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## **The end of foreign policy consensus? How Remainers and Leavers view Britain's place in the world**

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# The end of foreign policy consensus? How Remainers and Leavers view Britain's place in the world



*Drawing on data from the LSE's collection of materials from the 2016 referendum campaign, [Benjamin Martill](#) finds that the Remain and Leave camps articulated distinct views when it came to foreign affairs. The findings also suggest that the goals of British foreign policy itself are likely to be increasingly subject of political division after Brexit.*

The Brexit vote, we are told repeatedly, was about many things: immigration, taking back control, parliamentary sovereignty, judicial independence, and the ability to trade freely. In contrast, foreign and security policy seemed to feature less in the debate, with little or no mention of NATO or the EU's common foreign and security policies in the referendum campaign.

This has led to the view that the fallout of Brexit will be more manageable than in other areas, since Britain's interests will remain the same. Coupled with the primacy of NATO in European security and defence and the UK's unquestionable support for the Atlantic alliance, this would suggest that continuity – rather than change – will characterise British foreign policy after Brexit.

But this is somewhat optimistic, since the Brexit vote was animated not by a dislike for the EU alone, but by deeper beliefs about the nature of the world and the appropriate role of the state both domestically and internationally which transcend Euroscepticism. In short, the ideologies – or worldviews – that animated the vote also implicate foreign affairs, and view Britain's role in the world very differently compared with those worldviews animating the Remain vote.

Data from the LSE's comprehensive [collection](#) of materials from the 2016 campaign, [analysed](#) with my colleague [Adrian Rogstad](#) at the University of Groningen, suggests a number of systematic differences in how the principal Leave and Remain campaign organisations viewed Britain's place in the world. We looked, specifically, at how these organisations represented the UK's position in relation to five key aspects of foreign relations: security, ethics, trade, transnational authority, and democratic solidarity.

## Different Worlds

On each of these dimensions, we found the message differed significantly. Material from the Remain campaign made much of Britain's institutional membership, arguing this gave the UK clout and allowed it to play a greater role than it would otherwise. In contrast, pro-Leave leaflets saw British power and prestige (and history) as the main sources of its influence, seeing institutional ties as constraints on British power. While the obvious example used in most cases was the EU, the claim itself when deployed by both campaigns was a more general one, with Remainers seeing institutions as means of magnifying British influence and Leavers seeing them as illegitimate constraints.

Both stories also had different narratives of the 'long peace' within the West since the end of the Second World War. While the Remain campaign attributed the emergence of peace to the EU, which – they argued – had helped to overcome centuries of conflict between European nations, the Leave campaign argued that it was American power – through NATO – that was responsible for peace in Europe, which was erroneously attributed to the EU. Moreover, while the Remain campaign sought to highlight the benefits of EU enlargement across the region, Leave-promoting leaflets represented EU expansion as a dangerous threat to regional stability.

While both campaigns spoke of the benefits of free trade, closer inspection reveals very different notions of what free trade was. For the Remain campaign, free trade was viewed through an institutional lens, and much of their material highlighted how agreements between countries – including the EU – had facilitated the expansion of economic relations. In contrast, the Leave campaign viewed the question of trade through a more geopolitical, neo-mercantilist lens, arguing patterns of trade should be shifted to emerging powers, and that institutions prevented the UK from doing this.

There is also a discernible ethical difference. Remain material emphasised cosmopolitan themes and solidarity with other European nations, as well as the benefits of British engagement with the rest of the world and the normative good this produced. In contrast, Leave materials portrayed British contributions to the EU budget, along with the UK's foreign aid, as unjust subsidies that could have been better spent at home, evoking a more communitarian ethic.

And finally, both campaigns viewed the UK's set of partners differently. While the Remain campaign focused on the democratic credentials of the UK's partners (Europe, the 'West'), Leave materials focused much more on the UK's global credentials and its need for partnerships with new global power-centres (read: China) which need not be democratic.

## Foreign Policy Divergence

These differences point to divergent worldviews between supporters and opponents of Brexit on key foreign policy dimensions. The Remain campaign emphasised the value of supranational authority, the EU's role as a peacemaker, the need for institutionalised free trade, the importance of duties outside the UK's borders, and the need for democratic partners; the Leave campaign offered criticisms of each of these.

Of course, many of the tropes remain the same, giving a surface illusion of similarity. Both campaigns spoke about the UK as a 'great' global actor, for instance. But mentions by the Leave campaign equated greatness with British power and prestige and its 'global' history, while the Remain campaign saw greatness as a product of the UK's dependability and its support for humanitarian and development goals.

These divergent positions are important for two reasons. The first is to suggest that foreign policy is becoming increasingly politicised as a domain of policymaking. Where once there existed a fairly stable consensus in this area, it is now clear that the divisions surrounding Brexit are part of broader divergence in how British citizens view their country's role in the world. The second implication is that the liberal (Remain) basis of the UK's foreign policy is not necessarily as strong as might be imagined. Far from simply removing one tool of foreign influence (the EU), the Brexit worldview represents a repudiation of those liberal foreign policy goals – institutionalisation, cosmopolitanism, democratic alliances – which are at the heart of the UK's identity as an international actor.

## Enter Johnson

This creates a more challenging environment for Boris Johnson in the years ahead. While Brexiters, whom the government is keen to appease, may be satisfied with leaving the EU, they may not be in the end. The referendum campaign highlighted a number of demands that go beyond the UK's membership of the EU: engagement with emerging powers, reduction of foreign and development aid, freedom from supranational control, flexible trading arrangements, strengthening of Anglo-American relations.

These would amount to a significant shift in British foreign policy, one that may not accord with the [expectations of the UK's partners](#) or fit well with the [realities](#) of the UK's diminished status in world politics in the post-war period. Johnson may resist any such demands, recognising the value of European collaborative efforts, institutionalised free trade, or the soft power of Britain's aid and development efforts. Or he may continue to pander to the party right on these questions. Either way, the future of British foreign policy remains a political problem, one that Brexit alone will not solve.

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Note: the above draws on the author's [co-authored article](#) in *Global Affairs*.

## About the Author



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