

British foreign policy after Brexit: A two-level constructivist perspective

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Introduction

When the British electorate voted to leave the European Union in June 2016, they immediately triggered an extended period of political crisis and diplomatic awkwardness. Having ignored warnings from economic, business and financial elites that leaving the EU would damage the British economy, 52% of voters sided with a handful of elite ‘Brexiters’ who promised that ‘Brexit’ would enable Britain to ‘take back control’ – over immigration, above all (Goodwin and Heath 2016). Prime Minister David Cameron, who triggered the referendum and campaigned hard for ‘remain’, resigned at once. His successor as Conservative Party leader and Prime Minister, former Home Secretary Theresa May, set aside her nominal opposition to Brexit and promised to uphold the referendum result. Over the following months May struggled to build consensus – within her Cabinet, carefully constructed to balance pro and anti-EU factions among her parliamentary colleagues, or in the House of Commons, let alone the country as a whole. She made mistakes: refusing to consult on what Brexit should look like, contesting – all the way to the Supreme Court – the question of whether MPs should have a say on triggering the Brexit process, proposing an EU Withdrawal Bill that granted sweeping legislative powers to ministers and calling an early general election that eliminated her small parliamentary majority. But she also appeared to face a near-impossible task. The Brexit vote raised fundamental questions about British national identity, about the sort of country Britain was, had been in the past, and should in future become. It revealed a populace deeply divided – between elites and public opinion, and between different demographic groups. Reconciling these challenges, and devising a long-term national response, would always have been difficult. Charting Britain’s foreign policy course in future looks essentially impossible.

This paper considers possible future directions for British foreign policy in the aftermath of Brexit. Adopting a constructivist perspective, it identifies the distinct rhetorical claims advanced by competing actors at both the domestic and international levels about the sort of state Britain can and should be. Building on recent advances in role theory – informed by insights from neoclassical realism – it highlights the significant challenge British decision-makers face in developing a coherent post-Brexit international stance. By voting to leave the EU, Britain has already chosen a course that conflicts with what its key international allies want – neither the rest of the EU, nor the US, nor the Commonwealth countries see Brexit as a positive step. Domestic elites, most of whom backed Britain remaining in the EU, are locked in fraught contestation about what Brexit should look like, or even whether it should happen at all. Public opinion, meanwhile, oscillates between determination that the referendum result should be upheld, concern about its consequences, disappointment that the key factor driving the ‘leave’ vote – anger at relatively high levels of immigration – appears of little importance to policymakers, and distrust of anyone involved in the negotiation process. In the short-to-medium term, these competing forces seem set to prevent Britain taking clear international positions, and to ensure that those positions it

does manage to claim for itself lack external validation. Over the medium-to-long term, however, it seems likely that Britain will have to conform to the expectations its allies have of it – even if, as also seems likely, those expectations evolve meanwhile.

Constructivism, neoclassical realism and role theory

This paper begins from constructivist ontological assumptions about the nature of political life, and in particular from Nicholas Onuf's (1989) key argument that social reality emerges from the co-constitutive interaction between individual actors and their social environment. As Walter Carlsnaes (1992) has emphasized, in seeking to understand foreign policy in particular it is necessary to consider how developments at different levels of analysis mutually shape and reinforce each other. That can mean, as it does in Ted Hopf's (2002) work, considering how interactions among states shape their identities, which in turn constrain how they approach future interactions. It often means – as it does in the work of Martha Finnemore (1996), Peter Katzenstein (1996) and Alexander Wendt (1999) – emphasizing the structural pressures imposed on states by the international system. Yet this international-level focus looks unsatisfying to foreign policy analysts like Valerie Hudson (2005) and Juliet Kaarbo (2015), who consider the domestic arena critically important. Nor is it in fact an essential dimension of constructivist thinking. Both Roxanne Doty (1993) and Jutta Weldes (1996) have, for example, applied constructivist insights to the analysis of domestic-level pressures that shape foreign policy actions and outcomes. David Patrick Houghton (2007), meanwhile, has argued that FPA can be intergrated with IR by bridging the gap between individual-level cognitive explanations and system-level constructivist explanations.

This paper sides with the foreign policy analysts in arguing that domestic-level social forces matter, while remembering the key insight shared by Onuf, Carlsnaes, and others, that the co-constitution of identity by forces operating at different levels is key. It sides, furthermore, with those scholars – like Friedrich Kratochwil (1989) and John Searle (1995) – who emphasize the central place of language in the intersubjective interactions that constitute political reality. It recognizes Adler's (1997) claim that constructivism can hold the 'middle ground' between rationalist and interpretative epistemological approaches, but ultimately comes down on the interpretative side. Language is too important, and too difficult to study objectively, to decide otherwise. Building on Doty's (1993) distinction between the goals of positivist and interpretative research, it is less interested in why Britain's post-Brexit foreign policy might wind up heading a particular way, and more in how social forces might render different plausible outcomes possible or impossible.

Having established these conceptual foundations, the paper follows Thies and Breuning's (2012) recommendation and adopts role theory as the most plausible theoretical approach for analyzing Brexit in constructivist terms. Role theory entered the foreign policy analysis lexicon through Kalevi Holsti's (1970) account of 'National Role Conceptions'. According to Holsti, foreign policy emerged from the dynamic interaction of how decision-makers saw their state's role in international politics, and what other state leaders expected of them. Given the indeterminacy of the international environment – and, in particular, the key question of whether there is such a thing as international society – Holsti concluded that decision-maker perceptions mattered above all. Naomi Wish (1980) built on Holsti's work by using speeches by 29 leaders of 17 states to show strong correspondence between national role conceptions and four foreign policy behaviours arranged along two axes – co-

operative versus competitive and low status versus high status. Marijke Breuning (1995) took this domestic focus further by reformulating role conceptions as psychological rather than sociological constructs.

More recent scholarship has shifted the balance away from domestic-level variables. Stephen Walker (1981) initially agreed with Holsti that role conceptions appear to be the primary driver of role performance, but introduced ideas from exchange theory to show the importance of external cues in shaping how states conceive of and enact their own role. Cameron Thies (2012) developed this idea by talking about how states are socialized into particular roles through their interactions with others. Sebastian Harnisch (2012) agreed, emphasizing that the state – the ‘ego’ – takes roles while other states – collectively known as the ‘alter’ – make roles. In his analysis of British postwar foreign policy, David McCourt (2011a, 2014) argued convincingly – and contrary to Holsti’s original framing of the issue – that the focus of role theory research should be on the alter rather than on the ego, that states anticipate how others will react, and avoid claiming roles their international counterparts will not accept.

McCourt’s argument works especially well at an abstract level, and comes with good evidence showing British decision-makers carefully calibrating their approach to international politics to meet US and French expectations. In the field of security policy we can see several examples in recent years of British leaders taking the roles these key allies make for them. The Blair government’s enthusiastic participation in the 2003 invasion of Iraq reflected its commitment to the ‘faithful ally’ role laid out for it. British involvement in the 2011 Libyan intervention, and contribution to the coalition against Da’esh from 2014 onwards, also fit that model. At the same time, it is also clear that even in this area the position looks more complicated. The House of Commons vetoed British participation in airstrikes against the Assad regime in Syria in 2013, directly contradicting French (and American) expectations (Strong 2015). President Obama did not wait for British support before commencing operations against Da’esh in June 2014, which was a good thing – the Cameron government did not feel able to risk a parliamentary vote until September. Even then, Cameron limited British operations to Iraqi territory despite the large Da’esh presence (and US engagement) in Syria – a position that lasted until December 2015.

Most role theorists have moved in the opposite direction to McCourt (whose strong grounding in sociological theory stands somewhat in contrast to the more psychological inclinations typical among foreign policy analysts). As Kaarbo (2015) points out, most FPA research focuses on elite level decision-makers, so this focus makes sense. Their most significant recent advances concern what happens when different actors disagree about the role a state should play in the world. Cantir and Kaarbo (2012) discussed two main varieties of clash that can arise. Role conflict emerges when international-level expectations clash with domestic-level conceptions. Role contestation emerges when domestic-level actors disagree amongst themselves. It can be vertical – between elites and masses – or horizontal – among elites – with the latter being somewhat more common. Brummer and Thies (2015), for example, found that horizontal contestation emerged primarily between government ministers and opposition politicians, though inter-bureaucratic and intra-governmental disagreements could also have an impact. Cantir and Kaarbo (2016) noted furthermore that parliament can prove an important site for role contestation.

This reference to parliament highlights a final point raised by role theory research of relevance for this paper. As Thies (2010) pointed out, role theorists need to take not only

the ego and the alter into account, but also the audience for any interaction. McCourt (2011b) captures this point in his distinction between the ‘analytical’ and ‘political’ dimensions of a state’s role, with the former being more objective and substantive and the latter more subjective and rhetorical. Cantir and Kaarbo (2012) echoed this argument with their discussion of how individual actors can use claims about their state’s role strategically, specifically “to achieve particular policy, political or personal goals” (Cantir and Kaarbo 2016, 17). This idea proves helpful in analyzing Brexit, as we will see.

At this point, we take a slight left turn. As the difference in emphasis between, say, McCourt on the one hand and Kaarbo on the other hand makes clear, the role theory literature as a whole reaches no firm conclusions on which matters more – international-level alter role expectations or domestic-level ego role conceptions. To an extent, this indeterminacy makes sense. If a state’s role performance emerges from the dynamic interaction between how it sees itself, and how others see it, neither level will be primary. The relationship, in true constructivist terms, is co-constitutive rather than causal. In this, it resembles Robert Putnam’s (1988) rational choice model of two-level bargaining games. Putnam argued that inter-state negotiations (he focused specifically on trade, but his insights work equally well in other areas) involved policymakers in simultaneous, distinct but interrelated bargaining processes at both international and domestic levels, with both being complicated by the other. If we substitute the construction of Britain’s role in the world for the process of thrashing out a trade deal in Putnam’s model, we wind up with something that accords quite nicely with how role theory sees the foreign policy-making process operating.

Introducing Putnam in this way allows us to bring in his critical insight that positions states take at one level affect the options open to them at the other level. Policymakers who use aggressive rhetoric at home limit their options in dealing with counterparts abroad. Depending on how their domestic audiences view the situation, they might stand to benefit politically from diplomatic failure. Under some circumstances, pursuing the optimum position overall might mean satisficing at both levels – compromising with allied leaders and domestic rivals alike. It might also, however, mean accepting significant costs at one level rather than endure them at the other.

In the case of Britain’s decision to leave the European Union, then, we need to consider the possibility that domestic-level actors will seek to take international-level roles primarily to pursue domestic-level political goals, and conversely that fulfilling international-level expectations might mean generating unacceptable domestic-level costs. We need to take seriously both Holsti’s view – that the international system looks too little like a full society to generate constraining social pressures on policymakers in their pursuit of particular roles – but also McCourt’s counter-argument (which is to some degree analogous to Thies’ work on socialization) that role-taking by an ego is inconceivable without role-making by one or more alter(s), that states cannot take roles unless other states make them, and that what other states do consequently matters more than one single states want. We can reach a partial synthesis by recognizing that Holsti’s argument presumes international-level social pressures can only arise in the context of an international society (presumably in a coherent, English-school style sense), while McCourt’s alter pressures presuppose only the existence of other actors and a degree of interaction among them. From this perspective, Holsti’s argument – that the ego matters more than the alter – probably depends on an excessively tight definition of where international-level role-making pressure comes from. At the same time, it seems equally problematic to accept the most structurally-determined model implied by McCourt’s argument, in which actors have no role. If Brexit tells us

anything, it is surely that states sometimes refuse to take the roles their allies make for them.

We can make some progress in this regard by drawing from another unlikely source – neoclassical realism. In their latest attempt to codify and clarify the neoclassical realist research programme, Norrin Ripsman, Jeffrey Taliaferro and Steven Lobell (2016) introduced an important new idea. Responding to the criticism that the neoclassical realist combination of systemic pressures, individual psychology and domestic politics militated against prediction – that it offered a model, but not a theory, in other words – their latest effort suggested that these different factors worked along different time scales. The signals sent by the international system, they argued, would have the least impact, and be most open to misinterpretation, over the very short term – a matter of hours or days. The difficulties of mobilizing national resources effectively in the face of domestic political challenges would matter over the medium term – a period of weeks, months or a small number of years. Over longer time periods – years, decades and beyond – two things should happen. First, it should be impossible to act consistently in a manner inconsistent with international-level pressures. Second, a state attempting to do so should find its position in the international system changing.

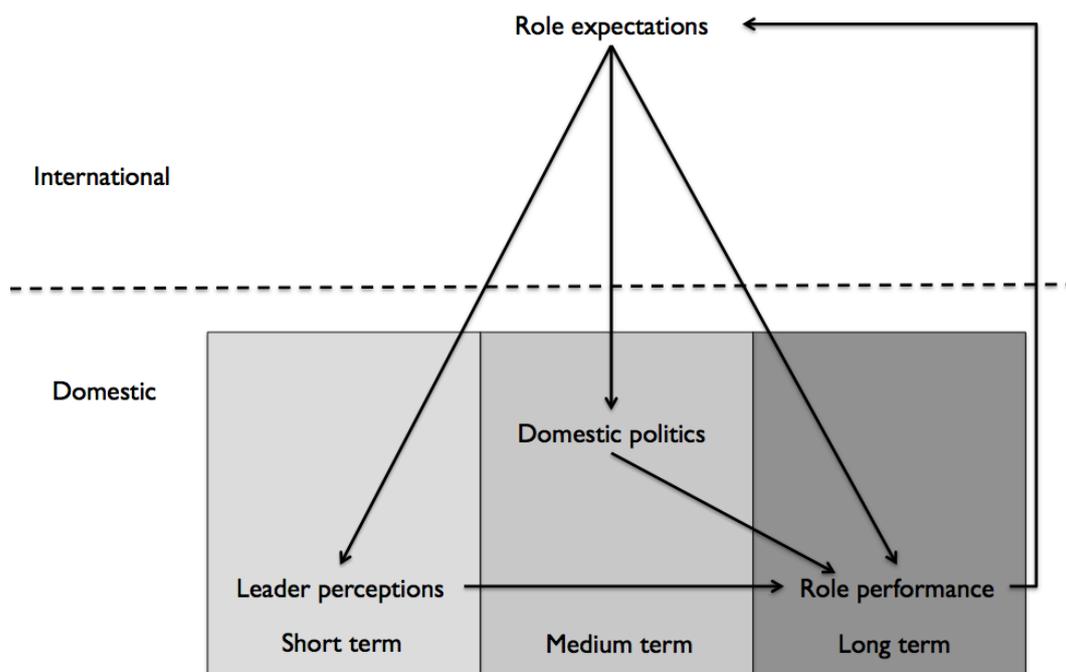


Figure 1: Role theory re-envisioned to account for timeframes.

This idea of timescale has much to offer foreign policy analysis in general – indeed, it seems a shame that the advocates of neoclassical realism have chosen (apparently for professional rather than analytical reasons) to present their work as a refinement of structural realism, with all the attendant accusations of degenerate theorizing that entails, rather than as a codification of FPA. It seems particularly apposite for role theory work, given the sensitivity role theorists already show to the dynamic interaction between international and domestic-level pressures. If we replace the material balance of power in the international system – the key independent variable in the neoclassical realist account – with international-level role

expectations, we can adapt the wider model to our purposes. We wind up with the model set out in Figure 1, which adapts a similar figure from Ripsman et al (2016, 34).

In the first instance, international-level role expectations set the context in which states seek to take on particular roles. In the short term, their actual role-taking is influenced by how their leaders interpret the signals they receive from the international system about what roles are acceptable. In the medium term, individual perceptions matter less, since the volume of information about international expectations will go up over time – as will the range of actors involved in interpreting that information, reducing the significance of idiosyncratic forces. Scope remains, however, for the government to fail to win sufficient domestic support to enable it to perform the role expected of it. This is the timeframe over which domestic-level role contestation matters. Finally, in the long term, neither individual psychology nor domestic-level role contestation matters. Either shorter-term variations from international-level expectations will have cancelled each other out, or – as the feedback arrow to the right of figure 1 suggests, the state's sustained failure to meet international expectations over time will change what other states expect of it. A state that consistently fails to act like a great power in the face of demands to accept the responsibilities associated with that status will eventually find other states stop thinking of it in that way.

We are left, then, with a refined version of role theory, a two-level constructivist model inspired by neoclassical realism. This is the model applied to Brexit over the following pages.

International role conflict and Brexit

It is quite clear that Britain's decision to leave the European Union conflicts with the expectations other states had for it. Oliver (2016, 1325), for example, writing before the referendum, found that beyond the EU, "there is next to no support for the idea that a Brexit would enhance Britain's standing in the world". Within the EU, meanwhile, Oliver identified broad consensus among governing elites that Brexit would constitute a regretful act of self-harm by a valued partner. European Council President Donald Tusk (2017), for example, met the UK's Article 50 notification with the statement that "there is no reason to pretend that this is a happy day, neither in Brussels, nor in London. After all, most Europeans...wish that we would stay together, not drift apart...we already miss you". The only positive note Tusk struck came when he observed that Brexit had made the remaining EU member states more determined to work together and to strengthen their cooperation.

Oliver and Williams (2016), meanwhile, noted that Britain's decision to leave the EU undermined to some degree its commitment to a 'special relationship' with the United States. President Obama, for example, visited the UK in the run-up to the referendum vote to make the US position quite clear. Noting that "part of being friends is being honest", Obama warned that Britain would be at the "back of the queue" as far as the US was concerned. Given the EU's far greater size and wealth, the US much preferred Britain to stay in. At the same time, as Obama (2016) remarked on the day after the referendum result, Brexit does not affect Britain's role in NATO, "a vital cornerstone of US foreign, security and economic policy". The US-UK "special relationship" would survive, he insisted. Then-candidate Donald Trump (2016), meanwhile, responded much more positively to the Brexit vote, pledging to "strengthen our ties with a free and independent Britain, deepening

our bonds in commerce, culture and mutual defence”. Trump’s subsequent elevation to the presidency suggested the US might be more positive about Brexit in future.

Brexit clearly raised questions amongst the remaining EU member states about Britain’s commitment to what Gaskarth (2014, 566) identified as its “regional partner” role. Instead of participating actively – and, as Menon and Salter (2016) note, effectively – in the European project, Britain had opted to sit outside. Tusk’s emphasis on the determination of the remaining member states to stay united, a position Oliver (2016) predicted and one maintained throughout the first year of Brexit negotiations, suggests Britain had little chance of successfully disrupting EU unity in order to promote its own particular interests. Indeed, Oliver and Williams’ (2016, 566) suggestion that Britain might wind up playing a “spoiler” role towards the EU looks unlikely to play out for the simple reason that the EU is refusing to be spoiled.

Brexit’s impact on transatlantic relations looks, at first glance, more difficult to resolve. The transition between the Obama and Trump administrations triggered massive upheaval in the roles the US claimed for itself, while also affecting the roles it sought to make for other states. Given President Trump’s oft-expressed nativism and protectionism, it seems clear on the one hand that he would support a decision informed at least in part by similar sentiments. On the other hand, it also looks less clear that he actually will fulfill promises he made about boosting US-UK trade links. As Marsh and Baylis (2006) noted, the idea that the US and UK enjoy a ‘special relationship’, and that Britain should play the role of ‘faithful ally’, enjoys considerable prominence in British foreign policy decision-makers’ minds. Although, as Hood (2008) identifies, the domestic controversy surrounding the invasion of Iraq in 2003 undermined the picture somewhat, it seems clear – as Sperling (2010) argues – that the US, UK and third party states expect Britain to act as the closest US ally. Withdrawing from the EU damages Britain’s ability to do that, but does not eliminate it (Oliver and Williams 2016). Britain remains in NATO and continues to co-operate closely with the US across a range of security fields.

Oliver (2016) additionally pointed out that Commonwealth leaders – despite their initial qualms about Britain joining the EEC in 1973 – generally do not accept that Brexit offers an opportunity to re-ignite post-imperial relations. Instead, most see Brexit as further evidence of Britain’s failure to adapt to the aftermath of Empire. Britain might try to claim a revived role as the centre of the Commonwealth, but that is not a role other Commonwealth states will willingly make for it.

Domestic intra-elite horizontal contestation

As Whitman (2016) rightly notes, the Cameron government called the 2016 Brexit referendum primarily to address intra-elite tensions. Though most British elites supported Britain’s continued membership of the EU – Chatham House (2015, 2-3) found 72% of respondents in favour and some 50% against the idea of having a referendum in the first place – a relatively small group of elite policy entrepreneurs led the charge towards the EU exit. Chief among them were the long-term, on-again, off-again leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) Nigel Farage, and the Conservative Mayor of London and MP for Uxbridge Boris Johnson. Both were charismatic, though each appealed to quite distinct voter groups. Johnson’s decision to join the ‘leave’ camp, breaking with his long-standing ally and friend David Cameron, was widely interpreted as a key moment in its development –

but also as an attempt to position himself as Cameron's successor, a good example of how individual actors can engage in role contestation for reasons other than to change their state's role performances. Neither Farage nor Johnson really advanced the intellectual argument for leaving the EU – that task fell to others figures such as Justice Secretary Michael Gove, who led the official Vote Leave campaign. Instead they brought political star power to a movement otherwise short on elite support.

During the referendum campaign, the 'leave' group divided into two rival camps – Vote Leave, led by Gove, Johnson and Conservative MEP Daniel Hannan, and Leave.EU, led by millionaire businessman Arron Banks and endorsed by Farage. At first, this elite division looked like a political weakness. In due course it proved more of a strength. Vote Leave initially emphasized a set of arguments for leaving the EU based around the idea that British sovereignty suffered from participation in supranational institutions. Gove's (2016) statement explaining his decision to campaign for Brexit summed this case up quite well. Its contrast to the pro-Remain stance taken by Eurosceptic former Conservative leader and foreign secretary Lord Hague, however, summed up the disagreements among even those quite close to David Cameron. Hague (2016) pointed out that Britain had actually largely shaped the EU's direction of travel to fit its own image of what European integration should look like, and that the case for leaving looked quite different to the position when he fought (and lost) the 2001 general election on a promise to 'keep the pound'. Leave.EU, meanwhile, focused on immigration, a consistent hot-button electoral issue for UKIP, but one that elites remained mostly relaxed about. Though Vote Leave in due course shifted focus more towards immigration, this initial division of effort appeared to help the Leave campaign reach quite distinct groups of voters. The immigration argument itself, meanwhile, allowed the Leave campaigns to raise an issue on which their Remain counterpart was weak (Menon and Salter 2016).

It also, however, raised difficulties in the aftermath of the referendum vote. With the vast majority of MPs, most business leaders, most Scottish voters and sizeable portions of the media having voted Remain, newly-minted Prime Minister Theresa May (herself nominally a Remain supporter) faced significant challenges in conceptualization Britain's post-Brexit international role. The small size of her parliamentary majority (eliminated entirely by the snap election she called in June 2017) left her forced to accept defeat on key votes, and struggling to win over large groups of both opposition and government MPs. Even within the Cabinet, divisions remained, with Chancellor of the Exchequer Philip Hammond preferring to keep Britain as closely economically aligned as possible with the EU while Brexit Secretary David Davis and Trade Secretary Liam Fox preferred to sever Britain's EU links completely to create maximum room for regulatory divergence in search of new markets. In parliament, May had to contend with the European Research Group, a back-bench pro-Brexit caucus comprised of more than enough MPs to remove her as party leader and headed up by the eccentric MP for North Somerset, Jacob Rees-Mogg; the ten Democratic Unionist Party MPs, on whose support she depended after 2017 and who staunchly opposed any Brexit that weakened Northern Ireland's connection to the UK – a goal that implied the re-establishment of a hard border with the Republic of Ireland, a violation of the Good Friday Agreement; and the Labour Party, whose leader's ambivalent stance on the virtues of EU membership reflected a broader distrust of free markets that stood in stark contrast to the faith shown by pro-Brexit ministers. In short, the May government found itself politically weak, and subject to contradictory pressures.

Most British political, social and economic elites wanted Britain to remain in the EU, yet the May government insisted that it must leave. Of those who wanted Britain to leave, some preferred a version of leaving that returned some sovereignty to London while minimizing the disruption to business. Others were willing to accept considerable disruption in order to maximize the return of sovereignty. Some wanted a post-Brexit settlement that allowed Britain maximum flexibility in terms of striking new trade deals, in particular in terms of consumer, environmental and workers' protections, which would all likely need to be cut to secure large trade deals with the US or China. Others – Jeremy Corbyn being a good example – would accept a reduction in trade to protect these rights. It was clear even before the referendum that there was no elite consensus on any post-Brexit role that Britain could play in the world, whether as a promoted or international institutions, regional partner or useful ally to the US. Much of the debate turned on purely parochial matters, and when it did alight on questions of international politics, too few of the contradictions involved in the different arguments for Brexit were addressed. Even then, with most elites opposed to Brexit in the first place, reaching consensus was going to be tough.

Domestic elite-mass vertical contestation

If reaching agreement among elites about what Brexit should mean for Britain's role in the world looked challenging, generating any sort of consensus between elites and the mass public seemed impossible. As Bevir, Daddow and Schnapper (2015) found, there has never been a real mass consensus in Britain on what its role should be in Europe. Chatham House (2015) found similar levels of belief amongst both mass and elite respondents in the idea that Britain should seek the role of great power, but considerable disagreement over whether that entailed EU membership or not. While 72% of elites supported EU membership, just 40% of mass respondents concurred. Goodwin and Heath's (2016) initial analysis of the referendum result found that Remain voters were clustered primarily in areas of higher income and higher levels of educational attainment than was common in the country as a whole. This finding made sense in light of Hobolt's (2016) observation that attitudes to immigration – and especially hostility to immigration and distrust of elites – explain much of the individual-level variation in referendum voting behavior. As Henderson et al. (2016) concluded, this variation encompassed differences in terms of how salient individual voters considered economic and cultural motivations, and described significant variation between the UK's distinct nations.

One reason why British politicians have traditionally shunned referendums is that they reduce elite involvement in the policymaking process – a particular concern in the case of Britain's EU membership (2016). With the Leave campaign having secured victory in the referendum vote itself, however, the task of actually taking Britain out of Europe fell back into the hands of elites. This caused, and looks set to continue to cause, considerable controversy, not least because the referendum vote revealed relatively little about what voters actually wanted, but also because many of the things they wanted conflicted with what even pro-Brexit elites sought. The clash was best summed up by Boris Johnson's (2018) attempt to make the case for a 'liberal Brexit'. As Stephen Bush (2018) put it, "the Brexit vote was not a liberal moment or anything like it. Yes, many of its cheerleaders in the press are liberals. Yes, its most thoughtful policy thinkers are liberals. But the impulses that drove the majority of Leave voters weren't". Matthew Goodwin (2018) made a similar point on Twitter, noting that the vast majority of Leave voters felt threatened by immigration above all else. A report from the Legatum Institute co-authored by senior Leave campaigner

Matthew Elliott drew similar conclusions, finding that most British voters preferred more statist, more protectionist and much less liberal (in either social or economic terms) policies than even pro-Brexit elites (Elliott and Kanagasooriam 2017).

There is a certain irony about this position, given the work Leave campaigners did in encouraging distrust of elite politics both during and after the referendum. Michael Gove (2016), for example, famously decreed that British people “have had enough of experts” during a Sky News interview with Faisal Islam. Crucially, for our purposes, Islam had just referred not only to elites, but also to “the US, India, China, Australia, every single one of our allies...the IMF...five former NATO Secretaries-General” as opponents of Brexit. Gove’s response – “I’m not asking the public to trust me, I’m asking them to trust themselves” proved hugely effective in terms of the referendum debate, but it raised serious issues about how the apparent clash between what most Brexit voters wanted from Brexit and what most pro-Brexit elites wanted from it could possibly be resolved.

Conclusion: British foreign policy after Brexit

In sum, the decision to leave the European Union left Britain reeling from three distinct crises, each affecting the sorts of roles it could conceivably play in international politics. The different expectations operating at different levels are summarized in Figure 2.

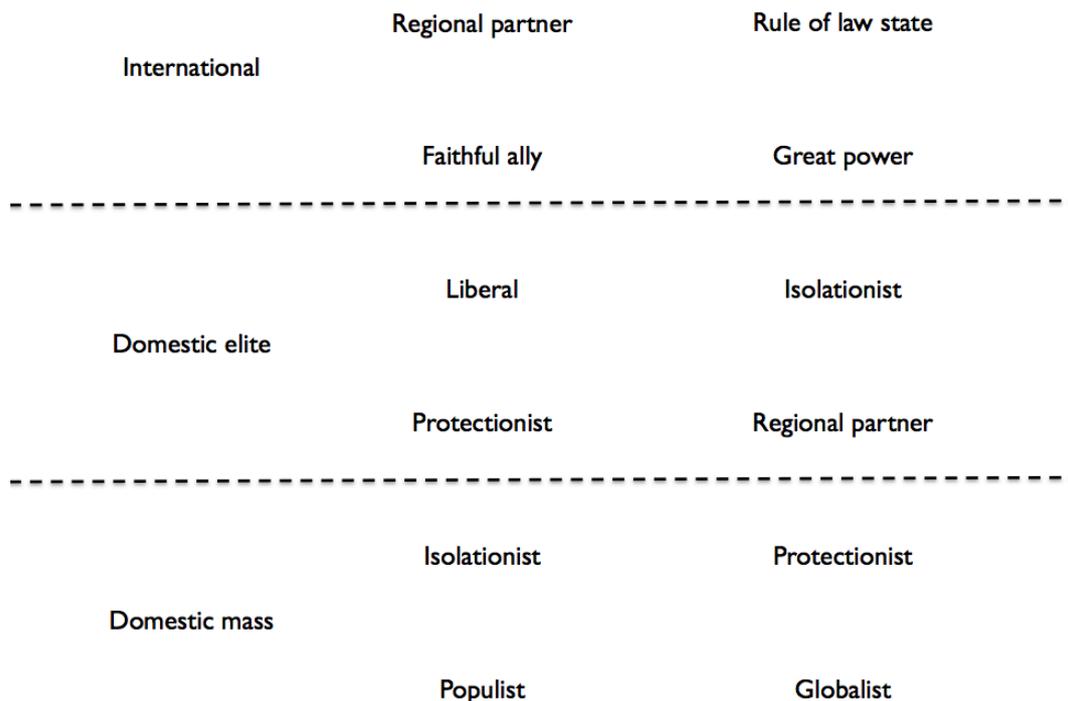


Figure 2: Role expectations for Brexit Britain at different levels of analysis.

First, it created international-level role conflict, with the electorate ignoring – and even, to a degree, actively rebelling against – the view of Britain’s main allies and trading partners that it should remain an EU member as part of broader roles of regional partner, faithful ally and rule of law state. There is no version of Brexit that meets what Britain’s key international partners want, since what they want is for Britain to remain in the EU.

Second, the Brexit vote created domestic-level intra-elite horizontal role contestation, as a small number of entrepreneurial figures led the Leave campaign to victory against a much larger majority of political and economic elites. That division – between a Eurosceptic minority and a pro-European majority – survived the referendum result, though many ‘soft’ Remain supporters – Theresa May among them – embraced the situation. Divisions within the Leave campaign, furthermore, meant even the minority of elites who wanted Brexit took different views about what in practice that should entail, from the hardline free-marketeters who dreamed of tearing down barriers to business and trade to protectionists who saw the EU’s internal market as too much of a threat to domestic workers, consumers and culture. While scope remained for a compromise between ‘soft’ Leave and ‘soft’ Remain elites, who together comprised a majority – at least in parliament – the dominance of the Conservative Party by hardliners, and the weakness of the Prime Minister, rendered that option unlikely to succeed. That meant Britain seemed unlikely to accept a ‘junior partner’ role towards the EU, but left open the question of what position it might take instead – with both more supportive and more critical positions being possible.

Finally, the Brexit vote failed to resolve significant domestic-level elite-mass vertical role contestation. This, again, partly reflected the fact that most elites wanted Britain to remain in the EU while most voters opted for it to leave, as well as the fact that most pro-Leave elites wanted a very different sort of Brexit from that demanded by most Leave voters. There is clearly no version of Brexit that most British voters will consider legitimate, making future disagreements about Britain’s international role orientation all the more likely.

A referendum offers a snapshot of national attitudes at a particular moment in time. It consequently allows a state’s population to decide a policy course that conflicts with the role expectations other states have of it. Over time, however, it is likely to prove more difficult for Britain consistently to take role positions that contradict its allies’ expectations. What roles Britain tries to take depends in turn on how the domestic politics of Brexit shake out. With the May government weak, the Conservative Party divided and Labour struggling to agree a coherent alternative stance that avoids alienating both working-class Leave voters and middle-class Remain voters, it remains deeply unclear what the medium-term future of British foreign policy might look like.

Britain will probably continue to claim the role of great power, though its ability to sustain that claim will fade. It will find taking the role of faithful ally harder having ignored its closest allies’ advice, and it seems unlikely to exert much influence as a regional power sitting outside of the EU. Depending on who wins the political battles of the next two years or so, however, Britain could yet wind up claiming a more integrated role in international economic and political communities, securing the sort of Singapore-writ-large role that many elite liberal Brexiters wanted. It could also turn inward, pursuing an isolationist stance more in keeping with the thinking of the average Brexit voter. There is a risk, as Oliver and Williams (2016, 566) note, that the clash between international expectations and domestic role conceptions will leave Britain cast as an “awkward inbetweenner”, neither influential in Europe nor able to define itself independently of Europe. There is a further risk, depending on how the domestic role contestation process plays out, of Britain winding up as a “spoiler”, undermining the EU’s positions. While this has, to some extent, been Britain’s role with regard to those advocating greater supranationalism within the EU since 1973, it could prompt much greater international-level conflict if enacted from outside of the EU framework.

As we learn from incorporating the neoclassical realists' interest in time horizons into our role-theoretic framework, states cannot escape international expectations forever. They can, however, trigger changes in what those expectations involve. If Britain looks like it is isolating itself, it will become more isolated as former allies seek engagement elsewhere. If it looks less willing to take on international obligations, or less able to exert international influence, other states will cease treating it as a great power. Over time, in other words, the expectations to which Britain has ultimately to conform are likely to adjust, iteratively, to what Britain is able to organize itself to do. That will be true whether it resolves the multiple role contestations at work domestically or not.

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