

# Brexit will affect, but not determine, the EU's roles in a changing world arena



*What effects might Brexit have on the EU's capacity to play an effective role in the world arena? **Michael Smith** writes that the Withdrawal Agreement suggests both the UK and EU will have to reassess their global roles and their discourses of globalism, but whereas for the UK this is an existential problem, for the EU it is part of a continuing evolution – and one which is likely to be shaped and re-shaped more by global forces than by the changing status of Britain.*

Both the EU and the UK have well-developed discourses of globalism and their places within a global system. For the UK, this has evolved from the original doctrine of the ['three circles'](#) inspired by Churchillian rhetoric after World War II, through the 'retreat to Europe' in the 1970s and into the current image of a 'buccaneering' global Britain projected by many Brexiteers, including the Prime Minister. As part of this evolution, for at least some Eurosceptic Britons, membership of the European Community and then the EU was defined as part of a defeat and a retreat from global power, and this conception has played its part in recent Brexiteer rhetoric. For the EU and the Brussels institutions, the discourse of globalism has been more about how the Union might realise a global role, initially as a 'civilian' or 'normative' power and more recently as a power of a conventional type. The [EU's Global Strategy](#) published in 2016 expressed this view of a 'strategically autonomous' Union, wielding at least some of the attributes of a 'normal' power to pursue a harder-edged role in the world arena.

A study of discourse and rhetoric, however, tells us little about how things might actually develop. As argued by my article in a recent special issue on post-Brexit EU policies, one way of exploring how discourses are converted into policy and action is to assess the [roles conceived and played](#) by the UK and the EU. In this way, it is possible to see the focus on ['global Britain'](#) as a way of conceiving a new and more expansive global role, and to see the EU's Global Strategy as expressing the aim of playing a new and more hard-edged role in the world. But the key is to look at the ways these roles might develop in specific areas of policy, and to see how they might interact in the future. The picture is necessarily a mixed one, but it points towards more fundamental problems for the UK than for the EU as a consequence of Brexit. The real problems for the EU come from elsewhere, as a look at several policy areas indicates.

Central to the future relationship between the UK and the EU is the focus on [trade](#) and [development](#). Much of the attention of negotiators and the public for the next year is likely to be on this area and particularly on trade. Both the EU and post-Brexit UK are ['trading states'](#), highly dependent on international conditions to achieve prosperity and domestic stability. But for the UK, the question of trade in a post-Brexit world will be conditioned by the continuing vulnerability, shaping its capacity to negotiate favourable agreements not only with the EU but also with a large group of powerful potential partners. For the EU, the challenge will not be as sharp – the loss of the UK is significant but not fundamental – but there are other challenges in an increasingly polarised global political economy, from the [US, China and beyond](#). The linked question of development is arguably less challenging since there are already mechanisms aimed at coordinating development assistance activities among a mixed constellation of governmental and non-governmental organisations in specific regions; so the [post-Brexit relationship](#) between the UK and the EU is in principle capable of being managed, assuming that basic changes in UK and EU policies are avoided.



**Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, speaking at the World Economic Forum on 22 January 2020, Credit: [World Economic Forum \(CC BY-NC-SA 2.0\)](#)**

A second key area of interaction between the UK and the EU in a post-Brexit world is that of [security and defence](#). For the British, separation from the infrastructure of EU security cooperation (both military and non-military) would constitute a major challenge to practices and processes built up for decades – practices and processes to which the UK has made a central contribution, despite their awkwardness in specific cases. This is particularly true of non-military cooperation in areas such as the fight against terrorism and the security aspects of migration. Whilst [NATO](#) might be seen as a substitute in some respects, the depth and extent of cooperation in the EU context has been both distinctive and cumulative. For the EU, the loss of the UK's links to intelligence networks – for example, the ['five eyes'](#) grouping – and of the more general British capacity to deal effectively with global security problems, is a genuine loss, and one that constitutes an incentive to the negotiation of post-Brexit arrangements; but not all [EU member states](#) are convinced of the benefits of a close security relationship (beyond NATO) with the British, partly because of the UK's close links with the US and partly because of recent scandals relating to the UK's failures in police and judicial cooperation.

This uncertainty in security and defence links closely with the third area of post-Brexit uncertainty: [transatlantic relations](#). The [challenge of the Trump administration](#) is in many ways a crystallisation of trends that have been noticeable for a while: a US focus on hard power and military methods as opposed to soft power and negotiation, the globalism of US policies and the shift of US attention to the Indo-Pacific and the Asia-Pacific regions, the increasing weaponisation of trade and economic policies in US foreign policy. For the British, this is the sharpest of dilemmas: their security and economic interests dictate a complex and sensitive balance between apparently irreconcilable forces in the US and the EU, a balance thrown into strong relief by recent disputes over the role of [Huawei](#) in 5G telecommunications, over [policy towards Iran](#), and over a range of [trade issues](#). This potent mix will only become more disabling in post-Brexit framing of the 'global Britain' discourse, again pointing to the exposed and vulnerable position of the UK. For the EU, as noted above, the close links between the UK and the US are challenging as they look to negotiate the future relationship with London, and the EU has itself proved vulnerable to the Trump challenge; but the political economies of scale offered by [EU collective action](#) can potentially prove an important insulating factor.

Both London and Brussels will find it difficult to translate role conceptions into role design and institutionalisation, and both will experience problems of role performance in the post-Brexit world. For the UK, however, characterised by exposure and vulnerability in many areas, the challenge is more fundamental than for the EU; after all, the debate about the EU's proper role in the global arena has been going on for fifty years, and there is an accumulation of habits of collective action (and inaction) that can be drawn upon. The defection of the UK is thus in principle a manageable challenge; less easily managed are the large changes in the global arena that threaten to marginalise the EU in a more polarised and geopolitics-centred world. Whilst this is evidently recognised in the new EU leadership, and the discourse of geopolitics has strengthened in recent months, there is no evidence yet that this challenge can easily be overcome.

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*Note: This article first appeared on our sister site, [LSE Brexit](#). It gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.*

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