

Advancing human rights in a post-Brexit era: Global or Wavering Britain?

The UK has traditionally exerted significant influence on the global human rights agenda through diplomacy. Sean Molloy and Rhona Smith explore the future of this influence, particularly in the context of Brexit. Their analysis casts doubt on the unfettered optimism of 'Global Britain' – the idea that the UK can emerge from its ties with the EU as an influential actor in the field of human rights.

The UK has been at the forefront of developing human rights law and norms and exporting them globally. One way to do so is through diplomatic efforts. Human rights diplomacy, as it is often termed, refers to the utilisation of diplomatic activities channelled towards the promotion and protection of human rights to alter the practices of those capable of impacting them.

In our [latest research](#), we examined the UK contributions to human rights mechanisms within the [Human Rights Council](#) (HRC) – those initiatives which, at their core, exist to help promote the improvement of human rights around the globe. We suggested that these mechanisms, which include the [Universal Periodic Review](#), interactions with [Special Procedures of the HRC](#), and the drafting and adoption of [HRC Resolutions](#), can be understood as specific opportunities for diplomatic efforts. We also found, perhaps unsurprisingly, that countries like the UK do not use HRC mechanisms to promote human rights more generally but rather to further their own individual human rights priorities.

None of this is, however, particularly ground-breaking or nuanced: countries have their own priorities and a large part of international relations is about how states seek to persuade, induce, demand and inspire others to adopt their values and ideas. What we were more interested in was the extent to which the UK might be able to continue to exert this type of influence going forward. At the core of 'Global Britain' – arguably the flagship project of the UK's post-Brexit foreign affairs – is a sense of optimism that the break with the EU offers new opportunities, due to increased flexibility, autonomy, and leadership. The strengthening of human rights is a fundamental pillar of this project, one that reflects the belief that not only will the UK continue to export human rights abroad, but that it will be better at doing so. We examined three interrelated shifts that might undermine this optimism.

The challenges for 'Global Britain'

Firstly, there are growing examples of the UK drawing back on its support for, and compliance with, human rights norms. If part of the ability to influence other states is the result of a perception of legitimacy of the state deploying its human rights diplomacy, reputational damage could impact the potency of the UK's human rights diplomacy.

Secondly, historically there has been a distinct direction of travel in the international human rights field. Notwithstanding long-confirmed ideological differences between East and West or North and South, frequently liberal democratic and often economically powerful states like the UK have sought to induce other, less liberal and often economically inferior states to take up the human rights mantle. Today, however, wider geopolitical changes have seen a rise of new powers capable of staving off such demands, and a corresponding lessening of this influence. Often adopting very different ideas and priorities about rights in general, the specific rights to be prioritised and the countries deemed to require intervention, the ability of countries like the UK to exert influence is changing with the emergence of other influential actors.

Finally, while the UK has benefitted from its membership of the powerful EU, withdrawing from it raises questions regarding the UK's international policies generally, and specifically in the HRC.

A convergence of issues

The extent of each of these changes is, as of yet, uncertain. Moreover, questions arise as to which particular shift is likely to have the greatest impact. We suggest that it is the convergence of these changes that is likely to have the greatest effect on the UK's ability to exert influence. For instance, the UK's double standards in the area of human rights are longstanding.

Examples include the role of UK security actors in such places as Iraq and Northern Ireland. However, previously, the UK, as a member of the EU, could point to human rights developments brought about by the supranational organization as an example of its own human rights record, regularly aligning with the EU position on human rights issues in the HRC. Without this cover, the UK is less able to negate negative human rights interventions by pointing to the human rights progress elsewhere.

Similarly, the pandemic has heightened awareness of human rights more generally, particularly of how each country is able to guarantee individual rights and liberties. This increased societal consciousness in the area of human rights has been brought about by, amongst other things, wide claims of disproportionate and unnecessary infringements on human rights as a response to COVID-19.

While there has long been opposition to human rights as a universal concept, there has always been a strong rebuttal of claims to cultural relativism, in particular by the UK. Yet, the UK's departure from the EU has rendered building trade alliances much more of a preference (arguably necessity) than when operating within the single market community. This could not only mean that less attention is afforded to promoting human rights but also that the UK will develop trade relationships with countries previously side-lined as a result of their human rights record and reputation. Thus, the aforementioned shifts cannot be viewed in isolation or weighed independently from wider geopolitical global shifts and developments.

Uncertain futures

Underpinning the ability of the UK to act as a leader is its continuing influence. We suggest that the UK's influence in HRC mechanisms is bound up in a combination of its power, its perception as a human rights-compliant country and its geopolitical position and allegiances. Understood as such, the optimism associated with the opportunities that will emerge post-Brexit cannot be detached from the sources of this influence and the wider context and shifts threatening the status quo.

For more information, see the authors' accompanying paper in the [Cambridge Review of International Affairs](#)

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