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Webber, Mark

DOI:

[10.1057/s41311-023-00482-4](https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-023-00482-4)

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Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Webber, M 2023, 'Identity, status and role in UK foreign policy: Brexit and beyond', *International Politics*.
<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-023-00482-4>

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Identity, status and role in UK foreign policy: Brexit and beyond

Mark Webber¹

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Abstract

Brexit—the UK’s withdrawal from the European Union—is at the same time historic, controversial and of enduring significance. That description applies to both the UK’s domestic politics and (the focus here) its external relations. This article introduces the special issue ‘Adapting to Brexit: Identity, Status and Role in UK Foreign Policy’. It suggests that Brexit has had a dual character—being a source of both anxiety and opportunity for the UK—and, in consequence, can be usefully analysed through the concept of role adaptation. A focus on national ‘roles’ is a well-established way to think about what drives foreign policy. But role only makes sense when linked to the parallel concepts of status and identity. Insofar as Brexit has challenged (or, for some, has boosted), the status and identity of the UK, then so role adaptation becomes necessary. This piece outlines all three concepts—role, identity and status—placing them at the service of an analysis of Brexit’s effects on British foreign policy. That framing is then deployed in the thematic articles which follow.

Keywords Brexit · Identity · Status · Role · Foreign policy

As part of a special issue of *International Politics* on: Adapting to Brexit: Identity, Status and Role in UK Foreign Policy.

✉ Mark Webber
M.A.Webber.1@bham.ac.uk

¹ University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

Published online: 16 July 2023



Introduction

Michael Clarke and Helen Ramscar (2020: 1) have described Brexit as ‘the greatest strategic and economic change in the status of [the UK] for well over half a century’. Tellingly, this change was self-induced. Brexit cannot be regarded neatly as an ‘external shock’ acting upon the UK body politic, in reaction to which the British government undertook some sort of ‘structural adjustment’ to new realities.¹ Brexit was an act of will. It occurred as the result of a UK-wide referendum, itself the culmination of a decades’ long political controversy in British domestic politics. Because it had domestic origins, the response to Brexit has been seen by many as parochial, self-serving, even tragi-comic. Here, the grandiloquent emphasis on ‘Global Britain’ is mere words, ‘a glib post-imperial phrase’ that reflects a presumption of influence rather than a serious strategy for its exercise (Kettle 2021).

Undoubtedly, the UK has spun its foreign policy to avoid giving the impression the country is retreating from the world. The 2021 *Integrated Review* (HM Government 2021) provided the intellectual template for ‘Global Britain’; that document’s 2023 ‘refresh’ laid out the UK’s ambition to ‘shape the global environment’ (HM Government 2023: 10). UK-hosted meetings of NATO leaders (in 2019), as well as the G7 and COP-26 (in 2021), the Commonwealth Games (in 2022) and the Global Investment Summit (2023) could be seen as evidence of that ambition in practice. But just how much of a shift is this exactly? A concern with status has, after all, been a fixed feature of UK foreign policy for decades. Further, while many warned of the deleterious effects of leaving the EU, this is not how Brexit was justified by its supporters. For them (a group which came to include the Conservative governments led by Theresa May, Boris Johnson, Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak), a decline in Britain’s status was not regarded as Brexit’s tolerable collateral damage. Brexit was, in fact, rationalised on precisely the opposite grounds, as an act that would unbind the UK from the shackles of EU membership and increase Britain’s freedom of manoeuvre in its foreign and security policy (Buckledee 2018: chapter 6). Brexit has thus had a double and perhaps contradictory significance—raising immediate status concerns while simultaneously providing the UK with the opportunity to reassert its historic international influence. That convergence—of anxiety and opportunity—has found expression in forms of role adaptation (a term explained below) whereby the UK has sought to hedge against a Brexit-induced loss of status by elevating relationships outside of the EU.

Status

Why does status matter in how we consider UK foreign policy? The straightforward explanation here would point to positional advantage, how material capabilities (military, economic, technological, scientific, and demographic) alongside soft

¹ On ‘external shocks’ and ‘structural adjustment’ in foreign policy, see, respectively, Hermann (1990) and Levy (1994).



power (culture and political values) confer upon a state ‘tangible benefits in security, wealth, and influence’ (Renshon 2017: 3). Foreign policy follows the direction which possession of such resources makes possible, albeit in circumstances where the capabilities of others matter too. Relative power and the cooperative and competitive outcomes of state interaction that follow is the name of the game in international politics. But this is only part of the story. Even realism, the IR approach most preoccupied with capabilities, leaves room for non-material explanations of state behaviour. Whereas the neo-realism of Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer adopts an almost fatalistic system determinism on how states behave (cf. Freire 2019), neo-classical realism strikes a rather different note. As Gideon Rose (1998: 146–147) has suggested, ‘there is no immediate or perfect transmission belt linking material capabilities to foreign policy behaviour. Foreign policy choices are made by actual political leaders and it is their perceptions of relative power that matter, not simply relative quantities of physical resources or forces in being’. That emphasis on leadership (or agency) is, of course, a mainstay of non-structural approaches. Thus, for Frédéric Merand (2020: 14), foreign policies cannot simply ‘be read off the international system or the international division of labour’—they ‘are enacted by people who have the ability to make [...] decisions’. This is a valuable but hardly a new point. What makes it interesting is that it suggests leaders in making such decisions might be driven by grand objectives—not simply the everyday concerns of policy. Here, status is an end in itself; it is desired not because it is a proxy measure of material capabilities, but rather because it embodies the aspirations of national identity and self-image (Götz 2021: 243).

The desire for status has, in fact, long been seen as a driver of state action—as relevant to ‘small’ states such as Norway, rising powers such as India and China, and ascendant states such as the USA (Renshon 2020). Status concerns are especially consequential for those moving up or down the international hierarchy. A rising power (China for instance) might err towards caution in its foreign policy, confident that its growing power will mean its status credentials are recognised. A declining power (Russia for example), by contrast, might feel an acute status dissatisfaction—a sense of injustice and discrimination because its presumed higher status is not being acknowledged by others. In the latter case, the difficulty of adjusting downward can result in the risky pursuit of ‘status-altering’ events (aggression against one’s neighbours in the Russian example) (Renshon 2017: 24; Krickovic and Zhang 2020). But equally, it might entail a more measured and systematic foreign policy of status protection—efforts designed, in Jonathan Renshon’s (2017: 4) words, ‘to preserve one’s current position or slow one’s decline’. That observation is particular apposite when it comes to the UK. The history of post-War British foreign policy can be seen as one prolonged effort to sustain the UK’s position as a great power.²

Status protection is, of course, conditioned by the external circumstances in which foreign policy decisions are made. For the UK, that context has been fundamentally altered by exit from the EU: in ways that are both constraining (the loss of

² This theme is taken up in the article by Christopher Hill in this issue. See also McCourt (2014), Stephens (2021) and Vucetic (2021).



‘voice opportunities’ at the European level) and empowering (London is no longer bound by EU competencies on trade and environment policy). How might this altered context shape policy? Two broad considerations are relevant here. First are the views of the foreign policy decision makers themselves. As Hyam Gold (1978: 569) noted many years ago, ‘environmental factors influence foreign policy decisions neither invariably nor directly, but only insofar as they affect or are mediated through the perceptions and attitudes of relevant decision makers’. To deploy a distinction of even longer standing, the ‘operational milieu’ of UK foreign policy has shifted with Brexit, but just as important is ‘how the policy maker imagines [that] milieu to be’ (Sprout and Sprout 1957: 328). Second is the fact that foreign policy is played out by reference to others. In foreign policy, the ‘modes of enablement and constraint’ are not simply a consequence of structural circumstance; they also follow from ‘agential forces’—how, in other words, actors relate to one another in the same ‘interactive setting’ (Dessler 1989: 444).

These considerations matter in how we consider status. Status follows from the capabilities a state possesses, but it is realised in how that state is regarded by others. Status is not, in other words, simply a matter of how, in relative terms, a state is ranked according to the possession of material attributes. As Marina Duque (2018: 580) has noted, it is also ‘fundamentally social’; status is a matter of recognition in other words. That moves it pretty close to the related notion of reputation. But while these two concepts overlap they do not coincide. A state can, after all, have a high status but a bad reputation³ (the converse is also true). ‘Reputation’ is a behavioural quality—‘beliefs’ held by others ‘about a trait or tendency of an actor, informed by observation of the actor’s past behaviour’ (Renshon et al. 2018: 325). Status is something more. It is about the possibilities of action that follow from rank and standing (in both its material and social senses) *and* the deference shown by others as a consequence of that positioning (Kemper 2011: 13–14). Deference may diminish if a state’s reputation is sullied and it may be the case that eventually reputational damage is so chronic and acute that the social element of status falls with it. A ‘good reputation’ Robert Keohane (2005: 105–106) suggests, ‘makes it easier for a government to enter into advantageous international agreements; tarnishing that reputation imposes costs by making agreements more difficult to reach’. Over time, such costs will render a state less influential, less able to enact its foreign policy priorities and *ergo* undermining of its status. These processes do not necessarily run in parallel, and status is, arguably, more ‘sticky’ than reputation. However, the cumulative effects of reputational erosion are powerful. Thus, successive foreign policy blunders—the British role in the Suez crisis and the 2003 Iraq war, for instance—stand as way-stations in the long-term diminution of the UK’s international status (Cook 2004).

³ As was the case of the USA under the Trump administration. See also the commentary that attended the US withdrawal (by the Biden administration) from Afghanistan in August 2021 (Daily Telegraph 2021).



Role and identity

A quest for status might be regarded as an end in itself because it delivers ‘tangible benefits’, but beneath the surface of such instrumentalism lurks a powerful political and psychological need. A state which has experienced elevated status often remains committed to greatness (and with it, a rejection of decline and weakness) as an ongoing act of self-identification (Hagström 2021). And this, in turn, is underpinned by a conception of *role*—the notion held by ‘actors about who they are, what they would like to be with regard to others, and how they therefore should interact in (international) social relationships [...]’ (Harnisch et al. 2011: 1–2). ‘Role’, David Blagden (2019: 471–472) has suggested, is ‘social, relational and performative—it is about deriving utility from being seen as the sort of actor that discharges certain rights and responsibilities’.

Role theory has acquired an important place in the study of foreign policy, particularly when explaining how states adjust to changing international circumstances. Philippe Le Prestre (1997: 5) has noted that a state’s ‘role definition’ generates ‘an image of the world [...] and influences the definition of the situation and [...] the available options [before it]’. An idea of role allows a state to formulate foreign policy and thus to navigate turbulent external circumstance. Adjusting foreign policy in this way does not leave the underlying role untouched. As Kalevi Holsti’s (1970: 294) foundational piece on role theory pointed out many years ago, flux in the international environment is given meaning by national roles, but these roles might themselves be adapted, even transformed, by the changes they seek to accommodate. Dirk Nabers (2011: 84) has pointed out, similarly, that ‘roles can destabilize [...] in times of social instability’. Yet we also know that roles can be stubbornly persistent, especially so when articulating a claim to a hierarchical position—‘how’ that is, according to Barry Buzan (2004: 19), ‘states define their claims and roles in relation to each other’ whether as ‘superpower, great power, regional power or suchlike’. These two processes of change and persistence may well co-exist: a state may efface one role but at the same time affirm another. The USA, for instance, eschewed its anti-communist role as the Cold War wound down, but in the decade that followed it continued to emphasize its credentials as the leader of the liberal international community (McCrisken 2003: 159–160). A similar manoeuvre had been performed by the UK some four decades earlier. Decolonisation after World War Two had rendered Britain’s imperial role untenable but the idea of an, admittedly ill-defined, world role took its place—justified, first, by the creation of the Commonwealth and, second, by an assumption that the exercise of international influence across two centuries simply accorded to the British an earned position of a global power (Northedge 1974: 219–20).

Role is thus a nuanced way to understand a country’s external or foreign policy orientation. Does it help when looking at Brexit? At first sight, Brexit appears contradictory. Siren warnings that Brexit placed the UK’s good standing in jeopardy were made clear to London by its (then) fellow EU member states following the 2016 referendum (Harrois 2018). The search for a role post-Brexit has thus



been about preserving a status for the UK that was, ironically, placed in jeopardy by the very act of leaving the EU in the first place (Hadfield 2020: 183–186). This seemingly contradictory occurrence might simply be explained away by the turbulence of British domestic politics. An irrational foreign policy act was the outcome of domestic political division, ill-judged decision-making by flawed leaders and a form of perverse path dependence whereby a process was set in motion that proved impossible to reverse even when its negative consequences became clear (Macshane 2021). Having crossed the threshold and exited the EU, foreign policy then became geared towards limiting the damage of Brexit and urgently seeking out new international opportunities. The articulation of the UK's post-Brexit role—whether as ‘global trading state, great power, faithful ally to the USA, regional partner to the EU and leader of the Commonwealth’—thus took on a decidedly instrumental nature (Oppermann et al. 2020).

Instrumentalism alone, however, cannot explain foreign policy. Identity also matters. As Hadfield-Amkhan (2010) has written, ‘national identity operates visibly to inform the national interest, and viably to constitute and motivate the foreign policy choices of states’. But how does this relate to role? Identity, can be seen as a composite of the various roles actors ascribe to themselves and which are then affirmed in their interactions with others (Ned Lebow 2016: 79). Identity and roles, in other words, can be mutually constitutive (Nabers 2011: 82). States (or, more accurately, their governing elites), ‘choose’, according to David McCourt (2011: 1600) ‘to enact roles such as “leader” or “reliable ally” in particular situations in order to make their identity affirming behaviour in international politics meaningful’. To extend this argument, one might regard a state as having a master ‘role orientation’, one that, in effect, is short-hand for its identity claim. More ‘specific national role conceptions’ are the way by which that orientation is pursued (Gaskarth 2014: 46).

What does this entail in the British case? Jamie Gaskarth (2013; 78; 2014: 47) has suggested that the UK's dominant role orientation (or what he has also referred to as British ‘self-identity’) ‘is predicated on the idea that Britain is a leading global actor’. That role is accepted across the governing domestic political spectrum and forms an expectation among important international partners of how, when dealing with the British, the UK sees itself. British role conceptions—as a good ally, a diplomatic convening power, a soft power, a trading and finance state, a defender of the rule of law, follow logically from that point of reference.

Identity and role are bound up here with an elevated sense of status and that is, in some ways, the key to understanding Brexit. The UK's exit from the EU appears to be much less of a conundrum if it is seen as the outcome of a particular interpretation of how British status was to be preserved. Brexit was premised on an assumption that continued EU membership had become inimical to British sovereignty and unnecessary for the articulation of the UK's identity as a global actor. Brexit, by this view, was the bold step by which the restraints on the UK's freedom of action would finally be resolved (Daddow 2019; Beasley et al. 2021; Tombs 2021: 69). In this sense, refreshed role conceptions did not suddenly emerge into the light of day in response to Brexit—they were already there. The idea that the UK would be ‘one of the most influential countries in the world’, would consolidate the transatlantic relationship, and would be at the forefront of scientific, environmental and technological



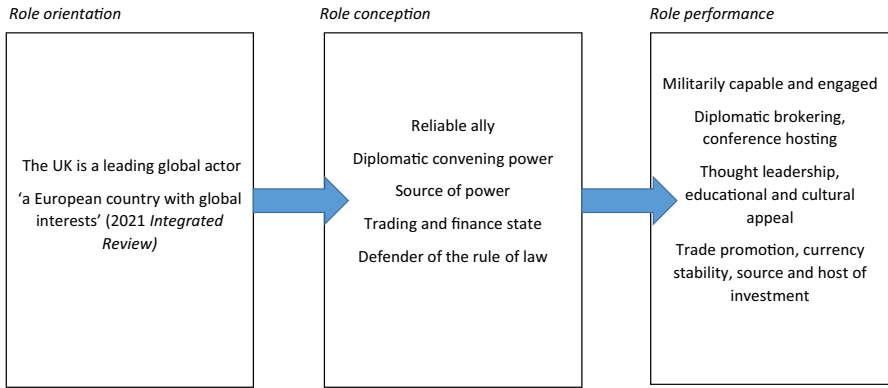


Fig. 1 Role adaptation in UK foreign policy. Adapted from Gaskarth (2014: 47) and Harnisch (2011: 8–9). See also House of Commons, Select Committee on Foreign Affairs (2020: Chapter 2)

advances certainly gained currency as Brexit opened up a ‘new chapter’ for the UK (Johnson 2021). But these conceptions clearly played upon assumptions of national distinctiveness, even exceptionalism, already firmly embedded in UK foreign policy (Parnell 2022: 392; Vucetic 2022: 258–59). One might regard British foreign policy after 2016 as a series of actions aimed at ‘offsetting’ the damaging consequences of Brexit. But it is just as much a ‘reset’, an effort to preserve the sense of status that has been the central concern of British foreign policy before, during and after membership of the EU. Here, the underlying role orientation and role conceptions remain, but the ‘strategies and instruments [of] performing [that] role’ change (Harnisch 2011: 10).

Figure 1 characterises that process as one of role adaptation. It assumes the UK’s role orientation as a leading international power is fixed. Brexit has challenged the idea that the UK is a global actor and so adaptation occurs in the conception and performance categories where this core claim has had to be constantly asserted. Global Britain, in this light, is not simply a slogan; it is an exercise of discursive shape-shifting meant to give meaning to the idea that the UK remains ‘a European country with global interests’ (HM Government 2021: 60).

That said, Brexit has shattered elite consensus in British politics. Analytically, this is important because role analysis relies on the view that political elites hold a shared position on national role orientations. That view has always been something of a generalisation, ‘blackboxing’ elite debate and elbowing out evidence of intra-elite contestation (Cantir and Kaarbo 2012). Empirically tenuous, it can nonetheless be justified by assuming that intra-elite differences are matters of emphasis not substance and that the discourse and actions of foreign policy are rolled out once differences have been resolved. On this basis, we might accept that the headline of the UK’s role orientation—that the UK is or, at least, should be, a global actor—is a useful shortcut to understanding the direction of foreign policy. Even so, one major caveat remains. Role consensus is increasingly a thing of the English (or Westminster) governing elite. One outcome of Brexit has been to distance opinion in Scotland from the core claims of UK foreign policy, indeed, from the very notion that



the UK has a foreign policy that represents Scottish interests at all (Hendry 2021). But foreign policy is made in Westminster, so even that caveat is not fatal to the premises of a role approach. It does, however, draw our attention to currents submerged beneath British national identity and role conception—that is, an unstated but essentially *English* outlook (Vucetic 2021: 32–33, 73–4, 193).

Role adaptation requires achieving the best fit between an actor and its external environment. But despite the positive narrative the UK government has put on its foreign policy after Brexit, role adaptation has not gone down well among the UK's major—now erstwhile—partners in the EU. Brexit has also complicated the relationship with the USA, the UK's major ally. And hanging over all of this are material factors. These were qualified in our analysis above, but they remain significant. Whatever its level of ambition, material constraints still limit the UK's options (inhibiting role performance, in other words). Overall, as Ryan Beasley et al. (2021: 1) have noted, the UK has after Brexit experienced a profound challenge to reposition 'itself into an international role that simultaneously meets its various domestic desires for greater control, its international foreign policy ambitions, is acceptable to international actors, and comports with prevailing sovereignty norms around anti-colonialism and the liberal international order'. Role adaptation is the response to these challenges, but it may ultimately be in vain. The development of the UK's role in the world after Brexit could well be a story of unsuccessful decline management, one that demonstrates the mismatch between the British elite's self-perception of status, and its social and material reality (Merand 2020: 5).

Conclusion

Brexit is not the only recent development that affects Britain's position in the world. The COVID-19 pandemic, accelerating climate change, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its associated economic consequences have all had negative and enduring effects on global markets and human security; all have worsened the 'gridlock' that blights global governance (Hale and Held 2017). These problems have all directly affected the UK's domestic politics and socio-economic welfare and have challenged its claim to global influence. Sat above this tale of woe is the increasingly dysfunctional relationships between the USA and China on the one hand and the USA and Russia on the other. Such sharpening great power rivalries have forced other states (the UK included) and international organisations to take sides in an emerging global politics of strategic competition (Mazarr 2022).

These developments have had, and will continue to have, ripple effects on the UK for many years to come. But none of them was made in Britain. Brexit, by contrast, is a uniquely British occurrence. Its impact on British identity and status, and the UK's role in the world is, therefore, likely to be substantial and long-lasting. In that light, what are the signposts that might mark the UK's adaptation? Put another way, what past roles might serve as a model for the UK outside the EU (Hauser 2019: 245)? Can the UK assert diplomatic, military or environmental leadership unencumbered by the constraints of EU membership? Or is its influence diminished by Brexit?



The articles in this special issue address such questions. They are based on the framework of analysis outlined in this short introduction which connects status, identity and role to the conduct of UK foreign policy. The special issue considers the historical context of the UK's membership of the EU, examines how Brexit is viewed by the UK's major partners and reflects upon the broad trajectory of UK foreign policy since the 2016 UK referendum. A number of articles apply the idea of role adaptation to case studies of post-Brexit foreign policy. These look at diplomacy (including cooperation with the UN, the Commonwealth and the EU), European defence (including NATO), defence industrial policy, nuclear weapons, environmental policy and trade. The case studies do not exhaust the range of activities where the UK's claims to global status apply. One could have also looked at the life-sciences industry, cultural and soft power, cyber capabilities and even the UK constituent nations' sporting prowess. All these add to the UK's reputation, have a substantive basis in material achievement and have figured in the UK government's post-Brexit narrative of national purpose. Those activities we have chosen to consider stand out because they meet some or all of the following criteria: they are subject to specific and important foreign actions, have a significance that pre-dates Brexit and have been expressly repurposed in the light of the Brexit watershed. Taken individually each has something important to say about Brexit's impact; taken together, they are a measure of the turbulent journey the UK has taken since the EU membership referendum.

Finally, a word on timescale. Empirically, our analysis regards Brexit (a descriptor for the UK's formal departure from the EU) as being triggered by the outcome of the UK-wide referendum held in June 2016. That vote saw a slim (but binding) majority opt in favour of leaving the EU, so terminating a membership status that goes back to British entry into the then European Economic Community in January 1973. Following the referendum, an interregnum followed during which the UK and the EU negotiated a new relationship. An EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement entered into force in February 2020 (that text also included a Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland) and an EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement was reached in December. The UK left the EU Single Market and Customs Union at the end of that month. Simultaneously, EU law including rulings of the European Court of Justice ceased to apply. Brexit as an event can be placed within these three and half years and even be extended back to the beginning of 2013 (the point at which Prime Minister David Cameron committed to a referendum). But Brexit has a spatial as well as temporal meaning. The latter has a reasonably narrow focus (the crucial years of 2013–2020) but what happened in that delimited period only makes sense when seen within a broader (spatial) context—that is, by reference to Brexit's antecedents and later consequences. The articles in the special issue adopt this dual perspective. Brexit's 'eventfulness' (Vucetic 2021: 35) can be judged both as a moment in time (a historical watershed) and as the cause (or accelerant) of major processes of change, evident for our purposes in the UK's role adaptation.



Declarations

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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