The World HandCOV'd: United Kingdom in the shadow of Brexit and COVID-19

Alexandra Murphy

Contents

1 Key takeaways
2 Pre-COVID-19 security and geopolitical circumstances
3 Recent developments
4 China
5 The EU
6 Russia
7 Scotland
8 What is next for the UK?

Key takeaways

- The UK is not shrinking back from difficult foreign policy decisions that alienate potential trade partners, and is prioritizing national security and human rights issues.
- Determination to "get Brexit done" has shaped part of the UK response to COVID-19 and demonstrated a lack of willingness to work with the EU in a time of crisis.

The United Kingdom was facing testing geopolitical circumstances even before the outbreak of COVID-19. The UK is seeking to shape its new role outside of the EU and this has coincided with fresh disputes with Russia, a growing dispute between China and the United States US, and challenges in the UK's 'special relationship' with the US, alongside the global COVID-19 pandemic.

> These factors alone would suggest the UK chart a nuanced foreign policy, appeasing new trade partners and assuaging political tensions, however this has not been the case, and the UK has recently acted in spite of possible political repercussions, passing the Magnitsky Act and offering citizenship to Hong Kong citizens. These decisions will have strong geopolitical ramifications for the UK during and after the global pandemic.

Pre-COVID-19 security and geopolitical circumstances

In December 2019, the UK held a general election resulting in a resounding victory for Prime Minister Boris Johnson and ensuring the UK's exit from the EU, which took place on 31 January 2020. This began an 11-month transition period where the UK effectively remains in the EU's customs union and single market, and continues to follow EU rules, but there with no members of the political institutions, such as no UK MEPs in the European Parliament.

As one of the original NATO members, the UK hosted a Heads of State and Government meeting in early December 2019 to mark NATO's 70th anniversary. With Brexit weakening UK ties to the rest of Europe, the UK's role in NATO is even more essential to demonstrate continued commitment to global security and cooperation. As part of a wide range of UK support in NATO, the UK currently contributes some 900 troops to the Enhanced Forward Presence in Estonia. As a NATO member, the UK also faced the recent uncertainties of the alliance which included US opposition to Turkey's purchase of a Russian air defense system, rebukes over European countries' defense spending, and an uncertain commitment from Trump to the alliance.

The UK had a fresh taste of navigating relations between the EU and the US over the Iran Deal. French, German and UK foreign ministers together expressed regret at the US decision to withdraw from the nuclear deal with Iran. The UK gave implicit support to the US over the assassination of Qasem Soleimani in January, but then also stood with European leaders and called for both the US and Iran to deescalate. This situation highlighted the difficulties the UK will face as it attempts to placate both the US and the EU.

Recent developments

China

The UK is no longer in a so-called "golden era" with China, as labelled by the then-Chancellor George Osborne in 2015. This era saw Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to the UK in 2015, grand plans for Chinese investment, such as in a new nuclear program, and approval for Chinese telecoms giant Huawei to help build the UK's 5G network. The contrast with today couldn't be more stark. Media reported that Boris Johnson was "furious" with China over misleading figures of the number of COVID-19 cases and the infectiousness of the virus. In July, the UK reversed the decision on Huawei sparking anger from China, with Chinese state media foreshadowing "public and painful" retaliation. This decision is believed to be the result of US pressure. US Trade

Representative, Robert Lighthizer, said the new United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement will be a template for future US trade deals, and it includes a clause empowering the US to reject any trade deal Mexico or Canada does with a "non-market economy," which would include China. This type of deal could be replicated with Britain.

UK-China relations face further complication due to the situation in Hong Kong. Boris Johnson denounced China's imposition of a security law on Hong Kong and said the law constituted a clear breach of the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984, for when Hong Kong was handed back to China in 1997, putting an end to the "one country, two systems" principle enshrined in the Joint Declaration. In July 2020, Britain made an offer of British citizenship to up to three million Hong Kong residents, infuriating Beijing and leading to warnings of repercussions. Beijing's ambassador to London, Liu Xiaoming, accused the UK of gross interference and warned "China wants to be the UK's friend and partner. But if you treat China as a hostile country, you would have to bear the consequences." The UK Foreign Office also recently urged China to allow UN observers to Xinjiang over fears of human rights violations.

This situation has also highlighted the scale of the oncoming diplomatic challenge for the UK.

The 44th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council saw competing international responses to China's new national security law in Hong Kong. A statement in support of the new Chinese law was backed by 53 countries, and the UK had the support of 27 countries in criticizing the law. China's support group included 15 African countries underlining how the UK has lost sway in Africa over the past 5 years to China, and some of the Gulf monarchies normally close to the UK. As the UK leaves the EU, it also has no clear strategic or practical response to China's Belt and Road Initiative.

The EU

In the government's refusal to join the EU's COVID-19 vaccine programme and an EU procurement scheme for medical ventilators, alongside the UK government missing three opportunities to be part of an EU scheme to bulk-buy PPE, ministers were forced to deny that anti-EU sentiment had played a role. A senior civil servant, Sir Simon McDonald, claimed that the UK took a "political decision" not to join the EU scheme to source medical equipment, and despite this claim later being retracted, it echoed a widely held belief that the UK government was prioritising Brexit over EU cooperation during the pandemic.

In June 2020, the UK and the EU agreed not to extend the transition period beyond December, meaning there are just under six months to negotiate a deal before the transition period ends. After a recent round of talks in June, the EU's chief negotiator, Michel Barnier ,said no significant progress had been made towards a deal, accusing the UK of backtracking on commitments. Talks have stalled due to a failure to agree on key issues such a fisheries policy and the Northern Ireland border. Stumbling blocks also include issues such as data.

> The UK is risking a data adequacy agreement ensuring the free flow of personal data between the UK and the EU if it cannot be proved that there are sufficient safeguards included in the UK-US agreement on data access for criminal investigations to comply with EU standards, further highlighting the difficulties facing the UK of straddling US and EU trade agreements.

Russia

UK-Russia relations did not recover following the 2018 nerve agent attack in Salisbury, having never fully recovered from the Alexander Litvinenko poisoning in 2006, and remain tense. On 13th July, the first Magnitsky sanctions were announced in the UK targeting, amongst others, Russian officials allegedly involved in the mistreatment of Sergei Magnitsky. Russia threatened to retaliate with reciprocal measures and called the sanctions "pointless", adding that the move "will not improve Russian-British relations".

In July, the UK Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab, accused Russia of hacking COVID-19 vaccine research in the UK, US and Canada, again eliciting an angry response by the Russian Ambassador, Andrei Kelin, saying "I don't believe in this story at all." The UK had been one of the strongest nations in pushing for EU sanctions against Russia and with Brexit it will be interesting to see if the UK continues to pursue an assertive sanctions policy against Russia.

Scotland

The question of Scottish independence could be back on the table after a poll in July showed 54 percent of Scots now favour independence. The 2014 referendum was supposed to put the question of Scottish independence to rest for a generation, however when Scotland voted to remain in the EU by 62 percent, the issue reignited. The independence question has been compounded by First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon's, handling of the COVID-19 crisis which has been perceived as more competent than

England's. The Holyrood elections in 2021 could result in a new mandate for a second referendum if the Scottish National Party (SNP) win a large majority. This internal issue could have serious consequences for the UK's security and geopolitical position, not least as the UK's nuclear deterrent, Trident, is located in Scotland.

What is next for the UK?

In the coming years, the UK faces a prolonged period of negotiations due to Brexit, renegotiating at least 759 treaties. This will come during a global recession, while globalization is in retreat, and with a crippled domestic economy, making a once difficult task much more exacting.

> The declined extension to negotiations with the EU makes it clear that the UK does not wish to drag Brexit on any longer than necessary.

In June 2020, the UK government announced the merging of the Foreign Office and Department for International Development, with Boris Johnson saying that UK aid spending had for too long been without "reference to UK interests", signaling tighter control over foreign spending in the future as part of the government's initiative 'Global Britain'.

The US election in November will determine future UK and US relations. There are fears that a Trump reelection will see the bilateral relationship suffer, but also that a Biden administration could see the UK placed as a secondary partner behind the EU. The UK's position regarding China is unlikely to become conciliatory, and the Chinese Ambassador was challenged on British TV over the treatment of Uighur Muslims on 20 July. The UK's new Magnitsky Act is ostensibly to be used as part of the UK's more 'human right's based foreign policy, but there are no signs yet it will be applied to China.

Thus, there are many challenges ahead for the UK, particularly trying to find its new position in an increasingly divided world, without being able to count on the support of the EU or the US.

Alexandra Murphy *- Visiting Fellow, Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations (UK-Belarus).*

The paper is part of the project The World HandCOV'd: Assessing longer-term implications of the pandemic disruption for international security. The project is implemented by the

Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations and KAS Belarus.
The content of the publication represents the views of the author only.



Alexandra Murphy
Visiting Fellow, Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations