

With China ascendant, Britain's ability to shape human rights at the UN now looks uncertain



*Britain has had a powerful influence at the UN Human Rights Council and on development issues generally, writes **Richard Gowan (European Council on Foreign Relations)**. But without the UK, the EU's progressive voice will be weakened. The government hopes to continue to exert influence through non-EU networks, but pressure to tie up trade deals may curtail its criticism of countries like China.*

Despite the prominence of the Security Council, some of the most sensitive post-Brexit UN diplomacy will take place at the Human Rights Council, the General Assembly, and across the development system. Many of the most important advances in international cooperation since the end of the cold war will be at stake (even if the processes involved can be opaque to outsiders). During the last three decades, European countries, the US, and other liberal states have placed human rights at the centre of UN diplomacy. They have also pushed the UN development machinery to modernise and adapt to cover not only traditional aid but also gender issues, climate change, and conflict prevention.

The UK has been pivotal in both processes. At the Human Rights Council in Geneva, British diplomats have far deeper networks with non-European countries than most of their EU peers. Their counterparts in New York speak on behalf of the Union in roughly half of the human rights cases in which the bloc has a common position. The UK typically argues for a strong emphasis on individual and political rights rather than softer formulations on socio-economic rights, but is a little more flexible on this than some northern EU members. London's influence on development policy is even greater. It is not only one of the top donors to UN agencies, but also a leading source of ideas. British research organisations such as the [Overseas Development Institute](#) play a crucial role in informing not only British policy but also EU and US debates.



EU High Representative Federica Mogherini attends a conference on supporting Syria. Photo: [EU External Action Service](#) via a [CC-BY-NC 2.0 licence](#)

In New York, the UK and other major European donors align to promote aid effectiveness. This does not necessarily make them popular inside or outside the EU. The British can take a tough approach to aid negotiations, keeping a constant eye on costs, whereas other EU members are often willing to be a little more political, offering non-Western countries sweeteners for the sake of a deal.

Even if many EU members think the British can be too rigid in aid debates, they also admit that it is nice to have them around to protect the bloc's budgets. It is unclear who, after Brexit, will pick up the slack in human rights debates in New York and Geneva, and whether the EU can remain robust in development negotiations without British support. Equally, there is little certainty that the UK will be able to pursue its policy lines as firmly outside the EU as it has done inside the bloc.

While the British usually urge the EU to be firm at the UN, they also benefit from the cover the Union provides them on tough issues. At the General Assembly and the Human Rights Council, EU members coordinate their efforts on some of the human rights issues likeliest to offend China, Myanmar, and North Korea. This prevents Beijing from singling out an EU member to penalise.

UN watchers differ over whether Brexit will increase or reduce the UK's influence on aid and human rights issues. The optimistic interpretation (for London) is that, freed from EU coordination duties, the British will be able to speak more freely and combine with non-European states to advance their agenda.^[1] The UK has a good track record of building coalitions with non-Western countries on human rights issues, suggesting that it has an effective strategy it can follow in future. The pessimistic interpretation is that, once outside the EU, Britain will have to curtail its ambitions to avoid being singled out for criticism. For example, it is difficult to imagine that London would take a lead role on resolutions that could offend China if it was conducting trade talks with the country.

The UK will in any case play a somewhat less prominent role on human rights after 2019, when its current term on the Human Rights Council ends. It will be three years before the British can rejoin the council.

London will retain numerous channels through which to influence both UN policy and the EU after Brexit (even without some form of EU-UK coordination) as an influential member of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, as well as the boards of UN agencies such as the Development Programme. But if its policy influence is reasonably secure for now, its ability to shape the overall direction of the political debate on aid and human rights is uncertain. China's current drive to embed its state-centric principles and language in UN resolutions is probably only the first stage in a drawn-out effort to reshape the organisation's standards. Although Chinese officials currently remain willing to compromise in negotiations, close observers suspect that they are setting out an ideological stall to show other states how they aim to reshape the UN during the next decade.

If the UK will have to tread carefully, other EU members will simply need to work out how to fill the gap it leaves in EU coordination mechanisms after Brexit. At the most basic level, they will have to divvy up negotiating and speaking duties on those issues which the UK has led on for the EU, chewing up time and resources. (By the same token, the UK will also need to invest more diplomatic effort in debates it previously left to other EU members to handle). The number of European countries able to substitute for the UK effectively is limited. Marc Limon, director of the Universal Rights Group (which monitors the Human Rights Council), argues that even France and Germany lack diplomatic networks comparable to Britain's. He estimates that the next best-connected EU member is Portugal, which has a good ear for non-Western positions, while the Netherlands is strong on the rules and norms of the Security Council (one of the reasons that it has partnered with the UK to keep the US engaged). More conservative EU members – including Hungary, Malta, and Poland – may take the opening provided by Brexit to rein in what they see as the egregiously progressive norms on issues such as gender and sexuality pushed by more liberal members, sowing more dissension in the bloc. At a minimum, these conservatives have the potential to stop the EU establishing new progressive positions at the UN as a bloc – at a time when other Western UN members, such as Canada and Norway, are loudly promoting liberal positions.

Nordic countries and the Netherlands have more influence on development policy than Germany, despite the fact that Berlin's spending should make it a superpower in this area. Even so, mid-sized and small European donors tend to focus on specific UN agencies and priorities rather than the development system in its entirety (a tendency suited to the UN's sprawling Sustainable Development Goals, which set out 169 targets for states to adopt). Finland, for example, focuses on women's rights, while Slovakia prioritises security sector reform. This strategy is sensible in the sense that it maximises a country's influence on specific policy areas, but it appears to have prevented many states from gaining an overview of the UN's activities. One notable exception is Ireland, which often manages complex General Assembly aid negotiations because it can speak convincingly to both EU and developing states.

There is a risk that, as the UK adjusts its diplomatic posture after Brexit and EU members get up to speed on processes that the British formerly led on their behalf, China and other non-Western powers will intensify their efforts to reframe political debates on development and human rights. Some UN officials believe that the battle to defend a liberal vision of human rights at the UN has already been lost. The disruption arising from Brexit will, at a minimum, hamper Europe's ability to protect its principles.

Reference

[1] On the UK's work with non-EU states, see Megan and Karen E. Smith (2017) *UK diplomacy at the UN after Brexit: challenges and opportunities*. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 19 (3). pp. 527-542.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE. It is an excerpt from [Separation anxiety: European influence at the UN after Brexit](#) (European Council on Foreign Relations, May 2018).

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