

# Britain's role in world affairs will be dwarfed post-Brexit

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Britain's future role in Europe and the world is one of the key disagreements in the Brexit debate: whether it'll surge or decline is the question? **Mareike Kleine** focuses on an aspect that has so far received less attention in the debate, namely the relationship between domestic politics and Britain's role in world affairs, and concludes that a Brexit will likely condemn the UK to parochialism.



Most [proponents](#) of the Britain's exit from the EU allege that it would strengthen rather than weaken the UK's role in world affairs. Most [foreign policy and trade pundits](#) disagree with this claim, citing the damaging uncertainty in the aftermath of an "Out"-vote and the UK's [diminished bargaining power](#) in future trade negotiations.

In this post, I will focus on an aspect that has so far received less attention in the debate, namely the relationship between domestic politics and Britain's role in world affairs. To exaggerate only slightly, because of this relationship, Brexit will likely condemn the UK to parochialism.

[Leave campaigners](#) base their argument on the assumption that, without the EU, the UK will be free to pursue its enlightened, rational foreign policy, as it did in the past. I believe that this is a very questionable assumption that is based on a biased reading of British history, overconfidence in a supposed British foreign policy culture and, most importantly, an ignorance of the UK's changed political landscape.



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First, and most apparent, the public has [lost interest](#) in global engagement, certainly engagement by military means.

Second, we know from the political economy literature that majoritarian electoral systems, as in the UK, tend to be more responsive to protectionist pressures, *ceteris paribus*, than systems of proportional representation, as they exist on the continent. My colleague Stephanie Rickard found that this [holds true](#) not only for tariffs, but also for non-tariff barriers and subsidies.

European Union law against non-discrimination and the EU's very successful and highly effective competition policy prevent government from national protectionist reflexes, [as demonstrated in aftermath of the financial crisis](#) when

Europe was spared the protectionist backlash that many feared.

How will British governments fight off protectionist forces and damaging beggar-thy-neighbor impulses without the disciplining power of EU law and the EU's competition policy? It is quite possible that these interests would hijack the post-Brexit renegotiations with the EU as well as the renegotiations of the many Preferential Trade Agreements that the UK will drop out of in the event of Brexit. Great Britain is likely going to end up more cut off global markets than ever before.

Third, there is [substantial evidence](#) that governments with unstable domestic coalitions become more equivocal and hesitant to commit. Although it looks like the Conservative party will stay in power for a long time to come, it will still have to tip toe on eggshells in order not to upset the many cross-cutting frictions within the UK. Just to mention a few:

- The Conservative party itself will continue to fight over the UK's specific relationship to the EU, as demonstrated by the frictions within the cabinet over Brexit.
- UKIP is not going to go away after Brexit. The [potentially arduous renegotiations](#) with the EU will offer plenty of opportunities for UKIP to mobilize and exploit frictions within the Conservative party.
- These fights will put a strain on England's relationship with the more [pro-European Scotland](#) and the [deeply divided Northern Ireland](#).
- Any trade negotiation with the EU and third countries will lay bare the [massive imbalances](#) between London and the rest of the UK.

These unstable and volatile domestic interests will make any ruling government very hesitant to pursue a clear and stable foreign policy. This ambiguity will in turn make the UK a [very unattractive](#) because a potentially unreliable cooperating partner, to the EU and to the rest of the world, [no matter how special the relationship](#) .

In short: Think not Norway, Switzerland or Singapore. Think Liechtenstein, and you will get a picture of Britain's future status in world affairs.

*This post represents the views of the author and not those of BrexitVote, nor the LSE. Image by [Mike Peel](#) CC-BY-SA-4.0.*

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