

A Nostalgic Future for trans-Atlantic Cooperation

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During and after the Brexit campaign, Boris Johnson drew on a nostalgic vision of Britain's historical position in the global order. Through employment of the nostalgic concept of Global Britain he tried to convince the British people that the European Union limited the United Kingdom's international capabilities. If Britons would vote to annul European membership, Britain could once again assert itself as a leading hegemonic power. Without the EU standing in the way of success, British exceptionalism would thrive, restoring British pride and global leadership.

Global Britain is not the only nostalgic concept shaping UK foreign policy today; so is the idea of the Special Relationship with the United States. Some part of Britain has always favoured their partner across the Atlantic to those on the European mainland. Whereas this relationship has arguably always been more special to the UK than to the US, Johnson has openly expressed his hopes for a renewed salience of this transatlantic bond. AUKUS was, then, a fantastic triumph for Johnson, for it symbolised a revival of cooperation within the Anglosphere.

But the triumph of AUKUS cannot conceal that Brexit has also worked to the detriment of Britain's role as a security provider within Europe.¹ An important aspect of the Special Relationship was that Britain could provide the US with exclusive access to European affairs, but, without the ability to influence EU decision-making, the UK is now argued to be of significantly less value to the US.² Those who believe the UK has lost its role as bridge-builder forget, however, that Britain could still be of significant value to NATO.

The Atlantic Alliance is now one of the most important multilateral forums for Britain. To compensate for losing its say over European security matters, the UK will need to focus more on its role within NATO. The North Atlantic Council is the only channel where the UK is still able to shape European security and defence policy.³ Becoming a driving force within the Atlantic alliance will contribute to the UK's Atlanticist outlook and fits within the Global Britain ambition.

Whereas NATO is an important multilateral asset for the UK, post-Brexit Britain can also be of value to NATO. The UK is not only the most significant military spender in Europe, with an average 2.2% of GDP which accumulates to 59.2 billion US dollars per annum,⁴ the former EU member state can also become a diplomatic asset for NATO. Europe and the US are diverging; while the EU is increasingly focusing on strategic autonomy, the US

¹ Nele Marianne Ewers-Peters, "UK should prioritise NATO, Euro-Atlantic cooperation and resilience in post-Brexit European security," LSE British Politics and Policy, March 24, 2021. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/nato-euro-atlantic-cooperation-brexit/>

² Joke Kabbert, "Brexiting the long search for Exceptionalism?" *Atlantisch Perspectief* 45, no. 5 (2021): 25-29.

³ Ewers-Peters, "UK should prioritise NATO, Euro-Atlantic cooperation and resilience in post-Brexit European security."

⁴ SIPRI Military Expenditure Database

has shifted its focus to China. This means Europe and the US are drifting apart in a time where trans-Atlantic cooperation should be a priority. The tensions on the Ukrainian border, Russian cyber-attacks, and China's assertion on the international stage underscore the importance of a strong Atlantic partnership.⁵

This is where the UK comes in. As a strong force within NATO, the UK can give an impetus to the alliance by asserting itself as a bridge builder between the US and Europe. Whereas they might have lost its intermediary position as EU Member State, the UK can continue to draw on the historical salience of the Special Relationship to present itself as a liaison between the US and the EU within NATO. Adopting this role as spearhead and bridge builder would not only satisfy the UK's own vision of Britain as a major diplomatic power but would also provide them with the potential to realign American and European security interests. That way, nostalgia for Global Britain and the Special Relationship could turn out to be of great value for a safe and secure future.

⁵ Leslie Vinjamuri and Jason Naselli, "Brexit Makes NATO Even More Important for the Atlantic," Chatham House, April 4, 2019, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2019/04/brexit-makes-nato-even-more-important-atlantic>