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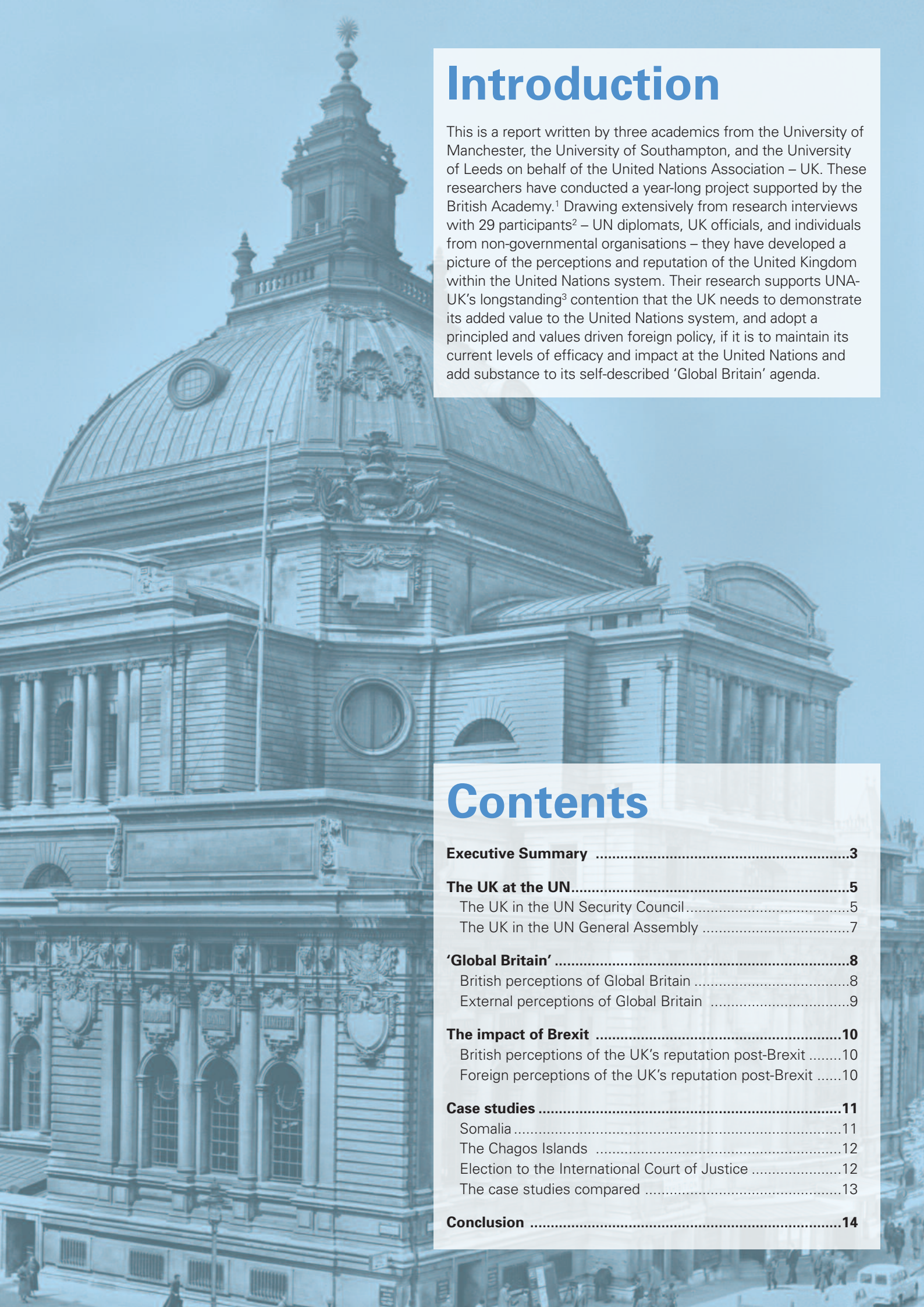
Global Britain in the United Nations

UNA-UK

Jess Gifkins, Samuel Jarvis, Jason Ralph



Introduction

This is a report written by three academics from the University of Manchester, the University of Southampton, and the University of Leeds on behalf of the United Nations Association – UK. These researchers have conducted a year-long project supported by the British Academy.[1] Drawing extensively from research interviews with 29 participants[2] – UN diplomats, UK officials, and individuals from non-governmental organisations – they have developed a picture of the perceptions and reputation of the United Kingdom within the United Nations system. Their research supports UNA-UK's longstanding[3] contention that the UK needs to demonstrate its added value to the United Nations system, and adopt a principled and values driven foreign policy, if it is to maintain its current levels of efficacy and impact at the United Nations and add substance to its self-described 'Global Britain' agenda.

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Executive Summary

On 23 June 2016 the UK voted to leave the EU. The referendum debate mainly focused on issues of domestic concern, however the decision necessarily has ramifications beyond the UK, and indeed, implications beyond the EU. It has been described as "clearly the biggest foreign policy challenge for the UK for a long time" by the Chair of the British Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee.[4] Similarly, Sir Simon McDonald, Permanent Under Secretary of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, described it as "the biggest thing that we have ever undertaken in peace time".[5] The UK's decision to leave the EU, or 'Brexit' as its colloquially known, impacts how the UK is perceived by other states, including its perceived reliability as a multilateral partner.

Front Cover: Prime Minister Theresa May and UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres. (UN Photo/Rick Bajornas)

Previous page: Methodist Central Hall, Westminster, where the first ever UN General Assembly was held. (UN Photo)

Right: Theresa May addressing the UN Security Council in September 2017. (UN Photo/Evan Schneider)

The influence that states can leverage in international negotiations is due, in part, to their reputation. In this report we explore the impacts of Brexit on the UK's reputation and capacity for influence within the United Nations' primary interstate forums: the General Assembly and the Security Council. The UK's seat in the UN Security Council is not under threat, but there is recognition that its legitimacy has weakened. Germany, for instance, has seized on this to reinvigorate its campaign for an EU seat within the Security Council by saying it will treat its non-permanent seat "as a European seat".[6]

For any loss of influence that the UK may experience there are other states looking to capitalise on shifting capacity, be it Ireland looking to position itself as an English-speaking 'gateway' into Europe[7], or France's increased leverage as the only EU member with a permanent seat in the Security Council. Historically, the UK's permanent seat has led it to prioritise the Security Council over the General Assembly where it now faces the double challenge of having focused less in this area in the past and no longer being able to rely on backing from the large EU bloc. Within the Security Council and the General Assembly there are challenges to the UK's influence and effectiveness as it navigates its withdrawal from the EU.

At the time of writing, the UK's departure from the EU has not taken place, so we are assessing changes in the UK's reputation as an effect of the 2016 decision to leave the EU.

The report is divided into four sections. First, we consider the UK's current practices within both bodies. Second, we investigate perceptions of the UK's policy of 'Global Britain' to see what traction it has gained both from British diplomats and in New York. Third, we analyse perceptions of the UK's reputation in the UN after the Brexit decision, from both a British and an international perspective. Fourth, a section of case studies where the UK has struggled to achieve its foreign policy interests after the Brexit decision, on Somalia, in elections to the International Court of Justice and in relation to the Chagos Islands.

While there are still areas where the UK remains influential, our research highlights considerable challenges for the UK in maintaining its current level of influence once it has exited the EU.

1. www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/uk-role-and-reputation-permanent-member-united-nations-security-council-after-decision-leave

2. We tried to interview and cite an equal number of men and women for this report. Unfortunately, this was not possible, partly because of the gender imbalance in the community we were investigating and additionally because the women we interviewed chose to be anonymous, as did 12 of the men (all interviewees were given the option of anonymity). As a consequence, all the interviewees we have cited by name in this report are male – a shortcoming in the data that should be given due consideration.

3. UNA-UK, 2016, 'Keeping Britain global', available at https://www.una.org.uk/keeping-britain-global

4. Foreign Affairs Committee (2018) 'FCO budget and capacity, and Annual Report 2017-18', (HC 1711). Available at: http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/foreign-affairs-committee/fco-budget-and-capacity-and-annual-report-201718/oral/92448.html.

5. Inside the Foreign Office, Episode 2: A Brave New World, 2018. Directed by Waldman, M.

6. The German Federal Government (2018) 'Germany in the UN Security Council: More Responsibility in the World', (8 June). Available at: https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/chancellor/more-responsibility-in-the-world-1141780

7. Wong, C. (2018) 'Ireland wants to replace UK as China's 'trusted friend' in Europe after Brexit, says Foreign Minister Simon Coveney', South China Morning Post. Available at: http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2138554/ireland-wants-replace-uk-chinas-trusted-friend-europe

To mitigate these risks we recommend:

- Specific policy ideas and resources from London, demonstrating the value of the United Kingdom in international forums. One such opportunity is presented by Secretary General António Guterres' call for a "quantum leap in collective action" on peace operations,[8] including leadership in New York on the implementation of protection of civilian mandates. This could also provide one means of following through on Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt's commitment to "do more within our budget on atrocity prevention".[9]
- Addressing gaps in diplomatic capacity at the General Assembly, which will develop as the UK is no longer able to rely on EU for burden sharing and support.
- Maintaining resolutely the UK's 0.7% commitment to foreign aid – a major source of soft power and influence.
- Developing a more refined communications strategy, including by dropping references to joining other groupings such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand (known as CANZ), which our data suggests would not be viable.
- Defending the legitimacy of UK leadership within the UN would provide for a more effective approach than maintaining the narrative of 'Global Britain'. This can be achieved by continuing to develop a more inclusive and collaborative approach to the practice of 'penholding' at the UN Security Council, including co-penholding with elected members, in ways that address the exclusionary effects of the practice. This is particularly important when emerging powers with resources to implement UK-negotiated mandates are elected to the Council. It is significant in this respect that Germany takes up an elected seat on the Council in 2019.

"While there are still areas where the UK remains influential, our research highlights considerable challenges for the UK in maintaining its current level of influence as it exits the EU."

Below: Prime Minister Clement Attlee addresses the first session of the UN General Assembly in London in 1946. (UN Photo/Marcel Blolomey)

8. Secretary General António Guterres, 8218th meeting of the UN Security Council, UN Doc. S/PV. 8218, 28 March 18; Brian Urquhart, Action for Peacekeeping. Will Political Consensus Lead to a Change in Practice? International Peace Institute, September 2018.

9. https://www.una.org.uk/news/civil-society-organisations-urge-uk-government-do-more-prevent-atrocities.

The UK at the UN

The UK in the UN Security Council

The UK is viewed as an activist state in the Security Council. It takes a strong role in drafting resolutions and agenda-setting and is generally seen as a skilled negotiator.

'Penholding' is an informal process whereby a state takes political ownership for leading drafts on a specific topic and since 2008 it has become more structured.[10] Penholding is a key indicator of influence, and between them, the UK, the US, and France (the "P3") now dominate penholding in the UN Security Council.

A diplomat who represented their country on the Security Council twice some years apart remarked that "I was surprised when I came back that all the pens were with the P3".[11] Indeed, of 36 agenda items with penholders in 2018 permanent five (P5) members 'held the pen' for 28 items. The UK is penholder for 12 agenda items – a full third of the total – mostly on its own and a few in collaboration with other members.[12] The items that the UK is penholder for include specific high-profile conflicts such as those in Yemen and Myanmar, as well as prominent thematic areas such as peacekeeping, the protection of civilians in armed conflict, and Women, Peace and Security.

This gives the UK considerable influence over whether and when to create a draft resolution, how to interpret a situation, and what measures or initiatives to propose. To some extent the P3 take on these roles because they have the diplomatic capacity – both in New York and at home – to act across a broad range of issue areas. It does, however, contribute towards a situation where the P3 are perceived as having disproportionate control over Security Council negotiations. There is a legitimacy cost for the P3 if they are seen as marginalising elected members.

The UK – again along with the US and France – generally dominates the agenda-setting process in the Security Council. Formally adding a new item to the Security Council's agenda for the first time is a procedural decision on which the veto can not be used. Without the veto, China and Russia were unable to block new agenda items on Zimbabwe, Myanmar and North Korea, nor were they able to generate enough opposition to block the decision in a simple majority vote. The UK is generally proactive on agenda-setting, although the UK and the US initially resisted adding Darfur to the agenda due to the concurrent conflict between Khartoum and the south of Sudan (now South Sudan).[13]

Below: UK Permanent Representative to the UN Karen Pierce chairing a Security Council meeting in 2018. (UN Photo/Manuel Elias)

10. On penholding see; Ralph, J. and Gifkins, J. (2017) 'The purpose of United Nations Security Council practice: Contesting competence claims in the normative context created by the Responsibility to Protect', European Journal of International Relations, 23(3), pp. 630-653; and Schia, N. N. (2017) 'Horseshoe and Catwalk: Power, Complexity, and Consensus-Making in the United Nations Security Council', in Niezen, R. & Sapignoli, M. (eds.) Palaces of Hope: The Anthropology of Global Organizations. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; and Gifkins, J. (2017) 'The Exclusionary Practice of Penholding', Fridays with MUNPlanet. Available at: https://www.munplanet.com/articles/fridays-with-munplanet/the-exclusionary-practice-of-penholding

11. Author Interview 2018. Interview #13. Conducted in New York, 27 July.

12. Security Council Report (2018) 'Monthly Forecast', February, Available at:

http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/2018_02_forecast.pdf

13. Gifkins, J. (2016) 'Darfur', in Bellamy, A.J. & Dunne, T. (eds.) Oxford Handbook of the Responsibility to Protect: Oxford University Press.

If the UK is able to maintain its political capital it will still be able to have a dominant position in relation to setting the Security Council's agenda.

The UK is generally viewed as a competent negotiator in the UN Security Council. Within the UN, the UK Permanent Mission is recognised "for its superior skills in the many legal technicalities that often bog down the Council".[14] UN diplomats we interviewed from outside the UK generally – although not exclusively – gave favourable reflections on their experiences of working with the British permanent mission during negotiations. For example, an interviewee from a non-EU country stated that "the UK even inside the Security Council is one of the most fair players. I do not recall anytime where they come to the table put out the document and say 'take it or leave it', no. They always give you enough time. Always engage in good faith in negotiations with you".[15]

Another non-EU interviewee from a Security Council member state described the UK as 'very good' in the way they conduct negotiations. They are "mostly, not always... very good, they try to build consensus, they have been very good with us on this, outside the Council and inside the Council".[16] An EU interviewee spoke more critically of the UK's drafting practices, describing an example where the UK circulated a draft after 6pm and expected states to be ready to negotiate the draft at 10am the following morning, with little time to speak with their foreign ministries.[17]

The more common reflections on British diplomacy though were that of skill, inclusion and of personalities who were well liked by fellow diplomats. Traditionally the UK permanent mission in New York is given some flexibility from Whitehall, however if the UK were to align itself more closely with the US after Brexit that could limit the UK's capacity for manoeuvre in the UN.

The UK then is currently viewed as a state with a high level of diplomatic skill within the Security Council. Diplomatic skill is not static, however. It relies on continued financial investment in diplomacy, as well as broader political investments in the reputation of the UK. A challenge for the UK in the Security Council is defending the legitimacy of its position as a permanent member. The UK and France – aware of their changing status as global military and economic power shifts – refrain from using their veto powers although the existence of the veto still shapes the dynamics within negotiations. The last time that either state formally cast a veto vote was in 1989.

There are specific proposals encouraging permanent members to formally commit to not using their veto in situations of mass atrocity crimes. The two main proposals on veto restraint are from the Accountability, Transparency and Coherence (ACT) group, and one led by France. The UK has expressed support for both proposals, however it was at the initiative of the UK that a caveat was inserted into the ACT proposal that the Security Council draft in question must be 'credible' which is a highly subjective term.[18]

Despite these debates around the use and legitimacy of the veto, the UK's position as a permanent member of the Security Council is not under threat – particularly because the British government would need to ratify any amendment to the UN Charter which gives the UK a veto over its own removal.[19]

Questions are increasingly being asked, however, about the legitimacy of the UK's position as a permanent member.[20] In interviews, questions were often raised by interviewees (unprompted) regarding the appropriateness of the UK's permanent position on the Security Council in light of Brexit and the UK's diminished status since 1945.[21] After Brexit, if the UK has less capacity to lead, draft, and negotiate key decisions on international threats then the legitimacy of its permanent seat will come under more intense scrutiny.

The Brexit negotiations themselves place the UK delegation in a difficult position as it needs to be on good terms with EU states and other economically powerful states with whom it will want to negotiate trade deals. An interviewee from a P5 state said that the UK was currently less willing to criticise EU states because they are prioritising the Brexit negotiations, and that "all interactions [with the UK] are seen through a Brexit lens".[22] Similarly, a non-EU interviewee explained that the UK was less willing to criticise China now, in recognition of how important China will be to the UK after Brexit.[23] These problems for the UK are self-reinforcing because if they tread more gingerly they appear to other members as if they are less powerful and less able to take a leadership role. This poses risks for the UK as they attempt to navigate their position in the world post-Brexit.

14. Adler-Nissen, R. and Pouliot, V. (2014) 'Power in practice: Negotiating the international intervention in Libya', European Journal of International Relations, 20(4), p 898.

15. Author Interview 2018. Interview #16. Conducted in New York, 4 August.

16. Author Interview 2018. Interview #18. Conducted in New York, 5 September.

17. Author Interview 2018. Interview #19. Conducted in New York 7 September.

18. Security Council Report (2015) 'The Veto', Research Report, No. 3. Available at: www.securitycouncilreport.org/wp-content/uploads/research_report_3_the_veto_2015.pdf

19. United Nations 1945. Charter of the United Nations. United Nations, Article 108.

20. Gifkins, J., Ralph, J. and Jarvis, S. (2018) 'Diplomats Reveal Concerns Over UK's Waning Influence on UN Security Council', Available: The Conversation. Available at: https://theconversation.com/diplomats-reveal-concerns-over-uks-waning-influence-on-un-security-council-103043

21. Author Interview 2018. Interview #17. Conducted in New York, 4 September; Author Interview 2018. Interview #14. Conducted in New York, 27 July; and Author Interview 2018. Interview #15. Conducted in London, 23 August; Author Interview 2018. Interview #18. Conducted in New York, 5 September.

22. Author Interview 2018. Interview #24. Conducted in New York, 12 December.

23. Author Interview 2018. Interview #25. Conducted in New York, 12 December.

The UK in the UN General Assembly

The membership and voting structure of the General Assembly – where each of 193 states has one vote without vetoes – means that negotiations are of a different nature to those in the Security Council. In contrast to the Security Council, influence in the UN General Assembly relies more on numbers, which means that groups carry more weight in negotiations than individual states, meaning that Brexit poses a greater challenge for the UK in the General Assembly. There is also a perception that the UK's permanent seat on the Security Council has led to a long-standing choice to prioritise the Council to the detriment of its engagement with the General Assembly.

At one of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee hearings, for instance, Lord David Owen said "I think we have very little influence on the General Assembly. Knowing how to handle the General Assembly is a skill. We have focused on handling the Security Council, which we have been very good at over the years, and we have disparaged the General Assembly."[24] Others echoed this sentiment that the UK has not invested enough in the General Assembly[25] and that the level of diplomatic skill it has in General Assembly negotiations it not as high as in the Security Council.[26] All of this means that there are some real risks for the UK in the General Assembly. Post-Brexit it will no longer be able to rely on support from other EU members and – having prioritised the Security Council – it has a relatively weaker diplomatic skill-set to fall back on without this bloc support.

Interviewees – both from the UK and abroad – saw a strong link between the UK's reputation within the General Assembly and its commitment to providing 0.7% of gross national income (GNI) in foreign aid. It was stressed that for many states development is their top priority within the UN.[27] In 2018 the UK was one of only 6 states which meets the target commitment of 0.7% of GNI in official development assistance.[28] Former UK Ambassador to the UN, Sir Mark Lyall Grant, described how crucial the foreign aid commitment is for the UK to demonstrate "evidence of real intent to be a global power",[29] and former UK Ambassador to the UN Lord Hannay concurred that without this continued commitment the UK's reputation "would be in sort of free fall territory".[30]

Below: Theresa May addresses the UN General Assembly, September 2018. – (UN Photo/Cia Pak)

24. 'Foreign Affairs Committee (2018) 'Oral Evidence: Global Britain', HC780, 30 January, House of Commons. Available at: http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/foreign-affairs-committee/global-britain/oral/77743.html.

25. Gowan, R. (2018) Separation Anxiety: European Influence at the UN after Brexit: European Council on Foreign Relations. Available at:

http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/separation_anxiety_european_influence_at_the_un_after_brexit

26. Author Interview 2018. Interview #8. Conducted in New York, 25 July.

27. Author Interview 2018. Interview #5. Conducted in London, 18 June.

28. McBride, J. (2018) 'Backgrounder: How Does the US Spend its Foreign Aid? ', Available: Council on Foreign Relations. Available at: https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/how-does-us-spend-its-foreign-aid

29. Author Interview 2018. Interview #5. Conducted in London, 18 June.

30. Author Interview 2018. Interview #2. Conducted in London, 24 May.

‘Global Britain’

British perceptions of Global Britain

Right: UNA-UK volunteers showcase the “Global Britain” traffic light scorecard at a UNA-UK conference in 2018. (UNA-UK/Alfie Jenkins)

Whilst the phrase Global Britain has a range of historical connotations[31] it has been taken on by the UK government as the defining phrase to encapsulate the UK’s foreign policy post-Brexit. Yet despite significant rhetorical references to the phrase, there is still no clarity on what Global Britain might mean, even from a UK perspective.

This has a knock-on effect, making it more difficult for the UK to project clarity of purpose abroad. Whilst the UK Government has stated that “Global Britain is already backed by substance” – including a recently announced ‘Global Britain Board’[32] – and thus demonstrates that the UK is “increasingly open, outward-looking and confident on the world stage”, our research suggests that this perception is not shared by stakeholders and diplomatic partners.[33]

One of the main areas of concern is how the policy of Global Britain fits into existing strategies and frameworks. We interviewed a range of UK officials – including three who have served as British Ambassador to the United Nations – and asked about their perceptions of Global Britain. Interviewees expressed concern at the government's lack of strategic thinking on the position of UK foreign policy after Brexit.

The more positive assessments regarding the Global Britain phrase emphasised opportunities for the UK to “do more and to be more engaged with the UN than we are currently”; there is little evidence of this as yet, it is “a work in progress”.[34]

Former European Commissioner Baroness Ashton described Global Britain as an “aspiration” stating that “it was a way of saying, both domestically and internationally, that Britain was still going to be an outward-facing nation”.[35] However, when discussing the potential for the UK to carve out a new foreign policy approach to alliance building at the UN, many interviewees were sceptical of the extra benefits the UK could gain outside of the EU. As Sir Simon Fraser, former Permanent Undersecretary at the FCO, explained in an interview, “we’re going to end up wanting to be pretty much where we are now on international affairs: an active influential voice”.[36]

As a result, the UK needs to consider in greater detail the purpose and direct policy implications of a new ‘Global Britain’ strategy, particularly in terms of how this might differ from its current foreign policy strategy as a member of the EU. This requires a more honest discussion regarding whether Global Britain is simply a rebranding exercise or the starting point for policy conversations that will seek to redefine UK foreign policy according to new or different values and priorities over the coming years.

“Despite significant rhetorical references to the phrase, there is still no clarity on what Global Britain might mean, even from a UK perspective.”

31. Hill, Christopher. 2018. 'Turning Back the Clock: The Illusion of a Global Political Role for Britain'. In Brexit and Beyond: Rethinking the Futures of Europe, eds. Benjamin Martill and Uta Staiger. London: UCL Press.

32. UK Government. 2018. National Security Capability Review. Available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/705347/6.4391_CO_National-Security-Review_web.pdf

33. UK Government. 2018. Global Britain: Government Response to the Sixth Report of the Committee. Available at: https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmfaff/1236/123602.htm

34. Author Interview 2018. Interview #7. Conducted in New York, 24 July; and Foreign Affairs Committee (2018) 'FCO budget and capacity, and Annual Report 2017-18', (HC 1711). Available at: http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/foreign-affairs-committee/fco-budget-and-capacity-and-annual-report-201718/oral/92448.html

35. Foreign Affairs Committee (2018). Oral Evidence: Global Britain. Available at http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/foreign-affairs-committee/global-britain/oral/77743.html.

36. Author Interview 2018. Interview #3. Conducted via Telephone, 4 June.

External perceptions of Global Britain

At the United Nations, diplomats from outside the UK were in agreement that the policy of 'Global Britain' was not of much relevance or was simply not discussed.[37] As one interviewee highlighted, "Other countries don't really talk about it much; they are more interested in what is the British policy on Africa or what is the British policy on the Middle East". [38]

Consequently, it was often characterised by diplomats as simply a slogan with very little behind it and was therefore "much more about the UK domestic audience". [39]

A non-EU diplomat also noted that the UK mission in New York had not been using the phrase in its statements, this was connected to what many saw as the "ambiguous character of the phrase". [40] Indeed, Prime Minister Theresa May's 2018 speech to the UN General Assembly did not include the phrase 'Global Britain'.[41]

The scepticism around the phrase was also linked back to the perceived motivations underpinning the Brexit vote, which many saw as being in opposition to the idea of a 'Global Britain' and against certain aspects of globalization.[42]

What these responses underline is the challenge for UK diplomats at the UN to both effectively interpret the phrase and use it to then frame new foreign policy objectives and strategies within the UN. This new strategy would need to come from the Foreign Office, particularly regarding important and difficult issues such as the instability in Somalia.

Consequently, if the UK government is seeking to promote 'Global Britain' on the international stage, evidence so far suggests it has struggled to convince external actors of either its purpose and meaning or its impact on directing UK foreign policy. As a result, the Foreign Office will need to consider the value of the 'Global Britain' phrase in more detail, beyond its rhetorical use to a domestic audience.

Below: The permanent representatives from the United Kingdom and United States, Karen Pierce and Niki Haley, converse at a Security Council meeting in 2018. (UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe)

37. Author Interview 2018. Interview #13. Conducted in New York, 27 July.

38. Author Interview 2018. Interview #10. Conducted in New York, 26 July.

39. Author Interview 2018. Interview #8. Conducted in New York, 25 July.

40. Author Interview 2018. Interview #16. Conducted in New York, 4 August.

41. May, T. (2018) 'PM Speech to the UN General Assembly: 26 September 2018'. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-speech-to-the-un-general-assembly-26-september-2018

42. Author Interview 2018. Interview #11. Conducted in New York, 26 July.

The impact of Brexit

British perceptions of the UK's reputation post-Brexit

Perceptions from the British elite on the impact of Brexit on the UK's reputation in the UN are bleak. An anonymous interviewee described perceptions of the UK currently as "we've lost our marbles"[43] and Former UK Ambassador to the UN Sir Jeremy Greenstock reported that "most other people – almost without exception – think we've shot ourselves in the foot".[44] Brexit was viewed by interviewees as situated within broader global shifts: "internationally it was seen as a huge knock to our reputation. It was seen… [as like] the US electing Trump: anti-trade, anti-multilateralism, anti-values, anti-immigration."[45]

There was a common narrative from British interviewees on the negative impacts of Brexit on the reputation of the UK in international politics. In terms of more specific and tangible impacts of these reputational costs, diminished British activism was described: "there is also a perception that the UK is doing less and championing fewer, and less difficult agendas. Most of the difficult diplomacy in 2018 on Syria and Yemen at the UN Security Council was handled by Sweden and the Netherlands."[46] Sir Simon Fraser concurred that "fundamentally and structurally I think our position, and our leverage in international institutions, will be weaker once we have left the European Union".[47]

While interviewees were careful not to attribute all of the UK's decline in the UN to Brexit they were clear that Brexit represented a negative impact to the UK's reputation and would decrease the UK's capacity for influence in the UN. Many interviewees – both from the UK and abroad – framed Brexit part of a broader and more long-standing decline in British influence internationally.[48] As such while there are concerns about the UK's role internationally after Brexit these also need to be viewed in relation to broader international power shifts.

Foreign perceptions of the UK's reputation post-Brexit

As has been aptly pointed out however, "it is not for the UK and its own Government to say how it is regarded at the United Nations. It is about how other people regard us at the United Nations. That is what counts."[49] To better understand how the UK is perceived within the UN after Brexit we interviewed current diplomats from a range of UN member states both inside and outside the EU.[50] An interviewee from an EU member state described Brexit as "a historic mistake" and said that the UK's "reputation as a competent and effective international actor has been weakened".[51]

When asked whether Brexit had already impacted the UK's capacity for influence an interviewee from a non-EU state said "Yes, I can feel the UK's weight in the Council is dwindling, you can feel it. Definitely when Brexit happens things will change."[52] And an EU source at the UN described that "one of the risky things about Brexit is the inconsistency of the mood and you know to be effective in the Security Council is this sort of mixture of being confident, consistent, reliable".[53]

These comments indicate the risk for the UK that it can be viewed as a weakened actor, which in turn effects its capacity to set the agenda and lead coalitions that can deliver UN mandates. That compounds longstanding doubts about its status as a permanent member of the Council.

43. Author Interview 2018. Interview #15. Conducted in London, 23 August.

44. Author Interview 2018. Interview #6. Conducted in London, 18 June.

45. Author Interview 2018. Interview #17. Conducted in New York, 4 September.

46. Author Interview 2018. Interview #1. Questions answered via email, 31 August.

47. Foreign Affairs Committee (2018) Oral Evidence: Global Britain. House of Commons.

48. For example, Author Interview 2018. Interview #22. Conducted in New York, 11 December; and Author Interview 2018. Interview #15. Conducted in London, 23 August.

49. Foreign Affairs Committee (2017) Oral Evidence: The UK's Influence in the UN.

50. We have approached all UN member states that have served on the UN Security Council since the Brexit referendum (2016-2018), which was a total of 25 states. Not all states were willing to participate in this research.

51. Author Interview 2018. Interview #11. Conducted in New York, 26 July.

52. Author Interview 2018. Interview #18. Conducted in New York, 5 September.

53. Author Interview 2018. Interview #10. Conducted in New York, 26 July.

Case studies

The following section gives examples of situations where the UK has found it difficult to achieve its goals within the United Nations system since the Brexit referendum. Funding for African Union peacekeeping in Somalia, a vote against the UK in the General Assembly on the Chagos Islands, and the failed re-election of a British judge to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) illustrate how the UK has found it difficult to secure its interests and fulfil its commitment to an active international role.

The Chagos Islands vote and the ICJ elections were described by Lord Hannay as "straws in the wind". He continued: "they show which way the wind is blowing, in my estimation. I don't think it is going to stop blowing in that direction any time soon, and I think they demonstrate that our ability to fend for ourselves in the much more exposed position we are in now is not as great as we would perhaps wish it to be."[54] While these early indicators cannot tell us what the UK's position will be after Brexit, they do indicate that the UK has been distracted by the referendum result and can be interpreted as early signs of decreased influence.

Somalia

The UK has played a highly influential role in the coordination of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) since its creation in 2007. As a UN Security Council and EU member it was able to successfully leverage pooled EU resources to strengthen AMISOM's military capacity in the region. This has been supported by the UK's significant diplomatic skill, which effectively aligned EU policy to its own national foreign policy preferences.[55] As one interviewee explained, "the UK had an agenda of promoting support to Somalia and they promoted that in the UN and they made the EU pay for it."[56]

The UK's decision to leave the EU therefore has significant implications for the AMISOM mission, due to its heavy reliance on EU funding.[57] In fact, the EU decided to cap its funding for AMISOM, over UK objections, in January 2016, illustrating the limits of the UK's influence even before the referendum result. Interviews with some EU member states, moreover, reveal a growing concern that Brexit will accelerate an EU move towards greater focus on the Sahel region, exacerbating P3 disagreement about how to address insecurity in Somalia.[58] The decision to leave the EU is seen as a significant factor in the difficulties the UK has faced in trying to secure further financial support to the AMISOM mission.[59] In contrast, France has been extremely effective at mobilising resources for Sahel states, successfully garnering the support of Germany along with the initially reluctant US, following six months of intense negotiations.[60]

The case illustrates how UK diplomacy will require considerable extra financial resources to compensate for further diversion of EU resources away from the mandates it manages to negotiate at the UN. Prime Minister May demonstrated UK leadership in this area by making her first visit to sub-Saharan Africa in August 2018, and announcing an extra £7 million of new UK funding to support the AU peacekeeping mission in Somalia.[61] Despite this new investment, the mission will likely require considerable further resources over a sustained period to ensure a successful handover to Somali forces. This was certainly a factor in the Security Council's decision in July 2018 to delay the proposed AU troop reduction until February, along with changing the handover date to December 2021.[62]

The Somalia case clearly demonstrates the challenges the UK faces to meet its responsibilities as a permanent Security Council, which means mobilising resources that can deliver the mandates its diplomats negotiate. Without that, the efforts of diplomats will not deliver sustainable solutions to security problems, and that will lead to further questions about the UK's role on the Council.

54. Foreign Affairs Committee (2017) Oral Evidence: The UK's Influence in the UN.

55. Sánchez-Barrueco, Maria-Luisa S. 2013. "The European Union Comprehensive Intervention in Somalia: Turning Ploughs into Swords?" In Globalizing Somalia Multilateral, International and Transnational Repercussions of Conflict, 1st ed., 227–50. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

56. Author Interview 2018. Interview #9. Conducted in New York, 26 July.

57. Mahmood, O.S. and Ani, N.C. (2017) Impact of EU funding dynamics on AMISOM, Institute for Security Studies. Accessed 15 October, https://issafrica.org/pscreport/addis-insights/the-impact-of-new-funding-uncertainties-on-amisom

58. Author Interview 2018. Interview #8. Conducted in New York, 25 July; and Author Interview 2018. Interview #9. Conducted in New York, 26 July.

59. Author Interview 2018. Interview #18. Conducted in New York, 5 September.

60. Author Interview 2018. Interview #18. Conducted in New York, 5 September.

61 May, T. (2018) 'New UK Support to Boost Long-term Stability in Somalia', (30 August). Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-uk-support-to-boost-long-term-stability-in-somalia

62. UN (2018) Resolution 2431, Adopted by the Security Council at its 8321st meeting S/RES/2431.

"While these early indicators cannot tell us what the UK's position will be after Brexit, they do indicate that the UK has been distracted by the referendum result and can be interpreted as early signs of decreased influence."

The Chagos Islands

Following a long-running legal dispute between the UK and Mauritius over the Chagos Islands, the UK lost a UN General Assembly vote by 94 votes to 15 in June 2017. The resolution requested that the ICJ render an advisory opinion on the legal consequences of the UK's decision to separate the Chagos Archipelago from Mauritius before Mauritius gained independence in 1968. The Mauritian government challenged the actions of the UK as a breach of UN General Assembly resolution 1514. The UK territory is currently home to the US military base, Diego Garcia, which has provided a central justification for the UK's argument against ceding the territory back to Mauritius, due to its significant strategic and defence purposes. The British government has promised that the territory will be returned when it no longer serves this purpose but has refused to provide a date or time scale.

What was most notable about the voting outcome for the UK was its failure to gain the support of EU member states, of which only four chose to support the UK, with the majority of EU members abstaining from the vote instead. Furthermore, the US was the only permanent Security Council member willing to vote with the UK. The Chagos Island case can also be framed in terms of UK subservience to the US on security issues, where there is a pattern of the UK following the US lead on some foreign policies. This can often bring significant reputational damage which has increased given the current 'America First' policy being put forward by the Trump administration. Consequently, a number of EU member states interviewed warned of the reputational damage of being too close to the US at this particular political moment, with the UK described as "having difficulty finding a middle point between the US and Europe".[63] The distinct lack of EU support has been connected to growing concerns of declining UK influence in light of the UK's decision to leave the EU.[64]

Interviewees were cautious not to link the defeat directly to Brexit, highlighting that "It's always been difficult for UK to win votes in the General Assembly on decolonisation issues".[65] However, the lack of EU solidarity was more directly questioned in relation to the impact of the UK's decision to leave the EU.[66] Consequently, the case has potentially wider implications for the future of the UK's other ongoing territorial disputes, such as the Falkland Islands, along with the broader challenge of maintaining EU cooperation in the General Assembly, particularly if European solidarity does decline in the years following the UK's exit.

It is however important to note that the UK ordered the permanent deportation of the Chagossian people from the Islands in 1973 and that the overall treatment of the Chagossians by the UK, represented a violation of basic human rights and a racist policy of forced displacement. Their treatment following this displacement further underlines the extent of the cruel and inhumane decisions made by the UK.[67]

Consequently the UK's lost vote on the Chagos Islands must not be viewed purely as a measure of global influence, but also in relation to the substantive issues arising over these previous violations of rights. The UK should also consider the further reputational damage caused by its decision to continue fighting against the return of Chagossians to their homeland.

63. Author Interview 2018. Interview #18. Conducted in New York, 5 September.

64. BBC (2018) Chagos Islands dispute: UK 'threatened' Mauritius. Accessed 20 October 2018. www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-45300739

65. Author Interview 2018. Interview #13. Conducted in New York, 27 July.

66. Author Interview 2018. Interview #2. Conducted in London, 24 May.

67. Donnelly, S. and Laszlo Guha, T. (2018) Fifty years of fighting for a better future. Accessed 11 December, www.una.org.uk/magazine/2018-1/fifty-years-fighting-better-future

Election to the International Court of Justice

In November 2017 the UK failed in its campaign to get British judge Sir Christopher Greenwood re-elected to the ICJ. This was the first time the UK has not had a judge in the ICJ in its 71-year history. Having been unsuccessful in the first round of voting, the UK was forced to run off against India for the seat, ultimately failing to gain a majority of votes in the General Assembly, despite support from the Security Council. The British Parliament's Foreign Affairs Select Committee reported that it was "a failure of UK diplomacy in an area of traditional UK strength" and that the vote might "be an indication that the influence of the UK within the UN is at risk". [68]

Whilst the decision reflects a growing shift in the balance of power at the UN, away from the dominance of the Security Council permanent members, it is notable that France was able to successfully re-elect its judge in the first round of voting with relative ease. Even more concerning for the UK was the fact that the same French candidate for the ICJ came second to Sir Christopher Greenwood in the 2008 vote, evidencing a decline in overall UK support and international standing. While interviewees were clear that this could not be attributed entirely to Brexit, it was linked to decreased British influence and described by Sir Jeremy Greenstock as a vote the UK "shouldn't have lost". [69] Certainly, there is evidence to suggest that the UK did not campaign as hard on this vote and was potentially distracted by other concerns. Interviewees highlighted that the British Permanent Representative was not in New York campaigning on the day of the vote. This was viewed as a noteworthy diplomatic blunder.[70] This was contrasted with the effectiveness of the French Permanent Representative who was actively coordinating with member states to try and secure promises of support in the final hours before the first vote.

The case studies compared

The direct significance of the UK's decision to leave the EU is notably varied across each of the three cases outlined. In relation to the Somalia case, it is clear that the UK's decision on Brexit exacerbates the already difficult task of securing funding to support the peace operations mandated by UK leadership at the Security Council. Further evidence of shifting EU priorities came in July 2018 when it was announced that the EU's naval counter-piracy operation headquarters currently based in the UK, would be moved to Spain, along with the relocation of the Maritime Security Centre Horn of Africa (MSCHOA) to France.[71] The restriction of the UK to third-party involvement in EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions is likely to significantly reduce the UK's current influence in the region.[72]

In contrast, the loss of the Chagos islands vote was not a direct result of Brexit, even if EU member states had sided with the UK this would not have swung the vote decisively in the UK's favour. However, the case does raise questions regarding the potential longer-term impact for the UK if it were to lose the benefits of European solidarity in the General Assembly.

However, it should be noted that previous literature on EU voting in the General Assembly has highlighted that votes on decolonisation generate much greater disagreement amongst EU members.[73] It is important to also note that the UK and France have tended to converge on such issues in contrast to other EU members, which was not the case in this example.[74]

The UK's loss in the ICJ election suggests an element of foreign policy distraction. However, the role of Brexit must be viewed in connection to a range of other factors which influenced both voting patterns and the overall strategy of the UK. Whilst the UK was very unlikely to have beaten the Indian candidate in the second vote runoff in the General Assembly, its loss to the French candidate in the first round did highlight the contrasting efforts and focus of the two countries in prioritising the election. Brexit reinforces the importance of the UK not taking for granted its relationships with key allies in the General Assembly and the UN system more broadly, particularly during a period of growing push back against the influence of permanent members in the UN.

68. Foreign Affairs Committee (2018) 2017 Elections to the International Court of Justice Fourth Report of Session 2017–19. Accessed 22 October 2018, https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmfaff/860/860.pdf

69. Author Interview 2018. Interview #6. Conducted in London, 18 June.

70. Author Interview 2018. Interview #12. Conducted in New York, 26 July.

71. BBC News (2018) EU piracy task force to leave UK post-Brexit. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-45012347

72. House of Lords (2018) European Union Committee 16th Report of Session 2017–19 HL Paper 132 Brexit: Common Security and Defence Policy missions and operations. Available at: publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201719/ldselect/ldeucom/132/132.pdf

73. See Luif, P. (2003) "EU cohesion in the UN General Assembly", European Union Institute for Security Studies Occasional Papers no. 49. Available at: www.iss.europa.eu/content/eu-cohesion-un-general-assembly and Persson, J.A (2012) Cohesion or Cacophony?: An analysis of EU voting behaviour in the United Nations General Assembly from the 62nd until the 65th session, CFE Working paper series No. 48, Available at: www.cfe.lu.se/sites/cfe.lu.se/files/cfewp48.pdf

74. ibid

Conclusion

New York might seem insulated from the high-drama of the Westminster-Brussels relationship, but Brexit will have an impact on the UK's standing at the United Nations. British diplomats will perform strongly but they will lose political capital because they are less able to align their campaigns in the Security Council and the General Assembly with the influence of their colleagues in Brussels. As Sir John Sawers has explained, Brexit means "the UK would suffer "a double loss" at the UN since it would not be able to shape the influential common EU policy in New York or be able to rely on EU support at the General Assembly."[75]

Nevertheless, the respect felt by a wide array of stakeholders for the UK's staff in New York is undiminished by Brexit. UK diplomats are described as "top of the league".[76] And while this report has focused on the challenges posed by Brexit, it should be noted that UK diplomacy at the Security Council has had successes since Brexit, especially with respect to diplomatically isolating Russia following a chemical weapons attack inside the UK.

But the UK must not draw the wrong lessons from these successes. The UK has invested resources in, and to a certain extent is more comfortable dealing with, the 'high politics' of great power relations within the Security Council. Measures of esteem for the UK within New York reinforce this and, more to the point, the UK has been less dependent on the EU in this area. In contrast, the case studies we have considered – resourcing peace operations mandated by UK penholding and securing support in the General Assembly – are areas where the UK is exposed because here its burden as a permanent member has been reduced by its membership of the EU. It is for this reason that experts like Ian Martin, former director of think-tank Security Council Report and former Special Representative to the Secretary-General, concludes that "the decline in UK influence [in New York] is palpable. It's partly Brexit, but not only."[77]

While the UK's permanent seat on the Security Council is safe in the sense that it would need to consent to its own removal, our conclusion is that Brexit exacerbates concerns about the legitimacy of that privilege. The status of the UK at the UN, and particularly the legitimacy of the UK's position as a permanent member of the Security Council, will therefore be weakened if the impact of Brexit is not offset by effective 'compensatory strategies',[78] such as those recommended in our Executive Summary.

Below: A British contingent of UN Peacekeepers to the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) mark the establishment of a field hospital in Bentiu in 2017. (UN Photo)

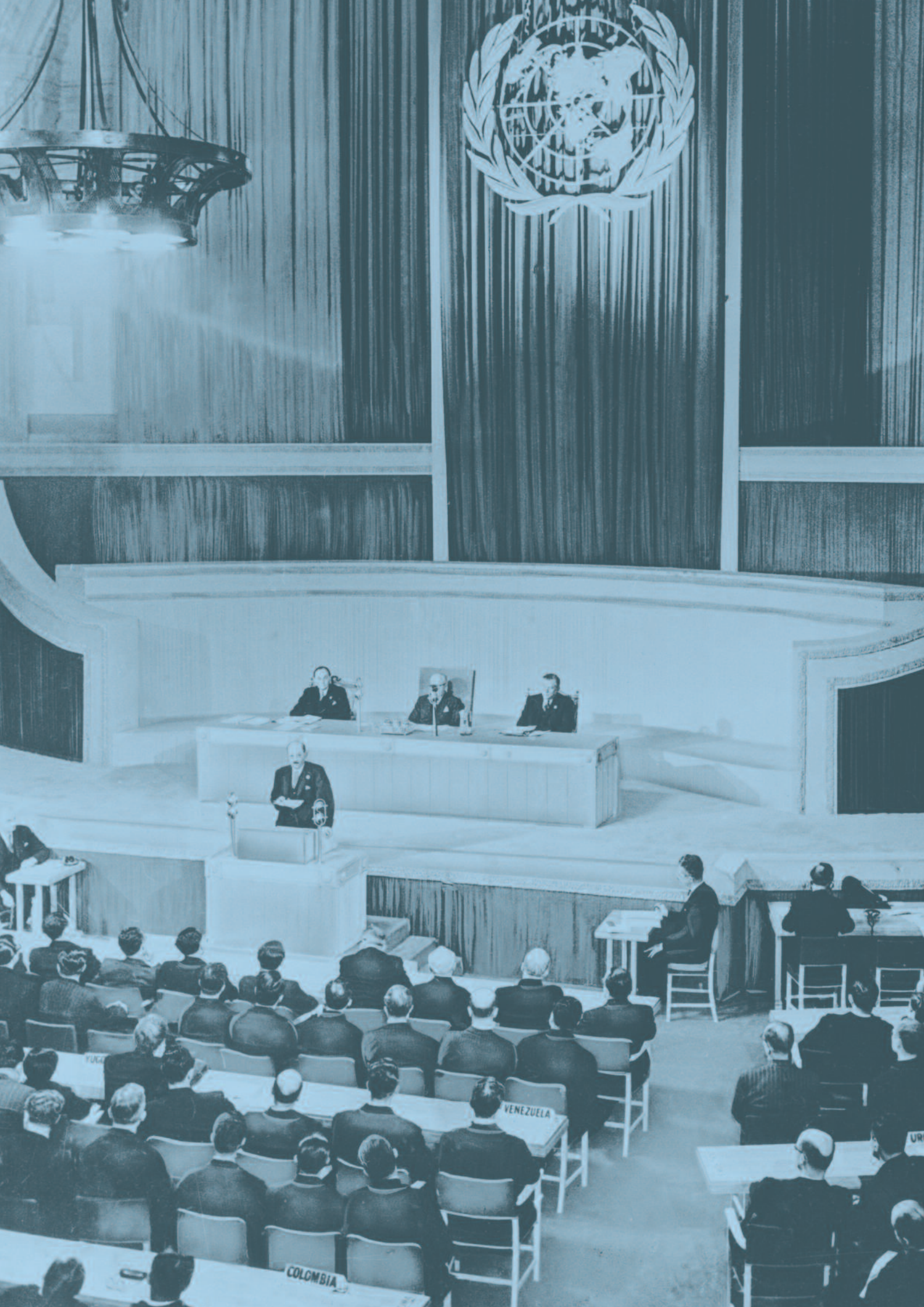
Right: Prime Minister Clement Attlee addresses the first session of the UN General Assembly in London in 1946. (UN Photo)

75. Wintour, P. (2017) 'Brexit will cause loss of influence on scale of 1970s, says ex-MI6 chief', The Guardian. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/dec/19/brexit-loss-influence-1970s-ex-mi6-chief-sir-john-sawers

76. Author Interview 2018. Interview #23. Conducted in New York, 11 December.

77. Michael, D. (2018) 'Britain's influence in the United Nations is fading', i Newspaper. Available at: https://inews.co.uk/news/world/britains-influence-in-the-united-nations-is-fading/

78. Rebecca Adler-Nissen, 'The Diplomacy of Opting Out: A Bourdieudian Approach to National Integration Strategies', Journal of Common market Studies, 46 (3) 2008, p.664.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