

Post-Brexit British Foreign Policy: More European than Ever?
A Review of Think-Tank Contributions to the Debate

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Abstract

Brexit has given the UK the ability to diverge from EU rules and practices including in the domain of foreign policy. What London will want to and will be able to do with such newly found freedom at the international level, however, remains unclear. Collecting the evidence from 70+ think tanks across the political spectrum in the UK and beyond, this paper argues that the ‘Global Britain’ ambition will not be global either in scope or in its geographical engagement. The cases of trade, multilateral organizations, and security and defense demonstrate the attempts of the post-Brexit British Foreign policy to diverge in format from EU practices without profound deviation from the EU’s objectives. To the contrary, think tanks emphasize the human capital and resources that London will dedicate to building a relation with the EU as an external partner, making ‘Global’ Britain more European than ever before.

Introduction

According to the evidence gathered from think tank pieces written in 2020, this paper argues that the ‘Global Britain’ ambition will not be global either in scope or in its geographical engagement. ‘Global Britain’ is the articulation used in the UK’s Integrated Review to define British International Policy. Despite a lack of a clear definition of what ‘Global Britain’ entails, the UK Government makes reference to: an emphasis on openness as a source of prosperity, a more robust position on security and resilience, a renewed commitment to the UK as a force for good in the world, and an increased determination to seek multilateral solutions to challenges like climate change (UK Cabinet Office, 2021). However, according to the opinion expressed in most think tank outputs, rather than global, British foreign policy post-Brexit is likely to entail a limited reorientation towards the East – mainly Turkey, China and the Pacific (Centre for European Reform, 2020c; European Council on Foreign Relations, 2020b; Policy Exchange, 2020) – and a continued substantial effort directed to its new relationship with Europe. Consequently, the divergence from EU policy is expected to be minimal and cooperation with Brussels to continue despite a rhetoric of divergence.

Great effort was placed in obtaining a representative image of the debates and opinions across think tanks to build this paper. Given the sea of literature produced during 2020, I started my

research using “What Think Tanks are Thinking” briefing published by the EU Parliament. The briefing included commentaries, studies and reports from international think tanks written with a wide range of perspectives on the challenges and opportunities that Brexit would bring to the UK and Europe (European Parliament Research Service, 2020). Aware of the potential anti-Brexit bias that the list of articles pre-selected by the EU could reproduce, I subsequently expanded my research into self-declared pro-Brexit groups such as the Institute of Economic Affairs, the Heritage Foundation, the European Research Group, Legatum Institute, Cato Institute and the American Enterprise Institute. In total, this paper encompasses an analysis of over 70 articles written in the UK, France, Italy, US, Hong Kong, Poland. Interestingly, no significant difference was found vis-à-vis the argument of ‘Global Britain’ being not-so between reports written in the UK and those produced elsewhere. In fact, the biggest divergence was on the topics covered, for instance, the Internal Market Bill received much more attention from the UK think tanks than from overseas think tanks. Interestingly, those think tanks that were vocally pro-Brexit in 2016 remained silent vis-à-vis the future of British Foreign Policy in the 2020-21 period, the absence of their voice is palpable in the arguments collected in this paper which consistently challenge the concept of ‘Global Britain’. In all cases, the think tank reports produced in 2020 were critically affected by the uncertainty regarding the possibility of a no-deal resolution. In fact, think tanks such as the Institute for Government (2020c), UK in Changing Europe (2020a), European Policy Center (2020d) and Centre for European Reform (2020a) predicted such a scenario, which eventually did not materialize.

I divide this paper according to the main themes highlighted by the think tanks themselves. First, in relation to trade, the paper will show that in the 2020-2021 period international think tanks expected that the ‘Global Britain’ approach would focus on selective trade relations in the Pacific region. Second, think tanks argue the UK will attempt to convey the idea of a ‘Global Britain’ in international fora by introducing new initiatives with no substantive change in terms of objectives pursued. Third, think tanks unanimously claim that the post Brexit security and defense policy will remain closely linked to the European agenda, despite a shift towards ad-hoc cooperation structures. Lastly, I dedicate a fourth section to the future EU-UK relationship. I separate this from the other three aspects emphasized by think tank outlets because the post-Brexit London-Brussels interactions are not perceived by think tanks as part of the formal future British foreign policy. Instead, they are constantly referred to as an externality of Brexit that London is yet to become aware of and recognize in its discourse and foreign policy arrangements.

Trade Relationships with Asia and the United States

On trade, the EU was not only the UK's main interlocutor but also the mediator for any agreement with third partners. Hence, the UK's departure from the EU single market means London has little choice but to diversify trading partners. An analysis from Chatham House, which appeared in November 2020, proposes a powerful argument about the limited reach that 'Global Britain' will ultimately be able to achieve (Chatham House, 2020b). Trade deals will be oriented towards two main interlocutors, Asian partners and the US.

In September 2020, Policy Exchange (2020) presumed that the UK would look for agreements with Turkey, China, Japan, and apply to be part of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). In fact, Policy Exchange argued that agreements such as the CPTPP are an attempt to boost the economic and political relevance of the UK in the Indo-Pacific region. Within the region, the UK will aim at becoming a valuable partner for those countries which value a free and open international order in the Indo-Pacific region, according to Chatham House (2020b). Limiting future engagement within the Indo-Pacific to a selection of countries to those upholding the rules-based international order could cross off a number of potential partners such as Duterte's Philippines, further reducing the geographical scope of the 'Global Britain' outlook in its already diminished engagement within Asia. Despite its reduced reach, the turn towards the East is the only sign that a globalist approach is taken by London, given that no coherent economic nor political plan has been rolled out for the UK's engagement in other significant regions of the world such as Latin-America, Africa or Central Asia. In fact, as identified in Chatham House's November 2020 report, the only significant change in the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) has been a shift towards an Indo-Pacific framework. demonstrating a reorientation of foreign policy that is exclusively towards Asia. Hence, despite the 'Global Britain' ambitions, the post-Brexit UK is truly limiting itself to become part of what Chatham House calls 'Team Indo-Pacific' (2020b) – embedding the UK's economic future in such region rather than a full diversification of its partners.

In the eyes of Chatham House, the scope of the trade agreements to be reached with the limited partners in Asia is also too constrained to be considered a truly 'Global' policy. This point was also stressed by Policy Exchange (2020), according to whom the UK will aim at taking the new trading partnership in East Asia as an opportunity to shape regional and global developments but will be constrained to do so since the UK will continue to be linked to EU trade policy. As the Centre for European Reform (2020e) explained in its analysis of August 2020, London will only be able to use the spare quota unused by the EU for products such as Stilton cheese, tea extracts and bread mix. This is exactly the case for a potential partnership with Japan and Turkey, as stressed by the Centre for European Reform (2020c). For instance, the article explains that Turkey

is bound by the terms of its customs union with the EU hence Istanbul will have to replicate the rules of origin criteria applied in the EU-Turkey FTA in its own trade deal with Britain. This means that flexibility in trade agreements can only exist if the EU first agrees to it in its own negotiations, uprooting any possibility of comprehensive trade agreements with the UK.

In the eyes of neoliberal think tanks, the second-best positioned interlocutor for trade deals after Brexit is the United States. The work produced by the Heritage Foundation, Cato Institute and the American Enterprise Institute during the trading negotiations continuously advocated for the UK to walk away from any EU trade deal and revert to WTO rule in its relationship with the US. Nevertheless, a closer partnership with the US does not suffice to argue that the UK policy is truly global either. According to the Council on Foreign Relations (2020a), the prospect of a U.S.-U.K. free trade deal (highly curtailed by Biden's elections) could entice the British government to do what Washington would like on issues such as China. Accusing the EU of anti-Americanism and at fault for a weakened transatlantic alliance, the Heritage Foundation argues that Britain will be a stronger partner for the US after Brexit. Nevertheless, also, in September 2020, Carnegie Europe (2020a) saw this as a further weakening the 'Global Britain' ambitions and surely jeopardizing the claims of freed sovereignty in foreign policy since a trade deal with the US will demand the UK to open its agricultural markets to American products. In December 2020, the European Council on Foreign Relations (2020g) implied that London would have to accept highly sensitive concessions on sectors such as food standards and pharmaceuticals, which will subsequently lead to lost trade opportunities with other partners such as the EU, antagonistic to antibiotic use in meat products. Consequently, the UK will have to prioritise one trade relationship over another. The inter-conditionality of trade agreements (i.e., clauses of agreements with one partner will depend on clauses of agreements with third parties) will force the UK to decide whether the imposition of tariffs or quotas or the narrowing in scope of any TCA is a price worth paying for a deeper trading relationship with other strategic partners, the only two choices available for London according to LSE Brexit Blog in December (2020). Hence, although the UK no longer has to compromise in new trade deals outside the bloc, its bargaining power and position have diminished significantly. In other words, London will not be able to trade everything with everyone and hence, the UK's ambitions will be compromised in their global attempts.

There are two additional considerations that limit the scope of the 'Global Britain' approach and place the EU as a trading partner back on the table. One, as highlighted by the European Council on Foreign Relations in December 2020 (2020c), the geographical distance of the UK with the US and particularly the Pacific imply that any trading relation will not be enough to offset the decline in trade with the EU. Facing a potential shortage in supply of imports and difficulties to

export all the products manufactured within the UK, as long-shipping routes will increase commercial costs and deteriorate perishable goods, London will continue to be dependent on the EU. Two, the public perception analysis carried out by the European Council on Foreign Relations in August 2020 (2020a) shows that although most British voters support a more internationalist role for the UK after Brexit, during the pandemic, two-thirds say that their opinion of the United States and China had worsened significantly. In the same study, British voters expressed better opinion of countries such as Germany, presenting a dimmer view of the possibility to find public support for the touted post-Brexit trade partners beyond the EU. Consequently, logistical reality and domestic sentiment present an additional obstacle for the actualization of the 'Global Britain' policy. In brief, therefore, according to the Center for European Reform, the Council on Foreign Relations and Chatham House, the most likely scenario is that the EU will remain the UK's closest and most important trading partner and will influence British trade relations beyond Europe.

International Fora

In multilateral organizations, the pre-Brexit UK shared interests and practices with the EU – speaking from within the European position or in full alignment with it when no EU delegation was present (i.e., United Nations Security Council) (Carnegie Europe, 2020a). Post-Brexit, think tanks anticipate the UK will attempt to play a new internationalist role, but it will not embody a substantial expansion of Britain's strategy. Chatham House (2020b) described in November 2020 the British post Brexit foreign policy as a coherent effort to pursue the same three pre-Brexit foreign policy objectives of promoting prosperity, protecting the rules-based international system, and being a 'force for good' in the world, as phrased in the Integrated Review. These three objectives have not changed from pre-Brexit Britain. The UK will, however, attempt to introduce new initiatives that point at a global strategy without changing foreign policy goals. UK's new preference towards ad-hoc coalitions of like-minded states illustrates the prediction by Foreign Policy Centre in December 2020 (2020a) regarding impediments that a weakened post-Brexit London will face in the attempt to maintain a constant global engagement. As the European Policy Centre (2020a) explained, Britain has proposed the creation of a 'D10' alliance of 10 liberal democracies – the G7, Australia, India and South Korea – to counter China's growing technological influence. As an internationally focused middle power (Institut des relations internationales et stratégiques, 2020), the Foreign Policy Center underscored in December 2020 (2020a), that post-Brexit Britain will benefit enormously from promoting wider global acceptance of international institutions and established norms, and the D10 illustrates the acknowledgement of the need to do so through cooperative frameworks. In this way, rather than a global power, in September 2020 Chatham House (2020a) saw the UK becoming a freestanding medium power with strong traditions of diplomacy, defense, intelligence, trade and aid. Chatham House

recognized that sometimes London may find a specific national role, such as convening next year's COP26 climate conference, yet, nine times out of 10 the route to UK's national goals will lie in leveraging relationships with others. 'Global Britain' hence will be a (out-of-necessity) 'cooperative' Britain in order to obtain the same foreign policy objective as Pre-Brexit UK.

Further, the accomplishment of foreign policy goals will face capability challenges as a UK, characterized by Institute for Government (2020f) in December 2020 as having less influence, less voice, less economic power, will continue to be hugely dependent on and interdependent with European neighbors, in the eyes of the Scottish Centre for European Relations (2020b). In the short term, the Centre for European Reform (2020h) predicted in November 2020 that some of the things the UK will do internationally would be designed to look different from what the EU itself is doing, though they are unlikely to undermine or contradict the substance of EU positions. Already in June 2020, the European Policy Centre (2020a) questioned that an isolated British strong position at the UN and taking full advantage of forum such as the G7 or COP will successfully promote prosperity, protect the rules-based international system, and be a 'force for good' in the world. The Centre for European Reform (2020b) and the Institut des Relations Internationales et Stratégiques (2020) coincide in arguing that the UK will have to cooperate with European partners on, inter alia, Iran and the Middle East, China, terrorism or Russia, especially sanctions - as the European Policy Centre (2020a) highlights - size matters incredibly, to maintain and shape efforts to respond to shared global challenges. However, in September 2020, Carnegie Europe (2020a) convincingly pointed out that cooperating on things like sanctions only makes sense if there is a broader agreement on the overarching foreign policy objectives, which leaves UK actions as profoundly intertwined with the EU in international organizations despite London's symbolic efforts to be seen as taking sovereign decisions independently as concluded by the Institute for Government (2020f) and Carnegie Europe (2020b).

Defense and Security

Lastly, pre-Brexit British security and defense were also closely related with the EU efforts where shared objectives were embodied in shared military exercises, information sharing and cooperation (Foreign Policy Centre, 2020a). Brexit does not change the UK's geographic position, the islands and EU member states will continue to live in the same strategic environment. Hence, the think tanks whose work is examined here unanimously argue that the 'Global Britain' approach will not entail a significant expansion from previous defense and security goals nor partners beyond sugar coating the working structures as empowering the UK's ambitions. In September 2020, Carnegie Europe (2020a) indicated that the UK will insist on flexible structures that allow London to plug into European foreign and defense policy, yet the European Council on Foreign Relations (2020d) underscored that it will do so only where this is in London's

interests. However, the Senior European Experts Group (2021) argued that these interests are no different from the European ones, rendering the security and defense actions of Post-Brexit Britain no more global than before. The European Policy Centre (2020b) and Centre for European Reform (2020g) agree in their interpretation that the insistence by London that the UK does not require an institutionalized relationship with the EU simply illustrates the UK's desire to underline its independence from the EU. British ministers' plan to work through bilateral relationships or ad hoc coalitions, in particular the E3, is an example of that symbolic effort for the Center of European Reform. However, as the Institut des Relations Internationales et Stratégiques (2020) highlighted, in substance, the UK has already demonstrated a strong interest in the new European security forums and arrangements that have emerged in recent years. The Centre for European Reform (2020b) and European Council on Foreign Relations (2020d) are confident that London will continue co-operating with European and counts on working with them through NATO and building on existing bilateral ties with France and Germany – with which it already works closely – in the E3 format on policy towards Iran. The UK seems to believe that it would have little to gain from institutional arrangements for external security cooperation with Brussels. In fact, beyond the E3, any other structured arrangement such as the CFSP will be regarded in London as “subjugation to EU decision-making”, as the Centre for European Reform (2020g) quotes British officials in its November publication. Nevertheless, in June 2020 the European Policy Centre (2020a) argued that regular dialogue and meetings would foster policy convergence on important security challenges and come as close as possible to replicating the regular and institutionalized contacts on defense of EU membership.

Consequently, the “end the era of retreat” claimed by Boris Johnson (2020) was perceived by the European Council on Foreign Relations (2020d) in December 2020 as a mere discursive exercise with superficial implications rather than a profound global re-orientation of the UK defense and security policies. The Centre for European Reform (2020g), the Foreign Policy Centre (2020a) and European Council on Foreign Relations (2020a) concur in arguing that the main pillar for its security policy will remain NATO rather than any more globally representative security framework such as the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, United Nations General Assembly itself or an Anglosphere – for which the Foreign Policy Center finds there is little appetite – demonstrating a very limited practical expansion of its security engagement under the 'Global Britain' umbrella. Hence, according to Egmont (2020a), the increase in Ministry of Defense's budget by an additional £16.5 billion over four years responds to a need to pay off the costs that leaving the EU will have on British military industrial sector rather than a transformation of the UK into a global and unilateral military actor in its own right.

European relations, again?

According to think tanks, the narrative about ‘Global Britain’ obscures the reality that the UK will now need to invest large amounts of foreign policy human capital and resources in building a relationship with the EU as an external partner (UK in a Changing Europe, 2020b). The literature produced after the agreement in December by UK in a Changing Europe (2020d; 2020e; 2020f) and the Institute for Government (2020h) agree that, given that very little about the UK’s long-term relationship with the EU has been settled and that the agreement reached on the 24th of December lacked any comprehensive measures to phase in new formalities, the UK is likely to be in non-stop negotiations with the EU for decades after Brexit. Taking this claim a step further, the Center for European Policy Studies (2020) predicted in December 2020 that there will be even more EU-related meetings for UK officials than in the past however, it warns that the dynamic will be different. Instead of being able to build alliances on particular topics with other EU member states, in the future, the UK will find itself alone in the room with the European Commission. What makes things worse for the Scottish Center for European Relations (2020b) is that UK diplomats will have much less contact and interaction with their EU counterparts than they had inside the EU – knowledge, influence, networks will all be weakened by Brexit. Thus, cultivating an understanding with the Commission officials will be a priority and such diplomatic effort will render ‘Global Britain’ into European Britain. The perpetual consultations and talks that the new agreement requires identified by the Institute for Government (2020a) back in July 2020, including unintended frictions (alongside the many foreseen and deliberately introduced frictions) predicted by the Scottish Center for European Relations (2020b) and the Center for European Policy Studies (2020), will compete in resources with diplomatic endeavors beyond Europe. With the constraints in diplomatic capacities envisioned by the Polish Institute of International Affairs (2020) in its December 2020 publication, London will have to prioritize where to invest its diplomatic effort and, whatever the decision might be, *ceteris paribus*, the UK surely will not be able to stretch out globally.

Further, a Centre for European Reform article in September 2020 (2020f) foresaw that it is quite possible that a future UK government does not share the ideological blockages of the current government and seeks to improve the relationship where possible. This will require a further re-orientation of the UK’s efforts towards the EU rather than globally. Regardless of the political leaning of the future UK governments, in December 2020 the Centre for European Reform (2020i) insisted that every successive UK government will want to inevitably renegotiate, or alter, aspects of the relationship with Europe. A European oriented foreign policy goal that will come at cost of the ‘Global Britain’ ambition.

Conclusion

The ‘Global Britain’ ambition will not be global either in scope or in the geographical engagement. Rather than global, post-Brexit UK foreign policy will entail a limit reorientation towards the East (mainly Turkey, China and the Pacific) and a never-ending engagement with Europe. Despite the absence of a coherent and official foreign policy made public, the research collected through think tanks makes no significant reference to any considerable engagement with other regions such as Latin-America or Africa nor other areas of cooperation such as migration, environment or gender equality that would render the post-Brexit UK foreign policy a truly global strategy (Istituto Affari Internazionali, 2020). The UK will attempt to demonstrate an enactment of the newly found freedom and sovereignty to diverge from the EU rules and approaches. Nevertheless, the UK cannot escape the historical and geographic forces that link its future with that of the European Union. ‘Global Britain’ will imply a very limited and predominantly short-term divergence from the European Union foreign policy agenda.

Chronological Trend

It is worth highlighting the chronological trend followed in the publication of articles during 2020. Think tank output on post-Brexit foreign policy were reduced in size in the first semester of 2020 due to the attention devoted to the coronavirus pandemic. In the second half of 2020, there was a spike in the work produced around September-October as a result of the Internal Market Bill announcement, particularly amongst UK groups. Across think tanks, there was a particular concern for the symbolism that breaking international law would entail in the UK’s post-Brexit international engagement (Institute for Government, 2020d). Attention to Brexit decreased again towards the end of October as the UK government desisted in pushing the Internal Market Bill policy forward. The attention to Brexit incrementally rose as the date of the official departure (31st December 2020) approached. Once an agreement was reached on the 24th December, a substantial amount of literature was produced by think tanks to analyze the implications of UK-EU bill on post-Brexit UK foreign policy.

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