalist positivist view of the world in which reality is revealed, and a more, broadly speaking, reflectivist approach to things in which reality is co-constituted, is relevant. It is not the case that the UK was always weak in the EU, but more that the internal political crises of the UK set it on a path to construct its own (for the moment at least) lesser role in Europe. In plain language, all the Brexit process "reveals" is that if a country decides to withdraw from an advanced regional integration project without a feasible plan and with positions mainly based on domestic politics and an unrealistic view of its own leverage, it will end up leaving on unfavourable terms and/or economically damaged.

More important for our purposes is this question: where does Brexit leave the UK as a major power? It now certainly has more options to pursue a different kind of economic policy. It could look for trade agreements with states such as the US, India and China (all tremendously difficult prospects though). On the pro-Brexit side, it could be argued that the UK's swifter COVID-19 vaccination process shows the advantages of not being tied to an EU-wide approach, but the jury is still out on which approach works better. More broadly, it is important to understand that the EU did not really constrain the UK's foreign policy (foreign and security policy is still "intergovernmental" rather than collectively controlled like agriculture and trade), therefore the benefit of leaving the EU is not clear.

The UK may consider itself freer (now that it has ended its freedom of movement with the EU countries) to liberalise travel with a wider range of countries or to go further with the "five eyes" group of Anglophone intelligence allies. A major question is how much to align itself with the EU's foreign policy positions or how to distinguish itself from them. It is noteworthy that the UK, as a part of the Partnership Council with the EU, refused to include structured cooperation of foreign policy issues. Not too much should be read into this, as the UK could still cooperate as and when it sees fit, including on issues such as sanctions. Even in the Trump era it was noteworthy that the UK kept to the "European" mainstream on issues such as the Iran deal, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and climate change. Brexit offers an insight into the enduring power – or not – of the liberal (and in particular, European) West. Can these fundamental common values overcome economic and political rivalries?

Post-Brexit UK may prove to be a fascinating case study of the usefulness (or not) of the soft power concept. Soft power is often criticised as essentially vacuous, although its popular use is somewhat oversimplified compared to Joseph Nye's original formulation (2004). Obviously, the popularity of the Premier League or Sherlock does not translate into any kind of political influence for the British government. The extensive role of UK universities or the prestige of British science may be understood as a kind of long-term influence for the UK as a whole. Brand Britain on the whole has been gravely damaged by Brexit, which is generally portrayed as an act of vanity and self-harm by the international media. Such reputational damage could be overcome with time.

The UK's raw capabilities are still impressive. It is a nuclear power with extensive intelligence capabilities and military resources. It is still a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Its economy is one of the largest in the world and its scientific resources are exceptional as is its cultural and educational clout in many respects. Nevertheless, it is not big enough to lead or force other countries to its will via hard economic or military power. A recent paper by Chatham House argues that it should aim to be a global broker rather than a great power (2019). It should try to play a lead coordinating and networking role in pursuing key objectives such as 'protecting liberal democracy; promoting international peace and security; tackling climate change; championing global tax transparency and equitable

economic growth.' In this regard, the recent reduction of the UK's aid target (from 0.7 to now 0.5 percent of GDP) sends a terrible message in this year of global crisis. However, the UK is still on course to give proportionately more than other large countries. Controversial for some, the report stresses that the UK should work most closely with the EU and not waste time trying to distinguish its role from it. It notes the strain on the UK's diplomatic resources based on the need to increase activity in Europe (now that it is out of the main institution) and in the WTO.

The UK also has significant vulnerabilities. Its various overseas territories (including Gibraltar, the British Virgin Islands and the Falkland Islands) have been aghast at the economic and political impact of Brexit, which has left them exposed in different ways. The government's interest in the Indo-Pacific is understandable, but it is hard to know how sustainable that is, given the UK's location and the strain on its resources. Generally, doing something for the sake of it is not a good idea and the UK should be wary where efforts to redeem its pride and status could lead it. This is the kind of thing the Chatham House paper warns against, but this modest proposition to be a "global broker" may not satisfy the wounded pride of post-Brexit UK. There are concerns that increased military involvement in the Pacific merely attracts trouble without giving the UK a significant role in shaping US policy in the region (which will be the defining factor). The role of psychology has been increasingly brought into the study of IR (Lebow, 2018), and post-Brexit UK will offer a fascinating case study.

The major danger is the internal threat to the UK's integrity posed by a hard Brexit not supported by Scottish or Northern Irish voters. Added to this is the fallout of poor management of the pandemic and how that may exacerbate Brexit tensions. Irish unity is something that has long been accepted in principle as a possibility by British elites, but the loss of Scotland would be a body blow to the UK's great power pretensions and may even put its permanent seat on the UN Security Council in jeopardy.

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