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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The diplomacy of 'Global Britain': settling, safeguarding and seeking status

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Abstract

Brexit has induced a diplomatic reorientation on the part of the UK. In the post-referendum period, the UK has sought both to re-make its relationship *with* Europe (mainly through negotiating a position as a third country to the EU) and to reset its broader foreign and security policy objectives *beyond* Europe. This article explores how this has been pursued through the reinforcement of Britain's identity, role and status as a Euro-Atlantic power, alongside a 'plurilateral' approach that has emphasised partnerships and foreign policy issues within and beyond Europe. Through an examination of the UK's developing relationship with the EU and role in the United Nations and the Commonwealth, the article explores how the UK Government has sought to project British influence and to preserve the UK's status as an international actor of note.

Keywords Brexit · Diplomacy · United Nations · Commonwealth · Global Britain

Introduction

Brexit is the most substantial dislocating event in the diplomacy of the UK since the end of the Second World War. For well over half a century, the UK has cultivated a significant international role, one that has belied the shift from its former position as a global imperial power. By the second decade of the twenty-first century, the UK was well positioned as a major international actor through its membership of

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key international security and economic forums (the UN Security Council, the G7, the EU and NATO), its possession of major military capabilities including nuclear weapons, and its 'special relationship' with the USA. The vote to leave the EU in the 2016 UK-wide referendum displaced one essential pillar of these arrangements with the implication that the others would require some refashioning as part of a new post-Brexit diplomatic strategy.

In the post-referendum period, the UK has sought both to re-make its relationship *with* Europe (mainly through negotiating a position as a third country to the EU) and to reset its broader foreign and security policy objectives *beyond* Europe. This has meant a reinforcement of Britain's identity, role and status as a Euro-Atlantic power, alongside a 'plurilateral' approach that has emphasised partnerships and foreign policy issues within and beyond Europe. Such a role adaptation was signalled by the UK Government in the idea of 'Global Britain' authoritatively set out in the 2021 *Integrated Review* (HM Government 2021a) and reinforced (albeit with a dropping of references to Global Britain) in its refresh of the *Review* published in Spring 2023) (HM Government. 2023). In its re-formulation of Britain's role and the status, the Government was seeking to convey its continuing role as a Euro-Atlantic power allied to a 'tilt' to the Indo-Pacific. This positioning of the UK belied two tensions that have emerged in British foreign policy as a consequence of Brexit.

The first is a tension between remaining focused on Europe or opting to move beyond it, thus sparking one of the most important debates in UK foreign policy for many years. This article explores the implications of this tension in Britain's dealings with the EU, the UN and the Commonwealth, and the consequences for the UK's identity, various roles and membership-based status. The second relates to Brexit's consequences. On the one hand, Brexit can be seen as motor of beneficial change, affording the opportunity to instigate a wholesale and positive 'reset' of the UK's international relations (Bew and Elefteriu 2016). This position has become a leitmotif of the UK government's articulation of a new post-EU direction for British foreign policy. It has been consciously driven by process under the May, Johnson, Truss and Sunak administrations with the articulation of the initially vague notion of Global Britain giving way to its operatisation through administrative restructuring (with a remaking of Whitehall departments, policy goals and ambitions (through the *Integrated Review* process), and resource allocation (through shifts in government expenditure).

A contrastive position is that Brexit has been seen as having profoundly negative effects, requiring both tactical and strategic 'offsetting'. Among its key partners in European and international forums, Brexit is regarded as having severely disrupted the UK's various roles, obligations and capacities (Hill 2019).

Whether Brexit is viewed negatively or positively, three observations seem relevant. First, Brexit has revised the geometry of multilateralism for the UK in a truly unique fashion. The country is the first Member State that has had to refashion its external relations having left (as opposed to having joined) the EU. Second, and related, Brexit has had consequences for the UK's relationships outside the EU, both within large multilateral organisations such as the UN, NATO, the Commonwealth and the G20, and the legion of smaller, minilateral organisations like the G7 and the E3 (Bell & Vucetic 2019; Clegg 2019; Galland, Raines & Whitman 2020; Ralf

et al. 2020). Third, and aligned with the overarching theme of this special issue, much of post-Brexit diplomacy has entailed a substantive, if uneven, recrafting of the UK's identity, its sense of status and the performance of its role as a significant international actor. The resulting 'status insecurity' (Cladi 2021) has led to a somewhat paradoxical attempt to combine both the offsetting and resetting aspects of Brexit evident in forms of *continuity* with pre-Brexit avenues of engagement, *and* a 'reconnection' with neglected or less visible components of UK foreign policy.

Brexit has materially unsettled the UK's key foreign policy relationships in both permanent and transitory ways. The association with the EU has, by definition, been the most disrupted. That relationship had been 'one of the two pillars of British influence', alongside the transatlantic connection (Gaskarth and Langdon 2021: 1). Beyond the EU, however, the UK has also had to consider its options. The UK position in the UN system (including its permanent membership of the Security Council) and its anchor position within the Commonwealth represent equally important components of British diplomacy (Dee & Smith 2017). For this reason, the article looks in some detail at the changes to the UK's role and to a lesser extent, its status, across three forums—the EU, the UN and the Commonwealth, where post-War (not just post-Brexit) Britain has pursued a number of self-referential roles. (NATO is just as significant, but is treated separately in this special issue.) As we suggest below, the UK's post-Brexit political discourse remains defiantly focused on the UK's credentials as an important international actor—a 'global' rather than simply a regional power.

Global Britain: contesting ideas and the search for new foreign policy identity, role and status

Brexit set the UK up to pursue what Cladi (2021: 2) terms 'multiple modes of engagement.' These have become centred on the controversial concept of 'Global Britain'. Is Global Britain, as Cladi (2021: 2) has suggested, simply 'a temporary palliative with little basis for an overarching and far-reaching EU-UK post-Brexit security partnership'. Or is it, rather, a wholly new method of redefining the UK's *role* in the world, simultaneously recommitting the country to more concrete forms of *status* through leadership of international organisations, the consolidation of key bilateral relationships and the uptake of new responsibilities? (Daddow 2019). Whatever one's perception of Brexit, Global Britain has to be approached both rigorously and consequentially. The publication of the *Integrated Review* was a signature statement of UK foreign policy was a rare moment in which UK political discourse shifted for the first time beyond the vexed issue of exiting the EU to consider the full range of Brexit's systemic impacts at the international level. The recapitulation of its core analysis and prescriptions in the *Refresh* of the *Integrated Review* demonstrates that there has been a significant degree of consolidation in the post-Brexit diplomatic narrative on the role and status being sought by the UK. The major departure in the *Refresh* is that the major trends identified in the original *Review* (shifts in the distribution of global power; interstate systemic competition

over the nature of international order; rapid technological change; and the worsening of transnational challenges) were all deemed to have accelerated.

Despite its myriad drawbacks in terms of detail and resourcing, Global Britain (as most extensively codified in the *Review*) has arguably operated as an all-encapsulating diplomatic programme designed to provide a post-Brexit UK with a new position in international relations. As importantly, the process of reviewing the *Integrated Review* that resulted in the published *Refresh* highlighted the extent to which a set of key propositions are identifiable in a post-Brexit roles and the status sought for the UK through its diplomacy. As such, *the Integrated* Review and its companion *Refresh* provide a much-needed unifying form upon which British identity, roles and status can be gradually recalibrated, and upon which British diplomatic, defence, security, development and multi- and bilateral preferences can be reconstructed.

Identity

As with all other sovereign states, the UK's national identity operates as a self-referential concept denoting a narrative of political, economic and social development, a preferred set of values and a heritage of past and present national interests. British collective identity and national interests have over time reinforced each other to produce a broadly coherent sense of self (identity), preference (interests) and mode of obtaining these internationally via a distinct foreign policy. (Hadfield 2010). The *Integrated Review* articulates the overarching importance of national identity in three key ways. First, it deepens the overarching logic of the UK as a value-based political union, one that is 'bound by shared values that are fundamental to our national identity, democracy and way of life'. The UK's value-based national identity, the document asserts, 'will continue to guide all aspects of our national security and international policy in the decade ahead'. Second, national identity is seen as under increasing threat arising from a host of sources and competitors, including technology, cyberspace and even space. Third, and most importantly, national identity is regarded as the single most effective means of projecting the UK's self-image—as positive, progressive and resilient, reinforced, in turn, by Britain's reliable 'soft power' credentials (HM Government 2021a: 13, 30, 49).

Roles

Roles provide a range of opportunities—some clear, some ambiguous—by which to define one's place within a given community. Roles are internally driven and externally defined; they help to clarify identity in terms of 'who' the UK perceives itself to be, and the foreign policy means by which identity is translated into the pursuit of interests.

The adoption of Global Britain was meant to signal that there would be no retreat from international engagement. Indeed, it signified a higher order of ambition for the UK's post-Brexit diplomacy. Prior to the *Integrated Review*, Global Britain

performed the function of a container in search of content. Its specific meaning, and how it would inform the particulars of UK foreign policy remained open to question and criticism (House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee 2018). The use of a concentrated, possibly reductivist, label by which to encompass the totality of the UK's foreign, security and defence policy was something of a departure from past UK diplomatic practice. Post-World War Two governments have been at pains to articulate the panoply of ideas, values and interests that underwrite and guide British foreign policy through swathes of speeches, statements and policy documents. But, a single unifying statement encompassing Britain's place in the world has generally been eschewed (Johnson 2019: 123). Unlike the periodic updates of the UK's security and defence policies, the UK's foreign policy has historically lacked a set-piece review framework by which to hew out anything resembling a public grand strategy for British diplomacy. Consequently, the major landmarks in the history of the UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) *née* Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) have been organisational rather than ideational (Hall 2013; Devanny & Berry, 2022). Regarded by senior civil servants as ideologically driven, Brexit did not initially sit well with the remit of the Foreign Office. The Conservative cabinet, in consequence, remained suspicious of its commitment in overseeing the Brexit process (Hadfield and Wright 2021). Responsibility for negotiating the UK's departure from the EU was lodged with a new Department for Exiting the EU (DExEU), and a post-Brexit UK trade policy was to be pursued through another new body—the Department for International Trade (DIT). The FCO, meanwhile, was merged with the Department for International Development (DFID) in September 2020 in advance of the completion of the *Integrated Review* process.

Departing from the traditional ideas-free approach to UK foreign policy, the *Integrated Review* sets out quite definite goals in terms of articulating the value of a national identity (as above), consolidating some familiar UK roles and laying claim to new ones. The *Review* document refers to 'role' on 24 separate occasions and the *Refresh* is replete with the, 'leading', 'active', 'significant' and 'catalytic' roles played by the UK. The most important is arguably the first— that the UK will maintain 'a leading *international role* [emphasis added] in collective security, multilateral governance, tackling climate change and health risks, conflict resolution and poverty reduction'. There are also references to the UK playing 'an important convening role on issues of consequence to our shared security and prosperity'; to pragmatic burden sharing arising from the need to 'lead where we are best placed to do so and […] partner[ing] and support[ing] others as necessary to pursue our goals'; and to a 'historic role in keeping the North Atlantic open' (HM Government 2021a: 6, 11, 45, 72). While much commentary focused on the *Integrated Review's* explicit 'tilt to the Indo-Pacific', the Atlantic dimension remained critical in the architecture of post-Brexit foreign policy, with clear references to the UK's continuing role as a Euro-Atlantic power continuing in the *Refresh*.

Status

Status is a form of self-reference arising from the specific responsibilities assumed and expected of a state pursuant to its membership of international organisations and obligations under international law (Bukovansky et al., 2012). Carried out effectively and reliably, the scope of these responsibilities and obligations produces prestige in comparison to other states, which in turn helps to 'clearly delineate the effects of status from those driven [solely] by power or interests' (Macdonald and Parent 2021: 4). The construction of status has both a procedural element regarding the actual execution of a state's rights and obligations, and a substantive aspect in underwriting the values, identities and 'collective beliefs about a given state's ranking in values attributes' (Larson et al. 2014). While roles operate along a horizontal spectrum that reflects the exercise of soft and hard power capabilities, status is more obviously hierarchical, operating on a vertical plane that is intrinsically comparative.

A choice of roles from soft power to facilitator, patron, sponsor and mediator remains available to post-Brexit Britain. Its ability to carry out these rules through membership of key organisations has the potential to directly augment or diminish the UK's status within regional (e.g. European) and international (e.g. UN and Commonwealth) hierarchies alike. But this process is not trouble-free. Frictions with the UK's former European partners occasioned by the process of exiting the EU, coupled with a turbulent international environment (a global pandemic, an international energy crisis and the return of interstate war to Europe), has meant that in the years since the 2016 referendum, the place of the UK in the international system has been open to challenge. The upshot has been national leaders 'plainly obsessed with investing in, seizing, and defending' international status (Renshon, quoted in Macdonald and Parent 2021: 5). These difficult circumstances have provided added context to long-standing debates on the impact leaving the EU might have for the UK's place in the world.

One position—what we might define as *offsetting pessimism*—saw Brexit as representing a diminution of the UK's position in that the EU had been regarded as a medium for amplifying the UK's foreign and security policy voice. This view foresaw an attenuation of the UK's standing in Europe and an understanding that a reworked relationship would need to be sought with the EU, initially by upgrading the 2021 Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA), followed by an extension to encompass greater cooperation especially on foreign and security policy (Ricketts 2021; Stephens 2021).

For *resetting optimists*, by contrast, Brexit afforded the UK a welcome opportunity to fashion new forms of plurilateral engagement, by concentrating on a few specific partners (states and organisations) including small or previously neglected multilateral forums (Seely and Rogers 2019; Whitman 2021). Plurilateralism also suggested a differentiation of responsibilities, allowing the UK to shift not only its geopolitical preferences (e.g. from the EU-centric to either the Euro-Atlantic or Indo-Pacific) but the nature of its roles. Thus Brexit represented a natural, indeed overdue, requirement to release the UK from a regressive, stultifying multilateralism unsuited to the thrusting and progressive opportunities available, from trade to development, from new military arrangements to new alliances. As

Webber (2022) argues in the framing piece, rather than accepting the 'tolerable collateral damage' incurred by leaving the EU, 'Brexit was, in fact, rationalised on precisely the opposite grounds, as an act that would unbind the UK from the shackles of EU membership and increase its freedom of manoeuvre in foreign and security policy'. Thus, for Prime Minister Theresa May (cited in HM Government 2018): 'we have never defined our global outlook primarily through the membership of the European Union or by a collective European foreign policy.' Similarly, Boris Johnson (cited in BBC News 2019) described Global Britain as a method by which to 'recover our natural and historic role as an enterprising, outward-looking country.

Russia's war on Ukraine, intensified with the large-scale invasion in February 2022, has risen to commentary that the UK had (re-)established a position as a leading role in Europe's security through its diplomatic and military support for Ukraine (Chalmers 2023). The war, as highlighted by the British Government in the *Refresh*, is a reinforcement of the Euro-Atlantic orientation of the UK's diplomacy—and allowed for the safeguarding of the UK's status as a significant participant in the European security order.

The articulation of new positions for the UK's place in the world has drawn upon a rich tradition of debate on Britain's fundamental interests and identities. A long-standing convention in such debates is to refer to Winston Churchill's 'three majestic circles'. In a short speech delivered in 1948, Churchill (then out of office as Prime Minister but leader of the Conservative Party and the opposition in Parliament) described the UK as the only country which had 'a great part' in 'three interlinked circles' 'among the free nations and democracies'. These comprised the British Commonwealth and Empire; the English-speaking World; and United Europe (Churchill 1950). Although each of the groups of states identified by Churchill is now unrecognisable in form and substance from the late 1940s, they remain important parameters for much of the post-Brexit debate on the UK's place in international relations. Further, the notion of 'exceptionalism' at the heart of Churchill's analysis—a uniquely distinctive set of identities, interests and obligations—has been a significant undercurrent in the advocacy of roles and responsibilities for the UK for many years (Wallace 1991; Garton Ash 2001; Gamble 2003). Each of the three circles has been re-deployed and re-purposed in Brexit and post-Brexit debates.

Churchill's idea of the English-speaking world has long been associated with the idea of the Anglosphere—a framing concept back in vogue since Brexit. For some, the principal allure lies with the former dominions of Canada, Australia and New Zealand—hence, talk of a revitalised CANZAK (Seely and Rogers 2019; Mabley 2021). The premise here is that a shared language and head of state, along with similar political and legal systems, bolstered by positions as high income countries creates a correspondence of outlook and interests that in turn allows for economic, foreign and security policy cooperation. Others have suggested that new partners including India, Singapore and Malaysia present relationships ripe for reinvigoration. However, the CANZAK orientation has one obvious advantage in that it is broadly complementary to a renewed post-Brexit relationship with the USA. President Barack Obama's statement (cited in Hughes 2017) after the Brexit referendum that the UK would remain an 'indispensable partner' of the USA sat easily with the long-held view in Westminster

and Whitehall that the shared transatlantic relationship was indispensable. The Trump period, however—quite separately from Brexit—created uncertainty as to the direction of that relationship. Under the Biden administration, however, it appears to have been largely restored to good health notwithstanding the President's qualms over UK compliance with the Northern Ireland Protocol (Vinjamuri and Kundnani 2021; Wall 2022). The emphasis on the Anglosphere has not ruled out renewed attention to historical ties elsewhere. Arguments that Brexit would allow for a revitalisation of the UK's relationship with the Commonwealth were advanced both before and after the June 2016 referendum. Prime Minister Boris Johnson (2022) noted in the run up to the UK-hosted Commonwealth Games in the summer of 2022, that the Commonwealth represents both a 'unique opportunity' for the UK to expand its trade, to connect to a number of 'vast and growing' markets, and joining more fully to countries with a common heritage of 'shared values, history […] institutions [… and] language' as well as 'familiar legal and administrative systems'. But there are some obvious limitations. The Commonwealth is a globe-spanning cluster of independent states constantly in search of a common purpose. As a loose expression of Britain's imperial past, it has not proven to be a vehicle through which the UK has been able to exercise significant international influence. Not only are the Commonwealth countries extraordinarily diverse (hence, there is no notion of a Commonwealth bloc in international politics to which the UK can target its diplomatic blandishments) but their trading and diplomatic relationships with the UK were altered significantly (and, arguably, irreversibly) with British accession to the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973. In 2020, the Commonwealth accounted for just 8.7 per cent of UK trade (imports and exports combined) the equivalent of the UK's total trade with Germany alone (Ward 2021: 4). The current condition of the Europe circle comes closest to Churchill's original delineation. Departure from Churchill's formulation in favour of actually joining the process of European integration gained ground with British governments from the early 1960s as a response to the relative decline of UK power and loss of great power status. After accession to the EEC, UK governments subsequently amended the notion of British exceptionalism. Majestic circles gave way to the idea that the UK performed a distinctive role as a bridge to Europe both for the UK itself and for the USA (Whitman 2019: 384). The UK attempted to found its relationship simultaneously on transatlantic reliability with the US alongside participation in Europe's major diplomatic and security institutions, acting as both a conduit and a shaper of transatlantic diplomacy.

Whether or not 'rejoining' the EU becomes a feature of UK political debate remains to be seen. At this stage re-integration of the UK back into the laws, regulations and standards of the 'market order' provided by the EU does not appear to be a likely short- or medium-term political objective. (It is not supported by any of the mainstream UK political parties.) The UK remains, in the words of the *Integrated Review*, and the *Refresh*, a European power, by force of geography, geopolitics and the preponderance of its patterns of trade. Whether it is as influential a European power outside the EU as it was within is an open question. As explored below, the foreign policy precepts outlined in the UK's Global Britain mandate herald a variety of opportunities and pitfalls regarding Britain's place in Europe, the Commonwealth and foremost international organisations like the UN. Thus, the UK's ability to redefine its national identity, recalibrate its roles and rethink its status will remain an ongoing preoccupation.

The UK's post-Brexit relationship with Europe and the EU, the UN and the Commonwealth

Brexit has required the UK to consider seriously how it wishes to redraft its identity, apply its roles and improve its status. Roles are the operating principle providing the UK with a spectrum of available forms of impacting the international system in terms of capacity and commitment. Status remains most clearly associated with the range of specific responsibilities arising from membership of key forums and legal frameworks. The following sections explore the various options facing the UK in its ability to rebuild its reputation and harness the material benefits of both role, and status in three directions: towards Europe and the EU, the UN and the Commonwealth.

Europe and the EU

The UK's formal status-settling diplomacy with the EU straddled a period from the result of the June 2016 Brexit referendum up until the entry into force of the EU-UK TCA in January 2021. It represented an interregnum in which the UK transitioned from being an EU Member State to simply occupying the place of a non-member 'third country' (Whitman 2019). This transition required adjustment on both sides. Among many EU Member States and EU officials, there was widespread incredulity that the UK government would interpret the referendum result as a decision to leave the EU (Oliver 2018). But as the reality of the situation sank in, then so European solidarity took hold: the 'EU27' (that the is the EU's collective membership minus the UK) was viewed as having a collective interest in pursuing negotiations with another Member State (that is, the UK) under the terms of Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty (Laffan 2019). The UK government's response to the Brexit referendum was initially conditioned by the resulting domestic political convulsions rather than its external consequences. The resignation of Prime Minister David Cameron shortly after the referendum triggered a contest for the leadership of the Conservative Party and consequently for a new Prime Minister. The leadership contest set the tone for the subsequent premiership of Theresa May insofar as Brexit as an objective was confirmed but in terms (typified by the 'Brexit means Brexit' slogan) that managed to be both crystal clear and essential meaningless. This phrasing at least showed intent but it was conditioned above all by a domestic political imperative. Under May's watch, the timetable for Brexit, the UK approach towards the withdrawal negotiations and the ambitions for a post-Brexit relationship with the EU were all driven by a need to manage the Conservative Parliamentary Party. This took priority over the promotion of consensus across party lines both in parliament and between remainers and leavers in the UK's constituent nations. (Hayton 2018).

The decision to invoke Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty on 29th March 2017 and so trigger the negotiations on the UK's departure from the EU was not accompanied by a clear UK blueprint for the longer term. The UK's diplomacy towards the EU was not conducted with a clear perspective as to the role that Britain would seek in Europe outside one of its key multilateral structures nor the concomitant diplomatic

status being sought for the country. The question of withdrawal from the EU and the terms of the future UK-EU relationship, while inseparable, were often poorly articulated in UK political debate on Brexit and almost entirely without reference to possible choices or strategies for diplomatic influence in Europe outside the EU's structures. That disconnect was also further complicated by the EU preference for a diplomatic process that sequenced negotiating withdrawal prior to opening any negotiations on the future relationship. The UK government's negotiation preferences were set out in a number of set-piece speeches by Ministers (notably that by Prime Minister May at Lancaster House in January 2017), White Papers (especially that on EU exit and new partnership in May 2017), 'future partnership' papers, position papers (published to coincide with each round of negotiations on the Withdrawal Agreement) and Ministerial statements to Parliament. The multiple rounds of negotiation under Article 50 resulted in the text of a Withdrawal Agreement (WA) in November 2018 followed by eight months of tortuous Parliamentary political drama that saw the House of Commons deadlocked on approving the text of the agreement.

Throughout, the UK continued to operate as a member state of the EU. It participated in the work of the Council of the European Union, as well as COREPER I and II meetings of deputy and permanent representatives to the EU and their attendant working groups. The UK also retained its ambassador to the Political and Security Committee (PSC), its permanent military representative to the EU Military Committee (EUMC), and participated in the Committee for Civilian Aspects of Crisis Management (CIVCOM) as well as the institutional arrangements associated with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). All of this continuing participation was a perpetuation of engagement with 27 other European states that had functioned as the key conduit for organising diplomatic engagement since accession in 1973.

Theresa May called a snap general election for June 2017 in the hope that an increased Conservative majority would both enhance her personal authority as Prime Minister and strengthen the negotiating hand of the UK in its dealings with the EU (Kavanagh 2018). That gamble backfired. The Conservatives lost their slim majority in the Commons and the party was forced into an agreement with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) to sustain it in power. May announced her resignation in June 2019 after the House of Commons rejected for a third time the WA her government had negotiated with the EU.

The brief period of renewed UK-EU negotiations under the Johnson-led government resulted in one substantive change to the WA and the accompanying Political Declaration (PD). The so-called Irish backstop (a source of much misery for the May government) was replaced by the Northern Ireland Protocol attached to the WA. This set out specific arrangements for Northern Ireland which meant an ongoing adherence to certain regulations of the EU Single Market. This compromise allowed the Johnson government to claim a framework for leaving the EU was fully in place and so for the Conservative Party to stand in the general election of December 2019 on a platform to 'Get Brexit Done'. The Conservative victory with a large parliamentary majority, altered the domestic political context in a manner that allowed for both the WA to receive parliamentary approval and then for the

TCA to be negotiated in a short time frame. This introduced a degree of stability (and routinisation) into the EU-UK relationship and also facilitated work on a set of agreements with non-European third countries to create a predictable framework for trade with the UK. The diplomatic role pursued by the UK at this stage can be characterised as that of 'normalisation seeking' in the status of its relationship with its EU. By utilising a degree of domestic political stabilisation, the Johnson Government sought to achieve terms of agreement with the EU on the formalities of the structures that would govern the post-Brexit relationship between the two parties. The re-established status in the relationship sought was to be 'normal' third country to the EU and to have a relationship akin to that established between the EU and Canada.

Formal exit from the EU occurred on 31st January 2021, but had no immediate diplomatic and foreign policy impact as the UK's departure from the EU had already been priced into the UK's relationships with third countries. The final UK minister attended a Council of the EU meeting on 28th January and the UK Permanent Representation to the EU (UKRep) was reborn as the UK Mission to the EU.

In contrast to the political drama that had accompanied the WA, negotiations on the future EU-UK relationship was less febrile. These were concluded in a swift eight month period commencing in March 2021. The UK was now negotiating in its new position as a third country to the EU rather than as a hybrid continuing Member State and exiting party. The UK's position was to seek a recognition of its status as a third country with the EU predicated on a key *leitmotif* that its diplomacy would be 'sovereignty' seeking (Frost 2020). The TCA agreed in December 2020 established what the European Commission (nd.) referred to as 'a solid basis for preserving [the …] longstanding friendship and co-operation' between the UK and the EU. The UK's relationship with the EU was from that point on organised on the basis of the provisions of the WA and the TCA with both agreements providing for the establishment of Councils and other working structures to manage the relationship. The formal relationship is almost entirely conditioned by trade and regulatory issues and associated information and border cooperation arrangements. The early operation of the WA and TCA, and the working through of related issues (regarding Northern Ireland and the Single Market, border management arrangements and sensitive sectors such as fisheries and vaccine procurement) suggest that the EU-UK relationship is multi-dimensional and open to multiple players (including the UK's devolved administrations, Brussels-based institutions, the EU member states and third countries such as the USA).

With the important exception of the Northern Ireland protocol, and at the behest of the UK, no substantive arrangements were set up for foreign and security policy cooperation (Whitman 2020). Instead, the UK has sought other opportunities for influencing the foreign policies of its European neighbours through its roles in multilateral institutions such as the UN Security Council, the G7, and NATO, as well as via informal groups such as the E3—with France and Germany—and bilateral diplomacy.

A further characteristic of UK foreign policy post-Brexit has been the cultivation of relationships of policy connectedness by more publicly aligning positions with other smaller groups of states such as those composed of all of the Five Eyes

intelligence sharing partners (Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA) on issues such as China's treatment of Hong Kong (Young 2021). This has not meant establishing competing foreign policy positions from those collectively held by EU member states. But it has allowed the UK to adopt public policy positions more swiftly than would have been the case had it remained a participant in the EU's foreign policy coordination system where lengthy collective consultations between the member states are often required. It is also a key component of the strategy that the UK can seek greater influence through utilising a range of diplomatic partnerships to the greater effect of a more substantive international role for the UK.

As already noted, leaving the EU has been a spur to rethinking the UK's broader diplomatic strategy including the implications for its place in Europe. Whitehall has had the benefit of structured re-consideration of the purpose of the UK's diplomatic and security position in Europe as part of the wider *Integrated Review* process. The *Integrated Review* has drawn criticism in the UK and on the continent for being light on EU-related content. This misses the point; the document is, after all, premised on the UK leaving the EU and so perforce looks to other horizons. And it does not neglect Europe. The so-called tilt to the Indo-Pacific grabbed the headlines, but the document as a whole is strongly focused on the Euro-Atlantic region. In that light, its assessment of Russia as an 'acute and direct threat' seems particularly apt—borne out by the aggression against Ukraine.

Britain's post-Brexit relationship with the UN

In 2018, articulating the impact of Brexit for international audiences, Sir Simon McDonald, Permanent Under Secretary of the FCO (cited in Gifkin, Jarvis and Ralph, 2019: 3), described the change as 'the biggest thing that we have ever undertaken in peacetime'. Reports at the time highlighted the collateral damage this monumental effort might cause to the UK's position at the UN. A House of Commons *Briefing Paper* from May 2016 (Lang 2016) considered whether Brexit would have 'no direct effect' on its role in the UN Security Council. Less optimistically, the paper noted the possibility that 'the UK would have even less legitimacy than it has now as a member of the permanent five of the UN' and that Brexit might kickstart the wider question of reforming the UNSC, with 'any reform process […] undoubtedly question[ing] the legitimacy of the seat of a UK outside of the EU' (Lang 2016: 2).

Scholarship on the UK and the UN has stressed the implications for UK UN diplomacy outside the political and diplomatic groupings to which Britain was a participant as a consequence of its position as an EU member state (Dee & Smith 2017). In view of such challenging circumstances, a report in 2019 sponsored by the UK United Nations Association (UNA) outlined a number of ways by which the 'negative impacts of Brexit on the reputation of the UK in international politics' might be ameliorated. Concerns arose in three key areas: first, the UK's 'perceived reliability as a multilateral partner', second, its legitimacy as a (formerly) European member of the UNSC alongside France, and third, its overall diplomatic utility in terms of available hard and soft power (Gifkins et al., 2019: 3).

From a reputational perspective, the UN underwrites both role and status for the UK. As Gifkins et al (2019: 3–5) explain, 'the influence that states can leverage in international negotiations is due, in part, to their reputation'; for post-Brexit Britain, this means managing the potential fallout or change regarding its own 'reputation and capacity for influence within the United Nations' primary interstate forums: the General Assembly and the Security Council'. Pre-Brexit, the role-based profile of the UK in the Security Council had been premised on its position 'as an activist state' that 'takes a strong role in drafting resolutions and agenda-setting and is generally seen as a skilled negotiator'. The UK's specific influence was seen in two key ways: penholding (leadership in convening forums and completing key texts including resolutions) and robust diplomatic capacity in tackling a crisis situation and identifying with others 'what measures or initiatives to propose' (Gifkins et al. 2019: 5).

Some of the dire predictions arising from pre-Brexit foreign discourse simply did not arise, including those relating to a purported London versus Paris antagonism spilling over into the coordination of key Security Council business, a revitalised Security Council reform campaign, and a robust repositioning of Ireland as an alternative European portal for American and international political and financial interests. The UK's relations with both France and Germany played out entirely cordially (Gowan 2020). Indeed, in June 2021, London agreed a joint statement with Berlin supporting Germany's case for permanent UNSC membership.

The UNA-UK report made a number of recommendations to offset the perceived risks of Brexit with the aim of 'demonstrating the value of the UK in international forums' (Gifkins et al., 2019: 4). In substantive terms, these included revitalising the UK's commitment to peacekeeping (further explored below), exhibiting more effective leadership in the 'implementation of protection of civilian mandates' within crisis situations; and maintaining the UK's 0.7 per cent of gross national income (GNI) commitment to foreign aid.

In procedural terms, the UK was also advised to:

- Address 'gaps in diplomatic capacity at the General Assembly […] as the UK is no longer able to rely on [the] EU for burden sharing and support';
- Assert UK leadership via a clearer sense of Global Britain's mandate, specifically through 'a more inclusive and collaborative approach to the practice of "penholding" at the UN Security Council';
- Rework its communications strategy, interestingly, by 'dropping references to joining other groupings such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand'.

The question, post-Brexit, is how well the UK has performed against these proposals. The *Integrated Review* claims a number of accomplishments achieved by the UK. Typically, florid Johnsonian predictions opened the 2021 *Review*, reasserting the 'UK's place in the world and our ability to seize the opportunities ahead' in which 'the strength of our Union will combine with our international partnerships, modernised armed forces and a new green agenda, enabling us to look forward with confidence as we shape the world of the future' (HM Government

2021a: 7). The key UN-related areas of activity were seen to comprise the following (HM Government 2021a: 4, 8, 15):

- The first convening by the UK of the UNSC's long-standing, global meetings on the impact of climate change to peace and security spurring both the UK's 2050 net-zero target and increased 'British research and development in green technologies' based on the UK's International Climate Finance programme;
- Convening COP-26 (26th UN Climate Change Conference in Glasgow) in partnership with Italy in November 2021;
- Continuing to meet UN Security Council responsibilities, and playing 'a more active part in sustaining an international order in which open societies and economies continue to flourish and the benefits of prosperity are shared through free trade and global growth';
- Remaining one of the largest single funders of the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Gavi vaccine alliance;
- Working in the UNGA to launch a five-point plan 'to protect the world from future pandemics' and another on reducing space-based threats and analysing space systems;
- The December 2020 deployment of 300 UK troops to Mali in support of the UN peacekeeping mission 'providing [a] highly-specialised reconnaissance capability';
- Ongoing work with the UN High Commission on Refugees now substantially enhanced as a result of the Ukraine crisis.

Three points are worth noting here. First, UK participation and even leadership of current UN activities (including on-the-ground support for UN peacekeeping and humanitarian relief) has continued after Brexit. Indeed, one could argue that Brexit has seen—or possibly provided the fillip for—an enhanced UK contribution to UN peacekeeping, which for many years had been materially modest. At least in terms of overall numbers, the Mali deployment represented not only a degree of re-engagement, but possibly the first demonstration of the recommended 'quantum leap in collective action on peace operations called for by UN Secretary General (cited in Gifkins et al. 2019: 4) for all UN members. Second, the UK's 'penholding' skills have been required as a result of the Ukraine crisis. This has been predominantly in NATO where the UK has taken a leading role, but the crisis has also been on the UN agenda. Following the unlawful invasion of the Ukraine by Russia on 24 February 2022, the UK demonstrated not only its willingness to retain its penholding role in these and other forums, but to reap the diplomatic dividends in terms of its reputation as both a leader on its own merits, and facilitator of collective responses entailing both EU (e.g. over sanctions and the support of lethal aid to Ukraine) and international actors (in terms of coordinated multilateral humanitarian responses).

Third and less positively, the decision to cut official development assistance (ODA) has had a negative effect on the UK's international reputation. To deal with the increased cost of underwriting the UK economy in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government announced in the November 2020 Spending Review that

the 0.7 per cent GNI target would be cut to 0.5 per cent as a 'temporary measure'. No date for a resumption was provided—only the vague assurance, according to Foreign Secretary Dominic Rabb (cited in UK Parliament, Hansard, 2020), that the decision would be reversed 'when the fiscal situation permits.' Not only had the 0.7 per cent target been written into domestic law in 2015, it was also a UN-backed recommendation, and the UK had been seen as a global leader in meeting it (it was one of only five countries to do so in 2019). Even at 0.5 per cent, the UK was still well ahead of most other developed economies (the average in 2019 was 0.3 per cent). Nonetheless, the move prompted a severe domestic and international backlash. The response was, in part, one of disappointment—as the UK had seemingly abandoned its aspiration to be 'one of the world's largest providers of aid' (Dorman 2021: 301). Whatever the argument about the size of the remaining budget and the UK government's claim still to be a 'moral and humanitarian leader' (HM Treasury 2021), in light of its other actions (which included funding vaccine development, but also oddly increasing its defence budget)—this step was hugely damaging to the UK's reputation (Cameron-Chilese et al. 2021).

Too little time has elapsed to provide a full and fair assessment of the UK's ambitions in regard to the UN as a whole. An interim judgement was comprehensively laid out in a 2022 report published by Chatham House (Niblett 2022: 8). Assessing the Review's own organising principles of strength, security, prosperity, resilience and global influence as well as the UK's claim to being a 'problem-solving and burden sharing nation with a global perspective', the outcome is seen as predictably uneven. One important UN-based 'win' was the outcome of COP-26, most importantly the Glasgow Climate Pact, an agreement reached in no small measure to the diplomatic persistence of the UK Presidency (Nuttall 2021). COP-26 also saw renewed efforts to sustain climate finance. No major breakthrough occurred at Glasgow. But a Climate Finance Delivery Plan co-sponsored by Canada and Germany with British support did see a recycling of existing commitments. The UK also reiterated its own pledge (made in 2019) to double its climate finance commitment between 2021 and 2026, with 'an extra £1bn in 2024–2025 if the economy grows as forecast' (HM Government 2021b: 5).

The other major issue tackled through the UN system was the COVID-19 pandemic. As a Chatham House report noted, here the UK 'sought to [play …] a leading role in the global response to the pandemic' as the core funder of key programmes including Gavi (the Vaccine Alliance) and CEPI (Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations), and ranking fourth in the world in terms of total pledged donations to COVAX. These initiatives were, the report continued, offset by the UK's prioritisation of domestic vaccine supplies. The UK also 'failed to secure more than a vague commitment from participating governments at the June 2021 G7 summit in Cornwall to donate one billion COVID-19 vaccines' to a range of low-income states for the following 12 months (Niblett 2022:18–19).

Molesworth and Hug (2021: 6) have produced a helpful summary of the reputational impact of Brexit, including within the UN itself. Overall, post-Brexit Britain remains:

> a country possessing both an experienced diplomatic network and an internationally recognised cluster of peacebuilding expertise both in civil society and academia. It has a long-standing desire to show leadership on the world stage, currently embodied in the Government's concept of 'Global Britain' […] in recent years [this] has tended to take the form of firefighting and ad hoc responses to crises, the UK's public understandable fatigue towards further military engagement and the recent reductions in the aid budget

While the spectrum of roles and foundations of status remains largely stable, one subtle casualty of post-Brexit foreign policy has been the distinction between diplomacy, defence and development. As Molesworth and Hug (2021: 7) argue, the overall approach of the *Integrated Review* highlights 'the security [rather] than the development lens' through which much of UK foreign policy is seen. This narrowed focus may make it difficult for the UK to genuinely and sustainably be a force for good in the wider world, a position made more problematic by the cuts in the ODA budget. Overall, the UK's 'moral weight and norm-shaping capacity relating to conflict within the international community' has shrunk.

Britain's post-Brexit relationship with the commonwealth

Commonwealth states neither individually nor collectively have viewed Brexit as a desirable outcome for the UK (Oppermann, Beasley and Kaarbo, 2020:142–144). The set-piece biennial Commonwealth Heads of Government meetings (CHOGMs) have not been a vehicle through which a post-Brexit relationship has been charted. The CHOGM is the forum in which major initiatives are launched for the Commonwealth (beyond a Secretariat it has no standing institutional arrangements that bring its members together in ministerial formats). The 2018 meeting of the 54 members was hosted by the UK in the midst of continuing domestic political dislocation caused by uncertainty over the future form of the EU-UK relationship. The June 2020 meeting was postponed (twice) until 2022 because of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the 2022 Rwanda CHOGM focusing largely on ongoing post-COVID assistance, and work on climate change complementing the objectives of the COP-26 meeting.

As outlined above, the Commonwealth was routinely invoked during Brexit debates. It represented a curiously potent combination of cultural, political and economic promise 'giving sustenance and shape […] to the Eurosceptic conviction that the UK's future lies outside the European Union (EU) and involves the resumption of alliances based on deep cultural affinities with other English-speaking countries' (Ricketts 2021:**). Within the *Integrated Review* (HM Government 2021a: 60–62), the Commonwealth is regarded as a foreign policy magnifying force—as 'an important institution in supporting an open and resilient international order'. This, it is claimed, allows the UK to operate, and possibly lead, amongst a group of states 'with a [shared] national interest in promoting democracy, sustaining individual freedoms, [and] driving sustainable development'. While avoiding explicit references to replacing trade with the EU, there remains the goal

also that the Commonwealth may prove valuable for 'cross-border trade in goods and services' so supporting economic growth. India features as an example of a Commonwealth partner enabling Britain to retain 'strong cultural links' as well as facilitating education and trade collaboration. The Commonwealth is variously referenced as a forum (alongside the UNSC, G7 and G20), enabling post-Brexit Britain to maintain 'a leading voice', underwriting both its 'global perspective and global responsibilities', and a structure by which the UK can invest bilaterally (with Australia, Canada and New Zealand) and multilaterally on the basis of 'shared history, values and people-to-people connections'.

The Commonwealth, on the one hand, appears to be a viable avenue of British engagement. It offers occasional reputational lustre to the UK (as in Birmingham's hosting of the 2022 Commonwealth Games). It also gives the impression of being a vibrant and attractive organisation—something more than a club of former British colonies, dominions and dependent territories. In 1995, Mozambique (a former Portuguese colony) became the first country to join the Commonwealth despite having no prior constitutional connection to the UK. Rwanda (a former Belgian colony) followed in 2009. Gabon and Togo (two former French colonies) acceded to the Commonwealth in 2022. For some, the Commonwealth's seeming power of attraction constitutes an 'Anglophone pivot.' Gabon and Togo, for instance, were motivated by a desire to access 'the organisation as a useful network of diplomatic and cultural influence' and for exercising 'soft power' on the world stage' (BBC News 2022).

Yet, for all this, there has been clear evidence of relegation, with the Commonwealth representing the fourth and possibly least important 'circle of influence' for post-Brexit UK (after Europe, the USA and strategic partners including China, Russia, Japan and Saudi Arabia). The Commonwealth affords, but has never guaranteed, direct material influence for Britain, and has been of little consequence in the UK's enduring search for a post-War and post-imperial role. The organisation itself, moreover, has offered little in the way of policy substance and diplomatic coordination, and has been written off by some as a vainglorious talking shop (Murphy 2018). Indeed, the UK—along with the entire organisation—has suffered self-induced setbacks in historically failing to call out those of its own members in breach of the Commonwealth's own organising principles: on everything from rule of law and democracy to freedom of sexual orientation.

Overall, the Commonwealth remains a passive multilateral option, rather than an active plurilateral avenue for post-Brexit influence building. After NATO, the UNSC and the G7, the Commonwealth seems to inhabit a secondary tier of association, alongside the G20, IMF, WTO and other networks. The Commonwealth is likely to prove an enduring reminder to a post-Brexit UK of the promise and perils of Global Britain. Not only do foreign policy makers need to show greater sensitivity 'to the reputational legacy and risks' arising from Britain's colonial past; there are also limits to how effectively the Commonwealth can genuinely achieve post-Brexit wins for the UK (Niblett 2022: 55).

Conclusion

A distinctive characteristic of the UK's diplomacy through and beyond the Brexit process is that there has been a significant concern with maintaining roles for the UK and reaffirming the centrality of status seeking for Britain through those roles. Although diplomacy might be seen as a political and administrative elite preoccupation, the concern with the UK's international status and standing also appears to be shared by the public. Recent surveys from the British Foreign Policy Group provide a useful insight into post-Brexit Britain's ability to chart its way following 'seismic shifts' in its international role, arising both from Brexit itself, but relationally from the challenges posed by Russia and China (Gaston 2022). Under the aegis of the Global Britain mandate, polls suggest that the UK remains (in British public opinion, at least) in possession of an enviable international reputation. Good portions of those polled had not heard of the Global Britain ambition, but specified nonetheless three areas which had enhanced the UK's post-Brexit reputation between 2021 and 2022: the COVID-19 vaccine rollout, the war in Ukraine and the decision to join the AUKUS alliance. This positive picture is balanced by perceived harms to the UK's reputation stemming from the withdrawal from the EU, 'the UK Government's temporary foreign aid spending reduction', and the role played by the UK in NATO's hurried withdrawal from Afghanistan. In this survey, as in others, leadership, visibility and sustainable influence are key components of what defines post-Brexit role-making. Favourable comparisons with the UK's erstwhile EU partners, meanwhile, remain central parts of what comprises status.

Whether post-Brexit Britain can engineer a balance between role and status, while also ensuring the UK's proclaimed values and policies remain relevant, remain key questions of the post-Brexit period. The challenge here, to repeat, is historic in scale and sweep. Brexit has caused significant disruption to the diplomatic strategy pursued by the UK since the early 1970s. A central organising idea that emerged following entry into the EEC was that a strong connection to Europe would supplement the transatlantic link. NATO served both purposes; but membership of the EEC and later the EU was the important European abutment. The idea of Global Britain is intended to make good the dismantling of one end of this long-standing diplomatic structure. Global Britain, initially a place holder concept, provided the impetus behind a recapitulation of long-standing roles and approaches to international status seeking for the UK. Although Brexit generated a substantive political discord and parliamentary dislocation, the preference for seeking status through long-standing (and revised) roles for influence did not dissipate. A major issue of political contestation was whether these could be achieved (or were inevitably diminished) outside the EU.

In summary, two key dynamics have arisen as a consequence of the UK's status seeking approach to its post-Brexit foreign diplomacy: first, pragmatism in terms of accepting semi-permanent attenuation and ostracisation as a former 'European' leader. Or, rather, as a consequence of the UK response to the war in Ukraine, a process of recredentialisation as a 'European security' leader in shifting diplomatic

energies into forums and bilateral and minilateral relationships (with Baltic littoral and central and eastern European states such as Poland and Ukraine). Separation from the EU is, of course, the source of this shifting nature of the leadership role being sought in Europe. Second, the use of *plurilateral preferences* in opening up new areas of group-based and thematic engagement with and without Europe. This includes the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) in Europe and without Europe new relationships such as those through AUKUS, the relationship with Japan (through enhanced security ties including GCAP), ties with the still-ill-defined CANZAC and the broader Anglosphere, and the exercise of leadership and convening power in the UN system (on climate change, for instance). This is of a piece with some traditional ties—hence, the UK's strengthened role in NATO (considered elsewhere in this special issue), and the continuing priority accorded to relations with the USA.

On the latter, a third (and non-Brexit related) dynamic is that the election of President Joe Biden has restored a sense of greater predictability to the UK's relationship with the USA following the Trump years and boosted by collaboration on support for Ukraine. Although it has also meant engaging with an administration attentive to the implementation of the Northern Ireland Protocol, the UK's evolving policy stance on China appears to be more aligned with that of the USA than the EU and the Biden Administration has a policy on Russia more in synch with that of London (than that favoured in Paris or Berlin). The idea that Brexit would eliminate the usefulness of the UK to the USA in European affairs has not, at least in the case of Ukraine, been borne out (Lucas 2022).

More generally, the UK's preference for plurilateralism and especially its enthusiasm for minilateral frameworks illustrates an emergent coherence of approach that has given some diplomatic form to the notion of Global Britain.

Declarations

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

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