**Brexit and Britain’s Role in the World**

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**Introduction**

For 50 years, both of the UK’s major political parties have agreed that European Union (EU) membership should be a central plank of the country’s foreign policy.[[1]](#footnote-1) European integration has been seen as a vital means by which Britain’s political and economic influence can be amplified in a world first characterized by Cold War and today by continent-sized superpowers and global challenges like climate change. The Brexit decision therefore promises a fundamental realignment of the UK’s international relations, where EU membership will no longer sit at the heart of its external relations.

In this contribution, I ask two related questions about this development: How did foreign policy considerations interact with other socio-economic causes of Brexit? And what does Brexit mean for the future of Britain’s role in the world?

Focusing on the political power of language, I argue that Brexit represents the victory of a domestic-oriented discourse of national sovereignty, independence, and democracy, and thus separation from the Brussels bureaucracy, over a discourse of Britain’s “role in the world”—as a country that “punches above its weight” through “global leadership,” among other tropes. Crucially, since 1945 British foreign policy has been not only *reflected* in the cliché-filled rhetoric of Britain having an important world role but in fact *constituted* by it. Brexit could therefore well mark the first genuine shift in UK foreign policy since 1945, because beyond the practicalities of negotiating new relationships with countries in Europe and elsewhere, the whole rhetorical edifice of Britain’s role in the world has been brought into question. Unless Brexit fails to go through, UK leaders may well struggle to construct a meaningful role in the world and sell it to the British public going forwards. Consequently, even though British elites still want to the country to be a big player internationally, a retreat into a more marginal foreign policy posture after Brexit is a distinct possibility.

**Brexit and the Language of Britain’s “Role in the World”**

Brexit will once again kick up anxiety among Britain’s political and military elites about the country’s future on the world stage. They will ask: Did British voters turn away from internationalism in favor of “Little Englandism?” Will Britain’s voice count for anything when outside the EU? Will Britain still be able to “punch above its weight?” What about the so-called “special relationship” with the United States? Will Washington have any use for a Britain isolated at the edge of Europe, not able to play the part of America’s Trojan horse in Brussels? The seemingly ever-prescient comment by former US Secretary of State Dean Acheson in 1962 that Britain had “lost an empire and not yet found a role” will no doubt be trotted out in support of answers positive and negative.

The problem with beginning from questions like these is that they are laden with tropes and clichés. Acheson’s barb is only the baldest. Beyond being simply annoying in how frequently they appear in discussions of British international history, they are better understood as *part* of the discourse of UK foreign policy and not a neutral explanation of it (McCourt 2011).

UK foreign policy is not alone in this regard: France has notions like the *mission civilisatrice* and the United States various tropes related to American exceptionalism such as the “Shining City upon a Hill.” Even the EU itself has the fledgling trope of “normative power Europe” (see Sjursen 2006). Nonetheless, accepting Wittgenstein’s warning about the bewitchment of the senses by means of language, we can say that these tropes and clichés are, *analytically speaking*, meaningless.

At the same time, however, the rhetoric of foreign policy cannot be discarded because while analytically misleading, it is frequently politically powerful. That is, trope and cliché filled language can often mobilize support for particular policies: in the case of Britain, usually those in favor of an internationalist foreign policy and the high levels of defense spending required to support it.

Brexit is the perhaps the most consequential decision in UK foreign policy since the Suez crisis of 1956, and probably even more consequential; it deserves analysis that avoids as far as possible cliché-filled language (as many able commentators have so far failed to do) while remaining attuned to the political power of the rhetoric and discourse of Britain’s global role. A sociological approach, broadly construed, is uniquely useful since sociologists are strongly attuned to the dangers of reification (or mistaking conventional artifacts for real things, for Karl Marx and Theodore Adorno) and the conflation of “folk concepts” with reality (for Pierre Bourdieu).

**Returning to Brexit and Britain’s *Role in the World* (Carefully)**

These observations cast the foreign policy aspects of Brexit and its foreign policy implications in a different yet profound light: Brexit marks the very possible end of Britain’s *role in the world*,understood as a discourse of global leadership, military prowess and Britain’s membership of the world’s “top diplomatic tables.” Again, this language doesn’t just describeUK foreign policy; in a very real sense it constitutes it. I mean something specific, and analytical, therefore, when I say that Brexit represents the end of Britain’s *role in the world*. In line with sociological understandings of “roles”, I mean that the main expectations attached to Britain—comprehended and communicated in and through the language of Britain’s *role in the world* (see McCourt 2014)—will likely change, both for UK policy-makers themselves and the leaders of Britain’s major global interlocutors.

Brexit represents the end of Britain’s *role in the world*, therefore, not because Britain will lose the force multiplier effect of being associated with a polity of half a billion people. Britain will still be part of NATO, the OSCE, the Council of Europe, the UN, and a host of bilateral initiatives such as those in defense and security policy. Nor will Britain’s role gradually fade away because of Scotland’s possible exit from the Union, which would leave an impoverished England and Wales of some 57 million people unable to foot the bill of an internationalist defense and security posture. Reductions in military capability are matters of policy of future governments: greater defense spending is always possible. If “Rump UK” (rUK) policy-makers really wanted it, therefore, and could persuade the people and their representatives in parliament to support it, rUK could retain the hardware and personnel to throw its weight around in the world.

The end of Britain’s *role in the world* means that the main expectations about Britain, which up to recently was communicated through a language of worldwide interests and the need for a strong diplomatic and military presence, will change. Again, the phrase “Britain’s role in the world” was never meant as a neutral statement of fact. It was an argument to be deployed in UK politics in support of active foreign policy and large defense spending. To put the matter in stylized terms, Britain’s role in the world will be over because Britain will be expected act more like Australia, Canada and New Zealand, or even Germany, than like France or Britain up until recently. Britain will be expected to play the role of regional power, rather than great power with a residual extra-regional posture. Post-Brexit Britain might then be quite an active international player, as are Canada, Australia and New Zealand, with relatively high levels of defense spending deployed in a wide array of settings around the world. But it will not be expected to take a lead as it has recently in Kosovo, Sierra Leone and with France in Libya. It’s a foreign policy, but not a *role in the world*.

The main expectations about what Britain is and should do in world politics will not change overnight. Setting out his agenda as Foreign Secretary on 14 July 2016, Boris Johnson announced a familiar sounding vision of Britain as “great global player.” (*BBC News Online*). Brexit, Johnson noted, “did not mean Britain would be leaving Europe, just leaving the EU.” (Ibid.) President Obama has already moved to play down fears over Brexit and suggested that US-UK relations will be close, as has US Secretary of State John Kerry, who—Johnson reports—hopes for “more Britain abroad.” (Ibid).

Yet, both Obama and Kerry would urge caution: there is no need to panic about Brexit from the US perspective. But over time Britain will be expected to do less in the world, again, not because it could not if voters chose to, but because the language of “Britain’s role” and “out of area capabilities” and “UK global leadership” will become less meaningful and hence less politically powerful. They may also just become silly. They are less likely to be effective in attempts by policy-makers to gain support in parliament and in the country for the type of interventionist foreign policy that has marked the post-1945 era.

Why then, from the perspective of the language of the UK’s *role in the world*, did Britain vote to leave the EU? Put simply, in the context of a referendum, when elite views are not determinate, the main expectations about Britain as a world power they hold and other states profess were nowhere near trump political arguments the that were promises to stem immigration from Europe, or to spend the £300m a day the UK spends on the European Union on the National Health Service instead. Even a strongly worded intervention by President Obama on behalf of remain did not swing popular opinion (*The Atlantic*, 22 April 2016), testimony to the relative strength of domestic versus international discourses in the referendum debate.

Finally, why was the domestic discourse triumphant? Public fatigue over wars of choice, such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan, and earlier Kosovo, would seem to be part of the answer. As would the emergence of strong nationalist discourse in Scotland, which pushed voters north of the border to decisively reject Brexit in favor of a European vision for Scotland. Identifying the reasons *why* a domestic discourse of democratic control over the UK’s future won out over a long-standing discourse of Britain’s *role in the world* opens broader questions that cannot be fully addressed here. Attention to the language of British foreign policy, however, tells us much about the *hows* of the Brexit vote—what made it possible, and what are its likely effects for the future of the UK in international affairs.

**Conclusion**

Language to the effect that Britain remains a big player on the international stage were already sounding unrealistic before Brexit. Following the negative vote on intervention in Syria in 2009, commentators have noted Britain’s retrenchment (e.g.The Week, 30 August 2013). It may well be that Brexit completes a process already underway. Nevertheless, this time, by voting the UK out of the European Union, the British public has weakened the discourse of Britain’s prominent *role in the world*, painstakingly recreated and nurtured after the end of its empire.

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1. On the conversion the Labour government under Harold Wilson to the cause of European Economic Communities by 1966, see Vickers 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)