

### The European Union and the Global Arena: In Search of Post-Brexit Roles

Smith, Michael

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version  
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Smith, M. (2019). The European Union and the Global Arena: In Search of Post-Brexit Roles. *Politics and Governance*, 7(3), 83-92. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v7i3.2133>

#### Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de>

#### Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY Licence (Attribution). For more Information see: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

Article

# The European Union and the Global Arena: In Search of Post-Brexit Roles

Michael Smith

Department of Politics and International Studies, University of Warwick, Coventry, CV4 7AL, UK;  
E-Mail: m.h.smith@warwick.ac.uk

Submitted: 29 March 2019 | Accepted: 30 July 2019 | Published: 16 September 2019

## Abstract

This article explores the issues faced by the EU in developing its international roles post-Brexit, using a combination of discursive analysis and role theory to investigate the development and performance of roles in a number of linked arenas. Central to this analysis is the assumption that whatever form Brexit takes, the EU and the UK will remain closely entangled, and thus that the post-Brexit role assumed by the UK will shape the evolution of EU external action. But a key task for analysis is to place the impact of Brexit into the array of wider forces affecting EU external action, and this is a key aim of the article. The article begins by exploring the discourses of globalism characteristic of UK and EU foreign policies, as focused by the debates about ‘global Britain’ and EU global strategy since 2015. It then introduces a simple framework for considering the roles conceived and performed by the EU, and their potential impact in the post-Brexit world. The article then considers three areas of EU external action, and the ways in which they might be shaped by a post-Brexit world: trade and development, transatlantic relations and security and defence policy. The conclusion discusses the implications of the cases, especially in relation to the conversion of discursive role constructs into performable roles—a problem central to EU external action—and concludes that whilst the impact of Brexit will be significant, it is likely to be less fundamental than the impact of the challenges faced by the EU in the global arena more broadly.

## Keywords

Brexit; European Union; external action; foreign policy; international roles; post-Brexit; transatlantic relations; United Kingdom

## Issue

This article is part of the issue “The Impact of Brexit on EU Policies”, edited by Ferdi De Ville (Ghent University, Belgium) and Gabriel Siles-Brügge (University of Warwick, UK).

© 2019 by the author; licensee Cogitatio (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

## 1. Introduction

Throughout the tangled history of the British engagement with European integration, there has been an intersection between the international roles conceived, aspired to or performed by the UK and the European institutions. Both entities have been subject to debate not only about the nature of their international identities but also about the ways in which British membership of the European project has affected both parties. This mutual entanglement, intersection and debate has been focused and concentrated by the process of Brexit (both

as a discursive phenomenon and as a process of negotiation and role-playing), and is also strongly informed by expectations of the international roles to be played both by the UK and by the EU in the post-Brexit world. This article sets out to provide a framework for the analysis of the interplay between Brexit and the EU’s international roles, broadly defined, with the general aim of illuminating some of the processes that have shaped it, of providing insight into some of the dynamics that are likely to shape the future of EU external action and of placing the impact of Brexit into the context of challenges faced by the EU in the global arena more generally.

## 2. Discourses of Globalism in British and European Foreign Policy

Conceptions of external action<sup>1</sup> both in the UK and in the European project have been strongly shaped by ‘historical’ forces, which have produced both a desire for global reach and a series of contradictions arising from that desire and from the institutional or material limitations of foreign policy elites. One of the most powerful images in the shaping of UK foreign policy after the Second World War was that of the ‘three circles of power and influence’ discerned among other by Winston Churchill. This gave rise to the notion that the UK was uniquely placed in the world order, at the intersection of transatlantic relations, the European order and the imperial/colonial networks that later transmuted into the (British) Commonwealth, a view which was buttressed by the UK’s position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and a nuclear weapons power (Gaskarth, 2013, Chapter 5). Such an image of ‘exceptionalism’ has been prominent recently in the discourse of leading ‘Brexiters’; whilst this is only one of several different ‘Brexit narratives’ embedded in the UK debate, it gains power from the potency of narratives linked to the ‘Anglosphere’ and the ‘special relationship’ with the US (Daddow, 2019; Hill, 2019; Kenny & Pearce, 2018).

At the same time, a version of the notion of the ‘three circles’ had and has important implications for the European project itself. The UK has been far from the only member state with aspirations to an expansive and ‘global’ foreign policy, although only the UK and France have a number of the key elements of global status (for example, nuclear weapons and permanent membership of the UN Security Council). The tension between globalist aspirations and the realities of diversity among EU member states has been one of the shaping forces in the development of ‘European foreign policy’ as an aspect of external action since the mid-1980s if not since the 1950s; and in important ways this has been shaped by the EC–EU’s engagement in transatlantic relations and the developing world as well as in the European order itself (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2014). Globalist discourses have thus vied with more regionalist and at times severely parochial elements in the development of the EU’s international role, and there has been a continuing tension between EU external action as a means of exporting European integration, as a channel for the development of a ‘real’ global foreign policy and as a means of promoting member states’ interests (M. Smith, 2006).

In the current conjuncture, as symbolised by the publication of the EU’s Global Strategy Paper (European External Action Service, 2015; European Union, 2016; Tocci, 2017) in the week following the UK referendum on membership of the Union, two very pointed discourses of globalism are at the centre of the Brexit debates

(Adler-Nissen, Galpin, & Rosamond, 2017). First, central to the Brexiters’ vision of a UK freed from the bonds of EU membership is the aspiration to ‘global Britain’ both in the international political economy and in the international security order. The idea that the UK has been prevented from playing a true global role by EU membership, and the belief that post-Brexit it will be able to play a new and leading global role, is fundamental to the discourse of those that espouse a ‘clean’ Brexit, and relies heavily on the assumption that there are new and exciting opportunities for an ‘independent’ UK in a changing global arena (Hill, 2019; Morris, 2011; Oliver, 2018, Chapter 7). The competing idea that the UK is very much a secondary power, and that without EU membership the country will be exposed to new risks and costs is similarly central to the discourses of those who oppose a ‘clean’ Brexit and wish to retain as close a link as possible with the EU post-Brexit. Second, on the side of European external action, the Global Strategy Paper introduced a new discourse of globalism into the debate, with its call for a global strategy not only in terms of reach but also in terms of the mobilisation of resources by the Union (European Union, 2016; K. Smith, 2017; Tocci, 2017; see also Haastrup, Wright, & Guerrina, 2019). In developing such a strategy, a post-Brexit ‘global Britain’ is inevitably going to be a central shaping force, on geopolitical, geo-economic, institutional and cultural grounds. It can of course equally be argued that the absence of the UK from current and future developments in EU external action provides the Union with new opportunities for institutional and policy development in the changing global arena. In this sense, the discourses of ‘global Britain’ and ‘global Europe’ are deeply interdependent, and in many ways Brexit reflects the position of the UK as a ‘pivotal outlier’ which has simultaneously been a source of capabilities for the Union and a constraint on its external action (for related discussion see Adler-Nissen et al., 2017; Daddow, 2019; Roederer-Rynning & Matthews, 2019).

## 3. A Framework for Considering EU Roles

This article makes the initial assumption that the EU will have problems in defining its international roles in the post-Brexit world, and that the presence of post-Brexit Britain will play a substantial part in shaping this process of role definition. Partly, this reflects the historical reality that the two entities have had such problems during the UK’s membership of the European project, that those problems have intersected in the development of ‘European foreign policy’ and other areas of external action, and that there is no reason to expect that the problems will go away just because the UK is no longer a member state. Partly also, it reflects the global background, in which the international opportunity structure for all actors has been shaped and reshaped by global power

<sup>1</sup> In this article, the purpose is to focus on a broad definition of external action, rather than on ‘foreign policy’ in the narrower sense. Using such a definition enables a fuller comparison and study of linkages between issue areas, and corresponds to the definition used both in the Lisbon Treaty and in the EU Global Strategy.

shifts that are still incomplete and ambiguous. For the EU, there is the perennial question about whether it can or should make the transition from a diplomacy rooted in 'civilian' and normative considerations to a version of external action that accepts the risks and costs of a 'real' foreign policy rooted more in considerations of hard security and geopolitics, whilst retaining a distinctive approach to economic and cultural aspects of external action (M. Smith, 2006).

One way of developing these and related arguments is to undertake an analysis based in ideas of international roles. Such an analysis has roots in the work of Holsti (1970), has been developed by others (for example Aggestam, 2004, 2006; Hill, 1993, 1998), and has been given new dimensions by the deployment of discursive and constructivist as well as rationalist approaches (Elgström & Smith, 2006; Knodt & Princen, 2003, Part I; see also Gaskarth, 2013, for a related study of British foreign policy, and Daddow, 2019, for an application to UK post-Brexit roles). In the context of this article, it constitutes a means of establishing linkages and tensions between the discourses of globalism identified earlier and the practices of EU external action in specific domains. Simply put, the conversion of discourses and aspirations into actions and impacts is given focus by an exploration of roles. More specifically, it is given focus by four aspects of role analysis: role conceptions, role institutionalisation, role performance and role impact (adapted from Elgström & Smith, 2006, pp. 6–7):

- *Role conceptions* encompass both actors' self-images and related narratives and the effects of others' role expectations, and the prompt investigation of the interplay between these two elements. They give rise to discussion of the extent to which actors can develop distinctive roles and can transfer or reproduce those roles in a variety of contexts. Discussion of the ways in which actors can play leadership (or followership) roles in specific areas of international life, or the extent which their conceptions of their role embody normative considerations, is a logical implication of a focus on role conceptions.
- *Role design and institutionalisation* concerns the extent to which and the ways in which particular roles are formally embodied in strategies and embedded in institutional arrangements. In relation to design, the part played by preferences and by understandings of identity and of norms is central; in relation to institutions, the ways in which both external and internal institutional arrangements are shaped by and reflect particular understandings of an actor's role(s) is a key element for analysis.
- *Role performance* concerns the extent to which and the ways in which a role is played—in other words, the actual behaviour of an actor. It is also influenced by external perceptions of how a certain

role should be, has been and is enacted. Role performance also entails a measure of flexibility and interpretation on the part of an actor—and thus a focus on the ways in which the enactment of a role (discursively or materially) changes the role itself.

- *Role impact* concerns an actor's ability to achieve desired effects, and thus such elements as effectiveness (goal realisation), efficiency (gains versus costs) and legitimacy (achievement of recognised status). But it also concerns the extent to which an actor can embed its role into the global arena and act as an agent of international structural change. Not only this, but the possibility of effects that are unplanned and unexpected can affect an actor's role and perceptions of it by others.

Elements of role analysis generate important questions related to the nature of EU external action in a post-Brexit world. Most importantly for the discussion here, they raise issues relating to the establishment of stable role conceptions and related narratives, their translation into action and performance and their likely effects both in the global arena and on the EU itself. In each of these areas, it must be remembered that roles are developed and played in a context, or a set of linked contexts: the implications of this for communication and negotiation in linked arenas, and for consistency, compatibility and credibility are crucial to role performance and role impact especially. The challenge posed by Brexit in these respects is at a high level: it is a process of major complexity and long duration, affecting many linked arenas and undertaken in a fluid and ambiguous global setting (cf. Rosamond, 2016). Faced by such a challenge, will the focus for the EU be on innovation and creativity in external action, or on standard operating procedures and the application of established rules and conventions? The next section of the article explores three policy domains with the aim of providing some initial evidence for evaluation.

#### 4. Global Britain, Global Europe?

In this section, the focus is on three areas of policy in which the UK and the EU are strongly engaged at the global level, and will remain engaged post-Brexit. They are: trade and development policy; transatlantic relations and security; and defence policy. Each of these is an area in which key areas of policy divergence have been identified in the debates of the past three years; although there are clearly other areas such as environmental politics that might have been selected, reasons of space and centrality lie behind this selection. In each case, the aim is to provide a brief probe of the area in order to clarify the kinds of questions that are likely to be faced by the EU in the post-Brexit world. Each case also cannot be taken in isolation from the others, and whilst it is clear that security and defence policies will be a key source of challenges post-Brexit (Martill & Sus, 2018; Whitman, 2016), our definition of EU external ac-

tion requires that it is placed in the broader context of EU diplomacy and the development of the EU's global roles. In the final section of the article, the argument returns to the issues of discourse and role outlined above.

#### 4.1. Trade and Development Policies

For the EU, the foundations of European integration in economic and commercial activity, and the extent to which the EU's international presence is still defined by its position as a 'trading state' focused on multilateralism and global governance, are deeply embedded in its international strategies and external action (M. Smith, 2004). This is not essentially changed by Brexit, but it is given a new twist, given that the UK could become a significant regional competitor in trade and commerce whatever form of Brexit emerges in the next few years. Not only this, but the 'subtraction' of the UK from the EU trade policy-making process could have significant effects on the internal balance of forces within the EU, since it would weaken the 'liberalising' camp of northern member states.

For the EU, Brexit constitutes a major if not fundamental challenge. As Silke Trommer (2017) has argued, the UK will be repositioned as a 'middle power' in a rapidly changing international political economy, in which the rivalries among 'great powers', especially the US and China, have taken a central place. The aspiration to initiate and conclude major free trade agreements on a global scale with established and emerging commercial giants implies a number of challenges for Britain, especially since the process of Brexit itself has drawn attention once more to the vulnerability of the country in both the commercial and the political spheres. This is also a challenge for the EU, since it implies that the UK could become a significant rival in pursuing the effective governance of global trade, and that (in principle, at least) it could form new alliances in the global trading system. The EU will need to engage with the UK—indeed, it is already engaged—in renegotiation of their positions in the World Trade Organization (WTO) and other institutions, and the evidence so far from attempts to re-shape tariff quotas and other arrangements indicates precisely that other WTO members are unlikely to just go along with the UK–EU proposals. This is a matter of central importance for the UK's attempts to re-establish itself as a leading force in the global trading regime; and it also coincides with a more general politicisation of trading arrangements, led by the Trump Administration, that bodes ill for both the EU as a major trading and investment partner of the US and the UK as a potential petitioner for new trade agreements.

In the area of trade, therefore, the EU has a major and established role, which it is finding difficult to pursue in a changing and more politicised environment but which gives a strong basis for strategic engagement. For the UK, the issue is more fundamental, since the Brexit process has exposed new vulnerabilities in a global political econ-

omy where there is intense competition and an increased level of bilateral as opposed to multilateral activity. This might severely limit the UK's ability to distance itself from the EU, and thus restrict the extent to which it can shape EU trade policies—a predicament that is at its sharpest in discussions of a possible future customs union between the EU and the UK. Whereas both the EU and the UK will find it necessary to reflect on their roles in the global political economy as a result of Brexit, there is no doubt about which of the two parties starts from the stronger position. Much will depend upon the nature of any emerging arrangements between the UK and the EU themselves (see for example Owen, Stojanovic, & Rutter, 2017): will they resemble an 'economic partnership' rather like that recently concluded between the EU and Japan, a customs union, or an European Economic Area-type association? Each of these would have important implications for the external action of the EU—but all of them will have to be pursued within a global system in flux with a high level of 'competitive interdependence' (Sbragia, 2010) and increasing elements of economic nationalism.

The roles played by both the UK and the EU in development policy have been distinctive and influential. Significantly, this area in the EU structure is one in which the member states contribute to collective efforts but also retain their own national policies and resources. There is clearly therefore a complex set of interactions in the framing and conduct of development policy, and to that extent the post-Brexit situation for the EU might be little changed from the already established policy processes. A key element of the context is also that important aspects of the EU's development policies have been strongly influenced by first the accession of the UK and then its role within the development policy structures. Relations with developing countries in the context of European development policies came to act, both for the UK and the EU, as another means of managing relations with a wide array of Commonwealth countries in the Africa, Caribbean and Pacific regions (ACP). Most developing countries (but not those in South Asia) within the Commonwealth have been and are subscribers to the Lomé and Cotonou Conventions, the principal frameworks for managing EU relations with developing countries.

For the EU, the impact of the UK on its development assistance policies has thus been deep, continuous and growing, reinforced by the fact that the UK is a major donor country both in the bilateral context and within the EU framework. The Lomé and Cotonou conventions have collectivised large parts of the obligations assumed by member states, although as already noted there has remained a substantial bilateral aid effort on the part of most member states including the UK. For the UK, the Lomé and Cotonou processes, and the broader evolution of EU development policies, have provided a route to leadership and leverage, whilst perpetuating significant elements of autonomy at the national level. The UK has proved a dynamic if not always positive influence, and

has played a key role in the movement of development policies away from an altruistic model and towards a securitised model in recent years (Carbone, 2017).

The potential impact of Brexit on EU development policies and on the Commonwealth countries included within EU frameworks will thus be significant. The process of Brexit itself, characterised by complexity, uncertainty and an extended negotiation and implementation process whatever the eventual outcome, has created anxiety over both the quantity and the qualities of development policies. The EU will need to adjust its development assistance policies to cater for the loss of the UK's contribution, and to adapt to the fact that the Commonwealth members of the Cotonou framework will no longer have a direct advocate in the form of the UK. The more general processes of (re)negotiation of free trade agreements and other arrangements will create work for the EU in relation to both developing and developed members of the Commonwealth, whilst the changed internal balance of forces as a result of the British departure may underline dynamics leading to a 're-nationalisation' of some aspects of development policy (see Price, 2019).

The UK exit from the EU will thus create potential costs and risks as well as opportunities for the EU in relation to development policy (Carbone, 2017; Henökl, 2017; Price, 2016). For the UK, the loss of a base in the EU through which to collectivise and multilateralise their obligations to a range of Commonwealth developing countries will require new resources and effort. For the EU, the loss of a major if sometimes irritating contributor to the development and implementation of policies will have uncertain effects, perhaps especially if the UK takes an activist view of the development of its relations with developing country Commonwealth members. A saving grace is the fact that the parallel but linked nature of existing development policies and processes has already created a set of expectations and arrangements for the management of bilateral and multilateral activities on the ground, which can be adapted or extended to encompass a post-Brexit context. To this extent, there are foundations for creating new and stable roles, and for building on established institutions and practices, but the existence of key challenges from other sources (for example China) will complicate the position both for the EU and for the UK.

#### 4.2. Transatlantic Relations

As is well documented, the British claim to occupy a special position in relations between the US and Europe has been a persistent source of tensions, expectations and disappointments especially for the British themselves. It was noted earlier in this article that the persistence of the 'three circles' image in UK foreign policy has been central to the persistence of globalist ambitions in the UK more generally. It is thus no surprise that part of the discourse of globalism surrounding the Brexit debates has

been the assumed ability of London to rekindle a 'special relationship' with Washington which would provide a major buttress to the 'global Britain' aspirations nurtured by Boris Johnson, Liam Fox and others (Daddow, 2019; Hill, 2019; Oliver, 2018). At the centre of this revitalized 'special relationship' would lie a comprehensive UK-US free trade deal, and at the same time a revitalized security connection through NATO as well as through the existing intelligence links established during the Cold War and since greatly developed.

For the EU, the idea of 'special relationships' is not by any means irrelevant, but is not centred on the idea that the UK has some sort of privileged position on grounds of history, institutions or culture. Indeed, it can plausibly be argued that each and every EU member state has a kind of 'special relationship' with the US, and that the tensions between different claims in this area has been a continuing theme of the EU's development both as a whole and also especially in the post-Cold War era. The tension between three key threads in the EU's relations with the US—'special relationships', transatlantic governance and world order—has been a constant theme in the development of the Union as an international actor since the early 1990s, whatever the nature of the administration in Washington and whatever the issues at stake (M. Smith, 2011).

The current conjuncture in transatlantic relations, though, poses new challenges (Stelzenmüller, 2018; Stokes, 2018; Wickett, 2018). The emergence of an administration that places its bets on a policy of 'America first', with a President whose position on key issues can fluctuate almost from hour to hour, has given rise to an atmosphere in which the search for multilateral solutions—as almost automatically espoused by the EU—has been supplanted by unilateral initiatives, often strongly influenced by 'domesticist' assumptions on the part of Washington. This is apparent in issues of global political economy, with the declaration of 'trade war' between the US and China and the demand for bilateral concessions on the part of other trading partners; it is evident in issues of international security, from dealing with Russia through challenging the Iran nuclear plan of action (seen when it was concluded as a major win for EU diplomacy especially in Brussels) to declaring a unilateral withdrawal from engagement with the Syrian conflict; and it is apparent in the systematic erosion and downgrading of mechanisms of global governance, including those addressing issues of human rights and environmental protection, along with the promotion of 'transnational nationalism' in Europe and elsewhere. Challenging behaviour on the part of US administrations is not new, but for the post-Brexit EU, the challenge of dealing with what in the 1970s was termed a 'rogue elephant in the forest' (Vernon, 1973) is perhaps more pressing than at any previous time, especially since it is accompanied by the radical shifts in the global opportunity structure and the nature of broader challenges in the global political economy and security noted earlier.



As in some of the other areas outlined earlier, it is clear that one of the challenges posed by Brexit in this context is the loss of solidarity and ‘political economies of scale’ precipitated by the UK’s exit. This is particularly a challenge for the UK, since it appears that there is no guarantee at all that they will be able to secure the revitalised ‘special relationship’ so dear to the hearts of the Brexiteers—especially not on terms that bring any benefits at all in political economy or the revitalisation of NATO (Wilson, 2017). The loss is not negligible for the EU: The defection of a leading member state, coupled with the confrontational politics of the Washington administration and the general resurgence of geopolitics as a means of shaping global structures and processes, means that the Union is at risk of being marginalised in a variety of important global arenas. It is not clear that the assumed benefits from the absence of the UK—ability to go further in security and defence cooperation prominent among them (see next section)—will be sufficient to compensate for the broader erosion of the EU’s status as an international actor that is implicit in the development of transatlantic relations within the broader state of international flux. The EU as a ‘trading state’ or as a ‘normative power’ loves stability and sustainability for a reason: because stability and sustainability of relationships and institutions are central to the achievement of commercial gains and the preservation of the European project itself. Brexit is only one of the elements threatening these aims in transatlantic relations—but it undoubtedly plays its part.

#### *4.3. Security and Defence Policy*

Whatever might be said about the importance of Britain to EU policies in other areas, it has been taken for granted throughout the period of UK membership that the country has a special status in security and defence policy. Along with France, the UK has been one of the only two EU member states with a full-spectrum military capability and the ability to intervene outside the European theatre on a large scale. Not only this, but (again with France) the UK was instrumental during the late 1990s in establishing the framework for what has now become the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP); although its record in recent years has reflected a strong tendency to constrain the possibilities for EU action in ‘hard security’, the UK has always been seen as central to any potential EU role in the framing of collective military action and to action in broader security policy (Hill, 2019, Chapter 4). This central position has been buttressed by the distinctive UK position in relation to intelligence-gathering, as a member of the ‘five eyes’ grouping, which in turn has reflected a deep and cumulative relationship with the US especially. The EU’s role in the absence of the UK is thus likely to be constrained, and indeed it might retreat from some of the more ambitious security and defence roles that have been the subject of debate since the late 1990s. Given the changing nature of security itself, and the new

types of threats that have emerged in the 21st century, the UK’s position in matters relating to cyber security, energy security and environmental security is also likely to matter when it comes to the forging of a security and defence role for the Union in a post-Brexit world.

There is another side to this story, of course, and there are those who argue that the departure of the UK will bring about a form of liberation for the Union—indeed, that it already has done so in the period since the 2016 UK referendum (Martill & Sus, 2018, pp. 9–12). Thus, the initiation of Permanent Structured Cooperation, a mechanism established by the Lisbon Treaty but never formally acted upon until 2017, has seen a step-change in the institutional support for defence cooperation, despite the differing views among member states about how inclusive or exclusive such cooperation might be. The reinvigoration of measures to take forward defence budgeting and defence industrial cooperation among the 27 member states (excluding the UK) has reinforced a process of security and defence integration that some have seen as leading towards a true European defence policy (Strikwerda, 2019). A new phase in Franco–German collaboration in security and defence policy might also be in prospect, although the two countries differ strongly on the assertiveness and scope of EU defence actions. It has also been argued that EU policies towards some key adversaries, especially Russia, might be softened in the absence of the UK, which has taken a strong line along with the US on relations with the Putin regime.

The example of Russia, though, also points to a more negative set of consequences for EU security and defence policies. The growth of new types of risk—or old types in new guises—has been characteristic of developments in both European and global security over the past two decades, and a post-Brexit EU might be less capable of addressing these, either because of the loss of UK capabilities or because of the new dynamics of relations between member states that might emerge in the absence of the UK. As noted above, the loss of a key member of the ‘five eyes’ intelligence network, and accompanying loss of access to UK intelligence sources (not all of which have been available to the Union whilst the UK has been a member state) is clearly a significant risk factor. The absence of a member state attuned to the ‘new geopolitics’ of the 21st century, and one above all with a major relationship with the US will be a key limiting factor in the EU’s capacity to identify and to address new risks and threats, let alone to respond to them. It is possible that the loss of one of the two member states enjoying permanent membership of the UN Security Council will entail costs in terms of the EU’s capacity to build coalitions on key security issues (although Megan Dee and Karen Smith, 2017, have argued that the UK, as in other areas, has more to lose in this respect than the EU). When these potential risk factors are combined with the growth of fragmentation in the Union, and the potential for internal conflicts arising from populism and ‘illiberal democ-

racy', the likelihood of difficulties in expanding an EU role in security and defence appears strong.

Whilst the achievability of a 'Global UK' role in security and defence post-Brexit can certainly be questioned (see Daddow, 2019; Whitman, 2016, and others), the concern here is with the possibility of new or changed roles for the EU. In some ways, this depends upon the nature of any post-Brexit relationship established with the UK. Will that consist of a 'CSDP Plus' arrangement where the UK has close links to and access to the CSDP process? Or will it centre on an intensified relationship within NATO (of which a number of EU member states are not members)? Or will it devolve into a series of bilateral UK agreements with individual EU member states, such as that already established with France? These three models have been explored in detail by Martill and Sus in a major recent study (Martill & Sus, 2018), but in the absence (at the time of writing) of any implementable agreement even on the terms of UK withdrawal, there is no way of predicting what the 'deep and special relationship' referred to by UK policy-makers might be. For the EU, the distinctions between the three models matter, since the extent to which the UK can continue to play a substantive role in the CSDP, or take a leading role in NATO, or detach EU member states through bilateral agreements, carries with it a set of potential constraints and opportunities for EU security and defence policies. As argued elsewhere in this article, however, these are far from the only potential forces likely to shape EU security and defence policy. How far does the subtraction of Britain outweigh changes in US security and defence policy, the rise of the 'new geopolitics', the weaponization of trade policy or the fragmentation of consensus within the Union as a source of risks and opportunities? There is no doubt that in security and defence policy, the absence of the UK will be felt, but these other forces will do as much if not more to shape and constrain the EU's capacity for external action in this area for the foreseeable future.

## 5. Conclusions

As noted immediately above, Brexit is only one of a number of factors contributing to a generalised sense of fluidity and uncertainty in the global arena of the early 21st century. Power shifts between leading international actors, the possibility of conflict between those actors in both the global political economy and areas of 'high politics' and security, the transnationalised challenges to domestic political and economic elites in a number of regions, and the growth of unilateralism and bilateralism in a world where the rules-based liberal order is increasingly under threat—each and all of these forces has important implications for the capacity of global actors to form consistent strategies and establish stable roles. To this, the EU is no exception. There is thus an important distinction to be drawn between the incentives and constraints that characterise the global arena and the (linked but distinguishable) incentives and constraints arising

from the mutual relations of the UK and the EU during and after the completion of the Brexit process.

Given this context, what can we say about the EU's search for new or modified international roles in the areas we have briefly examined? Here, we can return to the four central elements of role analysis noted earlier in the article. In terms first of *role conceptions*, it seems clear that the EU has confronted difficulties in establishing stable sets of understandings and expectations both at a general 'historical' level and in the more specific areas examined in this article. It appears, however, that the challenge is much greater for the UK than it is for the EU, since there is considerable conflict between the different narratives of the UK's actual and potential roles in the four areas. For the EU, contention between different understandings of Europe's global role(s) is almost a fact of life, and Brexit does little to disturb this set of circumstances: In fact, in some of the areas examined, it appears that Brexit simplifies the challenge for the EU, given the reduction in internal contention about external action (but with the caveat that with the growth of contending elites within the EU, there might emerge new constraining factors). Thus, in trade, at the global level, there is little that challenges the EU's essential conception of its roles (see also De Ville and Siles-Brugge, this issue). In development policy there are already mechanisms and understandings that can accommodate the change in UK status, albeit with a material subtraction of resources from the EU's inventory. Transatlantic relations pose a challenge both to the UK and to the EU, and for both there is a danger of marginalisation or renewed dependency—thus a challenge to established role conceptions in both cases. This is partly also evident in matters of security and defence policy, where the incentives for continued collaboration are strong but are accompanied by equally strong forces creating the potential for divergence.

As concerns *role design and institutionalisation*, a key challenge for the UK is the need to re-invent parts of its role and to re-establish the legitimacy of its presence in areas where its role has been externalised or sub-contracted to the EU. For the EU, the challenge is that of finding devices with which to perpetuate close collaboration with the UK on different terms. Thus, given continued economic interdependence, the aim of keeping the UK very close in commercial terms and managing (read: constraining) any divergence on the part of the UK from existing rules and institutions is likely to be a central shaping element in any post-Brexit EU strategy. At the same time, the emphasis in the EU Global Strategy on 'joined up policy-making' and the use of resources from across the EU institutions can be read in part as a pre-emptive assertion of a new style of EU policy-making for post-Brexit conditions (but with the caveat noted above: Brexit is only one of a number of forces shaping EU strategy). As noted above, mechanisms will need to be found for managing the inevitable interactions between the UK and the EU in contexts such as the WTO, and for handling the kinds of 'bi-multilateral' issues of global governance



that could create damaging externalities and loss of leverage on the part of the UK and the EU alike. The same is true of relations with the developing countries: arguably the EU is now much more important for many ACP countries than the UK alone, but both the UK and the EU are confronted by challenges from new or emerging actors and from the new geopolitics of aid. In transatlantic relations, divergence between the UK's and the EU's roles might become institutionalised via trade agreements or through differing attitudes to NATO, for example, but the real challenges for the EU are in the broader geopolitical and geo-economic forces expressed through 'competitive interdependence' and transactional diplomacy at the global level. In matters of security and defence, there is again the interplay of UK–EU and broader global forces, but as already noted there are strong incentives to support institutional innovation and re-design on the part of the EU.

In terms of *role performance*, the jury is by definition out and will be out for some time: The effects on both the UK and the EU's capacity to create, implement and sustain effective roles in the global arena will emerge over decades rather than months or years. But it is important to point out the close links between role performance and areas such as legitimacy, credibility and effectiveness. Whilst for the UK, there is almost an existential significance attached to its capacity for effective role performance post-Brexit, in all of the three areas discussed here, for the EU the stakes are arguably lower—the defection of the UK may be regrettable, but it does not undermine the Union's ability to maintain or develop the roles it has acquired over the past forty years or more. There is a general problem of EU credibility arising from the long-term effects of the economic and financial crises, from the proliferation of right-wing populist movements across EU member states and from the new centrality of geopolitics and transactional diplomacy in the global arena—but although clearly linked with the departure of the UK, this is distinct from any effects of Brexit narrowly defined. The discourse of globalism in the EU's external action crystallised in the Global Strategy, or the institutional incentives and constraints affecting role performance, will not shift radically post-Brexit or because of Brexit itself. Thus, the EU's enactment of its global role(s) will be more stable and sustainable (if limited by well-known factors) than that of the UK in a post-Brexit world.

Finally, it might be argued that *role impact* is the ultimate test of the ways in which role conceptions, role design and development and role performance come together to create sustainable and stable foundations for global influence. If this is the case, then the prognosis for the UK's role impact is distinctly uncertain. In all of the areas discussed here, the UK confronts an uncertain future characterised by a substantial gap between role conceptions and the realities of international life outside the EU—a future, moreover, that will require a substantial allocation of attention and resources, human, psy-

chological and financial, for an extended period. For the EU, despite the loss of the UK contribution in both tangible and intangible areas, the future is less challenging—but with the qualification noted above that the global arena is simply more challenging for every actor engaged in it, and particularly challenging for the Union as a conglomerate multi-national structure. The effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy of EU external action will thus not be fundamentally undermined by the defection of the UK, but it is likely to be challenged continuously by the evolution of global politics and the global political economy in general.

On this basis, it is important to restate the initial argument in this article: that whilst the UK and the EU alike have generated distinctive discourses of globalism on a historical and current basis, the acid test for external action is how and how far these actors can translate the discourse and attendant narratives into performable roles. For the UK, this is a fundamental question of its international life in a post-Brexit world. For the EU, on the other hand, the post-Brexit world in global perspective resembles broadly the world before 2016, in which the challenges of role stability, role conflict and role performance reflect an array of wider and more potent forces. Whilst these will be modified by the UK's absence, they will not be transformed. In terms of the initial assumption made by the article—that Brexit would play a substantial role in the redefinition of EU roles in the post-Brexit world—it is clear from the argument here that whilst Brexit narrowly defined will undoubtedly have effects, these are less likely to be fundamental than are the challenges to the EU's roles arising from the global arena more generally.

### Acknowledgments

I am very grateful to the editors, to other members of the thematic issue 'team', and to three anonymous referees, for their detailed and helpful comments on successive versions of this text.

### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

### References

- Adler-Nissen, R., Galpin, C., & Rosamond, B. (2017). Performing Brexit: How a post-Brexit world is imagined outside the United Kingdom. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 19(3), 573–591.
- Aggestam, L. (2004). *A European foreign policy? Role conceptions and the politics of identity in Britain, France and Germany*. Stockholm: Stockholm University Department of Political Science.
- Aggestam, L. (2006). Role theory and European Foreign Policy: A framework of analysis. In O. Elgström & M. Smith (Eds.), *The European Union's roles in international politics: Concepts and analysis* (pp. 11–29).

- London: Routledge.
- Carbone, M. (2017). The European Union and international development. In C. Hill, M. Smith, & S. Vanhoonacker (Eds.), *International relations and the European Union* (3rd ed., pp. 292–315). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Daddow, O. (2019). GlobalBritainTM: The discursive construction of Britain's post-Brexit world role. *Global Affairs*, 5(1), 5–22.
- Dee, M., & Smith, K. (2017). UK Diplomacy at the UN after Brexit: Challenges and Opportunities. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 19(3), 527–542.
- Elgström, O., & Smith, M. (Eds.). (2006). *The European Union's roles in international politics: Concepts and analysis*. London: Routledge.
- European External Action Service. (2015). *The European Union in a changing global environment: A more connected, contested and complex world*. Brussels: European External Action Service.
- European Union. (2016). *Shared vision, common action: A stronger Europe. A global strategy for the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy*. Brussels: European Union.
- Gaskarth, J. (2013). *British foreign policy*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Haastруп, T., Wright, A. M., & Guerrina, R. (2019). Bringing gender in? EU foreign and security policy after Brexit. *Politics and Governance*, 7(3), 62–71.
- Henökl, T. (2017). *Brexit: Impact, risks and opportunities for European development policy* (Briefing Paper No. 8/2017). Bonn: German Development Institute.
- Hill, C. (1993). The capability-expectations gap, or conceptualising Europe's international role. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 31(3), 305–328.
- Hill, C. (1998). Closing the capability-expectations gap? In J. Peterson & H. Sjursen (Eds.), *A common foreign policy for Europe? Competing visions of the CFSP* (pp. 18–38). London: Routledge.
- Hill, C. (2019). *The future of British foreign policy: Security and diplomacy in a world after Brexit*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Holsti, K. (1970). National role conceptions in the study of foreign policy. *International Studies Quarterly*, 14(3), 233–309.
- Kenny, M., & Pearce, N. (2018). *Shadows of empire: The Anglosphere in British politics*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Keukeleire, S., & Delreux, T. (2014). *The foreign policy of the European Union*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Knodt, M., & Princen, S. (Eds.). (2003). *Understanding the EU's external relations*. London: Routledge.
- Martill, B., & Sus, M. (2018). *Known unknowns: EU foreign, security and defence policy after Brexit*. London: LSE Ideas.
- Morris, J. (2011). How great is Britain? Power, responsibility and Britain's future global role. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 13(3), 326–347.
- Oliver, T. (2018). *Understanding Brexit: A concise introduction*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Owen, J., Stojanovic, A., & Rutter, J. (2017). *Trade after Brexit: Options for the UK's relationship with the EU*. London: Institute for Government.
- Price, S. (2016). Brexit, development aid, and the Commonwealth. *The Round Table* 105(5), 499–507.
- Price, S. (2019). The impact of Brexit on EU Development Policy. *Politics and Governance*, 7(3), 72–82.
- Roederer-Rynning, C., & Matthews, A. (2019). What common agricultural policy after Brexit? *Politics and Governance*, 7(3), 40–50.
- Rosamond, B. (2016). Brexit and the problem of European disintegration. *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, 12(4), 864–871.
- Sbragia, A. (2010). The EU, the US and trade policy: Competitive interdependence in the management of globalization. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 17(3), 368–382.
- Smith, K. (2017). A European Union global strategy for a changing world? *International Politics*, 54(4), 503–518.
- Smith, M. (2004). Between two worlds? The European Union, the United States and world order. *International Politics*, 41(1), 95–117.
- Smith, M. (2006). The shock of the real? Trends in European foreign and security policy since September 2001. *Studia Diplomatica*, LIX(1), 27–44.
- Smith, M. (2011). European responses to American diplomacy: 'Special relationships', transatlantic governance and world order. *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 6(2001), 299–317.
- Stelzenmüller, C. (2018). *Normal is over: Europeans hope that the Trump era is an anomaly, but the transatlantic divide has never been so stark*. Washington, DC: Brookings and Robert Bosch Foundation.
- Stokes, D. (2018). Trump, American hegemony and the future of the Liberal international order. *International Affairs*, 94(1), 133–150.
- Strikwerda, J. (2019). *Integration in the European Union's field of security and defence* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway.
- Tocci, N. (2017). *Framing the EU global strategy: A stronger Europe in a fragile world*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Trommer, S. (2017). Post-Brexit trade policy autonomy as pyrrhic victory: Being a middle power in a contested trade regime. *Globalizations*, 14(6), 810–819.
- Vernon, R. (1973). Rogue elephant in the forest: An appraisal of transatlantic relations. *Foreign Affairs*, 51(3), 573–587.
- Whitman, R. (2016). The UK and EU foreign, security and defence policy after Brexit: Integrated, associated or detached? *National Institute Economic Review*, 238(1), 43–50.
- Wickett, X. (2018). *Transatlantic relations: Converging or diverging?* London: Chatham House.
- Wilson, G. (2017). Brexit, Trump and the special relationship. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 19(3), 543–557.

### About the Author



**Michael Smith** is Honorary Professor in European Politics at the University of Warwick, and Emeritus Professor of European Politics at Loughborough University. He has published extensively on EU external policies and on EU diplomacy. His books include: *The European Union's Roles in International Politics: Concepts and Analysis* (Routledge, 2006; edited with Ole Elgström); *The European Union and the United States: Competition and Convergence in the Global Arena* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, with Steven McGuire; second edition in preparation); *The Diplomatic System of the European Union: Evolution, Change and Challenges* (Routledge, 2016, edited with Stephan Keukeleire and Sophie Vanhoonacker); and *International Relations and the European Union* (Oxford University Press, 2017, 3rd edition, edited with Christopher Hill and Sophie Vanhoonacker).