

Lingering Effects of the UK's Brexit Role Change

Written by Juliet Kaarbo, Ryan Beasley and Kai Oppermann

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JULIET KAARBO, RYAN BEASLEY AND KAI OPPERMAN, MAR 10 2021

UK foreign policy is afoot. As Brexit works to untangle the woven web of more than 40 years of membership in the EU, the UK is labouring to find a new role to play within the international system. It is reading for several parts: the leading role of Global Britain, the lucrative role of Merchant of Brussels, and the supporting role of Faithful Ally to the US, among others. While it was the 2016 Brexit referendum that sparked this transformation in UK foreign policy, almost five years later, the UK's part has yet to be cast. Role theory uses the dramaturgical metaphor to analyse a state's foreign policy roles on the world stage. We characterise Brexit as a dramatic change in the UK's foreign policy *role* – abandoning its role as an EU member state. Foreign policy roles are social categories that carry behavioural expectations from the state's own conception of its role and from others. Not only do states often struggle domestically to define and agree what role(s) they wish to play, internationally they are not fully free to choose their own roles but instead must negotiate these with other actors on the world stage through processes of casting, alter-casting, and role socialisation.

Our research has analysed the changes in the UK's foreign policy roles post-Brexit. Specifically, we have argued that while the UK has been casting for multiple roles (such as Global Britain, great power, leader of the Commonwealth, and faithful ally to the United States), some of these roles are in conflict with each other, and many international actors have largely rejected them for the UK. Somewhat ironically, this may push the UK towards a more isolated and diminished role on the international stage, which is precisely what the UK government has been resisting ever since the referendum.

We have also examined Brexit as a particular type of role change, driven by concerns over the UK's own sovereignty. This reveals the nexus between foreign policy roles and conceptions of sovereignty, demonstrating that: 1) sovereignty itself is a role whose value and meaning is contested; 2) this contestation has implications for the specific foreign policy roles a state may play; 3) when one state changes roles because of sovereignty concerns, other states with their own sovereignty concerns may resist, and 4) role change can reverberate more broadly in the international role system, affecting prevailing norms of sovereignty and generating 'sovereignty skirmishes' among actors.

Our previous analyses focused on the immediate post-Brexit period, between 2016 and the withdrawal agreement of October 2019. During this time, representatives of the UK, other states, international organisations and even Pope Francis acted, with both words and deeds, in a 'socialization game' of post-Brexit Britain. Now that the UK is out of the EU, do we continue to see role conflicts between the UK and others? Has the UK still not settled on a stable role? Do reverberations from Brexit carry on in the international role system? We would answer yes to all three questions and present two ways, as updates to our previous research, that we see lingering effects of Brexit on the UK's role and on world politics more generally.

First, President Biden's election has complicated the UK's new place in the world. The continued faithful ally role was the only post-Brexit role that was, at least partly, reciprocated – but that was under Trump. Biden does not share Trump's and Brexit supporters' 'sovereignty first' ideas, instead focusing on multilateralism and restoring a stable liberal international order based on state cooperation and strong international organisations. Biden, as VP, voiced his opposition to Brexit warning against 'reactionary politicians and demagogues peddling xenophobia, nationalism, and isolationism.' Biden later called Prime Minister Johnson a 'physical and emotional clone of Trump'. Johnson was, however, one of the first leaders Biden called after assuming the presidency, and common ground on NATO, Russia,

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and China may be glue that binds the two. But Biden is unlikely to prioritise a trade deal with the UK – a cornerstone to the UK's proposed global trading state and faithful ally roles. More specifically, Biden's opposition to Brexit may relate to his special connection to Ireland (his family's ancestral home) and his position that Brexit should not undermine the Good Friday Agreement with a hard border between Ireland and Northern Ireland.

The Irish border also relates to the second way in which the Brexit role change continues to reverberate internationally, triggering several sovereignty skirmishes involving unresolved sovereignty questions facing the UK. The border issue was highlighted recently when the EU invoked Article 16 of the Northern Ireland Protocol to stop EU-made Covid-19 vaccines from entering Northern Ireland. This protocol was a central feature of the Brexit deal designed to avoid potentially volatile border checks unsettling the sovereignty dynamics among the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, and Britain. The EU's hair-trigger reaction demonstrates just how quickly sovereignty can be weaponised during a crisis. Subsequently, the UK decision to unilaterally extend exemptions for Northern Irish businesses from the rules agreed under the EU-UK trade deal which the EU sees as a violation of the protocol and a 'breach [of] international law' further indicates the scope for EU-UK sovereignty skirmishes around the issue of Northern Ireland.

The possibility of Scottish independence – a sovereign role for Scotland – also heightened in the wake of Brexit, with a majority in Scotland voting to remain in the EU. Recent difficulties in Scottish fish exports to the EU, along with favourable approval ratings of how the Scottish government, in comparison to the UK government, has handled the Covid-19 crisis, have pushed support for independence to majority levels, although opinions remain fluid. An independent sovereign role for Scotland will be a key issue in the May 2021 Scottish elections, while the UK government is determined to use its sovereign powers to prevent a second Scottish independence referendum setting the stage for courtroom drama.

Elsewhere in Europe, Brexit continued to complicate UK-Spanish relations with the question of Gibraltar (which also voted overwhelmingly to remain in the EU). In 2020, Spanish military incursions into British territory around Gibraltar, threatened 'the prospect of a direct military confrontation between the two NATO allies.' Later in 2020, the status of post-Brexit Gibraltar was settled separately and bilaterally between the UK and Spain. The result effectively puts Gibraltar in the Schengen passport-free area under the auspices of Spain, moving the physical border around the Rock to the airport and seaport, and Gibraltar will apply EU duties and trade tariffs. This has been characterised as 'the biggest shift in Spanish-Gibraltarian bilateral relations since Gibraltar was ceded to Britain in 1713 during the War of Spanish Succession.' Such re-locating of the boundaries of sovereignty is yet another consequence of the UK's role change driven by its own sovereignty concerns.

More globally, UK sovereignty claims over the Chagos Islands (also known as British Indian Ocean Territory) have similarly suffered post-Brexit setbacks. In 2019, the International Court of Justice, siding with Mauritius, issued an advisory opinion that the UK was violating international law with its sovereign claims in the archipelago. In 2021, a UN maritime court confirmed the ICJ ruling and a similar non-binding vote in the UN General Assembly. In response, the UK re-asserted its sovereign claims over the territory, despite 'a growing international consensus that Britain should complete the process of decolonisation immediately'.

Argentina has also used Brexit and its focus on sovereignty to continue challenging UK control over the Malvinas/Falkland Islands. This initiative strengthened when the islands were left out of the EU-UK final trade agreement, on EU insistence that the UK could not negotiate for overseas territories. It has been reported that 'Argentine diplomats now believe there is a good chance talks over the almost two centuries-long dispute could resume.' Some speculate that France, Spain, Italy, and Portugal may be ready to lend their support to Argentina's positions, just as European states abandoned their support for UK control over the Chagos Islands.

Both the Chagos Islands and the Argentina case starkly illustrate sovereignty concerns on the broader international level. The sentiment among many is that any UK role change should not threaten a return to outdated and immoral notions of sovereignty that fuelled UK colonialism during its imperial exploits. Rather, some states see Brexit as an opportunity to reverse those historical consequences. The ramifications of Brexit also extend globally not simply because of its impact on international trade, but because the act of Brexiting has tugged at the prevailing norms of

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sovereignty, the very fabric from which states construct their various international roles. In this light, the great European experiment that pools sovereignty is being challenged by Brexit, threatening to unravel key features of the Liberal Order.

Almost five years after the Brexit vote, it is clear that the UK role change which was initiated by the referendum is still unfolding on the world stage, implicating the roles of other international actors and raising sovereignty issues both in the UK and globally. While the final act of this play has yet to be written, with new plot twists still emerging, role theory captures well the ongoing drafting and re-drafting of the Brexit script.

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