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# Unsplendid isolation: Britain after 'Brexit'

## A Biden presidency — allied to an EU pursuing 'strategic autonomy' — leaves a 'sovereign' UK with a bit-part role

Poor, isolated and destined to disintegrate. That's how the United Kingdom looks from the outside, in the first few weeks of its 'freedom' from the European Union. Fifty-seven per cent of Scottish voters, according to the latest poll, support independence. The Conservative government is preparing to rip up the Working Time Directive, which under EU law limited the working week to 48 hours.

Britain's fishing communities, among the most vociferous supporters of Brexit, are surprised to find they cannot now easily sell their fish to the European mainland. Meanwhile, truck drivers crossing the English Channel are having their sandwiches confiscated by Dutch border officials, under new rules on food import.

As they watched rioters sweep up the steps of the US Capitol, Europeans had to confront the fact that the UK isn't even the most dysfunctional of their Anglo-Saxon partners. Yet while the EU's foreign and security chiefs face a global superpower now about to turn on a dime — diplomatically and in terms of domestic policy — they also encounter a fading former empire which does not know where it is going.

## No discernible strategy

The problem with the UK is that, even after 12 months in office, its government lacks any discernible strategy. In February 2020, the prime minister, Boris Johnson, ordered an 'integrated review' — encompassing defence, foreign policy, development aid and security — advertised as the biggest shakeup in international UK priorities since the end of the cold war.

In March, as the coronavirus struck, the exercise was put on hold. With nation-states impounding supplies of protective equipment on the runway and travel restrictions going up across the world, the future

looked impossible to predict.

In September, the review restarted but, in the hiatus, civil servants had taken back control — to coin a phrase — from the inner circle of hard-Brexit advisers around Johnson. And with the defenestration of Johnson's key counsellor, Dominic Cummings, in December, the whole exercise shrank back to the problems that triggered it: defence budgets and force structures embodying the contradiction between elevated military aspirations and diminished influence and means.

On the bigger picture — of the UK's role in the world and its orientation towards its major partners — everything is uncertain. Johnson's threat in September to break international law and scrap parts of the EU Withdrawal Agreement damaged the UK's reputation so badly, in Brussels and Washington, that it cannot have been made in the expectation of a victory by Joe Biden in the US presidential election.

When Biden was asked, on the day of his victory, if he had a word for the BBC, he replied mischievously: 'The BBC? I'm Irish.' He did not need to add 'and your guy just jeopardised the Irish peace process' but the inference was heard around the world.

In truth, Johnson cannot concretise a UK foreign-policy strategy, post-Brexit. The one he had in mind was always a neo-imperial fantasy and it went up in flames the moment the coronavirus hit.

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In his now-infamous Greenwich speech, in the Old Royal Naval College in London, last February, Johnson set out a vision for the UK as the global champion, and beneficiary, of a new round of trade liberalisation. Complaining that tariffs were being 'waved around like cudgels', he promised that the UK would use its newfound independence, and separate voice at the World Trade Organization, to open up markets, just as the mercantile capitalists who built the Royal Navy in the 18th century had done.

How he would do this without military supremacy or significant diplomatic power was never explained — nor did it need to be in the world of bloated rhetoric in which Johnson moves. But now, with Biden about to take office, and subtle shifts in European thinking stimulated by the coming departure of the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, UK diplomacy has to move out of the rhetorical world into the real one.

## ‘Strategic autonomy’

Europe, as I have written here before, faces the imperative of achieving technological sovereignty and ‘strategic autonomy’. The two concepts have been nebulous at times among the European policy elite and the latter was described as an ‘illusion’ by the German defence minister, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer — but they are at their least nebulous in the Elysée palace.

In November, the French president, Emmanuel Macron, outlined a comprehensive global strategy for the EU — to become an equal player to the US in the creation of a new multilateralism, resisting the slide to great-power politics. He advocated ‘strengthening and structuring a political Europe’, arguing that this was ‘the only way to impress our values, our common voice, to prevent the Chinese-American duopoly, the dislocation, the return of hostile regional powers’.

Europe, in short, has to be a player in the game if it is not to be a piece on the board. Though strong centrifugal forces could prevent this happening, with the departure of the UK from the European stage these forces are weakened, not strengthened. The essentially rule-taking position of the UK, as revealed in the final phase of the Brexit negotiations, means it cannot any longer overtly play the role of Perfidious Albion — even though everything in the right-wing Tory mindset tells it to do so.

Europe is, of course, decades away from being able to deploy a functioning, integrated armed force or to create a systemic rival to the Silicon Valley technology giants. But it could conceivably achieve strategic autonomy in individual sectors and dimensions, such as space, the global positioning system and 5G telecommunications.

## More limited ambitions

The US, meanwhile, looks set to emerge from four years of geopolitical lunacy with more limited ambitions than before.

Tony Blinken, the secretary of state designate, is a Francophile, multilateralist and believer in international institutions and American interventionism. In an extensive interview last year, he sketched the likely aims of a Biden administration: to re-establish America as an ‘organiser’ of the world and build *ad-hoc* coalitions to achieve common goals.

*The only sensible strategy*

While the US would continue its ‘pivot’ towards dealing with the emergence of — and

*for the UK would be to seek to be the glue that sticks Europe and the US together, around the common task of building multilateral solutions and structures in a fragmenting global order.*

threats emanating from — China, that pivot was now conceived as 'Indo-Pacific', drawing the emerging Indian superpower as well as the EU into an alliance which could set red lines and rules of behaviour. Criticising Donald Trump, who tried to face down China without consultation with America's European allies, Blinken said:

'We're about 25 per cent of world GDP alone. When we're working with allies and partners, depending on who we bring into the mix, it's 50 or 60% of GDP. That's a lot more weight and a lot harder for China to ignore.'

Though Biden's administration will face a four-year semi-insurgency from the far right, if things go right we could be looking at an era of renewed US-EU co-operation, over climate, the Iran nuclear deal, middle-east peace and trade.

Whatever Johnson imagines, the strongest relationship over the next four years will be between Washington and Paris, and diplomatically therefore between the US and the EU. The UK, despite the hubris, will play a bit part.

## Scarring experience

Across UK politics, the scarring experiences of Brexit and the 2019 election debacle have left many progressives determined to put the issue of relations with the rest of Europe behind them. In English politics it is only among unrepentant liberals that we hear calls to 'rejoin' — for example, from the Labour peer Andrew Adonis or the Oxford don Will Hutton. The Labour leader, Keir Starmer, has pledged not to reopen the Brexit deal, nor to seek the revival of a free-movement agreement.

Yet geopolitical facts remain. If Biden's Democrats can ride out two terms in office, and if Paris, Rome, Madrid and Berlin can stay roughly on the same page on strengthening the European project, the neo-colonial fantasy of the British right — in which the UK plays the geopolitical role of a footballing *libero* — is over.

The only sensible strategy for the UK would be to seek to be the glue that sticks Europe and the US together, around the common task of building multilateral solutions and structures in a fragmenting global order. But

Johnson has never believed in that and his dysfunctional premiership remains the biggest obstacle to a clear, reality-based foreign policy for the UK — or what is to remain of it.

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