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Brexit: Navigating the Politics of Discord

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Summary

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The narrow victory for the Brexit campaign in the 2016 referendum campaign promised to reverse the slippage in British economic performance and global influence by quitting the 'failed' EU project. Yet barely two years after what Brexiteers celebrated as 'Independence Day', the bold promises made by the 'Leave' side in the referendum campaign have not—or have not yet—materialised. The national mood now, as evidenced in public opinion surveys, is increasingly unconvinced that Brexit is the answer to the UK's current problems or impending challenges.

The paper examines how the Brexit that was promised was always unrealisable because it naively overlooked the marked asymmetry of power between the EU27 and its former member state. The issues raised by the UK government's preferred 'hard Brexit' were bound to face serious challenges that could not be wished away by simplistic 'cherry-picking' solutions. During the withdrawal negotiations the three British prime ministers (in just five years) preferred hubris to pragmatism and fantasy over fact, with the eventual outcome being one that was far removed from what was promised in the referendum. Indeed, Brexit has brought the UK serious challenges and unanticipated consequences, both domestically and in terms of its external policy.

These were harsh lessons that successive British governments needed to face and that they avoided by defying the realities of hard power. The latest incumbent in Downing Street has finally begun to confront these unpalatable truths, acknowledging momentous challenges in the near and far abroad that point to the need to reset UK–EU relations. The time is not quite right for this though, as Brexit was a seismic, even a traumatic event for both sides. For that very reason the recent improvement in relations by no means ensures a prompt return to the *status quo ante*. It does however point to a more constructive relationship.

Keywords Brexit – Northern Ireland – Protocol – EU – UK



A cautionary tale

In February 2020 the Johnson government ‘celebrated’ what Brexiteers described as ‘Independence Day’. Boasts about recovering national control of the borders, laws and money gave rise to confident predictions of a country ‘liberated’ from the Brussels’ bureaucracy and with the prospect of becoming ‘Singapore-on-Thames’.

Hindsight permits a clearer appraisal of such bold claims and confirms that wishful thinking is no substitute for hard facts. A survey by Focal Data of ten thousand respondents shows that 63% now see Brexit as bringing more problems than solutions, with only 21% taking the opposite view.¹ A study by the London School of Economics reports additional Brexit costs of some £7 billion on household budgets due to trade and tariff charges, notably causing food-price inflation.²

Recent polling data likewise reveal rising public anxiety over Brexit’s adverse consequences and increased scepticism about optimistic claims by the ‘Vote Leave’ camp during the referendum campaign and the subsequent withdrawal negotiations.³ Certainly younger, better-educated voters, and indeed, even some of those who voted in favour of Brexit, are now expressing Bregrets.⁴

The complaint now is of being ‘misinformed’, indeed ‘misled’ by the Leave campaign. And no one is more culpable here than Boris Johnson, Brexit’s principal cheerleader. After all, it was his ebullient leadership that eventually broke the domestic deadlock in Parliament and with voters, securing him a ‘get Brexit done’ mandate in the 2019 general election.

Since that high point for Brexit, public support has waned. A reminder to ‘princes’ everywhere that politics is less about certainties than it is unanticipated consequences.

¹ *Best for Britain*, ‘New Attitudes Poll: Voters Want Relationship With Europe’, 28 May 2023, accessed at https://www.bestforbritain.org/brexit_attitudes_poll.

² *LSE*, ‘By the End of 2021 Brexit Had Already Cost UK Households a Total of £5.8 Billion in Higher Food Bills – New LSE Research’, 1 December 2022, accessed at <https://www.lse.ac.uk/News/Latest-news-from-LSE/2022/1-December-22/By-the-end-of-2021-Brexit-had-already-cost-UK-households-a-total-of-5.8-billion-in-higher-food-bills-%E2%80%93-new-LSE-research>.

³ J. Curtice, ‘Why Has Brexit Become Less Popular?’, *UK in a Changing Europe*, 7 September 2022, accessed at <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/why-has-brexit-become-less-popular/>.

⁴ M. Savage and T. Helm, ‘Trade Down, Economy Sinking, Support Falling: Is the Tide Finally Turning on Brexit?’, *The Observer*, 5 February 2023, accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/feb/05/trade-down-economy-sinking-support-falling-is-the-tide-finally-turning-on-brexit>.



Getting Brexit done . . . or not?

Newly installed in office, Johnson confidently predicted a straightforward, indeed a triumphal, Brexit. With the withdrawal negotiations deadlocked, the Article 50 deadline already extended and the clock ticking towards a ‘no deal’ outcome, his predecessor in office Theresa May had retreated from her confident prediction of an optimal ‘red, white and blue’ Brexit.⁵ Confronted, indeed confounded by EU obduracy over its own ‘red lines’, not least its insistence on maintaining the integrity of the single market and on border arrangements in Ireland that safeguarded the 1998 peace process, May settled instead for a ‘backstop’ arrangement that kept the UK *in its entirety* within some aspects of a common customs territory with the EU—at least until alternative arrangements could be agreed. The intention was to avoid what she and many economic commentators regarded as the adverse consequences of a crash-out ‘hard’ Brexit.

This arrangement being wholly repugnant to the arch-Brexiteers, led by Boris Johnson, it led to a showdown in Cabinet that eventually ended May’s premiership. There was a sovereigntist backlash in Conservative ranks in favour of a hard Brexit, which was celebrated as the outright recovery of control over domestic laws and national borders. It was a takeover Johnson claimed as a personal mandate for his uncompromising Brexit.

In office but by no means securely in power, Johnson attempted to manipulate a bitterly divided House of Commons to circumvent the Fixed Term Parliament Act and bring about a general election. In the process, he played fast and loose with both constitutional law and Parliamentary convention. First, Johnson defied Parliament’s sovereign will, as expressed in successive ballots initiated by backbenchers, to further extend the Article 50 deadline, which was intended by proposers to ensure a negotiated ‘softer’ Brexit. And second, even more heinously, he advised the late Queen to enact what the UK’s Supreme Court subsequently ruled was an illegal prorogation of Parliament, thus stretching the Constitution almost to breaking point.

Eventually the government did—legally—overcome the parliamentary deadlock to bring about a general election. After a forceful campaign led by a mesmeric leader, enough voters were persuaded to confer a parliamentary majority, which enabled the government to repeal the European Communities Act (1972). However,

⁵ N. Simons, ‘Theresa May Mocked for Calling for “Red, White And Blue” Brexit’, *Huff Post*, 6 December 2016, accessed at https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/theresa-may-mocked-for-calling-for-red-white-and-blue-brexit_uk_5846ade4e4b07ac72449bee4.



the margin of victory was due to the quirks of the majoritarian electoral system, with a numerical majority of voters actually voting for anti-Brexit parties. This awkward fact notwithstanding, Johnson nevertheless claimed a mandate for his 'hard' Brexit, and public endorsement of his peremptory demand that Brussels renegotiate his predecessor's draft withdrawal treaty.

The EU did reconvene negotiations, but on its own terms, doubling down on its own red lines, not least its insistence on the surety of the Northern Ireland peace process and the integrity of the single market. This was confirmation that even this cavalier politician, convinced of his own personal destiny, could not avoid the exigencies of power. Like his maligned predecessor, Johnson too was compelled to face the unpalatable reality of an interlocutor with much the stronger negotiating hand, even if personal vanity and ideological certitude precluded acceptance of the power imbalance in UK–EU relations.

The new prime minister's principal objection to his predecessor's draft treaty centred on what he traduced as its infringement of British sovereignty. In the view of Johnson and other key cabinet members, the backstop mechanism defied the very idea of Brexit as 'taking back control' by keeping the UK in the EU's customs arrangements, and was seen as a betrayal of the very idea of Brexit. Its evolution was, to them, a consequence of May's lack of grip and Brussels' mendacity. And it was considered not remotely acceptable as a 'solution' to the Irish border conundrum because it kept the UK as what Johnson contemptuously described as a 'vassal state'.⁶

That said, Johnson's subsequent 'renegotiation' hardly delivered the 'have one's cake and eat it' Brexit that he had promised voters during the election campaign.⁷ For he, too, was constrained by circumstances and had to accommodate Brussels' red lines, 'agreeing' to a variant of the backstop, albeit one confined to Northern Ireland–Great Britain trade rather than to the UK as a whole. This outcome only confirmed the power asymmetry between the EU as the *défendeur* and the British as the *demandeur*. An unpalatable truth for the latter, but one conveniently ignored by Brexiteers even as the new premier conceded more to Brussels' demands than he secured of his own. This was another example of diplomatic folly informed by the government's exceptionalism mentality, the legacy of an imperial past that has continued to shape British policy long after its expiry date.

⁶ BBC News, 'Brexit: Boris Johnson "Criticised" Theresa May's Plan for Deal With EU', 8 July 2018, accessed at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-44755049>.

⁷ R. Behr, 'The Tories Said We Could Have Our Cake and Eat It – Now We Are Stuffed and the Voters Are Hungry', *The Guardian*, 22 December 2021, accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentis-free/2021/dec/22/tories-cake-stuffed-boris-johnson-covid-restrictions-freedom>.



There was insistence on ‘bigging up’ national heft throughout these protracted negotiations, wilfully ignoring the patent fact of an interlocutor with greater political capital, more united as to purpose and with greater purchase over events. Moreover, the adversary had, throughout Britain’s ambiguous membership of the European Community/EU, grown steadily weary of its continuing insistence on opt-outs and special treatment, and by now was exasperated by Her Majesty’s Government’s interminable delay in actually leaving the Union.

Solving the Northern Ireland conundrum?

The impasse over the Irish border was settled by including a protocol appended to what was, in essence, May’s thrice-defeated draft withdrawal treaty. It was hardly the triumphal Brexit Johnson had promised when removing his predecessor. Indeed, it only served as confirmation that Brussels, not London, was controlling the power play over the divorce terms. There was firm resolve and consummate diplomacy on one side, and on the other a propensity for bluff and conceit.⁸

These latest negotiations confirmed most of May’s withdrawal ‘deal’, though the removal of her UK-wide backstop did ensure the hard Brexit that had never been promoted to British voters by the Leave side in the referendum. The backstop was substituted for a ‘backstop-lite’: a lesser incursion on British sovereignty by means of a protocol that retained ‘only’ Northern Ireland in aspects of the EU customs framework. This was a compromise by Johnson to accommodate EU insistence on border arrangements in Ireland that ensured the peace process by avoiding provocative infrastructure and political signage along the historic land border between the two Irelands, which would have been likely to revive ancient hatreds and incite paramilitary violence.

Why was so much prominence accorded to the Irish border in the Brexit negotiations? Context is key here. Northern Ireland’s politics is entirely separate from that of the mainland, shaped by a different history and distinctive socio-cultural dynamics.

⁸ L. O’Carroll, ‘How Is Boris Johnson’s Brexit Deal Different from Theresa May’s?’, *The Guardian*, 17 October 2019.



Partition was imposed on Ireland in 1921. Qualified independence was granted to one part of the island, with an enclave carved out of Catholic Ireland to safeguard the Protestant community. This province was designed and organised to accommodate the interests of the Protestant majority, with governance and political power firmly under Unionist control. It was a province run on sectarian lines, expressly to ensure an imbalance of political power and social status, and with cultural discrimination at its core.

From the outset it was an arrangement opposed by the minority Catholic nationalist community. Over time the demographic imbalance gradually shifted closer to numeric parity. This gave rise to a civil rights movement that demanded political, socio-economic and cultural equality. The conflict ratcheted up anxiety amongst the Unionist community, eventually escalating into virtual civil war waged by extremist paramilitaries on both sides. The presence of the British army after 1969, supposedly to keep the peace, merely intensified political violence on all sides of the historic divide.

The situation was described with typical Irish understatement as ‘The Troubles’. The mayhem and murder were only ‘settled’ in 1998 in a historic peace process brokered by the political authorities in London, Belfast and Dublin, significantly with active involvement from Brussels and Washington.⁹ It was a historic breakthrough, though an uneasy truce and one threatened by Brexit. Many in Ulster’s Unionist community supported Brexit for ideological rather than utilitarian reasons: as affirmation of their beleaguered identity rather than for material self-interest.

There was a cultural siege mentality, heightened by what many Unionists saw as a betrayal by May and Johnson’s subsequent willingness to trade border concessions with Brussels.¹⁰ The protocol was seen by Irish Unionists as outright treachery by the leader of the very party that had created the province, incorporated it into the Union and defended its British legacy; it was now ‘betraying’ that ‘sacred’ covenant to get an English Brexit over the line.¹¹

⁹ L. O’Carroll, ‘Northern Ireland at 100: A Timeline of Its Founding’, 30 April 2021, accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/apr/30/northern-ireland-at-100-a-timeline-of-its-founding> on 21 June 2022.

¹⁰ This issue is discussed in M. Sobolewska and R. Ford, *Brexitland: Identity, Diversity and the Reshaping of British Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

¹¹ N. Cohen, ‘Duped Again: Irish Unionists and the Long Sorry History of Tory Betrayal’, *The Guardian*, 6 February 2021, accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/feb/06/ireland-conservatives-dup-union-brexit>.



Talking to the neighbours

The historically fraught border between the Irelands, Northern and Southern, is even more problematic than the reinstated border between the EU and its departing member state. It is the only land border between two separate—and diverging—economic and regulatory jurisdictions. Moreover, it is a border with the potential for renewed political strife, making imperative the resolution of the issue.

Brussels' insistence on its own red lines made the prospect of a no-deal outcome more likely, and this persuaded Johnson, like his predecessor, to face the political reality and temper his intransigence. He met his Irish counterpart, Leo Varadkar, for bilateral talks about the border on 19 October 2019, at which they agreed a protocol on border management that was eventually ratified as part of the Withdrawal Agreement (in January 2021).

The new arrangements avoid the usual paraphernalia of customs infrastructure and signage at the geographical border. Border checks and formalities are relocated to a notional administrative border 'in the Irish Sea', although for practical purposes these are situated at Northern Ireland's ports.¹² Checks apply only to goods shipped to the province from mainland Britain and intended for transit to the EU via the Irish Republic. The pay-off here is that Northern Ireland, exclusively of the four constituent UK countries, has to remain aligned with some regulatory and customs requirements of the single market and, indeed, the customs union, whilst staying within the UK's customs territory and internal market. It is thus the only part of the UK to actually achieve a 'have one's cake and eat it' Brexit!

It is a novel arrangement that suits both Brussels, because it ensures its principal red lines, and Northern Irish business, because it provides special dispensations on rules pertaining to traded goods, state aid, sanitation (sanitary and phytosanitary) and veterinary controls that apply to agricultural production/marketing, value-added tax and excise in respect of goods.¹³

Although straightforward as to intention, these arrangements proved rather problematic in terms of implementation. This was due to a compound of the procedural arrangements on the ground involving excessive paperwork that

¹² *Belfast Telegraph*, 'Brexit Draft Agreement: What Has Been Agreed on Northern Ireland to Avoid a Hard Border', 14 November 2018, accessed 6 July 2022.

¹³ UK Government, *Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland*, accessed at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/840230/Revised_Protocol_to_the_Withdrawal_Agreement.pdf.



impeded supply chains, and ideological objections from Tory Brexiteers and Ulster Unionists that these arrangements were diminishing British sovereignty. In part, this was because the arrangements contradicted Johnson's glib assurances that he would never agree 'to conduct checks at the border', and similarly because it impaired the constitutional status of the province as a full and equal constituent of the United Kingdom.¹⁴

A complementary grievance raised by Unionists and Brexiteers alike was what they saw as a democratic deficit. Although the protocol refers to the principle of consent on the new border arrangements, an imperative for Tory Brexiteers and Irish Unionists, there was no mention of how this requirement would be satisfied, either in terms of a confirmatory majority vote in the Stormont parliament or Johnson's earlier promise of a unilateral Democratic Unionist Party veto. Consequently, for militant Brexiteers and Unionists the protocol raised more problems than solutions. As such it was a wholly unsatisfactory outcome for Brexiteers and militant Unionists alike. Grievances only intensified once the protocol became operational.¹⁵

So, Brexit was 'done' in name, but not remotely as promised by Johnson. The border question remained an unfinished business for Brexiteers and Unionists. Concerns were conveniently overlooked by the prime minister, who was more intent on delivering his election promise to 'get Brexit done' after protracted delays, with Unionist anxieties treated as merely an inconvenient detail. It was as if simply excising the *word* 'backstop' from the official discourse somehow altered the existential *fact* that there was a border, as required by law and by political exigency, between two now quite separate, and indeed competing, customs, economic and legal jurisdictions. Moreover, it was a border that was not remotely operated on British terms, but instead designed to accommodate EU interests as spelled out in Michel Barnier's 'red lines'.

There was no *finalité* then, and after a brief lull, rising pressure from the usual quarters was firmly back on Johnson, whose only response was to return to the familiar Brussels bashing, threatening to go back on his word on the protocol arrangements and to quit without a deal—the usual bluster. It was a situation one unnamed senior EU official described as Johnson's 'entirely negative' legacy in

¹⁴ J. Mayes, 'Boris Johnson Says Irish Sea Border "Over My Dead Body"', *Bloomberg UK*, 13 August 2020, accessed at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-08-13/johnson-says-irish-sea-border-over-my-dead-body-as-checks-loom> on 18 July 2022.

¹⁵ *The Guardian*, 'Editorial: *The Guardian* View on the Northern Ireland Protocol: Take the Deal', 13 October 2021.



Europe. The dysfunctional UK government was caught between the ‘hard rock’ of EU insistence on one side and its own kamikaze Brexit die-hards on the other.¹⁶

Sophistry rather than statesmanship was the benchmark of the UK government’s diplomacy, with wilful avoidance of unpalatable facts by a premier strong on bluster but lacking in strategic acumen. He was in denial about the UK’s loss of clout, its diminished international heft. Above all, it was a political leadership that prioritised tactics over strategy and was lacking real understanding of border complexities, not least requirements for avoidance of a hard border¹⁷.

This was the latest episode in the exceptionalism narrative that had shaped official Brexit discourse from the outset. The outcome was predictable for those prepared to acknowledge reality and who had avoided fantasising about the great game of international politics. Following his election as Prime Minister in 2019, and with withdrawal largely ‘done’ on the broad terms already negotiated by his predecessor, Johnson found himself under mounting pressure from all sides. His response? To take back his word on his own deal, to retreat from reality and resort to rhetoric.

Within weeks of his bold proclamation of ‘national deliverance’ and Brexit having been delivered, he about-faced in response to a rebellion in Tory ranks over Brexit’s unanticipated consequences for both the national interest and the country’s diplomatic reputation. A fractured governing party, and mounting exasperation from an EU determined not to unpick the withdrawal deal already in place, perplexed public opinion. It was hardly deliverance from Brussels’ ‘vassalage’: Instead, utter confusion reigned amongst a bewildered public that, as one commentator observed, had only recently come to terms with Boris’s suboptimal Brexit after years of muddle and mishap, with more of a sense of ‘relief than triumphalism’.¹⁸

So the revised withdrawal deal was finally signed at the eleventh hour, only for its signatory to campaign against it and demand yet more compromises from Brussels. This lack of constancy characterised this politician throughout the process, with him resorting to threats to renege on the protocol not for any substantive reason, but as a means of restoring his political reputation with fellow Brexiteers, saving face, and bolstering his shrinking authority with and shoring

¹⁶ Unnamed senior EU diplomat quoted in T. Connelly, ‘No Love Lost Between EU and Boris Johnson’, *RTE.ie*, 8 July 2022, accessed at <https://www.rte.ie/news/uk/2022/0707/1309008-eu-boris-johnson-analysis/> on 12 August 2022.

¹⁷ Connelly, ‘No Love Lost’.

¹⁸ N. Witney, ‘The Great Brexit Heist’, *Commentary*, European Council of Foreign Relations, 4 January 2021, accessed at <https://ecfr.eu/article/the-great-brexiteer-heist/> on 5 April 2022.



up his shrinking party base in order to rescue a tarnished premiership. Artful politics, which was repeated with rather less art by his successor, Liz Truss.

This led to the unseemly spectacle, then, of a democratic state, indeed a founder member of the post-war rules-based international order, threatening to unilaterally renege on a solemn treaty undertaking freely negotiated and signed into international law. This behaviour was even more reckless given the utter disregard for the still-fragile peace process. Such heedless short-termism was likely to inflame sectarianism and imperil the Belfast Good Friday Agreement.

How much this sequence of events was the product of misguided principle rather than outright cynicism is debatable. Critics accuse Prime Ministers Johnson and Truss of deliberately playing fast and loose with politics for personal benefit. The aim was to deflect public attention from a catalogue of policy failures and personal transgressions: a mishandled pandemic, ministerial misdemeanours over the government's own lockdown rules, and the subsequent rapid price inflation and escalating cost-of-living crisis.¹⁹

The consequence of such recklessness was continued political disarray, which was carried over from Johnson's premiership to the brief tenure of his hapless successor, Liz Truss. Her brief but calamitous premiership saw increased British intransigence on the protocol: continuing denial of the Brexit realities and a refusal to seriously engage with Brussels on the practicable solutions on offer for resolving the deadlock. The political situation on the ground in Northern Ireland was deteriorating by the week.

Of course, fall-outs in democratic politics usually end in compromise. Certainly, the Brexit that was eventually delivered is far removed from the extravagant promises written on the sides of campaign buses in the referendum campaign and those tabled by British negotiators in the withdrawal talks. Political bargains are always suboptimal, a collision of preferences whose eventual outcome depends on the leverage available to participants. And in these negotiations Brussels had the superior hand and played it more astutely.

All three British prime ministers mistook hubris for heft. Both Johnson and Truss were eventually brought down by this. There was a fatal disjunction between what Max Weber famously called the 'hard boards' of realpolitik and the extravagant fancifulness that characterised the mishandling of Brexit from the referendum campaign onwards. It was flawed diplomacy that saw all three consigned to history.

¹⁹ L. Lloyd, *The Brexit Effect. How Government Has Changed Since the EU Referendum*, Institute for Government (29 March 2019), accessed at <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/brexit-effect> on 4 May 2021.



Boris Johnson's political demise was almost a Shakespearean comedy, Truss's less epic tragedy than farce. Brexit, and an overestimation of British power, was the leitmotif of debacle in both cases. It was a medley of mishap and misdemeanour, made worse by political misjudgement and unrealistic goals, not least the fanciful insistence on a 'having one's cake and eating it' outcome that the EU would never have acceded to. By the end, it was an almost farcical episode, whose inimical consequences paved the way for Rishi Sunak's return to familiar British statecraft as the 'art of the possible'.²⁰

Brexit: almost 'done' but not quite yet

From the moment Brexit was formally enacted as the Trade and Cooperation Agreement, the strains apparent throughout the withdrawal negotiations resurfaced. Returned to office with a commanding majority, Johnson promptly ignored the lessons of the preceding negotiations. Both he, and even more so his immediate successor, became preoccupied with the 'exceptionalism' fallacies that had shaped the referendum's Leave campaign and preoccupied British negotiators throughout the lengthy withdrawal negotiations.²¹

Even as Brexiteers celebrated what they called 'our Independence Day', Her Majesty's Government persisted with futile demands for changes to the protocol. These included threatening to invoke the 'safeguarding clause' (Article 16) that permits either party to suspend operations with a view to arbitration, should a signatory deem that existing arrangements make for 'serious economic, societal or environmental difficulties that are liable to persist, or to diversion of trade'.²² There were even threats to invoke the so-called nuclear option by tabling legislation for an internal market bill, caveated by the astonishing admission that while this would certainly 'break international law', it *would* do so 'only in a very specific and limited way'.²³

²⁰ J. Henley, 'Pathetic, Incoherent, Chaotic: Europe's Verdict on Brexit Shambles', *The Guardian*, 20 March 2019.

²¹ A. Crozier, 'British Exceptionalism: Pride and Prejudice and Brexit', *International Economics and Economic Policy* 17/2020, 635–58.

²² J. Rankin, 'What May Happen if Article 16 of the Northern Ireland Protocol Is Triggered', *The Guardian*, 4 October 2021.

²³ G. Parker et al., 'UK Government Admits It Will Break International Law Over Brexit Treaty', *The Financial Times*, 8 September 2020, accessed at <https://www.ft.com/content/a20e7822-468f-4671-8e82-9dc5b5f353d8> on 16 May 2022.



The arrival in office of Rishi Sunak brought a deteriorating situation back to something more akin to diplomatic normality. He is an ideology-lite politician more concerned with a managerial approach to governance and transactional statecraft. After years of rancour, calm has descended on UK–EU relations. There is a marked change in tone and demeanour that has as much to do with the rising turbulence in international affairs as with any change in political personnel. Altogether more compelling issues now dominate the European, indeed the broader agenda of the Western rules-based order. Common sense now seems to be back in vogue as the benchmark of British diplomacy. The imperative now is for closer cooperation, even collaboration, and mending the broken fences between post-Brexit Britain and its erstwhile EU partners in response to the common threat and the strategic anxiety it has caused.

The challenge for Europeans is to ensure commonality of purpose in the face of Putin's brutal aggression in Ukraine. This situation has brought greater perspective to what are, by and large, mostly parochial squabbles compared with an existential threat from an aggressive near-neighbour, and indeed other global challenges. Both sides of the Brexit imbroglio have every incentive to re-engage, and with greater resolve than was apparent during the Brexit interlude. This starts with finding sensible solutions to the operational difficulties caused by the protocol, and indeed by the backwash of Brexit per se.

There are positive indications that resolution of the recent turbulence caused by Brexit in once-settled European relations is now firmly on the political agenda. The healing of the latest breach in UK–EU relations is now a realistic prospect. At the very least a return to customary normality is likely. On a cautionary note, however, we should remember that history is sequential not terminal, more process than closure. And who in the mutable world of contemporary international relations can reliably predict the future?



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