

British Foreign Policy after Brexit: Media Analysis

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Abstract

An analysis of over 70 editorials on post-Brexit British foreign policy, published in leading newspapers and magazines from 21 countries and in seven languages, allows us to identify three recurring themes which have shaped the media conversation since 1 January 2020. First, the clear consensus among the sources considered is that the world has changed drastically since the referendum in 2016, and not in the UK's favour. The rise of great power competition, protectionism, and unilateralism is unlikely to promote the rise of an independent, "swashbuckling" Global Britain. Second, a considerable number of the sources analysed take issue with what they identify as a neo-imperialist strain in post-Brexit British foreign policy, which they argue is misplaced due to the UK's increasingly limited ability to project power globally. Finally, a third, more optimistic theme present in a number of the sources highlights the possibilities now open to the UK, should it avail itself of its newfound independence. Although this paper makes no pretensions of comprehensiveness, it sheds some light on the arguments, assumptions, and ideas which have driven the media narrative of post-Brexit British foreign policy over the past year.

Introduction

An analysis of editorials on post-Brexit British foreign policy allows us to identify three recurring themes that have shaped the media conversation over the past year. First, the clear consensus among the more than 70 sources considered is that the world has changed drastically since the referendum in 2016, and not in the UK's favour. The rise of great power competition, protectionism, and populism are unlikely to promote the rise of the independent, "swashbuckling" Global Britain advertised by several leading Brexiteers. Second, a number of the sources analysed take issue with what they identify as a neo-imperialist strain in post-Brexit British foreign policy, which they emphasise is misplaced due to the UK's rapidly fading power on the global stage. Third, although a substantial majority of the sources subscribes to a rather gloomy view of Britain's prospects, a more optimistic strain highlights the possibilities now open to the UK, should it avail itself of its newfound independence.

Methodology

This paper considers sources from January 1st, 2020 up to the present day, ie, March 2021. Many of the articles I analysed were therefore responding to various key, newsworthy events that occurred during the time period in question, namely Brexit itself, on January 31st, 2020, the global COVID-19 pandemic, the US election, and various policy decisions by the UK government: trade deals, sanctions, the defence budget increase, and the decrease in development aid.

Concerning the choice of publications consulted, I mainly searched for articles published in newspapers of record, but also included influential magazines such as *The Atlantic*, *Der Spiegel*, or *Le Point*. In order to identify the most relevant articles, I systematically combed through every article in a given newspaper or magazine that contained the word ‘Brexit’, before narrowing my search to include terms such as ‘foreign policy’ and ‘Global Britain’.

The summary presented below has two main shortcomings. The first is linguistic in nature: although I considered sources in English, German, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Norwegian, and Danish, I was not able to take into account native-language sources from admittedly important countries such as Russia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Italy, the Netherlands, and Turkey. My analysis is thus somewhat skewed towards sources from Europe and the Americas,¹ although many foreign newspapers also appear in English (*Al Jazeera*, *Times of India*, Pakistan’s *The Nation*) and were duly consulted. A more prosaic obstacle I encountered was the persistent presence of paywalls, which prevented me from accessing several promising articles from *Le Monde*, the *South China Morning Post*, and various financial newspapers.

Although the media plays a crucial role in shaping public discourse, it itself is subject to various pressures. Most importantly, perhaps, media narratives runs the risk of being conditioned by an availability bias, whereby excessive deference is given to “newsworthy events” which often go on to provide the framework around which articles are constructed. This availability heuristic is not problematic *per se*, but it does bear keeping in mind, especially as it influences what the media chooses *not* to focus on.

This analysis therefore makes no pretensions of comprehensiveness, and there remains quite some work to be done in filling in the gaps mentioned above. Nonetheless, the three themes I was able to identify proved remarkably consistent, and it seems unlikely that the inclusion of a few more sources would drastically alter the conclusions presented in the pages below. This consistency has led me to forgo a geographic or policy-based approach in favour of a broad thematic approach. Finally, all the translations given below are my own.

¹ It is of course natural that there be more interest in Brexit and in British foreign policy in the West than in other parts of the world.

I. A Different World

A core sentiment expressed by a majority of the sources is that the assumptions that went into formulating and marketing a post-Brexit foreign policy in the run-up to and in the immediate aftermath of the referendum in 2016—perhaps best exemplified by the ubiquitous slogan ‘Global Britain’—are no longer valid. Two factors are consistently referenced in this regard: 1) the rise of great power competition, and, to a lesser extent, 2) the rise of populism, unilateralism, and protectionism.

An October 2019 article in *The Irish Times* describes the Brexiteers’ rallying cry in no uncertain terms: Global Britain is a “vague slogan”, a “useful Tory branding exercise”, and a “fundamentally [...] defensive spin designed to dress up a retreat as an advance”.² The article’s core argument: “What the Brexiteers tend not to acknowledge is that the world has changed since the 2016 referendum.”³

This theme of change is present either explicitly or implicitly in a great number of the articles analysed. When not directly identified, as in *The Irish Times*, newspapers habitually count off the various ways the world order has changed since the referendum.

The biggest change the sources identify is the reemergence of great power competition, which many of the sources predict will prevent the UK from acting independently, and will instead force it to become merely another minor player, caught between the US, China, Russia, and (paradoxically), the EU. A second article in *The Irish Times* from January 2021 puts the matter in stark terms: “The UK is weaker now than before, less well able to realise its sovereignty as a dominating power.”⁴ A February 2021 article in Germany’s *Der Spiegel* echoes that sentiment: “Even if the UK remains an important player on the world political stage, its influence as an individual actor will decrease in many areas [...] Already in the negotiations with the EU, Johnson was forced to abandon his ambitions not to conform to the bloc’s labor, social, and environmental standards, an experience that will doubtlessly be repeated with other negotiating partners. And the more powerful Britain’s counterpart, the weaker London’s negotiating power.”⁵

² Mac Cormaic, R. (2019, October 19). *The Painful Paradox of Global Britain*. The Irish Times. Retrieved February 2, 2021, from <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/the-painful-paradox-of-global-britain-1.4055354>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Gillespie, P. (2021, January 16). *UK will learn that size matters when it comes to sovereignty*. The Irish Times. Retrieved February 2, 2021, from <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/uk-will-learn-that-size-matters-when-it-comes-to-sovereignty-1.4459415>

⁵ Reichert, I. *Großbritannien nach dem Brexit. Die große Katerstimmung (The United Kingdom after Brexit. The Big Hangover)*. Der Spiegel. Retrieved February 1, 2021, from <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/grossbritannien-nach-dem-brexit-wunsch-und-wirklichkeit-a-2dbc1c7e-045d-41f8-ae84-a10b26348b22>

An editorial in Switzerland's *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* argues that if the UK decides to actively distance itself from the EU, the contemporary *Zeitgeist* will “drive the UK and the EU into structural competition.”⁶ The author, a former German ambassador to the Court of St James, offers the advice that “rivals can quickly turn into opponents, and opponents into enemies.” Meanwhile, Munich's *Süddeutsche Zeitung* warns that “the UK runs the risk of being crushed” between Beijing and Washington.⁷

A June 2020 article in France's *Le Figaro* also underlines the direct strategic consequences of the UK's loss of power: “In the new grand geopolitical game revolving around China, the UK occupies a special position due to both its former colonial legacy in Hong Kong as well as to Brexit. By distancing itself from Europe in order to take to the open sea with Global Britain, London will need the United States as well as China.”⁸

In fact, the centrality of China to the UK's future foreign policy is present in several of the articles.⁹ In 2015, Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne had heralded a “golden era” in UK-China relations.¹⁰ But recent British moves, such as banning Huawei from the UK's telecommunications networks and offering residency to over 3m Hong Kongers, have deeply damaged the relationship.¹¹ Commenting on the deteriorating relationship, China's *Global Times* tabloid emphasises that “The colony era [sic] has long been over, but the UK still tries to maintain certain influence [sic] over Hong Kong” and that “Beijing and London may [now] enter into a tense accommodation with each other.”¹² But as the third thematic section will illustrate, the article's pessimism is a notable exception and Chinese newspapers (at least those in English) generally sound a more optimistic note.

⁶ Adam, R. G. (2021, January 24). *Brexit done, Brexit won? – Was Grossbritannien gewonnen und die EU verloren hat; und umgekehrt ('Brexit done, Brexit won?' – What the UK has won and what the EU has lost, and the other way around.* *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*. Retrieved February 26, 2021, from <https://www.nzz.ch/meinung/brexit-done-brexit-won-grossbritannien-und-die-eu-ld.1597628>

⁷ Mühlhauer, A. (2020, July 22). *Von wegen souveräne Briten (Sovereign Britons? Far from it!).* *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. Retrieved January 21, 2021, from <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/brexit-souveraenitaet-grossbritannien-russland-1.4973947>

⁸ De La Grange, A. (2020, June 12). *Chine-États-Unis: Johnson sommé de choisir son camp (China–United States: Johnson forced to choose sides).* *Le Figaro*. Retrieved February 1, 2021, from <https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/chine-etats-unis-johnson-somme-de-choisir-son-camp-20200612>

⁹ Also see Magnus Obermann, 2021, “Shifting the post-Brexit alliances? Britain's China policy between American fervour, European ambiguity, and global British ambition”, BRIFPO Paper, London: LSE European Foreign Policy Unit.

¹⁰ *George Osborne on UK's 'golden era' as China's 'best partner in the West'.* (2015, October 23). BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-34621254>

¹¹ *The Economist.* (2020, July 14). *A ban on Huawei further worsens Britain's relations with China.* Retrieved on January 13, 2021, from <https://www.economist.com/britain/2020/07/14/a-ban-on-huawei-further-worsens-britains-relations-with-china>

¹² Hongjian, C. (2020, May 31). *Can China-UK 'Golden Era' Ties be Maintained?* *Global Times*. Retrieved January 13, 2021, from <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1190094.shtml>. The article was written before the UK's decision to offer residency to BNO citizens.

A July 2020 article in *El País*, however, argues that London's decisions in the summer of 2020 vis-à-vis Hong Kong and the ensuing backlash from Beijing demonstrated "the limits to the UK's ambitions to be a unique voice on the international stage [...] in the post-Brexit era."¹³ Harking back to the concept of a "golden era" the article argues that "the idea of Global Britain was based in large part on an increase in trade with China. But the events in Hong Kong and the Chinese government's attitude have greatly complicated efforts to achieve that positive relationship."¹⁴

Nor are relations with the EU and the US, the UK's natural partners, all that rosy, as several sources argue. Writing for Riyadh-based *Arab News*, Andrew Hammond points out that "Two of the long-standing pillars of UK policy in the post-war period, its alliances with the US and Europe, are in flux. Not only is Johnson misaligned with US President-elect Joe Biden on a number of issues, including Northern Ireland, but he also faces tricky ties with EU neighbours post-Brexit."¹⁵

An additional symptom of this malaise has been the fact that free trade and multilateralism are no longer in vogue, and this was taken as an ill portent for those who had advertised Brexit as a fundamentally globalism-friendly, free-trading endeavour.¹⁶

Finally, the global COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced and sharpened the problematic developments mentioned above, and will further restrict Whitehall's spending and policy-making powers, at least in the short-term. But although a few of the articles mentioned the pandemic and highlighted the British government's at times underwhelming response, it generally received short shrift from the sources considered. In fact, many of the sources made no mention at all of COVID-19 in their coverage of British foreign policy.

To recapitulate, a large portion of the articles I considered repeatedly refer to some combination of two factors which have fundamentally changed the equation since the UK decided to leave the European Union in 2016: 1) the rise of great power competition, and 2) the rise of unilateralism and protectionism. Ultimately, these factors will act as constraints on the UK's internal and external sovereignty. Given the singular centrality of sovereignty to the whole

¹³ De Miguel, R. (2020, July 12). *Hong Kong expone los límites de un Reino Unido solo (Hong Kong exposes the limits of a United Kingdom out on its own)*. *El País*. Retrieved January 12, 2021, from <https://elpais.com/internacional/2020-07-11/hong-kong-expone-los-limites-de-un-reino-unido-solo.html>

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Hammond, A. (2020, November 27). *British premier plans for post-Brexit 'Global Britain'*. *Arab News*. Retrieved February 15, 2021, from <https://www.arab-news.com/node/1769361>

¹⁶ This is the central argument of Landler, M. (2020, December 24). *Brexit Is Finally Done, but It Already Seems Out of Date*. *New York Times*. Retrieved February 6, 2021, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/24/world/europe/brexit-deal-boris-johnson.html>

idea of Brexit, the analysed media suggest unequivocally that the world which the now notionally independent UK has entered might actually end up fundamentally restricting its ability to act independently.

II. Brexit and Neo-Imperialism

The second major theme present in the media revolves around the UK's perception of itself and of its role in the world. A significant portion of the articles takes issue with the UK's belief that it will be more powerful apart from the EU, framing Brexiteers' dreams of a free-trading Singapore-upon-Thames with strong renewed bonds to the Commonwealth as a neo-imperialist fantasy.

The ostensibly neo-imperialist nature of Brexit is central to several of the articles consulted. Argentina's leading conservative paper, *La Nación*, ran an article in December 2019 entitled "Imperial Glory: Boris Johnson bets on the past in order to overcome the trauma of Brexit". Global Britain, according to the author, is naught but an "imperial chimera".¹⁷

Residual rancour over the Falklands war? Perhaps, but the article corroborates its argument with convincing statistics: "From an economic point of view, the Commonwealth—which represents only 14% of global GDP—constitutes merely 8% of the UK's foreign trade, compared to 42% with the EU and 15% with the US. Hard to imagine the radiant future which Johnson predicts."¹⁸

Catalonia's leading newspaper, *La Vanguardia*, combines the neo-imperialist argument with the great-power competition argument in section I, and interprets Brexit as a project in English nostalgia that would see the UK return to "the Elizabethan era, [...] when Shakespeare composed his dramas and comedies, the arts flourished, and domestic peace reigned".¹⁹ The alliance the UK would like to form, composed of India, Australia, New Zealand, and a number of African countries, would "no doubt be a valiant club", but would not fare very well against "Premier League teams": the US, China, Russia, and the EU.²⁰

When the "Tilt to the Indo-Pacific" became a buzzword in the fall of 2020, newspapers in Asia also began to turn their attention to the "neo-imperialist" nature of Britain's post-Brexit

¹⁷ Corradini, L. (2019, December 8). *Gloria imperial: Boris Johnson apuesta al pasado para superar el trauma del Brexit (Imperial Glory: Boris Johnson bets on the past in order to overcome the trauma of Brexit)*. *La Nación*. Retrieved January 21, 2021, from <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/el-mundo/gloria-imperial-johnson-apuesta-al-pasado-para-superar-el-trauma-del-brexid-nid2313681/>

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ramos, R. (2021, January 10). *El Reino Unido tras el Brexit: pocos amigos, muchos conocidos (The United Kingdom after Brexit: Few Friends, Many Acquaintances)*. *La Vanguardia*. Retrieved February 6, 2021, from <https://www.lavanguardia.com/internacional/20210110/6177877/reino-unido-brexid-europa-diplomacia-estados-unidos-china.html>

²⁰ Ibid.

engagement. Hong-Kong-based *Asia Times* wrote in December 2020 that the UK's desire to "[project] itself as a re-emerging force in global and particularly Asian trade" can be read as "an attempt to conjure up a grandeur of Britain in world politics that faded after the 1950s."²¹ We saw above how China's *Global News* framed Britain's Hong Kong policy in neocolonial terms.²²

In India, the release of Chatham House's *Global Britain, Global Broker* report on 11 January caused somewhat of a tamasha. Several newspapers expressed their displeasure at how India was portrayed in the report.²³ An article in the *Hindustan Times* titled "Is 'Global Britain' inimical to India?" gripes that "Rarely has a report from an 'establishment' institution in the UK portrayed India in such inimical terms".²⁴ The fact that Johnson was unable to attend India's January Republic Day celebrations as the guest of honour was perceived as an additional slight.

Two articles in *Al Jazeera* from January 2020 cover Britain's future relations with Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East, arguing that no fundamental changes are imminent. The article on Africa, which was published before the UK's cut to its development aid budget, points out that trade with the UK will be complicated by the fact that most African countries' trade with the UK is currently governed by trade deals negotiated with the EU, including Enhanced Partnership Agreements (EPAs) and the Everything But Arms (EBA) initiative. Replacing these deals on a bilateral level will take considerable time.²⁵ As for the UK's relations with the Middle East, the article expects a continued active role for Britain in the region, including trade in arms and engagement on issues such as Iran, perhaps in closer coordination with the US, with the singular caveat of lower development expenditures.²⁶

²¹ Hutt, D., & Bowie, N. (2020, December 17). *Global Britain ditches EU for an Asian future*. *Asia Times*. Retrieved February 15, 2021, from <https://asiatimes.com/2020/12/global-britain-ditches-eu-for-an-asian-future/>

²² Also see Nemo Buschmann, 2021, "How has the 'Global Britain' idea shaped the United Kingdom's Hong Kong policy after Brexit in 2020?", BRIFPO Paper, London: LSE European Foreign Policy Unit.

²³ The word 'rival' comes up several times, as does the following sentiment: "it should be obvious by now that the idea of a deeper relationship with India always promises more than it can deliver". For more, see Niblett, R. (2021, January 11). *Global Britain, Global Broker*. Chatham House. Retrieved February 26, 2021, from https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/2021-01-11-global-britain-global-broker-niblett_0.pdf

²⁴ Akbaruddin, S. (2021, January 20). *Is 'Global Britain' inimical to India?* *Hindustan Times*. Retrieved January 21, 2021, from <https://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/is-global-britain-inimical-to-india-101611150625192.html>

²⁵ Abdallah, R. (2020, January 3). *Can Africa really benefit from Brexit?* *Al Jazeera*. Retrieved February 6, 2021, from <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/1/3/can-africa-really-benefit-from-brexit>

²⁶ Yeung, P. (2020, December 30). *How might Brexit impact the Middle East?* *Al Jazeera*. Retrieved February 6, 2021, from <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/12/30/uk-mideast-brexit>

At the core of the neo-imperialist reading of Brexit is the notion that the UK is considered to be overestimating the extent of its influence and power. As in the first section, the conclusion the analysed media tends to draw is that the UK will ultimately find itself pushed around by great powers. The problématique of British sovereignty starts at home, however, and several articles note the centrifugal forces in Edinburgh and Belfast pulling the Union apart. But the UK's post-Brexit weakness also extends to important areas such as trade, so central to the notion of Global Britain. Greece's *Ekathimerini* recognises the ironic fact that "Brexit's reclamation of national sovereignty threatens the UK with internal dissolution", while "having voluntarily abandoned the world's most powerful trading bloc" has weakened London in upcoming trade negotiations.²⁷

Therefore, there is a general suspicion among the sources considered that the UK will attempt to mitigate the effects of Brexit by recreating some of the relationships and linkages which characterised the British Empire in its heyday. This interpretation of Global Britain chimes with the view that Brexit is at heart a backwards-looking endeavour. As such, the articles which ascribe to this second theme argue that any British foreign policy premised on neo-imperialism is bound to fail.

III. Brexit's Opportunities

While some of the most vociferous critiques and the most gloomy predictions for the UK's foreign policy post-Brexit come from EU countries, the tone is different elsewhere. The almost unanimous consensus across the EU is that the UK has committed an error of grand proportions by quitting the EU. As countries still within the bloc, there has always been a latent (although at times also explicit) tendency to want to punish the UK for its transgression—or if not to punish, then to wish it ill. Granted, Britain's approach to the Brexit negotiations has not exactly inspired confidence in Downing Street's ability to handle complex diplomacy, and given the turmoil which has characterised so much of British politics since the referendum, the worst predictions from the first two sections might very well come true. But this would be to ignore several key advantages the UK still has, which is the essence of the third core argument I came across in my analysis. Although the first two arguments go hand in hand, this one explicitly rejects prevailing opinion. Several publications used decisions taken by the UK after its exit to argue that Brexit may in fact have allowed the UK to become more flexible and independent in its foreign policy.

²⁷ Pagoulatos, G. (2020, January 9). *The Winner's Curse*. *Ekathimerini*. Retrieved February 1, 2021, from <https://www.ekathimerini.com/opinion/248209/the-winner-s-curse/>

According to a February 2021 article from Singapore's *Straits Times*, the £16.5m (\$21.8m) hike in defence spending (the biggest since the cold war) is hardly "the action of a country about to abandon its international responsibilities. Nor is it an indication of a nation which sees itself as being locked into an irreversible decline."²⁸ This, together with the UK's permanent security-council seat, blue-water navy, and nuclear arsenal, specifically counters claims that the UK no longer has the tools to pursue its global interests.

One of the few European sources to take a more positive tack, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* uses the Summer 2020 sanctions on human rights abusers in Russia, Saudi Arabia, Myanmar, and North Korea to argue that London is now pursuing a foreign policy based on "a mix of idealism and pragmatism". Comparing London's actions to protect human rights in Hong Kong with Berlin and Brussels's actions (or lack thereof), the newspaper muses: "better to have done a little bit on one's own, than nothing together".²⁹ The UK was also quick to apply sanctions on Belarus this summer, without having to seek the unanimous consent of 27 other states in the European Council.³⁰ It is crucial to point out that these newspapers do not argue that Brexit was therefore worth it. But the UK's exit from the EU, these sources argue, is the new *état des choses*, to be overcome rather than endlessly bewailed.

An *Asia Times* article from December 2020 titled "Global Britain ditches EU for an Asian future" explicitly welcomes the UK's new attention to Asia: "post-Brexit uncertainty hasn't deterred the UK from projecting itself as a re-emerging force in global and particularly Asian trade."³¹ Other articles pointed out the speed with which the UK has completed trade agreements with several Asian countries, although these were mostly rollover agreements based on preexisting EU deals.³² Agreements with countries that do not have such agreements like Thailand, India, and Indonesia, and which are not part of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), which the UK has applied to join, will take longer to negotiate. More broadly, it remains unlikely that gains for the UK in Indo-Pacific trade can ever offset losses in trade to Europe.

²⁸ Eyal, J. (2020, November 24). *Global Britain, the next chapter*. *Straits Times*. Retrieved February 6, 2021, from <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/global-britain-the-next-chapter>

²⁹ Buchsteiner, J. (2020, July 26). *Gegen Peking, gegen Moskau (Against Beijing, Against Moscow)*. *Frankfurter Allgemeine*. Retrieved February 1, 2021, from <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/grossbritanniens-aussenpolitik-gegen-peking-und-moskau-16877373.html>

³⁰ See Anna Ayers, 2021, "Post-Brexit British Foreign Policy Toward Belarus: Global Actor or Irrelevant Power?", BRIFPO Paper, London: LSE European Foreign Policy Unit.

³¹ Hutt, D., & Bowie, N. (2020, December 17). *Global Britain ditches EU for an Asian future*. *Asia Times*. Retrieved February 15, 2021, from <https://asiatimes.com/2020/12/global-britain-ditches-eu-for-an-asian-future/>

³² *How will UK play its 'sovereignty card' on world stage post-Brexit?* (2020, December 29). *The Nation*. Retrieved February 15, 2021, from <https://nation.com.pk/29-Dec-2020/how-will-uk-play-its-sovereignty-card-on-world-stage-post-brexit>, for example.

Success, however, is in the eye of the beholder. As a January 2020 article in *The Atlantic* argues, the UK could become “a medium-size economy flourishing next to a trading superpower; an open, multicultural democracy bound by trade agreements but not supranational institutions and law”, very similar to its Commonwealth colleague, Canada.³³

Conclusion

Albeit limited in scope, this analysis has identified three core trends in the international media’s coverage of British foreign policy post-Brexit. First, that the rise of great power competition, unilateralism, and protectionism present an obstacle to the foreign policy that Brexiteers advertised both during and after the referendum. Second, that it is possible to observe a neo-imperialist strain in Brexiteers’ plans for a post-Brexit foreign policy, which, however, no longer reflects the UK’s true capacity to project power and influence abroad. Third, a dissenting group of newspapers, many of them Asian, is decidedly more sanguine about Britain’s prospects, arguing that the UK can use its newfound flexibility and independence on regulatory and trade matters to carve out a successful foreign policy niche for itself. But even these more optimistic sources concede that success is by no means guaranteed.

What form the UK’s relations with Europe will take was a question largely passed over by the sources considered, even the European ones. This can be attributed at least partly to the fact that since media coverage is largely event-driven, last year’s reporting on British foreign policy was first and foremost a response to the UK’s foreign policy priorities during the time period in question and the “newsworthy” stories that resulted from these priorities, be it in Hong Kong or, more recently, in the Indo-Pacific more broadly. Meanwhile, coverage of Europe was overwhelming focused on the details of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) negotiations, and less on the form relations might take in the long term. However, as EU-British relations take on a more concrete shape following the end of the transition period, we should expect increased media focus on Britain’s foreign policy vis-à-vis Europe.

³³ McTague, T. (2020, January 21). *Britain Could Be Canada*. The Atlantic. Retrieved January 6, 2021, from <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/01/britain-brexit-canada-model-europe/605224/>

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