

# How has the United Kingdom’s foreign policy towards the Republic of Ireland developed since Brexit?

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## Abstract

*UK foreign policy towards the Republic of Ireland is defined by three interrelated and historically embedded dynamics, which Brexit has brought into sharper relief. The first is that UK foreign policy towards the Republic is spread internally across a complex network of political institutions and it is subject to an unusual degree of external actor pressure and scrutiny. The second dynamic driving UK foreign policy towards the Republic is the necessity for close and cooperative relations to manage the peace process in Northern Ireland. The third dynamic driving UK foreign policy is the need to protect the close economic integration between the two countries and to cooperate on organised crime. The UK’s exit from the European Union risks disrupting the equilibrium between these dynamics that has precariously existed since the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. The UK’s post-Brexit aspirations for ‘Global Britain’ requires its focus far beyond Ireland. However, the complexity and the sheer multitude of interests involved in the UK-Republic relationship means this could easily destroy such aspirations. Therefore, managing this equilibrium will be central to the UK-Republic relationship and the wider ambitions of UK foreign policy in the coming years.*

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## Introduction

The UK and the Republic of Ireland are geographically close neighbours with a complex and interwoven history. UK foreign policy towards the Republic is defined by three interrelated and historically embedded dynamics, which Brexit has brought into sharper relief.

The first is that UK foreign policy towards the Republic is spread internally across a complex network of political institutions and it is subject to an unusual degree of external actor pressure and scrutiny. The UK Westminster government's policy autonomy is challenged by groups within Parliament and national and regional devolved administrations. Furthermore, key UK partners, notably the United States and the European Union, hold particular interests in how the UK-Irish relationship is managed. The second dynamic driving UK foreign policy towards the Republic is the necessity for close and cooperative relations to manage the peace process in Northern Ireland. A vital security aim for the UK is to avoid a return to the paramilitary violence during The Troubles, through managing Unionist and Nationalist opinion. The third dynamic driving UK foreign policy is the need to protect the close economic integration between the two countries and to cooperate on organised crime. Economic and civic prosperity, particularly in Northern Ireland and the Republic, relies on continued cooperation and partnerships both in public institutions and the private sector.

The UK's exit from the European Union risks disrupting the equilibrium between these dynamics that has precariously existed since the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 (Tannam, 2019:284). Indeed, it has been suggested that since Brexit, UK policy towards the Republic has seen 'the old rule book...revised or destroyed'<sup>1</sup>. The UK's post-Brexit aspirations for 'Global Britain'<sup>2</sup> requires its focus far beyond Ireland. However, the complexity and the sheer multitude of interests involved in the UK-Republic relationship means this could easily destroy such aspirations. A serious failure of policy towards the Republic could create security problems and economic hardship within the UK. Moreover, externally, this could poison the UK's relationship with its closest allies and trade partners and damage its reputation on a global scale. Furthermore, a serious breakdown of the Northern Irish peace process or wider UK-Republic relations would consume the political attention necessary to build the network of trade agreements and influence networks central to the Global Britain project. Therefore, managing this equilibrium will be central to the UK-Republic relationship and the wider ambitions of UK foreign policy in the coming years.

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<sup>1</sup> E. Tannam (2020, February 26), From Anglo-Irish to British-Irish relations: What's next?, LSE Blogs. Retrieved from <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2020/02/26/long-read-from-anglo-irish-to-british-irish-relations-whats-next/> (28/2/21).

<sup>2</sup> L. Brooke-Holland, S. Fella and T. Robinson (2021, January 6), Research Briefing: Global Britain, House of Commons Library. Retrieved from <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2021-0002/> (2/4/21).

### *Background on UK-Republic Relations*

Although Britain and Ireland have a long and intertwined history, a key origin point in UK-Republic relations is the creation of the Irish Free State under the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty. This treaty provided the option to remain in the United Kingdom for the six counties that were partitioned to create Northern Ireland (Féron, 2014:96). The Irish Free State later became the Republic of Ireland in 1949 (Féron, 2014:98). A common travel area between the UK and the Republic has operated since 1923 reflecting the close economic and cultural ties between the two countries (de Mars & Murray, 2020:817; Davies, 2021:79). The eruption of sectarian violence and paramilitary activity, known as The Troubles, along Unionist-Nationalist lines in Northern Ireland from the late 1960s increasingly linked internal UK security to cooperation with the Republic. This cooperation eventually produced the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 between the UK, the Republic and the Northern Irish political parties. This was underpinned by the UK and Republic's common membership of the European Economic Community (later the European Union) after 1973, which helped facilitate cooperation on the 1973 Sunningdale Agreement, the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement and the launching of the peace process in 1993 (Guelke, 2017:45). EU membership provided a forum for negotiation and understanding even through periods of difficult relations during The Troubles (O'Brennan, 2019:162). Although Brexit has considerable implications for the peace process, and therefore UK foreign policy towards the Republic, this issue did not play a high-profile role during the Brexit referendum campaign in 2016 (Hobolt, 2016).

Since the beginning of the Brexit process, the UK government has avoided directing the same level of aggressive rhetoric towards the Republic as in its negotiations with the European Union, despite some hardening of UK media attitudes towards the Irish government (Tannam, 2019:291). A bilateral agreement between the UK and the Republic in 2019 ensured the Common Travel Area and reciprocal political rights between the two countries would remain regardless of the EU negotiations' outcome<sup>3</sup>. In September 2020, the UK government's position against a 'sea border' between Britain and Northern Ireland produced a major diplomatic row with both the EU and the Republic. This was because of the introduction of clauses into the UK Internal Market Bill which violated the Northern Ireland Protocol in the EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement<sup>4</sup>. However, the UK government later agreed to withdraw the clauses and agreed the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement which came into force in 2021<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> A. Beesley and S. Payne (2019, May 8), UK and Ireland agree to maintain common travel area, Financial Times. Retrieved from <https://www.ft.com/content/2b3fccf4-7186-11e9-bf5c-6eeb837566c5> (28/2/21).

<sup>4</sup> Brexit: PM defends planned changes to Withdrawal Agreement (2020, September 9), BBC News. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-54003483> (28/2/21).

<sup>5</sup> Cabinet Office (2021, January 5), Policy paper: The Northern Ireland Protocol. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-northern-ireland-protocol> (28/2/21).

*UK-Republic Selected Agreements and Institutions*

<b>Sunningdale Agreement</b>	Agreement between representatives from the UK, Republic and Northern Ireland on power sharing in Northern Ireland. Failed largely due to Unionist objections (Guelke, 2019:45; Tannam, 2019:279).
<b>Anglo-Irish Agreement</b>	Bilateral agreement between the UK and Republic providing the latter a consultation role in Northern Irish affairs (Guelke, 2019:45; Tannam, 2019:279).
<b>Good Friday/Belfast Agreement</b>	Peace agreement between Northern Irish political parties and the UK and Irish governments comprised of three strands (Tannam, 2019:281). Strand 1 sets up Northern Irish power sharing; Strand 2 facilitates cooperation between Northern Ireland and the Republic; Strand 3 facilitates bilateral cooperation between the wider UK and the Republic <sup>6</sup> .
<b>British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference</b>	Institutional forum created under Strand 3 of the Good Friday Agreement for bilateral cooperation between the UK and Republic governments, replacing the Anglo-Irish Conference created under the Anglo-Irish Agreement <sup>7</sup> .
<b>British-Irish Council</b>	Institutional forum created under Strand 3 of the Good Friday Agreement in which officials and ministers from the Republic, UK Westminster government and UK devolved administration governments can consult and cooperate <sup>8</sup> .
<b>North-South Ministerial Council</b>	Institutional forum created under Strand 2 of the Good Friday Agreement established for cooperation between the Northern Ireland Executive and the Irish government. So far includes six different sectors for cross-border cooperation (Tannam, 2019:300).
<b>The Common Travel Area</b>	Informal bilateral agreement (although subject of legal reference) between the UK and the Republic allowing free movement and mutual political rights for each others' citizens (de Mars & Murray, 2020).
<b>Northern Ireland Protocol</b>	Arrangement part of the EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement that protects EU Single Market standards, without a North-South border in Ireland, through checks on selected goods moving from the UK to Northern Ireland <sup>9</sup> .

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<sup>6</sup> Northern Ireland Office (1998, April 10), The Belfast Agreement. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-belfast-agreement> (28/2/21).

<sup>7</sup> The British Irish Council, Strand 3: British-Irish Council and intergovernmental conference. Retrieved from <https://www.britishirishcouncil.org/agreement-reached-multi-party-negotiations/strand-3-british-irish-council-and-intergovernmental> (28/2/21).

<sup>8</sup> The British Irish Council, About the Council. Retrieved from <https://www.britishirishcouncil.org/about-council> (28/2/21).

<sup>9</sup> Cabinet Office (2021, January 5), Ibid.

## 1. The Structure of UK Policy towards the Republic

The Brexit process has revealed the degree to which UK foreign policy making towards the Republic of Ireland is unusually complex and constrained. This is because there are multiple sources and ‘strands’ through which policy towards the Republic is created and implemented, of which the Westminster executive government is only one<sup>10</sup>.

### *Northern Irish Devolved Institutions and Political Parties*

The Northern Ireland Executive, the Northern Ireland Assembly and the political parties in Northern Ireland play a key role in UK foreign policy towards the Republic. The differing views and priorities of Unionist and Nationalist parties in Northern Ireland exerts political pressure on Westminster, which invariably constrains and shapes policy. The requirement that the Northern Ireland Assembly provides democratic consent to the Northern Ireland Protocol every 4 to 8 years (under Article 18 of the EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement<sup>11</sup>) may provide further leverage over UK policy, particularly if Unionist dissatisfaction over the ‘sea border’ remains.

### *Good Friday Agreement Institutions*

Post-Brexit UK cooperation with the Republic will be affected by whether the UK government intends to increase the role of institutions and forums created under the Good Friday agreement to replace EU ones (Tannam, 2019:300). This could involve expanding the role of the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference and the British-Irish Council<sup>12</sup>. Moreover, the need for cross-border cooperation in Ireland may require increased usage of the North-South Ministerial Council for cooperation between the Northern Ireland Executive and the Irish government. Notably, the Good Friday Agreement does not oblige the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference to meet regularly, thus its functions rely on continual political will and initiative (Tannam, 2019:297). In 2020, the Irish government committed to recommence meetings of the North-South Ministerial Council and undertook a strategic review of the UK-Irish relationship with an intention to utilise these institutions<sup>13</sup>. However, the extent to which the UK government intends to make these central to its foreign policy towards the Republic remains unclear. Furthermore, the British-Irish Intergovernmental

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<sup>10</sup> C. Gormley-Heenan (2020, September 26), Brexit and Ireland, north and south, UK in a Changing Europe. Retrieved from <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/long-read/brexit-and-ireland-north-and-south/> (28/2/21).

<sup>11</sup> Department for Exiting the European Union (2019, October 19), Policy Paper: New Withdrawal Agreement and Political Declaration. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/new-withdrawal-agreement-and-political-declaration> (28/2/21).

<sup>12</sup> E. Tannam and M.C. Murphy (2020, September 24), The Internal Market Bill may further erode trust and security in Ireland/Northern Ireland, LSE Blogs. Retrieved from <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2020/09/24/the-internal-market-bill-may-further-erode-trust-and-security-in-ireland-northern-ireland/> (28/2/21).

<sup>13</sup> M. C. Murphy (2020, June 25) Unrequited amity? Irish plans for enhanced British-Irish relations not reciprocated, Centre for Constitutional Change. Retrieved from <https://www.centreonconstitutionalchange.ac.uk/news-and-opinion/unrequited-amity-irish-plans> (28/2/21).

Conference may be limited by Unionist views that this cooperation allows the Irish government to interfere in Northern Ireland (Tannam, 2019:301)<sup>14</sup>.

#### *Other UK Devolved Institutions*

UK foreign policy towards the Republic may be disaggregated to other devolved administrations. The Irish government may seek cooperation networks with the governments in Scotland and Wales as well as larger city administrations (e.g. Manchester) to maintain close ties and cooperation post-Brexit<sup>15</sup>. This can be traced historically to the shift from the terminology of ‘Anglo-Irish’ to ‘British-Irish’ relations as part of Strand 3 of the Good Friday Agreement (Tannam, 2019:281). Yet the aggregate effects this may have on UK foreign policy are uncertain. This is because the UK Joint Ministerial Committee, which coordinates policy making between Westminster and devolved administrations, does not have clear protocols ‘to facilitate joint decision making in those areas of joint or overlapping competencies’ in UK policy<sup>16</sup>, such as relations with the Republic.

#### *Parliament and Brexit*

UK foreign policy decision space on the Republic has been constrained by the entanglement between the processes and objectives of Brexit and key areas of the UK-Republic relationship. Notably, in 2019, the UK Parliament rejected the May government’s EU withdrawal deal which used the ‘backstop’, a joint EU-UK customs union, to avoid the possibility of a ‘hard border’ between Northern Ireland and the Republic or a ‘sea border’ between Britain and Northern Ireland<sup>17</sup>. Parliamentary support for the current solution to this, the Northern Ireland Protocol, may be increasingly tenuous. This is demonstrated by the European Research Group of Conservative MPs declaring their opposition to this arrangement in February 2021<sup>18</sup>.

#### *External Actors: The EU and the US*

The ‘internationalisation’ of the UK-Republic relationship, under which the United States and the European Union have developed significant interests in how it is managed, serves to limit the UK’s policy autonomy in this area (Gillespie, 2014:42).

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<sup>14</sup> E. Tannam (2020, July 2), Shared Island? There’s hope for British-Irish intergovernmental relations, LSE Blogs. Retrieved from <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2020/07/02/shared-island-theres-hope-for-british-irish-intergovernmental-relations/> (28/2/21).

<sup>15</sup> E. Tannam (2020, February 26), Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> C. Gormley-Heenan (2020, September 26), Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Brexit: MPs reject May’s EU withdrawal agreement (2019, March 30), BBC News, Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-47752017> (28/2/21).

<sup>18</sup> S. Heffer (2021, February 25), Brexit: Tory MPs call on PM to scrap Northern Ireland Protocol - a year after they voted for it, Sky News. Retrieved from <https://news.sky.com/story/brexit-tory-mps-call-on-pm-to-scrap-northern-ireland-protocol-a-year-after-they-voted-for-it-12228787> (28/2/21).

During the Brexit process, the European Union took a negotiation position which linked a UK-EU trade deal to political arrangements on Northern Ireland and the Republic (Tannam, 2019:298). This effectively created dependency between the change in the UK-EU relationship and UK policy towards the Republic. Indeed, the EU's decision to effectively provide the Republic a veto over the UK's withdrawal terms 'dramatically reversed the historical asymmetry of power between the two nations' (O'Brennan, 2019: 169). Moreover, the EU's objective to protect the integrity of the EU Single Market may constrain the arrangements that the UK and the Republic can use for economic cooperation and managing peace in Northern Ireland in the future.

As the UK pursues a new foreign policy guided by Global Britain, a key objective of achieving a trade deal with the United States may constrain UK policy towards the Republic. UK actions which are perceived to threaten the Northern Irish peace process, for example the controversial Internal Market Bill clauses, may sour US opinion towards Britain. This is because the Good Friday Agreement is viewed as a significant legacy of President Clinton's Democratic administration and the continued importance of the Irish-American political constituency (Gillespie, 2014:40). Both President Biden and House of Representatives Speaker Pelosi have indicated the UK will be unable to improve its economic ties with the United States if the Good Friday Agreement is undermined<sup>19</sup>.

## **2. The Northern Ireland Peace Process**

Since the Good Friday Agreement, the UK's foreign policy towards the Republic has been based on the mutual objective of supporting the peace and reconciliation process in Northern Ireland (Gillespie, 2014:38; Guelke, 2017:42). Common membership of the European Union served to dilute the dichotomy of UK or Republic sovereignty (Féron, 2014:107; O'Brennan, 2019:163). Furthermore, the 'Europeanisation' of UK-Republic relations helped to normalise cross-border cooperation between Northern Ireland and the Republic (Guelke, 2017:48; Murphy, 2019:354) and was explicitly referenced in Strand 2 of the Good Friday Agreement (Tannam, 2019:282). The UK's decision to leave the EU Single Market created the possibility of a hard 'securitised' border between Northern Ireland and the Republic (O'Brennan, 2019:164) which risks undermining the peace process as an affront to Nationalists (Murphy, 2019:537) and becoming a target of paramilitary activities (Davies, 2021:87; Conway, 2020:10). UK government policy on Brexit has been conflicted by the imperative to protect both the peace process and preserve Northern Ireland's constitutional status as part of the United Kingdom. Indeed, UK government minister Michael Gove cited concerns over the integrity of

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<sup>19</sup> J. Ryan (2020, December 22), Brexit Britain collides with Irish soft power in both Washington and Brussels, LSE Blogs. Retrieved from <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2020/12/22/brexit-britain-collides-with-irish-soft-power-in-both-washington-and-brussels/> (28/2/21).



the UK Union as a rationale for the highly controversial Internal Market Bill clauses introduced in September 2020<sup>20</sup>.

### *UK Policy since Brexit*

During the EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement negotiations, the arrangements proposed to maintain an open border in Ireland significantly changed. Under Theresa May, the UK government favoured an EU-UK customs union if no other frictionless arrangements could be found (Tannam, 2019:293); whereas the Johnson government's preferred solution was the Northern Ireland Protocol, which requires checks on goods moving between Britain and Northern Ireland.

Despite the complexities for the peace process posed by the UK's withdrawal from the European Union, the UK and Republic governments have continued to work closely on restoring devolution and power sharing in Northern Ireland. In January 2020, the UK and Irish governments facilitated the 'New Decade, New Approach' Agreement allowing for the resumption of the Northern Ireland Assembly after a three year absence<sup>21 22 23</sup> showing the continued importance of this relationship<sup>24</sup>.

The UK government's position for much of 2020 was to oppose a 'sea border' between Britain and Northern Ireland. This had significant implications for policy towards the Republic as a 'no deal' with the EU resulting from disagreements over checks on goods crossing the Irish Sea risked the return of a hard border between the Republic and Northern Ireland to protect the EU Single Market. Moreover, this position culminated in the UK government's decision to threaten to violate the EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement via clauses in the UK Internal Market Bill. As a result, the Irish government supported the EU's legal action against the UK<sup>25</sup>. Although these clauses were removed in December

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<sup>20</sup> N. Slawson (2020, September 12) Brexit: Gove claims internal market bill protects UK integrity from EU 'threat', The Guardian. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/sep/12/brexit-gove-claims-internal-market-bill-protects-uk-integrity-from-eu-threat> (28/2/21).

<sup>21</sup> Northern Ireland Office (2020, January 9), Press Release: Deal To See Restored Government In Northern Ireland Tomorrow. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/deal-to-see-restored-government-in-northern-ireland-tomorrow> (28/2/21).

<sup>22</sup> Stormont talks: Draft deal to break deadlock published (2020, January 10), BBC News. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-51047216> (28/2/21).

<sup>23</sup> J. Evershed (2020, January 14), Stormont Restored: New Decade, New Approach?, The Centre on Constitutional Change. Retrieved from <https://www.centreonconstitutionalchange.ac.uk/news-and-opinion/stormont-restored-new-decade-new-approach> (28/2/21).

<sup>24</sup> E. Tannam (2020, February 26), Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> B. Haugh (2020, October 2), Internal Market Bill: Micheál Martin backs EU's legal action against Britain over Brexit bill, The Times. Retrieved from <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/internal-market-bill-micheal-martin-backs-eus-legal-action-against-britain-over-brexit-bill-09hxwtbq> (28/2/21).



2020<sup>26</sup>, this episode suggests the UK government could be willing to weaken trust with the Republic to fulfil other domestic and international political priorities<sup>27</sup>.

### *Future Policy Challenges*

UK foreign policy towards the Republic may have to contend with increased hopes for Irish unification among Nationalists in Northern Ireland (Tannam, 2019:284), particularly if the Northern Ireland Protocol orientates its economy away from the rest of the UK. Furthermore, the disagreement which produced the Internal Market Bill episode may continue to strain UK policy towards the Republic. This is because this disagreement effectively pitches Strand 3 of the Good Friday Agreement against Strand 2; the former protects Northern Ireland's place in the UK whilst the latter avoids a hard border in Ireland<sup>28</sup>. At present, it is uncertain whether this was a temporary phenomenon of the EU Brexit deal negotiations and implementation or a fundamental disagreement that will continue into the long term.

Problems may be exacerbated by the fact the Northern Ireland Protocol is intended to evolve as UK and EU law changes and potentially diverges<sup>29</sup>. This may be likely should the UK alter its economic standards and regulation when negotiating bilateral trade deals under its Global Britain policy. This is further complicated by the requirement for democratic consent for the Protocol from the Northern Ireland Assembly. This requirement, particularly if the Protocol is rejected, could lead to a spiral of distrust resulting in Nationalist demands for a border poll due to the fear that a hard border could be created in response to Unionist concerns<sup>30</sup>. This may leave UK policy with two difficult dilemmas. The first is the potential conflict between good relations with the Republic and accommodating Unionist political dissatisfaction. The second is the trade-off between implementing the trade and economic aspects of Global Britain and exacerbating the Protocol's problems. This trade-off could prove particularly difficult given damage to the peace process may undermine the desire of potential economic partners such as the United States to agree trade deals with the UK.

The European Union's prioritisation of the integrity of its Single Market may create further obstacles to solving these problems. In January 2021, the EU's brief decision to trigger Section 16 of the Northern Ireland Protocol to regulate Covid-19 vaccine exports resulted in negative reactions by both

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<sup>26</sup> Brexit: UK and EU reach deal on Northern Ireland border checks (2020, December 8), BBC News. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-55229681> (28/2/21).

<sup>27</sup> E. Tannam and M.C. Murphy (2020, September 24), Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> E. Tannam and M.C. Murphy (2020, September 24), Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> J. Ryan (2020, December 22), Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> C. Gormley-Heenan (2020, September 26), Ibid.

the UK and Irish governments<sup>31</sup>, although this demonstrated common positions between the UK and the Republic on protecting the peace process.

### **3. UK-Republic Economic and Crime Cooperation**

The UK's exit from the European Union has created a challenge to maintain the close economic and political cooperation between the UK and the Republic. Although the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement and the Northern Ireland Protocol broadly aim to preserve cooperation, the loss of common membership of EU institutions and agencies may create significant obstacles to this. Furthermore, the direction of UK policy beyond this agreement remains uncertain, despite the acknowledgement of concerns by UK government ministers in Parliament.

#### *Economic Relations*

A key concern is protecting the labour and supply chains that connect the economies of the UK and the Republic (Brooks, Scott, Spillane & Hayward, 2020:72). Around 50% of Irish exports have relied on access to the UK as a 'land bridge' to the European continent as an alternative to direct maritime routes (Vega, Feo-Valero & Espino-Spino, 2018:1). Thus delays and cost increases in accessing the UK under the new EU-UK economic arrangements, which involves an exit from the EU Customs Union, may have a considerable negative impact on the Irish export economy (Vega, Feo-Valero & Espino-Spino, 2018:10). Moreover, over 80% of Irish exports in the agri-food sector go to the UK, which is Ireland's second largest export market in goods and largest export market for services (O'Brennan, 2019:160). Similarly, the UK has a trade surplus with the Republic and exports increased to the Republic over the decade prior to Brexit, thus continued economic relations are significant for both the UK and the Republic (O'Brennan, 2019:161). Furthermore, maintaining economic ties and cooperation between the Republic and Northern Ireland is vital as these areas are particularly closely integrated. In 2018, 38% of Northern Irish exports went to the Republic and up to 66% of goods related to business supply chain activities travelled across the North-South border<sup>32</sup>. Yet, the economies of the Republic and Northern Ireland have highly different structures, the 'dynamic' south is far more private sector focussed whereas the North is sustained by a large public sector (Brooks, Scott, Spillane & Hayward, 2020:72). The economic reliance of Irish companies on construction may be one example of the Republic's economic vulnerability (Brooks, Scott, Spillane & Hayward 2020:72). An output drop of nearly 5% in construction in Northern Ireland was expected in the average Brexit economic scenario (Brooks, Scott, Spillane & Hayward 2020:74).

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<sup>31</sup> EU vaccine export row: Bloc backtracks on controls for NI (2021, January 30), Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> The Institute for Government (2020, July 1), North-South cooperation on the island of Ireland Retrieved from <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainers/north-south-cooperation-island-ireland> (28/2/21).

The importance of trade and economic cooperation to both economies was acknowledged by UK government ministers Michael Gove<sup>33</sup> and Brandon Lewis<sup>34</sup> in Parliament during 2020. However, the implementation of the Northern Ireland Protocol has resulted in increasing concerns in Parliament regarding business access and trade across the Irish Sea<sup>35</sup>. Furthermore, the UK's exit from the EU has led to concerns about the continued viability of particular areas of economic cooperation and supply chains such as live animal exports<sup>36</sup>. In the coming years, the objectives of Global Britain may encourage UK economic and regulatory divergence from the EU Single Market that could exacerbate the challenges of cooperation. Should disagreements and legal challenges between the UK and the EU over the implementation of the Northern Ireland Protocol result in economic restrictions, this may have damaging effects on economic cooperation across the UK and the Republic.

### *Crime Cooperation*

Another policy objective is to maintain cooperation with the Republic over crime, particularly around the Northern Ireland-Republic border. Brexit may increase levels of organised criminal activity as it creates possibilities for illegal immigration and goods smuggling and the loss of EU anti-crime mechanisms and agencies may encourage the belief that detection is unlikely (Davies, 2021:82; Conway, 2020:10). Moreover, if Brexit undermines the Northern Ireland peace process, this may increase paramilitary activity (Davies, 2021:82). This cooperation will also be significant for successfully maintaining the Common Travel Area. Previously, the divergence between criminal law in the Republic and the UK prior to joint EU membership undermined this arrangement and exacerbated The Troubles (Davies, 2021:79).

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<sup>33</sup> House of Commons (2020, May 20), Northern Ireland Protocol: UK Approach, Vol. 676. Retrieved from <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2020-05-20/debates/07EBAEC6-2593-4969-9A2C-C115FBEEDBBF/NorthernIrelandProtocolUKApproach?highlight=ireland#contribution-B9EF359A-8CE9-497E-AECF-25B744EB9627> (28/2/21).

<sup>34</sup> House of Commons (2020, June 24), EU Relationship, Vol 677. Retrieved from <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2020-06-24/debates/9D188FDF-8176-402A-BAD1-750FF21C5BD1/EURelationship?highlight=ireland#contribution-E88754D3-14A1-49F7-8EFC-DBA24ED21F8E> (28/2/21).

<sup>35</sup> House of Commons (2021, January 13), Northern Ireland Protocol: Disruption to Trade, Vol. 687. Retrieved from <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2021-01-13/debates/E279D04E-5550-45F1-A3D0-EBA10F969AFE/NorthernIrelandProtocolDisruptionToTrade?highlight=ireland#contribution-FF63DE2B-0102-4676-BE37-2DF7968EDD54> (28/2/21).

<sup>36</sup> House of Commons (2020, November 18), Northern Ireland Protocol: Implementation Proposals, Vol. 684. Retrieved from <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2020-11-18/debates/F92D2336-3015-4039-8A3E-E554DEB1DC9A/NorthernIrelandProtocolImplementationProposals?highlight=ireland#contribution-61A3E25E-7E31-4D2A-A690-33842E0B17F5> (28/2/21).

During 2020, UK government minister Lord True stated cooperation with the Republic on curtailing paramilitary activities remained a UK policy objective<sup>37</sup> and government minister Robin Walker acknowledged the importance of tackling organised crime<sup>38</sup>. The issue of the broader framework for cooperation policing, security and criminal justice is currently subject to an inquiry by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee in Parliament<sup>39</sup>. However, despite the existence of bilateral agreements between police forces in Northern Ireland and the Republic, the loss of EU institutions may slow key instruments of crime cooperation such as exchange of biometric information, criminal records and intelligence data (Davies, 2021:88). The Republic is also subject to EU data protection standards which may inhibit attempts to reconstruct UK-Republic crime cooperation bilaterally (Davies 2021:92). Another area of controversy may emerge should the UK and the EU diverge in human rights protections, and consequently policing standards, which may create political pressure to limit information sharing (Conway, 2020:12). Furthermore, even if a set of appropriate institutions and agreements can be reached to manage criminal justice matters over the coming years this may not curtail increases in crime. Economic barriers imposed by widening regulatory divergence between the UK economy and the EU Single Market may increase the number of opportunities and the attractiveness of smuggling (Davies, 2021:85). Therefore, the success of continued crime cooperation between the UK and the Republic may depend on the degree to which the UK pursues economic, data protection and human rights divergence from the EU.

## **Conclusion**

UK foreign policy towards the Republic since Brexit has revolved around the dynamics of multiple policy sources and networks, the Northern Ireland peace process, and the need for extensive economic and political cooperation across the UK and the Republic. Whilst the close integration and cooperation between the two countries that was previously facilitated by common EU membership is likely to be replaced by a bilateral approach, the exact form this will take remains uncertain.

UK foreign policy towards the Republic of Ireland may well be shaped and constrained by three areas of future developments. Firstly, the degree of regulatory divergence between the UK economy and the EU Single Market will be vital in determining UK policy options for protecting the peace process as

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<sup>37</sup> House of Lords (2020, May 21), Northern Ireland Protocol, Vol. 803. Retrieved from <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2020-05-21/debates/414D5CE1-1064-4FF4-ABC7-8F40363AB8A2/NorthernIrelandProtocol?highlight=ireland#contribution-9FECD730-66AD-4B92-8F18-06EA98829197> (28/2/21).

<sup>38</sup> House of Commons (2020, November 18), Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> UK Parliament Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, Cross-border co-operation on policing, security and criminal justice after Brexit. Retrieved from <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/534/crossborder-cooperation-on-policing-security-and-criminal-justice-after-brexith/publications/> (28/2/21).

well as other forms of economic and political cooperation. Secondly, although during the Brexit negotiations the EU wished to avoid the UK leveraging the Northern Ireland peace process for economic access, it may struggle to co-opt the UK and the Republic (as an EU member state) into enforcing economic checks in either the Irish Sea or the North-South border, given Unionist and Nationalist concerns and the level of dependency between the two economies. Thirdly, the exact form that UK-Republic relations will take depends on the level of priority given to Ireland by UK foreign policy makers and the institutions they choose to utilise.

In the context of the UK's wider policy of pursuing Global Britain, regulatory divergence may be a key requirement for increasing trade agreements and cooperation outside the EU. UK policymakers may wish to focus further afield on building political networks beyond countries such as the Republic in its near region. However, regulatory divergence which undermines the viability of the Northern Ireland Protocol and the wider peace process may undermine the UK's ability to gain economic cooperation and agreements. Furthermore, insufficient short term attention to developing these areas to replace EU-facilitated cooperation with the Republic may weaken the UK's ability to focus further afield in the long term, should the peace process and economic relations be disrupted.

## Selected Timeline of UK-Republic Relations

### *Before 2020*

<b>6<sup>th</sup> December 1921</b>	Anglo-Irish Treaty establishing the Irish Free State with Northern Irish opt out
<b>1<sup>st</sup> January 1973</b>	Both the UK and Republic of Ireland join the European Economic Community
<b>9<sup>th</sup> December 1973</b>	Sunningdale Agreement
<b>15<sup>th</sup> November 1985</b>	Anglo-Irish Agreement
<b>10<sup>th</sup> April 1998</b>	Good Friday Agreement
<b>June 23<sup>rd</sup> 2016</b>	EU Membership Referendum ‘Leave’ victory, but ‘Remain’ majority in Northern Ireland
<b>May 8<sup>th</sup> 2019</b>	Bilateral UK-Republic agreement to maintain the Common Travel Area regardless of Brexit negotiations outcome <sup>40</sup>

### *2020 Onwards (until 1<sup>st</sup> February 2021)*

<b>9<sup>th</sup> January 2020</b>	‘New Decade, New Approach’ Agreement reached to restored devolution in Northern Ireland <sup>41</sup>
<b>31<sup>st</sup> January 2020</b>	Brexit Day following EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement, which includes the Northern Ireland Protocol <sup>42</sup>
<b>9<sup>th</sup> September 2020</b>	Internal Market Bill introduced by UK government with clauses contravening EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement <sup>43</sup>
<b>1<sup>st</sup> October 2020</b>	Irish government supports EU legal action over Internal Market Bill clauses <sup>44</sup>
<b>8<sup>th</sup> December 2020</b>	UK government agrees to withdraw Internal Market Bill clauses <sup>45</sup>
<b>1<sup>st</sup> January 2021</b>	EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement and Northern Ireland Protocol come into effect <sup>46,47</sup>
<b>29<sup>th</sup> January 2021</b>	EU decision to invoke Article 16 of Northern Ireland Protocol on Covid vaccines reversed after UK and Irish government objections <sup>48</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> A. Beesley and S. Payne (2019, May 8), Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Northern Ireland Office (2020, January 9), Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Brexit: UK Leaves the European Union (2020, February 1), BBC News. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-51333314> (28/2/21).

<sup>43</sup> Brexit: PM defends planned changes to Withdrawal Agreement (2020, September 9), Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> B. Haugh (2020, October 2), Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Brexit: UK and EU reach deal on Northern Ireland border checks (2020, December 8), Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Prime Minister’s Office, 10 Downing Street (2020, December 24), International Treaty: Agreements reached between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the European Union. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/agreements-reached-between-the-united-kingdom-of-great-britain-and-northern-ireland-and-the-european-union> (28/2/21).

<sup>47</sup> Cabinet Office (2021, January 5), Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> EU vaccine export row: Bloc backtracks on controls for NI (2021, January 30), BBC News. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-55865539> (28/2/21).

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