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Without EU clout, how would the UK fare at the United Nations?

*Outside the EU, the UK would have to forge new alliances in international diplomacy. **Karen E Smith** and **Katie Laatikainen** consider how it would affect the UK's role in multilateral processes – debates in international organisations, multilateral treaty negotiations, and so on – particularly in the context of the United Nations.*



Leaving the EU would have an enormous – almost entirely negative – impact on British influence in international relations, as [numerous](#) commentators have [already](#) argued. But it poses particular challenges to the UK's influence at the United Nations. The UK is of course a permanent member of the , and this status would not be affected by a Brexit. As the UN Security Council is the most important international institution, it could be argued that Brexit would have little impact on the UK's role in the most powerful multilateral body.



However, the UK's role in other multilateral processes is a different matter altogether. One striking, though often overlooked, aspect of multilateralism is the importance of political and regional groups in negotiations and debates within the UN's various bodies (such as the General Assembly or the Human Rights Council) and negotiations (such as those on climate change or social and economic issues such as health or development). These groups include the Non-Aligned Movement, the G-77, the African Group, the Caribbean Community, and, of course, the European Union, long one of the most prominent groups at the UN.



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For decades, the EU member states have sought to coordinate their views and seek support for their common positions on a range of issues at the UN. Although the UK has been keen to ensure that EU coordination does not constrict its freedom of manoeuvre as a member of the UN in its own right, it has nonetheless found that acting within the EU has considerable advantages. In fact, in some contexts, such as the Human Rights Council, most of the UK's diplomacy occurs through the EU.

Why states prefer to negotiate in groups at the UN

Indeed, states generally find it advantageous to work through groups at the UN. Only the US rarely acts within a group, but nearly every other UN state does – though with differing degrees of enthusiasm. First of all, being in a group helps ensure that states win the ‘numbers game’: where decisions are taken by majority vote, then groups help states achieve the necessary votes in favour of their preferences. Secondly, and related to this point, being in a group helps a state to have a ‘louder’ and potentially more influential voice at the UN. States recognise that they can exercise more influence if they act collectively rather than on a national basis. Having the backing of a group can improve the chances that a state’s preferences will be achieved.

Thirdly, groups enable states to have access to more information than they otherwise would, because members of groups can share information about what they know of other states’ or groups’ positions and preferences. Finally, group membership enables states to avoid isolation. Smaller states that are ‘in between’ (not included in, or on the margins, of major groups such as the EU) find it challenging to operate when group politics are strong. This category includes states such as Mexico, Norway, Turkey, and Switzerland.

There are also disadvantages to working within groups: for example, members of groups inevitably have to compromise to achieve group positions, which are therefore rarely very innovative, and group positions can be rigid and thus make negotiations with other groups difficult. Coordination within groups can be time-consuming, leaving diplomats with little time to reach out to states outside the groups – one reason why states that are ‘in between’ groups often find themselves left out of key negotiations. But it is nonetheless apparent at the UN that states continue to place high importance on acting within groups.

The EU at the UN

In this context, the EU is particularly important: it is the most well-resourced, well-organised group at the UN. Its voice is heard on almost all issues on the UN agenda. Its positions are usually the nodal point in any negotiation or discussion. Within the EU’s coordination processes at the UN, the UK plays a crucial role in shaping decisions. Indeed, without British agreement, the EU could not act at all in the UN.

Leaving the EU would have a negative impact on the UK’s influence in multilateral negotiations at the UN, because it would find itself outside this key group. Although the UK could certainly seek to build coalitions with other states, it would be operating in a context dominated by group politics, in which breaking out of established groups is difficult. While there are several Western states such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand that are involved in informal political groups at the UN, these ‘like-minded’ states find it difficult to be influential in multilateral negotiations because they cannot marshal large numbers of votes, and their coordination processes are not as well developed as the EU’s are.

The UK would not be alone outside of the EU, but it would certainly not be in the centre of diplomatic processes. Aligning itself with the US would not help, not only because on many issues outside of the Security Council, the US and the UK have not been in agreement (from the death penalty to security issues such as small arms control), but also because the US is quite often isolated in debates. Many other states – including those in the Commonwealth, which tend to be active in the African Group or the Non-Aligned Movement – would rather stick with groups of developing countries than align themselves with rich, western states. So the UK would find it difficult to use the Commonwealth as an alternative fixed grouping to lead, and would instead have to build coalitions on a case-by-case basis – an activity requiring considerable diplomatic resources. Brexit would thus mean that the UK has less influence on fewer issues compared to the current situation. It would create quite a break in British foreign policy which has traditionally accorded much importance to the UN, and multilateralism in general.

Of course, some will argue that Brexit reflects an alternative foreign policy tradition that accords great importance to the transatlantic relationship; an unattached UK will be a free agent in UN processes, much like the United States is. However, such a vision overstates the weight of the UK in the contemporary world

order. In a world where power is diffusing not only to other, non-Western states but to non-state actors, Brexit would be a nostalgic vote for a world order that no longer exists. Power in contemporary multilateralism emanates from social networks, and Brexit would undercut the UK's role in one of the most critical diplomatic networks shaping global governance.

This post represents the views of the authors and not those of the BrexitVote blog, nor the LSE.

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