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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Reflections: the UK after Brexit

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Abstract
The articles in this issue have explored the effects Brexit has had on the UK's international role, identity, and status. In doing so they touch on the wider question of how significant a change Brexit has been for the UK. Most answers to that question point to effects on the constitution, unity, identity, political economy of the UK, and the country's place in Europe and the wider world. This concluding article highlights processes of both change and continuity. It explores how Brexit has triggered a critical juncture but this has not yet significantly changed the ideas (especially those held by the British elite) about the UK's role, identity, and status. Such a change may happen in time because the Brexit critical juncture is still happening, with the wider political fallout, especially to the UK's territorial integrity, still unfolding. Although even here, the potential for continuity should not be underestimated.

Keywords Brexit · Britain · UK foreign policy · Critical juncture · England

Introduction

Prime Minister David Cameron's decision to hold a referendum on the UK's membership of the EU was intended to 'settle the European question in British politics' (Cameron 2013). He was not alone in hoping for such an outcome. Former Conservative Prime Minister John Major supported the decision claiming, 'it can be cathartic. It can end 40 years of political squabbles' (Major 2013). It seems remarkable that such hopes once existed given the way the European question has consumed and disrupted British politics since 2016. In that seven-year period there has been (as of spring 2023) five prime ministers with the distinct possibility of a sixth in the near future. Cameron's expectation, one shared by many, was that when confronted with

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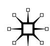


a choice the British people would opt for continued EU membership. The UK's relationship with the EU might have caused tensions, especially within the Conservative Party (Cameron and Major were also hoping the referendum would stop Tory infighting on the issue), but before 2016 it seemed unlikely that a majority of the British people would vote to disrupt a connection seen by most of the British political elite, as central to the UK's economy, politics, society and place in the world. No surprise, then, that the vote to Leave unleashed a period of intense reflection and debate about what the result would mean for the UK and, to a lesser extent, for others. Brexit has, for good or bad, disrupted the international options open to UK policy makers, accelerated changes domestically that are transforming the UK as a country, and made analysts (in both the UK and abroad) rethink the way in which the UK and its approach to international relations and place in the world are understood. The breadth, scale and permanence of the changes unleashed mean the result of the June 2016 referendum triggered a 'critical juncture' for the UK.

Yet at the same time there has been a good deal of continuity. Many of the issues faced before June 2016 have been at the heart of discussions and choices about the identity, status, and role of the UK in international relations in the period since. As Chris Hill makes clear in his article, discussion about Britain's international strategy continues to revolve around 'the organising idea' of Churchill's three majestic circles: the British Empire and Commonwealth; the English-speaking world, included dominions of the empire such as Canada and, crucially, the USA; and what Churchill termed 'United Europe'. As Hadfield and Whitman note, these orientations might now be 'unrecognisable in form and substance' but they still remain central to UK thinking, being 're-deployed and re-purposed in Brexit and post-Brexit debates'. Whatever strategy is pursued, the British elite retain a view that the UK has the ability to play a leading role internationally; its master role orientation continues to be that of a leading global actor. Has Brexit then, at least in Britain's international relations, been less a critical juncture and more a step along a road long-trodden by British policy makers? As Webber notes: '[a] concern with status has, after all, been a fixed feature of UK foreign policy for decades.' What then has actually changed and how significant is that change?

In this concluding article of this special issue I reflect on whether Brexit has been a critical juncture through three steps. First, I set out what Brexit is. Many discussions about Brexit are unclear about the meaning, timeframe and processes involved. The term 'post-Brexit' itself needs to be clarified because in many ways Brexit is still happening. Since the 2016 referendum result, Brexit has been the political weather shaping British politics in the same way that the outcomes of the 1945 and 1979 general elections defined the following decades. Second, I explore the idea of Brexit as a critical juncture. I show that Brexit does fit many of the criteria of such an occurrence, yet its full implications are still to be discerned. Finally, I consider the extent to which Brexit has caused a critical juncture that has intruded upon Britain's international relations. I do so by looking at several global roles that have appeared in debates about how a post-Brexit Britain could approach the world. The previous articles in this special issue are drawn on throughout this third step. The article concludes by arguing that Brexit has indeed been a critical juncture for the UK but this has not yet changed the British elite's ideas about the country's role, identity, and

status. This may happen in time because of the wider fallout from Brexit, not least to the UK's unity. Although even on matters surrounding the UK's unity the potential for continuity in how the British (or English) approach international matters should not be underestimated.

Reflecting on the meaning of Brexit

To understand the effect of Brexit on the UK and the UK's international relations we first need to do something that is not as straightforward as it sounds: reflect on what Brexit itself means. As noted in many of the preceding articles in this special issue, Brexit is not a single event. If there was a date on which Brexit 'happened' it cannot be said to have been the 23rd June 2016, the date of the EU membership referendum—although that can be said to be the moment when Brexit moved from being a short-term campaigning issue to the topic that would dominate British politics and government. Nor did Brexit happen on the date the UK withdrew from the EU, simply because there are two such dates, and the second comes with a big caveat. The UK left the EU's political institutions on the 31st January 2020. It withdrew from the EU's Single Market on the 31st December 2020, when the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) entered into force. The caveat is that Northern Ireland, both before and after the Windsor Framework agreed between the UK and EU in early 2023, would remain partly connected to the EU for some trading and regulatory purposes leading to the creation of a customs border between Great Britain (i.e. England, Scotland and Wales) and Northern Ireland. This has left some, especially Eurosceptics, feeling Brexit has not been fully delivered for the whole of the UK. The TCA, signed in 2020, is subject to five yearly reviews. With a UK general election due to be called no later than January 2025, there remains a strong possibility the review will become a politically contentious act straining UK-EU relations.

Brexit, therefore, becomes a series of processes rather than events, although even this creates problems of definition given the large number of processes involved. There are the processes that are the official negotiations: between the UK and EU; between the EU's various institutions and Member States; within UK central government; between UK central government and the UK's parliament, courts and devolved and local governments; between UK and EU officials and regulators; and between the UK (and to a lesser extent also for the EU) and non-EU states and bodies. There are also processes about adaptation. These can be political, with Brexit being a process by which the UK's (and to a much less extent, the EU's) politicians and political parties have had to come to terms with Brexit. There are also economic processes navigated by regulators, businesses and customers in the UK and outside it. There are social and cultural processes, especially over matters of identity and citizenship. And there are the foreign policy processes as the UK adapts to what Brexit means for its place in the world, to which we turn below.

Given some of these processes are ongoing, can it be said that the UK today is in a post-Brexit era? That depends on the outcomes. As with processes, a focus on outcomes both clarifies and confuses. Having won a general election on a mandate to 'get Brexit done', Boris Johnson did subsequently deliver both a Withdrawal

Agreement followed by the TCA. But as noted, for some Eurosceptics the outcome is incomplete because of the situation with Northern Ireland. The economic outcome also remains disputed. Identifying the costs of Brexit has been made difficult by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it has become clear that a price has been paid. The Office for Budget Responsibility has suggested that Brexit has led to a reduction in UK GDP of 4 per cent (*BBC* News 2021); John Springford (2022) of the Centre for European Reform puts that figure at 5.2 per cent. Both these projections argue that the long-term economic cost of Brexit can be distinguished from the sharp but short-term costs of the COVID-19 pandemic. But Leave campaigners remain adamant that Brexit was not about economics but sovereignty and control, and that the economic outcome of Brexit remains in play because no government has yet been able (or willing) to fully exploit what they argue are the economic and trade opportunities of leaving the EU. This controversy over the outcomes of Brexit stems, in large part, from the lack of clarity evident among proponents of Leave as to what exactly such a course of action would mean in practice (Grey 2021). This remains the case even with the Withdrawal Agreement and the TCA, which together equate to a form of 'hard Brexit' that very few Leave campaigners promised (or even anticipated) in June 2016. For this reason, the wider effects of withdrawal to the UK's political economy remain contested. While there is only a limited possibility of the UK re-joining the EU anytime soon, adaptation of the relationship has been a reality throughout the negotiations and looks set to remain so. Luxembourg Prime Minister Xavier Bettel's description (cited in Stephens 2018) of the negotiations in 2018—'[t]hey [i.e. the UK] were in with a load of opt-outs. Now they are out, and want a load of opt-ins'—still applies even after the TCA.

Such ambiguous adaptation can also be seen in the international consequences of the UK withdrawing from the EU. The outcome of the Withdrawal Agreement and TCA is that the UK no longer partakes in EU decision-making in the Common Foreign and Security Policy, over trade agreements, sanctions policies, the environment or regulatory diplomacy. And yet the outcome, as explored below, is that the UK finds itself drawn back to the EU for one of two reasons, both of which revolve around the EU's predominance in European affairs. First, Europe remains, along with the transatlantic relationship, the main strategic concern of British foreign policy. Europe is, as Churchill (cited in Simms 2016: xv) once said, 'where the weather comes from'. That weather is shaped significantly by the EU because, secondly, on many economic, social, or environmental matters the UK still aligns with EU laws and regulations because of the 'Brussels effect' (Bradford 2020). Of course, the potential to diverge from this exists, something Leave supporters in particular point out. But as discussed below, the outcome so far has been a continuation of alignment, albeit often quietly.

Brexit as a critical juncture?

Brexit has been and remains deeply controversial because so much is at stake. Through Brexit, the UK (and to a much lesser extent the EU) have faced questions and debates about identity and unity, political economy and trade, international

relations and security. Of course, many of the questions raised, such as over the future unity of the UK or the US–UK relationship, long pre-date the 2016 referendum. That vote, however, brought these matters together in a way that turned Brexit into *the* issue through which so much else in British politics has come to be framed and discussed (Oliver 2018). Brexit should also not be seen in isolation from a series of changes that have shaped the UK and the wider world. As Webber explains in his opening article, Brexit has unfolded against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, accelerating climate change, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the strategic competition between the United States on the one hand and China and Russia on the other. When all this is put together, does Brexit become a critical juncture for the UK? Did the 2016 vote set in train a series of processes and outcomes that have permanently remade the UK and its place in the world? Is the degree of change on a par with other critical junctures that have happened as a result of democratic votes by the British people: the 1945 general election that led to Clement Attlee's Labour government bringing in the 'post-war consensus', and the 1979 general election that led to Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government upending that consensus?

The idea of a critical juncture has been used to refer to a significant uncertain change that happens quickly and during which decisions are made by key political actors that create an enduring legacy that contrasts with other possible outcomes (Collier and Munck 2017). Research into critical junctures is often macro-comparative. The field is large and extensive, ranging from studies into changes to political party systems or national trade union movements (Rokkan and Lipset 1967) through to national revolutions or the collapse and replacement of international orders (Ikenberry 2001). It has been central to comparative politics and historical analysis (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007). In the field of international relations the idea of 'punctuated equilibrium', put forward by Stephen Krasner (Krasner 1984), is sometimes used to explain short periods of dramatic change between long periods of stasis in the international system. This contrasts with ideas of slow, continuous evolution. Related, methodological approaches such as process tracing, cross-case analysis and counterfactual reasoning can be used to help understand what sorts of event, whether national economic crises or wars, can cause critical junctures. Crucially, such studies look into what happens during the critical juncture to create the enduring change (often defined by path dependency) that follows.

A range of authors have discussed Brexit as a critical juncture (Zappettini and Krzyżanowski 2019; Gstöhl and Phinnemore 2021; Alexandre-Collier et al. 2022). All note that the June 2016 referendum was the cause of the critical juncture rather than the critical juncture itself. The critical juncture lies in the processes that followed that vote. These processes led to attempts by leading political actors to create new institutions not only for UK-EU relations but also in the setup of the UK's politics, governance, economy, identity and place in the world beyond Europe. Not all of these processes have resulted in clear outcomes. Critical junctures can take years or even decades to unfold and only appear quick from the perspective of a long historical timeframe. For this reason, Brexit is best understood as still ongoing and so only preliminary conclusions can be offered as to its conclusions. That said, Brexit has created opportunities to change the UK significantly, with some changes already producing outcomes with an enduring legacy. Most obvious here is the outcome of

the hard Brexit of the TCA as opposed to a softer Brexit such as membership of the European Economic Area (EEA). It is important to note that such an outcome was not predetermined. In the introductory article Webber notes, citing Denis Macshane (2021), that this may even have been accidental, the result of 'domestic political division, ill-judged decision-making by flawed leaders and a form of perverse path dependence whereby a process was set in motion that proved impossible to reverse even when its negative consequences became clear.' Compared to the aforementioned elections of 1945 and 1979, Brexit from the start had few clearly defined outcomes. Attlee and Thatcher won their respective elections with clear ideological agendas and manifestos to implement. Their positions included the UK's international relations. Under Attlee there was a move from Empire to Commonwealth. Under Thatcher there was a pursuit of free-market policies with the rest of Europe (which was instrumental in creating the EU's Single Market), in relations with the United States, and in the struggle against the USSR. By contrast, the problem with the 2016 referendum vote was the lack of a clear policy agenda around the option of 'Leave' (Grey 2021). Therein lies the reason why the outcomes of Brexit have been so difficult to define. The UK has been taken to the hard Brexit of the TCA but much else, such as decisions about the UK's political economy, have remained unsettled (Marr 2022). Even the TCA, as noted, was far from a predetermined outcome. As Helen Drake notes, the UK government was ill-prepared for Brexit and lacked 'a diplomatic strategy or narrative' once negotiations on its terms with the EU got under way. This led to the curious diplomatic position in which frustrated EU negotiators eventually felt compelled to set out for the UK the options London had to choose from. Was such a messy situation a critical juncture? Arguably, yes as such a situation never entails a determined outcome and incremental change is normal. As many of the articles in this issue point out, on matters of identity, status, and role the UK remains far from having a settled outcome from Brexit on international matters. Leaving the EU is an exceptional undertaking, but it need not lead in one direction only—a path toward greater and greater distance—it could also result in re-association and a movement back to closer relations.

A critical juncture for Britain's international role?

To examine whether the critical juncture of Brexit has led to role adaptation in Britain's international relations I explore several international roles that the post-Brexit UK could pursue. From the debates that have followed the 2016 vote (including those touched upon in the preceding articles of this special issue) it is possible to identify several such roles. This list is not exhaustive and other roles could be identified. That's because these roles in large part reflect political debates and tropes political actors draw on. Each of the roles is set out here as an ideal type, with a focus on what each would mean for the identity and status of the UK (Oliver 2020) and what each says about the broader orientation, conception and performance of role set out in the introductory article of this special issue.

'Switzerland with nukes'

This role would see the UK adopt an isolationist approach to the world as a regional but inward-looking power (Faulconbridge 2012). It would involve the UK detaching itself from the global security, economic and political arenas within which it has sought leadership since 1945. It would thus involve renunciation of some of the UK's leading resources in international relations, such as its permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Britain's international relations would focus on the security of the mainland UK, leaving few if any overseas commitments (including to the remaining UK's overseas territories). The UK might remain a member of NATO, but like the French in 1966 would withdraw from the integrated military command structure of the Atlantic alliance. International aid would be limited, and a sceptical approach would be taken to environmental matters. Economic, trade and immigration policies would be hostile to free-movement and open markets, and a mercantilist and protectionist outlook would become the norm. The UK would remain a nuclear power, but almost certainly at the cost of losing the US built and designed delivery system of Trident. That would leave the UK as a limited nuclear power in possession of only a small number of nuclear warheads.

Such an isolationist approach might sound extreme given the desire in the UK—especially amongst its elite—to play a leading role in international affairs. However, debates surrounding Brexit have contained some strong isolationist tendencies, especially towards the rest of Europe (at least in the form of the EU). The hard Brexit of the TCA has demonstrated, as Egan and Webber in their article note, a willingness on the part of UK decision makers to ignore economic costs (and the geographical realities behind it) in favour of political goals. A willingness to antagonise European allies has frequently been on show, perhaps in part driven by what Drake refers to as a 'victimhood status'. The Home Office's 'hostile environment' policy on immigration has long strained relations with the nationals and governments of non-EU states, with the possibility that this would extend to EU citizens being something EU negotiators were keen to prevent as part of the UK-EU Withdrawal Agreement. If this approach to the world has emerged it is because there is a domestic audience (sometimes casually referred to as the 'left behind') sceptical of immigration and globalisation and the security challenges they bring.

The 'Switzerland with nukes' option is unlikely to materialise. All of the articles in this special issue have shown no willingness on the part of the UK's elite to pursue a reduced role let alone an isolationist one. It would involve embracing the status and identity of a small, regional power focussed on itself and its immediate neighbourhood. Such a choice would incur the anger of Britain's allies who would come to view the UK as a security free-rider. In his article, Cladi makes clear that Brexit has not changed the UK's strategic culture of military pre-eminence and overseas commitment. And as Kienzle and Dee show in their article, the renewal of Britain's nuclear arsenal, the nuclear dimension to the AUKUS agreement, and the UK's continued participation in the negotiations surrounding the Iran nuclear deal all suggest that Brexit has not changed the emphasis on nuclear power and nuclear diplomacy in British foreign policy. On immigration, meanwhile, the UK might have ended free-movement for EU citizens and the legacy of the 'hostile environment' policy lingers,

but this has not changed the UK's demand for non-UK workers with immigration numbers continuing to grow since 2016. Nor are the UK's political elite known for favouring mercantilism. The TCA might have brought about a hard Brexit, but the UK has shown only a limited ability to break or isolate itself from the 'Brussels effect' (Bradford 2020). Furthermore, as Egan and Webber show even if the economic significance of the UK's new trade agreements have been overplayed, their pursuit has shown a UK government determined to play a leading role in global if not necessarily European economics.

'Singapore on Thames'

In contrast to the first role, the role of 'Singapore on Thames' (sometimes also referred to as 'Davos on Thames') would see the UK adopt a hyper-globalist, libertarian, low-tax, deregulatory approach to both domestic and international affairs. This would entail some isolationism so that business and trade were not jeopardised by politics, security, or ethical considerations. Immigration would be more open to attract the full range of high and low skilled workers needed. Defence capabilities would be configured for homeland defence, but with a commitment to supporting efforts to keeping trade routes open. The UK would be a member of various regional and international organisations, but with an explicit commitment to working through them to promote business, investment, and free trade. Outside of the EU's regulatory system, the UK would innovate or undercut the EU while also pushing for a move away from regional trading bodies in favour of more global competition. Britain would therefore be a leading player in global free trade where it would push for a new period of lower trade barriers globally.

It's easy to find problems with this ideal type. First, the use of Singapore in this role, like that of Switzerland in the first, is unfair on both countries. Switzerland's neutrality does not mean it is closed to globalisation. Indeed, Switzerland has been notorious for its willingness to be open to the free movement of capital. Singapore meanwhile has a highly interventionist state. Discussion of this idea can also overlook that the UK already has a city on the Thames which is hyper-global: London. Nevertheless, the desire to detach from the EU's 'Brussels effect' to deregulate and compete globally has been a clearly stated desire by some Conservative and libertarian backers of Brexit (Cliffe 2022; Marr 2022). The UK's successful development and deployment of a COVID-19 vaccine was heralded as an example of how this economic model could succeed while the EU's slower and more cumbersome approach doomed it to under-achievement. That the USA's vaccine development moved more quickly than the EU's seemed to reinforce the call for a more market-based approach. Wilkinson and Lucas note how the UK's world leading defence industry is seen by the UK government as playing a major role in 'global Britain'. As Egan and Webber makes clear, the UK has successfully negotiated a number of new trade agreements (even if most are very similar to those it had through the EU—a form of path dependence Brexit has not yet changed dramatically) in so doing developing a growing trade negotiating capability. There might have been costs, not least for British agriculture, but the UK has shown a willingness to push for free trade,

even going so far as to pursue the idea of being the first non-Pacific country to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership.

The idea of the UK as a buccaneering free-trading nation has, however, faced significant difficulties. Leaving the EU did not boost the UK's ability to produce a COVID-19 vaccine. Britons have shown a limited willingness to move towards an American free-market economic model as opposed to a more European social democratic one. London's model of hyper-global success does not appeal across the UK. Russia's invasion of Ukraine, growing tensions with China and unease at close relations with some Middle Eastern states have led the UK government and Britain's allies to pressure the City of London to turn away business with these states. As Wilkinson and Lucas's article highlights, the UK's defence industry is shaped by the UK's security needs and national interests and therefore not entirely by the free market. This has not stopped this agenda from being at the forefront of attempts by some in the Conservative Party to steer the UK toward a more neo-liberal outcome. However, as newly installed Prime Minister Liz Truss discovered, this role is not one that global financial markets felt that in the autumn of 2022 the UK had the capabilities to deliver on. Nor were the British people (or even the governing Conservative Party) enthusiastic about the costs. Far from earning a reputation for being a Singapore on Thames, her attempts soon saw the UK labelled as an emerging market or a new Argentina (Walshe 2022). Truss's resignation from office in October 2022—earning a record for the shortest-serving UK prime minister in history—did not put paid to the idea of emboldened deregulation, but it certainly cast doubt on the viability of any rush toward the Singapore-on-Thames adventure of low taxes, high growth and deregulation (Keegan 2022).

Could the UK go the other way, towards a more regulated, perhaps even Scandinavian style state that at home and abroad is more focussed on standards of living and development? Hadfield and Whitman point to how this has been made more difficult because the merger of the Department for International Development with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, something that points to a securitisation of British aid policy. The article by Burns gives some further pointers here through the policy area of the environment. As she makes clear, ideas of a 'Green Brexit' have been tied to notions of the UK as a leading player in the world. But this has not been backed by adequate domestic policy commitments, which in turn has undermined international credibility. It serves as an example of how on leaving the EU the UK might have escaped its institutional constraints, but this brought with it new tasks and administrative challenges the British state has struggled to live up to. The experience highlights how, as with the more neoliberal, free-trade approach, the language and expectations of Brexit have too often been about empowerment. The reality has been constraints and additional costs, ones which the UK has yet to fully come to terms with both domestically and internationally.

An EU-UK 'special relationship'

British prime ministers have long struggled to find a way to describe the relationship with the EU vis-à-vis other partners, especially the United States. The latter, Gordon

Brown claimed, was Britain's 'most important bilateral relationship'. That neatly sidestepped the fact that the relationship with the EU touched on so much that it went beyond being a strictly multilateral relationship. No wonder then that the need for a close relationship overhung the Brexit negotiations. Prime Minister Theresa May spoke of the need for the UK and EU to develop a 'deep and special partnership', although what this was to be and how it would be structured, she never set out. Such a relationship at its most developed would be as close as possible to re-joining the EU without actually doing so. It might also entail some form of membership of the EEA, although without reform of the EEA-EU relationship this would not provide any sort of bridge into EU decision-making.

If an institutional framework and sufficiently high level of trust could be created for a UK-EU special relationship, then there are grounds to hope that this might underpin a wider international role. While a Member State, the UK was described as 'an awkward partner' (George 1996) but one should not ignore the fact that successive British governments often showed the UK to be a quietly constructive interlocutor (Oliver and Daddow 2016). In domestic politics, governments were often unwilling to present their European credentials, but this might not be as big an obstacle in the future as it was in the past. In a twist, Brexit has shown the UK to be more European than many in the UK might have appreciated before June 2016. Brexit has confronted the British public and its political and economic elites with several realities about the UK economy (still heavily connected to the EU), society (more aligned with European outlooks than those of the United States or others) and place in the world (as a regional European power dwarfed by larger global powers, such as the EU). Perhaps one of the most notable developments from Brexit has been for pro-Europeanism to emerge from the shadows of British politics (Oliver and Walshe 2020). This creates the potential for a more positive relationship through the institutions and networks created by the TCA. While the degree of contact between political actors cannot be as deep as that associated with actual membership, the multidimensional nature of a possible future relationship means regulators, officials and representatives from across the UK (in both Westminster and beyond) can develop healthy connections with their EU counterparts (see also Phinnemore 2022).

This does not mean that a Europeanised UK is destined to rejoin the EU. It would more than likely take another critical juncture to break the path dependence of the TCA's hard Brexit. Further, while the UK has engaged with European multilateralism, a distance has remained with the EU. The war in Ukraine has reminded British policy makers that the UK has withdrawn from the EU but not from Europe. But that has meant a focus on relations with European states through NATO (as discussed by Cladi) and, at some remove, with the Council of Europe and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (Grogan 2022). It has also entailed a lot of muddling through in building links, especially bilateral ones, so as to avoid any formal UK-EU institutional setup on foreign policy coordination. The 2021 *Integrated Review* reflected this tone, making only a passing mention of the EU. This is not a sign of the EU's lack of importance to the UK's international relations; it is, rather, a sign of how such documents are drafted with political sensitivities in mind with geopolitics placed second. The 2015 UK *National Security Strategy* also said very little about the EU, despite it being published shortly after the election

of a government with a commitment to put to the British people one of the biggest foreign policy choices since 1945. That the EU remains the UK's most important multilateral relationship means the potential exists for closer UK-EU relations, but many decision makers remain uneasy at accepting this.

A 'Global European balancer'

Of all the roles outlined this would be the most ambitious. It would see the UK seek an independent way that builds on, but is not limited to, the European and US pillars upon which British foreign policy has been largely based since 1945. Such a course would not mean that relations with the EU or the United States would be unimportant concerns for British policy makers. They would instead be just two of several key relationships. Britain's economy, trade, politics, diplomacy, and defence would be configured as if it was a global power with global interests. For defence, it would see a strategy designed to allow the UK to engage in a wide spectrum of conflicts, with a return to deployments 'East of Suez' being one of the most obvious commitments. In an overlap with the 'Singapore on Thames' role, trade policy would be aimed at showing global leadership, which would see the UK try to move away from the pull of both the US and EU.

Such an independent global role would see the UK overstretched more so than any time since 1945. The scepticism of allies and foes is not difficult to imagine. Yet this role can be found in arguments that the Commonwealth might serve as a third way for the UK between the United States and the EU. It would also be a role that connects the UK to the Anglosphere, albeit without being preoccupied by relations with the United States. And it would connect the UK to large parts of the developing world and emerging markets such as India. Such ideas have been present in British foreign policy debates since 1945 (Kenny and Pearce 2018). The 2021 *Integrated Review* makes much of the importance of developing relations with emerging markets and favoured an 'Indo-Pacific tilt'. To its defenders, the idea of the UK seeking a role apart from the EU and the United States reflects a globalised world where neither side of the North Atlantic is any longer the centre of geopolitical affairs. They argue that as a result of its history the UK has the cultural, social, demographic, constitutional, historical and economic links to uniquely adapt to such a globalised world.

To sceptics such ideas are atavistic. The rediscovery of the Commonwealth harks back to a bygone age. While the Commonwealth does contain a number of emerging markets, the UK's trade with Germany alone matches the countries in this grouping. Most Commonwealth countries, meanwhile were opposed or wary of Brexit, seeing little or no benefit for them or, indeed, the UK. The end of the reign of Queen Elizabeth II in 2022, meanwhile, raised the prospect of moves by a number of Commonwealth states to become republics. The loss of the Queen's global reputation, and the debates her death prompted about the history of the British Empire add to a sense the UK would be overreaching itself if it felt it could embark on a more ambitious global role through this medium.

The 51st state

The UK's willingness to align itself with the United States has been a long-standing complaint by critics of UK foreign policy from all sides of the political spectrum. Despite much debate about what to call the relationship between the two—whether it is *the* special relationship or *a* special relationship—it has rested on a core that has survived the vagaries of prime ministerial-presidential relations, economic crises, and disagreements over international matters such as the Vietnam War, human rights, and cooperation on environmental matters. That core has been based on close relations in intelligence sharing, special forces, and nuclear weapons. Military staff and civilian officials working in those areas have developed an often unique and deeply trusting relationship which neither country shares with any other to the same extent. Could the UK through Brexit build a wider relationship where such 'specialness' (Danchev 1998) goes beyond this core to embrace a range of other areas?

Such a role has been alluded to repeatedly since the EU referendum and efforts have been made to develop it. The May, Johnson and Truss governments have all been clear that they would like to negotiate a free trade agreement with the United States. This reflects not only the importance of America to the British economy; it reflects also a desire by some politicians, especially within the Conservative Party to adjust the UK's regulatory alignment away from the EU. Such a move would build on the close relationship between the financial centres of London and New York. As the article by Wilkinson and Lucas points out, the UK's defence industry is already more closely aligned with the United States than with the rest of Europe. That orientation fits neatly with the military and intelligence core of the special relationship. Chris Hill notes that in turning away from the EU, and with a Commonwealth or third way option at best a hollow shell, the UK has found itself bound to turn more to the United States for leadership and status. One outcome of that has been the AUKUS agreement.

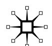
But a deepening trans-Atlantic relationship has problems of its own, touched on in many of the articles in this special issue. Wilkinson and Lucas note that while the close defence industry relationship enhances interoperability between British and American forces it also leaves the UK beholden to US defence policy and the US defence industry. It remains unclear if US policy makers welcome the UK's disengagement from Europe to assist the United States in areas of the world such as the Pacific. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has increased a long-standing US desire that the Europeans—the UK included—do more to defend Europe. The conflict has seen EU defence spending and cooperation grow but without the UK's direct involvement because its efforts at shaping European responses have been directed at NATO. Furthermore, Hill in his article points to how the AUKUS option shows the limitations of British aspirations to work beyond Europe insofar as this reinforces dependency on the United States. Similarly, as Hadfield and Whitman note in their piece, even the *Integrated Review*, with its 'Indo-Pacific tilt', still confirmed an 'Atlantic dimension […] critical to the architecture of post-Brexit foreign policy.' Disengaging from European security to pursue ambitions elsewhere in the world that do not connect back to European and North Atlantic security and stability thus appears to be a strategic dead end.

Similar problems face UK policy makers with regard to the economic relationship with the United States. A free trade deal would be a poor substitute for the bigger goal the UK had long sought of a US-EU trade agreement. Efforts to create the now defunct Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership were strongly backed by the UK because it would have deepened the US-European relationship. Some supporters of the idea (such as Liz Truss when UK Foreign Secretary) went so far as to call the idea 'an economic NATO' (Truss cited in Stokes 2022). The failure to agree a trade deal followed by Brexit has left the UK negotiating on its own with a US political system where favouritism towards the UK cannot be taken for granted. The situation with the Northern Ireland Protocol has caused particular problems. So too has potential backlash by British farmers, consumers, businesses, and civil society at the idea of connecting the UK to a close but ultimately subservient economic relationship with the United States.

An English foreign policy: Little England or Little Britain?

The June 2016 EU referendum reignited debates about Scottish independence only two years after the Scottish people voted to remain a part of the UK. A break-up of the UK would be one of the defining outcomes of the critical juncture of Brexit, with significant implications for the international relations of all the constituent parts of the UK. It could bring to an end the very idea of Britishness given the union of England and Scotland was central to British identity and to the creation of the British Empire (rarely ever described as an 'English Empire') (Colley 2005). As Kienzle and Dee make clear in their article, Scottish independence would almost certainly see the end of the UK's nuclear deterrent because of the lack of an obvious alternative location in England for the facilities at Faslane and, crucially, Coulport, both of which are in the West of Scotland. Irish reunification would see a dramatic change to the setup of the Irish Republic. The scale of that change—and the security implications for the Irish Republic—mean the remaining UK might need to commit to assisting the Irish Republic in this transition. The constituent parts of the UK would be plunged into negotiations over the break-up, opening up debates about debt, pensions, defence capabilities, and national and international institutions such as the BBC or diplomatic representation abroad. An independent Scotland could attempt to rejoin the EU, which if achieved would create a trade border in the island of Great Britain (Hayward and McEwan 2022). The length and nature of the process by which the break-up would happen, and how far it might go—whether it would include Wales—remain unclear but would have both domestic and international outcomes. The Former United Kingdom of England and Wales may be the successor state rather than England on its own (Matthijs 2017). While much of the focus in these debates has been on Scotland and Northern Ireland, an equally if not more important question is what would become of England.

Whether British foreign policy is really English foreign policy has been raised in the articles by Webber, and Kienzle and Dee. Exploring this question, however, presents us with several problems. First is the dearth of data or analysis about England and the English. In one of the few detailed studies of England as such, Henderson



and Wyn-Jones (2021) show that UK opinion polling is often about Great Britain (England, Scotland and Wales) with Northern Ireland often left out of the analysis because of its peculiar political setup. UK political science often fails to look beyond the system of governance centred on Westminster and Whitehall. Insufficient attention is thus given to devolved assemblies in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and to metropolitan and unitary authorities in England. This is something mirrored in media coverage, which can also be very Westminster-Whitehall centric. The few studies that do examine England can therefore raise more questions than answers. Henderson and Wyn-Jones's work has shown that the UK lacks a united sense of Britishness. This results in some curious configurations. It means 'British' foreign policy, at least on the issue of leaving the EU, aligns with those who identify more as English in England but with those who see themselves as more British in Scotland. It remains unclear, however, to what extent such divisions extend to other areas such as defence, international aid, international alliances, free trade and globalisation. Furthermore, little research exists on whether differences on such matters exist within England, such as between north and south or between London and the rest of the country.

What can we say, therefore, about whether Brexit is leading to a UK role in the world that is more English in its identity than British? First, with 85 per cent of the UK's population and economy it shouldn't be a surprise that England is central to the UK's role and outlook. One thing Brexit has not shifted, especially for that 85 per cent, is the centralised nature of the British state. While in the Brexit negotiations there were victories for Parliament and the Supreme Court in disputes with the UK government, these still revolved around the idea of the sovereignty of parliament. If anything, Brexit appears to have strengthened this idea with powers returned from Brussels focussed on Westminster-Whitehall in order to develop a more coherent UK internal market. International relations, including trade deals and immigration, are very much the preserve of Westminster-Whitehall. Efforts or calls to move towards a more consensus system, such as through 'people assemblies' to debate Brexit, have been more about political manoeuvring than embracing a move away from the majoritarian Westminster model. Internationally it is unclear—again, because of a lack of data and analysis—whether many know or care about the difference between England and Britain/UK given the already well-known (especially to the residents of the non-English parts of the UK) confusion that exists on the issue. The indifference of some in England, including ironically amongst members of the Conservative Party (or to give it its full name—the Conservative *and Unionist* Party), to the possible break-up of the UK points to the possibility that some feel the end of the UK will not be a significant change. Or, it is a price to be tolerated for a hard Brexit (McCall 2019). This begs important questions. If Brexit does lead to a break-up of the UK and sees England emerging (reemerging?) as the successor state, would England's politics, economy, and international outlooks (and the way it is viewed by others) be radically different to those of the UK? The break-up of the UK could be a critical juncture, including for the international outlooks of England and the rest of the former UK. But successor states such as Russia after the USSR point to the potential for the elites and institutions of such states to resist or even challenge rather than accept a changed role in the world.

Conclusion

The June 2016 referendum was meant to settle what David Cameron (cited in Oliver 2015: 77) referred to as the 'European question' in British politics. Instead, it triggered a critical juncture that seven years later is still unfolding with uncertain outcomes for the UK domestically and internationally. This does not mean other factors have not been important. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and growing problems in the UK's political economy have been important drivers of UK politics and foreign policy. Brexit, however, has been present throughout. It has been the political weather of British politics. Some of the outcomes of Brexit, most clearly the TCA, have created new institutions that now define a key part of the UK's place and role in the world. Other outcomes, such as in relations with the United States (including in defence), towards emerging markets, on trade and political economy, and domestically such as over the unity of the UK, remain in flux. Brexit has also been unique to the UK, with various attempts made to measure the UK's experiences against that of others (Springford 2022). Analysing Brexit therefore remains one of the best ways to understand the contemporary UK.

This concluding article of this special issue has reflected on the effects of Brexit on the UK's role in the world by looking at six ideal type roles. By doing so it was possible to look at whether Brexit has changed the UK in its relations with leading allies such as the United States, in its economic and trade outlook, or its defence posture. Crucially, this allowed discussion about whether Brexit has changed the UK's identity and status in the world and its leading role orientation. The analysis here shows that while there has been some role adaptation, there has also been much inertia. Whether it is in ideas of isolation or of a closer relationship with the United States, each role highlighted how the three key questions outlined in Chris Hill's article continue to challenge British policy makers: how to manage relative decline? how to play both a global and regional role without having to retreat to the latter? and how to align Britain's international relations with the sort of country the UK wants to be domestically? Despite some policies that hint at a more isolated and limited role, Brexit has not yet made British policy makers re-evaluate their desire to play a leading role in the world, including in Europe.

In time, the long-term changes of Brexit may lead to a different outcome. As this article and the preceding ones in this special issue show, it is clear that Brexit has triggered a series of processes that are changing the UK and its place in the world. However, it is difficult to be clear about the outcomes of these processes. Critical junctures are often only quick when viewed retrospectively over a long timeframe. The critical juncture of Brexit is ongoing, but we can discern some outcomes that have already started to have effects that point to longer-term costs that could eventually shift the outlook of policy makers and their ability to pursue the status protection discussed by Webber at the start of this special issue. The choice of the TCA has lowered British trade with the rest of the EU but, through the legal requirements entailed in the agreement, have limited the potential for the

UK to diverge from the EU's regulatory reach. Efforts to counteract this through trade deals with other countries and parts of the world have so far added little, but do point to a desire to prioritise politics over economics. The potential for the UK to break-up has increased, although the potential effects of this outcome on England remain unclear or under-researched. The trust of the EU and other allies has been weakened because of the frustrations at negotiating with a UK elite that struggled to define what they wanted from negotiations and who still appear to lack clear ideas of where they wish to take the UK.

Declarations

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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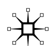

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