



The big squeeze: British foreign policy after Brexit

Commentary
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For Britain, a close security relationship with the EU will be impossible to establish without a close political and economic relationship too.

Nothing reveals a country's true nature and real interests more swiftly than an international crisis. Coronavirus is just such a global crisis, though with profound economic and social rather than security implications. It is a crisis in which national governments everywhere have led the response, but which cannot be solved without intense international cooperation. Moreover, it hits Britain just as its position in the world is being transformed by Brexit. To protect its fundamental national interests, Britain will have to make some difficult choices about who to cooperate with and who its real friends are. In reality, it faces a big squeeze, having to choose between playing a more subservient role in a US-dominated sphere of influence, or re-establishing closer cooperation with its European neighbours, but from a more distant, less trusted position. The government can pretend there are other choices, but events will swiftly prove it wrong.

To recall: the argument for Brexit was all about 'taking back control of our borders, our laws, and our money'. In arguing that Britain could take back control, its advocates made, perhaps unconsciously, two fundamental assumptions. Firstly, that the world is broadly a benign place; and, secondly, that Britain has strategic autonomy and can act on its own when it wants. Negotiating the details of Brexit, and the coronavirus pandemic itself, are putting these assumptions to the test.

Though it is rarely acknowledged, for most British governments the 'national interest' is synonymous with its domestic political interest. That includes keeping the country safe, keeping it prosperous, and protecting its citizens, which it does through maintaining military forces, pursuing policies that encourage economic growth, and – crucially – maintaining friends and allies. And, though decided on domestic political grounds, Brexit is fundamentally

a foreign policy issue, impacting directly on who our friends are, how we keep safe, and how we stay prosperous. Since 1945, Britain's foreign policy has rested on three pillars: the transatlantic alliance, European economic integration (since 1960), and preserving the multilateral system and international rule of law. Brexit knocks away the central pillar, and the other two are looking shaky. "Global Britain" as an alternative foreign policy has lacked sufficient definition to be useful at home or persuasive abroad.

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So what are Britain's instruments for protecting its interests, and what are the foreign policy options available to the government as it proceeds this year with its "Integration Review" of foreign, development and national security policy?

Britain has a strong military, ranked eighth in the world by the Global Firepower Index 2020. It maintains a nuclear deterrent, spends 2 percent of GDP on defence, and has a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. It also has a major intelligence capability. Even so, this is not enough to guarantee our security, so an effective NATO alliance remains crucial. But security depends on far more than military force. Hitherto, our political alliance with other European countries through the European Union helped assure our security against external threats to our economy, our data, and our people from terrorists, criminals, drug traffickers, and from economic or political pressure from Russia, China, and the US, as well as from environmental threats such as global warming and health threats such as coronavirus.

Some believe you can separate security from economics, and keep close relations with Europe on security issues while distancing ourselves politically and economically. But both are based on trust, and Brexit has greatly weakened Europe's trust in Britain's government. You cannot share secrets with those you do not trust.

Economically, the UK is currently ranked the sixth largest economy in the world. But on its own it is dwarfed by the US, the EU, and China, and it is unusually reliant for its wealth on trade with other countries. Exports of goods and services account for roughly 30 percent of the UK's GDP, and imports for another 32 percent, while 49 percent of our total trade in both is with the other members of the EU. With one of the most globally integrated economies in the world comes vulnerability as well as affluence. The scale of foreign investment in Britain means we are dependent on foreign investors and foreign visitors to sustain our income. Without food imports, Britain could not survive long. And without European markets, we would be lost. Coronavirus is already highlighting these vulnerabilities, delivering a massive hit to the British economy. Brexit on the lines of a Canada-style trade deal and no guarantees for British services will deliver a second major hit to the economy within a single year.

Thirdly, keeping friends and allies depends on many things. Britain has a good deal of soft power and is particularly respected for its advocacy of universal values in democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. But soft power alone is not enough. It needs political and economic backing to turn admirers into allies. And this has been lacking. In Africa, for example, many countries feel taken for granted and discriminated against by the visa regime, so will happily vote against the UK at the UN despite large aid budgets.

So what are the options?

1. **“Global Britain”**: The government’s declared ambition (though notably absent from the prime minister’s 3 February Greenwich speech) has never been clearly defined, being variously about ‘freedom to choose’ or ‘buccaneering traditions’. After three years of intensifying vagueness, “Global Britain” looks to other countries like little more than a slogan, not a foreign policy.
2. **A friend to all**: Building a coalition of the ‘friends of free trade’ was the focus of the prime minister’s speech. Ad hoc ‘minilateral’ agreements and coalitions on specific issues sound easy, but tend to be unstable as they focused on issues not interests, and are very hard diplomatic work. Countries that succeed in being a friend to all tend to be small, keep their head down, and avoid getting into fights. This is not a role that will appeal to this British government.
3. **Commonwealth**: With a global network of 53 member states, a combined population of 2.5 billion and annual GDP of \$11.9 trillion, this looks attractive. Free trade deals may open up some additional opportunities, and as a long-term investment both Africa and India look attractive. But it is a geographically dispersed, politically loose, and economically disparate grouping that cannot adequately protect the UK’s fundamental national interests of security and prosperity.
4. **Closer alignment to the US**: This could come through doubling down on our reliance on the US security guarantee, and building closer trade and economic links. But the current administration has made clear that access to US markets and shelter under the US security umbrella will come only with an explicit quid pro quo: uncritical support of US foreign policy decisions, adequate spending on defence, and closer integration with US standards and US suppliers. Recent examples of US pressure on the UK include not just Huawei, but threats on the digital tax proposals, and pressure to follow US policy on Iran and the Middle East Peace Plan.

5. **Continued alignment with the EU:** This would be good for our economy, and necessary but not sufficient for our security. Over 45 years, British business, manufacturing, and finance have evolved to profit from unrestricted access to the single market. Our economies are so closely integrated that economically Brexit is more an amputation than a divorce. The EU has offered the UK an EU standard prosthetic limb. The government, however, prefers a good old-fashioned Long John Silver-style wooden stump. In taking back control over its own decision-making, the UK also threw away its influence over others' decisions. Membership of the EU allowed the UK to ensure that no EU decision would be fundamentally damaging to its interests. On both sides the risk of divergence will now become greater. Despite the obvious advantage of continued cooperation on foreign and security policy, this will also be hard when one side requires a clear structured legal framework, and the other insists on ad hoc bilateral cooperation only.

The contradictions of the government's position will be swiftly exposed by the cold winds of reality, as they have been by coronavirus. In 2020, the UK's international reputation will be staked heavily on a successful COP 26. With the US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, the UK needs to build the strongest possible international coalition for more effective action. At the heart of that coalition would be the EU. But the conference comes in November, when the economy will still be recovering from the coronavirus hit, and the government will be gearing up for a major row with the EU over the endgame of post-Brexit negotiations. In theory, governments can segregate these things. In reality, it is the same government, the same leaders, dealing with both issues, and bad relations on one will spill over to the other. The Brexit negotiations could put at risk the success of COP 26, and with it Britain's position as a global leader.

Warm words and fine phrases, and even a Commons majority of 80, will not cover the nakedness of Britain's international position after Brexit. The government needs to fashion a foreign policy that will be adequate protection against the cold winds of international reality. And fast.

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