

British Foreign Policy after Brexit: Losing Europe and Finding a Role

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Abstract

British foreign policy stands at a turning point following the 2016 ‘Brexit’ referendum. Drawing on role theory, we trace the UK’s efforts to establish new foreign policy roles as it interacts with concerned international actors. We find that the pro-Brexit desire to ‘take back control’ has not yet translated into a cogent foreign policy direction. In its efforts to avoid adopting the role of *isolate*, the UK has projected a disoriented foreign policy containing elements of partially incompatible roles such as *great power*, *global trading state*, *leader of the Commonwealth*, *regional partner to the EU*, and *faithful ally to the US*. The international community has, through processes of socialization and alter-casting, largely rejected these efforts. These role conflicts between the UK and international actors, as well as conflicts among its different role aspirations, has pressed UK policies towards its unwanted isolationist role, potentially shaping its long-term foreign policy orientation post-Brexit.

The 2016 British referendum decision to leave the European Union (EU) represents a major rupture in Britain's international position.¹ Brexit has sparked intense debate about Britain's place in the world and will require "the largest rewiring of British foreign policy since World War II".² Leaving the EU will involve a fundamental shift in British foreign policy but how this re-orientation will play out is uncertain. While the 'taking back control' message of the 'Leave' campaign foregrounded the enhanced sovereignty Britain would achieve, specific foreign policy directions any gains in sovereignty afforded were not clearly articulated. Moreover, most of Britain's international partners were critical of Brexit before the referendum and have since developed their own views on what Brexit means and signifies³ for Britain's future place in international politics.⁴ Central to this question is Britain's ability to simultaneously enhance its autonomy and find meaningful foreign policy roles for itself while avoiding becoming an isolated state.

This article aims to navigate the international debates and uncertainty around Britain's post-Brexit foreign policy at this early but critical juncture. We use role theory to demonstrate how Britain is being socialised into foreign policy roles through interactions with other states in the international system.⁵ Specifically, we focus on Britain's role location process⁶ since the referendum, identifying a set of foreign policy roles that Britain has either casted for or rejected and tracing how role expectations of other relevant international actors have affected these efforts. We argue that role conflicts between Britain's conceptions of its own roles and international expectations towards Britain, along with the tensions and inconsistencies between the different roles Britain seeks to play, have not only increased uncertainty but may also be contributing to Britain's unwanted drift toward greater isolationism. While there is continuing economic and political uncertainty about the outcome of Brexit, and the UK itself

struggles to clarify the scope and purpose of this major policy change, the early socialisation process reveals the core prospects of Britain's role on the world stage and illuminates the long-term boundaries and opportunities for Britain's post-Brexit foreign policy orientation.

Our analysis builds on previous research using role theory to understand British foreign policy.⁷ The benefits of mapping the future of British foreign policy through role theory are twofold. First, this perspective emphasises the relational and interactive nature of roles states play in the international arena. Just as people cannot play the role of teachers unless others take up the role of students, states cannot adopt a role for themselves unless this role is accepted by other states. Britain's foreign policy after Brexit will not be defined simply by what role Britain *wants* to play, but equally by what role other states *let* Britain play. Second, role theory provides a broad perspective on the foreign policy orientation of post-Brexit Britain, moving us beyond the details of on-going negotiations between Britain and the EU-27 and toward more fundamental role interaction processes that are playing out, thus offering 'a means of interpreting current events in the light of their long-term implications'.⁸

We propose that Brexit significantly transforms roles available to and expected for Britain and offer a role theoretical take on British foreign policy for the post-Brexit environment. This environment involves a collision between Britain's preferred roles and those acceptable to international society. Empirically, our main purpose is to contribute to the academic discussion about British foreign policy after Brexit, which has only just begun.⁹ Theoretically, the article adds to the growing body of role theoretical work in International Relations,¹⁰ specifically connecting to discussions of role socialisation¹¹ and the importance of role conflict.¹²

Viewing Brexit through role theory reveals the central irony that the one role Britain has tried to prevent since the referendum – that of isolate – might emerge as precisely the role it is socialised into. Although Britain is casting for various alternative foreign policy roles (global trading state, great power, faithful ally to the US, regional partner to the EU and leader of the Commonwealth), these involve some mutual incompatibilities, and international responses to them have largely been sceptical. Such role rejections, in consequence, could push Britain towards the isolate role. The one other foreign policy role that looks most feasible – that of faithful ally to the US – is also tinged with the Trump administration’s ‘America First’ brand of isolationism. It is not our objective, however, to explore the relative weight the British government places on each of the roles it casts for. Rather, from our role theoretical perspective, which roles the government will come to prioritise will only emerge from the interactions between Britain and other international actors in the on-going role location process.

Role Location and Role Conflict

Role theory draws on a theatrical metaphor, seeing states in the international arena – like actors on a stage – playing roles that follow certain scripts.¹³ Roles are “repertoires of behaviour, inferred from others’ expectations and one’s own conceptions, selected at least partly in response to cues and demands”.¹⁴ Roles thus emerge from the interaction between role conceptions – an actor’s own preference for their roles – and role expectations ascribed to an actor by others. Roles prescribe certain behaviours which actors consider appropriate given their place in social structures.¹⁵ Holsti¹⁶ introduced role theory to the study of international relations, identifying several prototypical roles such as faithful ally, regional

leader, and isolate. Contemporary role theory research¹⁷ examines how states (egos) define and change roles¹⁸ and how other international actors (alters) try to influence and socialise states as they seek new roles.¹⁹

The social and strategic interactions between ego and alter(s) through which ego finds a suitable international role is the role location process.²⁰ For role theory, role location dynamics are socialisation, where states ‘learn’ their foreign policy roles in response to cues and demands of others.²¹ When a state casts for a new foreign policy role, it draws other international actors into this process. Alters may accept or reject ego’s preferred role and may alter-cast and socialise ego into alternative roles. If ego’s role conception and alters’ expectations are congruent, ego’s role is available and can be enacted. If they differ, role conflict ensues with each trying to promote or foreclose roles for ego.²²

Role conflicts are an important yet understudied aspect of role theory in foreign policy.²³ Although a variety of role conflicts are possible,²⁴ we focus on two types. First role conflicts can occur between ego and alter(s) regarding specific roles ego might play.²⁵ In a successful role location process, repeated interactions between ego and alters lead to convergence of their views on the role ego should play, resolving role conflicts. Second, inter-role conflicts arise when ego pursues two or more roles entailing contradictory behaviours,²⁶ which may result in fragmented and incoherent foreign policy.²⁷ Given its limited theoretical attention to date, our analysis explores the impact of these two types of role conflicts for Britain as they affect the early stages of role socialisation during Brexit.

While international roles are created through interactions between alters and ego, role theory invests both ego and alters with considerable scope for agency.²⁸ Especially during the initial stages of role location, ego has significant autonomy in selecting roles it casts for, just as alters have discretion in how to respond to ego and to push different roles. This scope for agency narrows as interactions between ego and alter delimit the set of roles available for ego.²⁹ When a state has been socialised into particular roles as a result of this process, these roles will ultimately impact how the state conducts its foreign policy.³⁰ Early stages of role location and the resolution of role conflicts are thus crucial to the eventual foreign policy orientation of a state.

We are interested in this early stage precisely because the roles available to Britain after it leaves the EU are still in flux, but are increasingly being circumscribed through its interactions with others. We trace how Britain, after the referendum, casted for a range of foreign policy roles, examining the international responses to each of these. We do not focus on domestic contestation over Britain's future international roles. Rather, we take the government as the agent representing Britain on the international stage, explore the foreign policy roles it seeks to adopt for Britain, and examine international expectations in the post-Brexit role location process.

Empirically, the early stage of role location consists mainly of verbal government statements and claims, and only to a limited extent material foreign policy behaviours. Consequently, we identify the roles Britain has cast for primarily through analysis of major foreign policy speeches and other public interventions, for example op-ed articles, of leading foreign policy decision-makers in the British government since the June 2016 EU referendum. The article

thus adopts a method that is well-established in role theory research which explores role location principally through the lens of the speech acts of high-level decision makers.³¹ Such speech acts constitute meaningful and consequential behaviours that draw other international actors into the role location process and contribute to carving out Britain's roles after Brexit. Over the longer term, however, the sustainability of any such roles will also depend on government discourse being supported by material capabilities and behaviours of both ego and alters.³²

The five roles we discuss have been pursued with some consistency by the British government and are in our judgment the most prominent roles in government discourse on British foreign policy since the referendum. While decision-makers generally do not make explicit references to these roles, we have discerned them from government statements that emphasise their core features and that can be interpreted as indicators of the roles. For each of the roles we then explore responses from a variety of international actors who are implicated by them. These actors include the governments of a range of Britain's international partners as well as the EU and other international organisations. In this way, we use roles Britain has cast for to focus our analysis of international responses. It is important to note that the discourse the British government employs to cast for international roles may in part be strategic or merely rhetorical. For example, it might be used to strengthen Britain's hand in the Brexit negotiations with the EU or for domestic political consumption. Irrespective of whether or not government decision-makers genuinely believe that Britain can and should play the roles they cast for, their discourse will nevertheless elicit international responses and feed into a process that delimits roles available to Britain after Brexit.

Locating Foreign Policy Roles for Post-Brexit Britain

Britain's efforts to locate a role since the referendum take place against the backdrop of international scepticism about Brexit.³³ Nevertheless, Britain has claimed that leaving the EU has broadened, not narrowed, the set of substantive foreign policy roles it can play by virtue of the sovereignty it gained. In particular, Britain tried to counter international role forecasts that Brexit will leave Britain a diminished international actor and to avoid being socialised into the foreign policy role of an isolationist actor. British efforts to enact foreign policy roles, however, have largely elicited negative international responses. The foreign policy roles Britain has casted for can be identified as *global trading state*, *great power*, *faithful ally to the US*, *regional partner to the EU* and *leader of the Commonwealth*. These roles vary in the autonomy they offer, and who the key alters are that can effectively accept or reject each role. But what these roles have in common, first and foremost, is Britain's rejection of the isolate role.³⁴

Isolate

The post-referendum priority of the British government on the international stage was to avoid being socialised into the role of isolationist, which would see Britain draw back from the international stage, downscale the resources it expends externally and focus largely on domestic concerns.³⁵ To avoid this role, Britain countered an emerging narrative that it might retrench from its international commitments and turn inwards.³⁶ Indeed, the widespread view among international commentators was that the decision to leave the EU was a vote to go it alone, putting Britain on a "voyage to inglorious isolation".³⁷ From this perspective, the Brexit referendum was an "isolationist catastrophe"³⁸ that brought to a head a pre-existing trend of Britain disengaging from the world. Interviews with members of the German

Bundestag in June 2017 reinforced this view that Brexit was an act of British self-demotion that would marginalise its international voice.³⁹ Similarly, Britain's international adversaries, most notably Russia, see Brexit as isolating Britain and seek to capitalise on Britain's perceived weakness.⁴⁰ What is more, there is evidence that the Russian government attempted to interfere in the referendum to support the case for leaving the EU.⁴¹

Immediately after the referendum, leading 'Leave' campaigners and the British government advanced an internationalist counter-narrative to dispel notions that Britain was heading towards isolationism. Boris Johnson, the most popular face of the 'Leave' argument, used his column in the Eurosceptic Daily Telegraph days after the referendum to spin Brexit away from the 'Leave' side's predominantly nationalist and inward-facing message:

[M]illions of people who voted Leave were (...) inspired by the belief that Britain is a great country, and that outside the job-destroying coils of EU bureaucracy we can survive and thrive as never before. (...) There is every cause for optimism; a Britain rebooted, reset, renewed and able to engage with the whole world.⁴²

In his first official United Nations visit as Foreign Minister (FM), Johnson distanced Britain's decision to leave the EU from the 'America first' message of then Republican Presidential nominee Donald Trump:

I would draw a very, very strong contrast between Brexit and any kind of isolationism. (...) Brexit means us being more outward-looking, more engaged, more enthusiastic and committed on the world stage than ever before.⁴³

Similarly, Secretary of State for International Trade Liam Fox⁴⁴ told an audience in Bogota that international speculations that Brexit was “a symptom of insularity, and that the United Kingdom would be withdrawing from the world stage” were unfounded: “I am here to tell you that nothing, absolutely nothing, could be further from the truth”. In the words of PM Theresa May in a speech delivered in India, Britain was “determined not to turn our backs to the world”.⁴⁵ Britain thus tried to undercut impressions that Brexit equals “little Englanderism”⁴⁶ and resisted being socialised into the role of an isolationist state.⁴⁷ If not isolate, the question then was what sort of role Britain would actually seek to play.

Global Trading State

After the referendum, Britain has made a sustained effort to cast for the role of a global trading state. This role envisages Britain as an outward-looking, liberal and internationalist leader on global free trade. Along these lines, the British government has portrayed a ‘Global Britain’ that would emerge after ‘Brexit.’ This has become a primary frame through which it depicts Britain’s new foreign policy orientation.

As a country that is “by instinct a great, global, trading nation”,⁴⁸ Britain would remain “a great champion”⁴⁹ and a “tireless advocate of global free trade”.⁵⁰ It would “continue to make the case for liberalism and globalisation” and show “calm, determined, global leadership to shape a new era of globalisation”.⁵¹ Indeed, leaving the EU is an opportunity for Britain to become “more outward looking than ever”⁵² and to “step up to a new leadership role as the strongest and most forceful advocate for business, free markets and free trade anywhere in

the world”.⁵³ This is, according to the British government, how the Brexit referendum should be understood:

[T]he British people voted for change. (...) They voted to leave the European Union and embrace the world. (...) The result of the referendum was not a decision to turn inward and retreat from the world. (...) June the 23rd was not the moment Britain chose to step back from the world. It was the moment we chose to build a truly Global Britain.⁵⁴

It is precisely the sovereignty gained through the Brexit referendum that allows Britain to enact the role of a global trading state. For the British government, the referendum was “a vote to take control and make decisions for ourselves and, crucially, to become even more global and internationalist in action and in spirit”.⁵⁵ After Brexit, Britain will have “for the first time in more than four decades (...) a fully independent trade policy”.⁵⁶ This gives it the “opportunity to forge new trade deals around the world”⁵⁷ and “to reassert our belief in a confident, sovereign and global Britain”.⁵⁸

We are going to be a confident country that is in control of its own destiny again. And it is because of that that we will be in a position to act in this global role.⁵⁹

The international reaction, however, to such attempts to cast itself as a global trading state is largely sceptical. Many of Britain’s international partners have emphasised the complexities in negotiating trade agreements and have made clear that they prioritise their trading relationship with the EU over Britain. These concerns were already articulated before the

referendum. For example, the Director-General of the WTO, Roberto Azevêdo, said Britain would not be allowed to “cut and paste” its existing terms of WTO membership if it left the EU, but would face “tortuous” re-negotiations of these terms:

Pretty much all of the UK’s trade would somehow have to be negotiated. (...) It is extremely difficult and complex to negotiate these trade agreements. And slow as well.⁶⁰

This point was reiterated by the IMF, warning in its 2016 annual report that “negotiations on postexit arrangements would likely be protracted”.⁶¹ Significantly, the challenges of negotiating post-Brexit trade deals were also raised by Britain’s closest bilateral partner, the US. In the most prominent international intervention in the British referendum debate, US President Barack Obama argued in a joint press conference with David Cameron:

I think is fair to say that maybe some point down the line there might be a UK-US trade agreement, but it’s not going to happen any time soon because our focus is in negotiating with a big bloc of the European Union to get a trade agreement done. And UK is going to be in the back of the queue.⁶²

In a later intervention, Obama reiterated his view in a BBC interview:

My simple point is that it's hard to negotiate trade deals. It takes a long time. And the point is that the UK would not be able to negotiate something with the United States faster than the EU. .⁶³

Canadian Prime Minister (PM) Justin Trudeau expressed a similar view, noting the trade deal between the EU and Canada took almost 10 years to negotiate and that “there's nothing easy or automatic” in negotiating such deals.⁶⁴

Since the referendum, Britain's attempts to secure trade commitments from its major non-EU trading partners have so far mainly been rebuffed. Britain is thwarted by its lack of sovereignty to negotiate trade deals until it has left the EU, and its international partners are reluctant to engage in substantive discussions about post-Brexit arrangements until the future British-EU relationship becomes clear. For example, FM Hunt had little more to show for his visit to Beijing than a vague promise from his Chinese counterpart “to open discussions about a possible free trade deal” after Brexit.⁶⁵ Perhaps the most important example, however, is Japan's response to what has been described as “quite aggressive”.⁶⁶ British attempts to secure a commitment to a post-Brexit trade deal at May's Tokyo visit in August 2017. Japanese officials made clear their priority was to finalise free trade negotiations with the EU and were unwilling to enter into discussions until they have more clarity about the final terms of Brexit. The only commitment the British government gained was that the two countries will carry over exactly the trade agreement negotiated between them to their bilateral post-Brexit trading relationship.⁶⁷ A similar arrangement was also floated for Britain's future trading relationship with Canada.⁶⁸ Britain's seeking to copy and paste EU trade deals calls

into question the value of its enhanced sovereignty after Brexit to enact the role of a global trading state.

The most positive response toward discussing post-Brexit trade deals has so far come from the US administration. President Trump has welcomed the prospect of a “major trade deal” with Britain, comparing it positively to what he perceives as EU protectionism. On his visit to Washington, FM Hunt detected “real enthusiasm from the US administration, from the President down, for a UK/US Free Trade Agreement” after Britain has left the EU.⁶⁹ However, the concerns of British consumer groups about food safety standards that resurfaced during Liam Fox’s visit to Washington in July 2017 indicate that any future negotiations about a US-Britain trade deal may be more protracted than the British government appears to envisage.⁷⁰ Overall, across a range of international actors, with the exception of the US, Britain’s efforts to cast itself into a global trading state role have been challenged by assertions that it lacks the autonomy to pursue this role.

Great Power

Since the referendum, Britain has also cast for the role of great power. This role, like the global trading state role, is global in scope but differs significantly with its emphasis on superior military, economic and institutional resources and the special responsibilities and rights these resources confer. While it has often been said that Britain can no longer play the great power role,⁷¹ ambition for it has experienced a revival post-referendum. This fits with Britain’s attempt to reject the role of isolate, but is more ambitious than its efforts to enact the role of a global trading state.

In casting for a great power role, Britain portrays itself as a major military power with global reach and responsibilities. The government employs discourses that foreground its “outstanding capabilities” as the country with “the biggest defence budget in Europe”⁷² and “a leading member of NATO”.⁷³ Correspondingly, Britain has reaffirmed its commitment to meet NATO targets on defence expenditure and has reinforced its contributions to European and international security ‘on the ground’. The British government agreed shortly after the Brexit referendum to deploy 650 troops to Estonia and Poland to strengthen NATO’s forward presence in Eastern Europe and has pledged to place another 3000 troops on call as part of a NATO rapid-response unit.⁷⁴ Most symbolically, perhaps, Britain committed to restore its “military presence East of Suez”⁷⁵ by rolling out a large-scale investment to re-open a naval support facility in Bahrain, “the first such facility East of Suez since 1971”.⁷⁶ It has announced deployment of Royal Navy frigates to the Persian Gulf to achieve an “enduring presence” in the region and to demonstrate Britain’s “global reach and world class capability”.⁷⁷ This is framed as a reversal of the policy of disengagement from East of Suez in the 1970s, which has come to embody Britain’s retreat from a great power role.⁷⁸ That disengagement, for FM Johnson, was a historical mistake that the current government has corrected: “Britain is back East of Suez”.⁷⁹

In the same vein, the government’s discourse emphasises its ability to project military power on a global scale. Citing a joint air force exercise with Japan and South Korea, Johnson reminded an audience in New Delhi that “Britain remains one of a handful of countries able to deploy air power 7000 miles from our shores”.⁸⁰ Similarly, Britain’s two “vast new aircraft carriers”⁸¹ are described as “a symbol of the United Kingdom as a great global, maritime nation” that “will transform the UK’s ability to project power around the world”.⁸²

Complementing its claims to superior military power, the British government references its economic strength as “the fifth biggest economy on earth” and home to “the greatest financial capital in the world”.⁸³ Another important plank of Britain’s claim to great power status is its position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. As May reminded the UN General Assembly, that position places “special responsibilities”⁸⁴ on Britain which it takes seriously. As befits a great power, Britain carries no less than “a commitment to the whole world”.⁸⁵

The international view of a ‘great power Britain’, however, is quite the opposite, with no discernible support for Britain’s assertion that Brexit will strengthen its standing in the world.⁸⁶ Rather, the expectation is that Brexit will diminish Britain on the international stage. Before the referendum, several international actors, especially from outside the EU, made clear their view Britain’s weight as an international partner is enhanced by EU membership and would suffer from leaving it. New Zealand PM John Key stated “We certainly think it is a stronger position for Britain to be in Europe”.⁸⁷ Similarly, the German Finance Minister, Wolfgang Schäuble, suggested that Brexit would diminish Britain’s influence in international relations: “In the era of globalisation, ‘splendid isolation’ is not a smart option”.⁸⁸ This view was shared by interviewees in the German Bundestag in June 2017 who doubted that Britain will even be able to play a middle-ranking power role after Brexit.⁸⁹ The decision to leave the EU is seen as accelerating a longer-term decline in Britain’s influence that has it moving from the “first team” to the “reserve bench” in international politics.⁹⁰ Brexit is also widely believed to reduce the influence Britain can wield through the UN system.⁹¹ A recent example is Britain’s failure to win support in the UN General Assembly for its candidate as judge in the International Court of Justice (ICJ), leaving Britain without an ICJ judge for the first time in the court’s history. Described as “a humiliating blow to British international

prestige”, it might be seen as a harbinger of Britain’s reduced status in the UN and on the international stage more generally.⁹² Post-Brexit Britain as a great power is in conflict with most international views, and Britain is being alter-casted as a diminished international actor for which the great power role is unavailable.

Regional Partner to the EU

Since the Brexit referendum Britain has also casted for the role of regional partner to the EU.⁹³ This role counters the isolate role but is less global in scope than either great power or global trading state. It sees Britain and the EU developing a “deep and special partnership that takes in both economic and security cooperation”.⁹⁴ To enable such a role, the British government communicates to its European audience that it wants to become the EU’s “strongest friend and partner”.⁹⁵ It promotes what it describes as a “vision for a bold, ambitious and innovative new partnership with (...) our EU friends”.⁹⁶:

We are leaving the European Union but we are not leaving Europe. Our vote to leave the European Union was no rejection of the values we share with our European friends. The decision to leave the EU represents no desire to become more distant to our European neighbours. We will remain strong allies. I want our membership of the EU to be replaced by a strategic partnership, which should include an ambitious free trade agreement and many other kinds of cooperation.⁹⁷

Britain has made clear that it remains committed to European security and close collaboration in justice and home affairs. It seeks nothing less than a “new alliance” and a “bold new

strategic agreement” with the EU.⁹⁸ From Britain’s view, the role of regional partner is not hindered by Brexit but rather facilitated by the sovereignty it will have gained.

The availability of this role turns largely on the outcome of the Brexit talks between Britain and the EU. In these negotiations, however, the EU-27 has alter-casted Britain more as a supplicant than a regional partner, and the widespread view is that Britain conducts the negotiations as the fundamentally weaker side and that it will disproportionately bear the costs of Brexit. According to IMF estimates, Britain’s GDP will decline by almost 4% over the long term relative to the no-Brexit scenario if the negotiations fail to reach an agreement about the post-Brexit trading relationship between the EU and Britain, compared to a fall of only 1.5% for the EU-27.⁹⁹ In the words of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, “our British friends will lose more than what we will lose”.¹⁰⁰

The priority of the EU-27 in the Brexit talks is less about partnering with Britain than with maintaining the unity of the remaining member states. To that end, leading EU members, in particular Germany and France, are willing to put aside specific economic interests and accommodate concerns of smaller member states.¹⁰¹ The guiding principle driving the common European line is that the outcome of Brexit negotiations must discourage other EU members from following the British example and help prevent further erosion of the EU. Thus any agreement about the post-Brexit relationship with Britain must be worse than the terms of full EU membership. As Maltese PM Joseph Muscat explained when Malta assumed the EU presidency, “we want a fair deal for the UK but that fair deal has to be inferior to membership”.¹⁰²

The EU's main focus is not its post-Brexit relationship to Britain, but rather further deepening European integration. For European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, the "wind is back in Europe's sails" since the Brexit referendum. Juncker proposes that the EU should "catch the wind", in particular to further integrate around the Eurozone and the Schengen system: "We will advance, we must advance because Brexit is not everything. Because Brexit is not the future of Europe".¹⁰³ Given the views on Brexit in the EU and its focus on keeping European integration on track, the scope for Britain to enact the regional partner role is limited.

Leader of the Commonwealth

Since the Brexit referendum Britain has also casted for the leader of the Commonwealth role, which counters the isolate role but is less focused on Europe than the regional partner to the EU role. This role centres on upgrading Britain's historical links to Commonwealth countries and turning the Commonwealth into a hub for Britain's wider diplomatic and economic relations.¹⁰⁴ This role is consistent with pre-referendum efforts to bring the Commonwealth "back at the very heart of British foreign policy".¹⁰⁵ Post-referendum, the government has intensified these efforts through official visits to a range of Commonwealth countries, including Australia, Canada, India, Kenya, New Zealand, Nigeria and South Africa. These largely symbolic gestures express the enhanced importance of these countries for Britain, as evident in May's statement during her visit to India in November 2016:

I wanted to come to India on my first bilateral visit outside Europe because this relationship matters more than ever. (...) As the UK leaves the EU and India continues its rise in the world, we should seize the opportunities ahead.¹⁰⁶

Britain has casted for the Commonwealth leader role by emphasising bonds of shared values and the common heritage of Commonwealth members as well as opportunities for deeper trading relations. Visiting Australia, FM Johnson professed his belief in “the Commonwealth’s capacity to strengthen common values among its members”,¹⁰⁷ such as democracy, the rule of law and an independent judiciary. Similarly, PM May in a joint statement with Indian PM Narendra Modi “recalled the strong bonds of friendship” between Britain and India: “Our shared history, our shared connections and our shared values make this a natural partnership. They form the foundations of a unique friendship.”¹⁰⁸

Britain prioritises trade with Commonwealth countries when it pushes for opening talks about post-Brexit relations. At the 2017 world economic forum, May highlighted that such talks had already begun “with countries like Australia, New Zealand and India”.¹⁰⁹ On her visit to Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa, May invoked the “deep historical ties”¹¹⁰ of the Commonwealth to hold out the prospect of “a new partnership between the UK and our friends in Africa” that will see the UK become “the G7’s number one investor in Africa”.¹¹¹ In a speech in Sydney, FM Johnson suggested that after Brexit, “Australia will be at, or near, the front of the queue for a new Free Trade Agreement with Britain”.¹¹² As for India, Johnson expressed Britain’s interest “to turbo charge [British-India relations]” with a new free trade deal.¹¹³

The reception of this role by the Commonwealth countries has been lukewarm, however. Many of these countries, including Australia, India, Canada and New Zealand, as well as a range of Commonwealth officials, were openly sceptical about Brexit before the referendum.¹¹⁴ Australian PM Malcolm Turnbull, for example, indicated having Britain as a close ally in the EU was “an unalloyed plus”: “We welcome Britain’s strong role in Europe”.¹¹⁵ Similarly, Commonwealth Secretary-General Patricia Scotland rejected as a “false choice” suggestions by Leave campaigners that Britain’s Commonwealth links should replace its EU membership:

I say the Commonwealth offers a huge amount, but the Commonwealth does not set itself up in competition with Europe – we are partners.¹¹⁶

Since the referendum, many have also objected to the neo-colonial overtones of Britain’s ambition to enact the role of Commonwealth leader,¹¹⁷ and even within Whitehall sceptical officials have branded the initiative “Empire 2.0”.¹¹⁸ Such neo-colonial critiques are perhaps even more compelling, given the dissonance between a Brexit desire for more sovereignty and Britain’s colonial past.

Commonwealth countries also worry that Brexit will negatively impact their trade relationships with the EU.¹¹⁹ New Zealand, for example, will likely prioritise negotiating a free trade agreement with the EU over their future trading relations with Britain.¹²⁰ India, in turn, considers Britain as an entry point into the European single market and might consequently attach less weight to Britain as a trading partner after Brexit.¹²¹ Indeed, commentaries of May’s visit to India have concluded that Britain has “little to offer in

exchange for desperately needed post-Brexit trade deals”.¹²² This suggests Britain’s trade negotiating position might be relatively weak: “Britain needs India more than India needs Britain”.¹²³ There is little indication that Britain’s effort to enact the role of leader of the Commonwealth resonate with the Commonwealth countries, challenging its availability.

Faithful Ally to the US

Britain is also casting for a more limited foreign policy role of faithful ally to the US. This pitches Britain as the closest international partner of the US and is expected to secure US support for British interests and enhance British influence on the international stage. This “power by proxy”¹²⁴ strategy underpins Britain’s ‘special relationship’ with the US and has been a long-standing maxim in British foreign policy. Since the Brexit referendum, Britain intensified its affirmation of the continued ‘specialness’ of the relationship with the US. The British government discourse weaves together past achievements with the promise of a reinvigorated post-Brexit alliance, establishing a sense of continuity that transcends its decision to leave the EU. This was to counter concerns that Brexit might reduce the value the US attaches to its relations with Britain, which partly comes from Britain’s influence inside the EU.¹²⁵

May’s speech to the Republican Party Conference is the fullest example of British discourse on the faithful ally role. She reminded her audience of the “unique and special relationship that exists between [Britain and the US]”:

[T]he leadership provided by our two countries through the special relationship has (...) made the modern world. (...) It is my honour and privilege to stand before you

today (...) to join hands as we pick up that mantel of leadership once more, to renew our special relationship and to recommit ourselves to the responsibility of leadership in the modern world. (...) So as we rediscover our confidence together – as you renew your nation just as we renew ours – we have the opportunity – indeed the responsibility – to renew the special relationship for this new age.¹²⁶

The US has generally reciprocated these role-seeking efforts. Immediately after the referendum, many in the US, including President Barack Obama, reassured Britain that the referendum outcome will not affect the ‘specialness’ of the US-British relationship. While Obama’s pro-‘Remain’ interventions in the referendum campaign raised concerns that Brexit would diminish US commitment to Britain, after the referendum Obama sought to dispel any doubts: “One thing that will not change is the special relationship that exists between our two nations”.¹²⁷ Similar reactions came from other US leaders, including Chairman of the Senate foreign relations committee Bob Corker, Republican Speaker of the House Paul Ryan, and State Department spokesperson John Kirby.¹²⁸ When President Obama congratulated May on becoming PM in July 2016, he assured her that he would “protect and deepen”¹²⁹ the special relationship.

In contrast to President Obama, Donald Trump spoke out in favour of Brexit during the British referendum campaign¹³⁰ and welcomed the result while a presidential candidate. Trump quickly promised to maintain the special relationship if elected President¹³¹ and, in a jibe at President Obama, made clear that under his Presidency Britain would “always be at the front of the line”. He claimed “zero will change” in US-British relations after Brexit.¹³²

A strong symbolic reaffirmation of the ‘specialness’ of US-British relations after Trump took office came with PM May’s Washington visit in January 2017. Both governments highlighted that May was the first foreign Head of Government to pay an official visit to the newly-elected US President in Washington.¹³³ For May, the invitation to the White House was “an indication of the strength and importance of the special relationship”,¹³⁴ and both President Trump and PM May used the visit to celebrate the special quality of the relationship. At their joint press conference on 27 January, Trump praised the “free and independent Britain” that emerged from the decision to leave the EU and gave his strongest endorsement of the special relationship:

The special relationship between our two countries has been one of the great forces in history for justice and for peace (...). Today the United States renews our deep bonds with Britain (...). We pledge our lasting support to this most special relationship. (...) [O]ur relationship has never been stronger.¹³⁵

The US response to Brexit suggests that the role of faithful ally will continue to be available for Britain, making British efforts to cast for it feasible.

Two important caveats are in order. First, the Trump administration’s ‘America First’ agenda and its economic nationalism create uncertainty for the longer-term sustainability of such a role.¹³⁶ For example, the US 2017 decisions to impose a punitive tariff on a new model of Bombardier passenger jets built in Northern Ireland, despite the personal intervention of PM May,¹³⁷ and to levy tariffs on steel and aluminium imports from the EU, strongly opposed by the British government,¹³⁸ show how little concerns of its faithful ally count when US

economic interests are seen to be at stake. Trump's public criticism of London Mayor Sadiq Khan's handling of the June 2017 terrorist attacks in London, and his re-tweeting of a British right wing group's anti-immigrant videos have prompted PM May to rebuke the US President, demonstrating difficulties Britain faces in keeping its faithful ally role under the Trump administration.¹³⁹

Second, this role has become increasingly contested in Britain domestically, especially after the 2003 Iraq War.¹⁴⁰ Domestic unease with the role is only reinforced by the unpopularity of President Trump in British public opinion, with large majorities believing he has made the world a more dangerous place and having no confidence in him 'doing the right thing' in international affairs.¹⁴¹ The widespread protests in Britain against a planned Trump state visit¹⁴² and the public demonstrations against his scaled-down 'working visit' to Britain in July 2018¹⁴³ show how controversial the US President is in British politics.

Conclusion

To paraphrase Dean Acheson's famous quote: Britain has lost Europe and not yet found a role. Brexit has created a 'role crisis' for Britain, which may represent a fundamental turning point in its foreign policy orientation going forward. Two different types of role conflicts play into this: the degree to which these roles are mutually incompatible and the nature and variety of international actors each role must engage. The former has made for rather undirected foreign policy, and the latter risks pushing Britain toward the path of least resistance and the roles of faithful ally to the US or isolate. In unpacking this 'role crisis', we hope to facilitate a reflexive and critical discussion about possible future trajectories of British foreign policy after Brexit.

Tensions between the different roles Britain seeks is giving rise to a role conflict where ego's role conceptions are incompatible with one another. Pursuing these roles at the same time can make for an incoherent foreign policy.¹⁴⁴ For example, Britain's efforts to play the role of global trading state are difficult to sync with the role of regional partner to the EU, not least because WTO rules imply inevitable trade-offs for Britain between embracing a customs union with the EU and having the freedom to pursue its own trade deals with non-EU countries.¹⁴⁵ The role of great power sits uncomfortably with that of faithful ally to the US, as the former portrays significant foreign policy autonomy but the latter compels a good measure of compliance. The contest between a British and an Indian candidate for a seat on the benches of the ICJ illustrates the trade-offs between the great power and leader of the Commonwealth roles. These role conflicts confound Britain's efforts to chart a clear foreign policy course, as efforts in one direction clash with efforts in another. Without a clear direction it will be difficult for Britain to enact any role.

Moreover, international responses to its disjointed efforts to enact these different roles have largely been negative, creating additional role conflict between Britain's role conception(s) and alters' role expectations. Role theorists see this as potentially giving rise to poor relations between ego and alters.¹⁴⁶ In the British case, this form of role conflict may be related to the number and type of international actors that must be engaged by each role, as a wider range of interested and powerful alters is likely to generate more resistance and alter-casting. While a single alter might accept or reject a new role sought by ego, multiple alters are involved makes socialisation more complicated. Alters may seek cues from others about how best to respond to ego's efforts, and thus the nature of alters' relationships to one another must also be considered.

This is clearly problematic for the role of great power, which is global in scope and requires acceptance by not only former EU partners Germany and France but also the US and other powers. Similarly, the leader of the Commonwealth role reaches broadly but lands awkwardly on those who would have to play the corollary ‘follower’ roles and who are instead seeking better trade deals. Britain would also have to overcome many obstacles to enact the role of global trading state, as individual countries might entertain trade deals with Britain but must also consider their relationship with the EU as a global economic actor. The regional partner to the EU role is challenged by EU-27 solidarity in its economic negotiations, and British efforts to highlight the value of security and counter-terrorism partnership can’t readily be separated from other regional partner dimensions. While the role of faithful ally to the US might be achievable for post-Brexit Britain, requiring the consent of only one major actor, its longer-term viability appears uncertain. Given the Trump administration’s ‘America First’ agenda this role is itself tinged with isolationism.

The irony, therefore, is that Britain could end up being socialised into the one role it tries to avoid – the role of isolate. In order to prevent such an outcome, Britain might eventually put more weight on those roles that encounter the least resistance internationally, thereby reducing role conflicts. Overall, the role conflicts between Britain and different sets of alters, as well as among its own proposed roles, have systematically constrained British agency in the early stages of role socialisation. The Brexit case gives us novel insights about the importance of role conflicts, which have not received systematic attention in role theory research. Role theory, in turn, helps illuminate the sources and nature of the intense debates over the UK’s future as an international actor.

As yet, Britain's role conflicts appear to remain largely unresolved. Whilst Brexit negotiations between Britain and the EU-27 are undeniably intricate and consequential, locating a foreign policy role for Britain *after* Brexit is arguably even more difficult and fundamental. The remaining EU countries will survive the Brexit crisis and may set Europe sailing in new directions, leaving Britain somewhat ironically more fully free to be alone playing the role of a sovereign castaway on an island largely of its own making. While Brexit may have enhanced Britain's sovereignty, it did not free its foreign policy, which remains conflicted between its anti-isolationist goals and the international community's reluctance to accept the alternative roles it seeks to play. The outcome of the long game is still anyone's guess, but the opening act of the Brexit play has set the stage for a difficult finale.

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