

On safer ground?

The emergence and evolution of 'Global Britain'

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The 2016 Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom marked a crossroads not only for the formulation and practice of British foreign policy, but also for the UK's relationships with longstanding partners and allies on the European and international political stage. A discursive product of Theresa May's stint as prime minister, the notion of 'Global Britain' stood at the core of the Conservative government's vision for what UK foreign policy could look like in the post-Brexit era.¹ What this notion meant in concrete and practical terms remained ambiguous, and the phrase itself became subject to much critique and ridicule in the subsequent years, at home and abroad. For Brexit supporters, the referendum result meant new global opportunities and more room for manoeuvring—with freedom from 'red tape' and European Union bureaucracy. For critics, leaving the EU to pursue a stronger global role was rather a contradiction in terms. They envisioned that Brexit would more likely weaken the UK's economy, union and clout on the world stage. The dream about 'Global Britain', they warned, could quickly derail into the reality of 'little England'.²

Why did the May government introduce the contested notion of 'Global Britain',³ and how did the 'Global Britain' narrative evolve and manifest itself in UK foreign and security policy discourse and practices in the ensuing years? In this article, we analyse the reframing of UK foreign and security policy post-referendum through the lens of ontological security theory. We argue that for the

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¹ UK Government, Prime Minister's Office and the Rt Hon. Theresa May MP, 'The government's negotiating objectives for exiting the EU', speech at Lancaster House, London, 17 Jan. 2017, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-governments-negotiating-objectives-for-exiting-the-eu-pm-speech>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 17 July 2023.)

² Cristina Gallardo, 'The incredible shrinking Global Britain', *Politico*, 19 May 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/the-incredible-shrinking-global-britain>; Michael O'Sullivan and David Skilling, 'Comment: From Great Britain to little England?', *Independent*, 12 April 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/comment-great-britain-little-england>.

³ For an early take on a similar question, see Oliver Daddow, 'GlobalBritain™: the discursive construction of Britain's post-Brexit world role', *Global Affairs*, 5: 1, 2019, pp. 5–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23340460.2019.1599297>.

Conservative governments in charge after the 2016 referendum, the ‘Global Britain’ narrative became a way not only of rebuffing international critique and shaming,⁴ but also one of soothing domestic existential anxiety and helping reframe the UK’s foreign policy identity in the post-Brexit years. Theoretically, we engage and contribute to ontological security scholarship highlighting how narratives serve as response tools and coping mechanisms for states facing ontological insecurity, offering a way forward for divided governing elites.⁵ Adding to ontological security theory, we address the issue of how these narratives evolve in the next phase, and the conditions under which they come to resonate with key audiences. We suggest that narratives about foreign policy identity are more effective when they are anchored in and revolve around what we call *home turfs*—themes and spaces where the state’s identity is more prone to find an ontologically secure base,⁶ thereby providing ‘the confidence necessary to assert one’s self’.⁷ In empirical terms, we illustrate how ‘Global Britain’ in the post-referendum years went from being mainly a rhetorical slogan and coping mechanism for government representatives, to becoming a framing device for the broader government apparatus when carving out UK foreign and security policy priorities post-Brexit.⁸ In doing so, we also add to the body of literature on ‘Global Britain’ and post-Brexit UK foreign policy, offering an analysis of how the ‘Global Britain’ narrative developed and acquired new meaning and substance as the Brexit process moved on from its initial stages.

We proceed in four steps. We begin by presenting our theoretical framework, drawing on insights from scholarship on how states seek not only territorial, but also ontological security, and how narratives play a key role in this respect. Adding to work studying the initial introduction of ‘Global Britain’ and developments in UK foreign policy identity post-Brexit,⁹ we here underline the

⁴ Kristin Haugevik and Cecilie Basberg Neumann, ‘Reputation crisis management and the state: theorising containment as diplomatic mode’, *European Journal of International Relations* 27: 3, 2021, pp. 708–29, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540661211008213>; Rebecca Adler-Nissen, ‘Stigma management in International Relations: transgressive identities, norms, and order in international society’, *International Organization* 68: 1, 2014, pp. 143–76, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818313000337>.

⁵ For example, Brent J. Steele, *Ontological security in International Relations: self-identity and the IR state* (London: Routledge, 2008); Nina C. Krickel-Choi, ‘The concept of anxiety in ontological security studies’, *International Studies Review* 24: 3, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viac013>.

⁶ Our analytical focus here is on dominant positions and representations in official discourse, put forth by various actors authorized to speak on the state’s behalf. Accordingly, we do not differentiate between or explicate in detail variations and nuances behind these representations, e.g. debates occurring *within* for example departments, bureaucratic agencies or political parties. For insightful discussions of domestic debates about ‘Global Britain’, see, for example, Andrew Glencross and David McCourt, ‘Living up to a new role in the world: the challenges of “Global Britain”’, *Orbis* 62: 4, 2018, pp. 582–97, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2018.08.010>; Benjamin Martill, ‘Withdrawal symptoms: party factions, political change and British foreign policy post-Brexit’, *Journal of European Public Policy*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2023.2198578>.

⁷ Jennifer Mitzen, ‘Ontological security in world politics: state identity and the security dilemma’, *European Journal of International Relations* 12: 3, 2006, pp. 341–70 at p. 274, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066106067346>. See also Ann Dupuis and David C. Thorns, ‘Home, home ownership and the search for ontological security’, *The Sociological Review* 46: 1, 1998, p. 24–47, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.00088>; Amir Lupovici, ‘Ontological security, cyber technology, and states’ responses’, *European Journal of International Relations* 29: 1, 2023, pp. 153–78, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540661221130958>.

⁸ Øyvind Svendsen, ‘“Practice time!” *Doxic futures* in security and defence diplomacy after Brexit’, *Review of International Studies* 46: 1, 2020, pp. 3–19, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210519000202>.

⁹ Daddow, ‘GlobalBritain™’.

importance of anchoring and organizing foreign policy identities and practices around 'secure bases'¹⁰ or home turfs. Next, we contextualize our study in recent scholarly work on UK foreign and security policy, before and after Brexit, before tracing and analysing, in the third step, how the government's discursive production of 'Global Britain' evolved in the years after the referendum. Moving first from international trade to the security and defence domain, and then from the Indo-Pacific and 'home' to the Anglosphere and the Euro-Atlantic, the 'Global Britain' narrative evolved in a different direction from that which May originally sketched in her much-cited Lancaster House speech of January 2017. While external developments evidently played a part in this, we argue that these shifts should be understood as expressive of British ontological security-seeking in the post-Brexit years. The international trade deals the government had forecast did not materialize as quickly as hoped, and negotiations with the EU dragged on. The global pandemic hit the world economy hard, with the UK economy among the casualties. And in February 2022, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine changed longstanding European security dynamics and debates overnight. During this period, the 'Global Britain' narrative pivoted to secure home turfs—sectoral and geographical—around which the UK's post-Brexit foreign policy identity could be anchored and reconstructed. We conclude with some directions for future studies—of UK foreign and security policy and ontological security-seeking more broadly—pointing out how notions like 'Global Britain' may assume different functions as the state transitions from a condition of immediate and existential anxiety to consolidation through anchoring identity in home turfs.

Managing ontological insecurity

Ontological security studies has been one of the fastest growing research programmes in International Relations (IR) in recent years.¹¹ Different aspects of the Brexit process have also been studied through the lens of ontological security.¹² The concept was initially imported to sociology from psychology, when

¹⁰ Dupuis and Thorns, 'Home, home ownership and the search for ontological security'.

¹¹ See, for example, Catarina Kinnvall, 'Globalization and religious nationalism: self, identity, and the search for ontological security', *Political Psychology* 25: 5, 2004, pp. 741–67, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2004.00396.x>; Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics'; Steele, *Ontological security in International Relations*; Catarina Kinnvall and Jennifer Mitzen, 'Anxiety, fear, and ontological security in world politics: thinking with and beyond Giddens', *International Theory* 12: 2, 2020, pp. 240–56, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S175297192000010X>; Jelena Subotić, 'Narrative, ontological security, and foreign policy change', *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12: 4, 2016, pp. 610–27, <https://doi.org/10.1111/fpa.12089>; Christopher S. Browning and Pertti Joenniemi, 'Ontological security, self-articulation and the securitization of identity', *Cooperation and Conflict* 52: 1, 2017, pp. 31–47, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836716653161>; Krickel-Choi, 'The concept of anxiety in ontological security studies'.

¹² Christopher S. Browning, 'Brexit, existential anxiety and ontological (in)security', *European Security* 27: 3, 2018, pp. 336–55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2018.1497982>; Christopher S. Browning, 'Brexit populism and fantasies of fulfilment', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32: 3, 2019, pp. 222–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2019.1567461>; Ian Manners, 'Political psychology of European integration: the (re) production of identity and difference in the Brexit debate', *Political Psychology* 39: 6, 2018, pp. 1213–32, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12545>; Ben Roshier, "'And now we're facing that reality too": Brexit, ontological security, and intergenerational anxiety in the Irish border region', *European Security* 31: 1, 2022, pp. 21–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2021.1949297>; Srdjan Vucetic, *Greatness and decline: national identity and British foreign policy* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021).

R. D. Laing's work was introduced by Anthony Giddens in the early 1990s.¹³ Later, the concept spread out across the social sciences, including to IR.¹⁴ Ontological security studies in IR set out from the premise that states seek not only physical, territorial security, but also security of the Self.¹⁵ Even more so, scholars pointed out that in and through practice, states will often prioritize ontological security concerns over material ones.¹⁶

Narratives form an integrated part of everyday life in all societies and play a key part in building and preserving relational identity and 'we-ness'.¹⁷ By weaving facts and occurrences together, adding structure, context, and meaning, narratives generate audience expectations: they make certain developments and outcomes appear more possible, likely, legitimate, necessary and desirable than others.¹⁸ Also for states, narratives are key to understanding why and how some policies and actions materialize, while others are tabled or fade away. Through textbooks, popular culture, political speeches and everyday news coverage, audiences are presented with dominant and alternative accounts of who the state is—at a specific point in time, in a specific context, and in relation to specific Others. Often, such present-day narratives are linked to narratives about the past or the future—who the state once was, and who it aspires to become. Foreign policy identities emerge, fasten, and change through such stories, which also serve to define 'an array of possible interactions and their likely outcomes'.¹⁹ While there is no 'one-to-one relationship' between a state's identity and its policies,²⁰ dominant representations set the bandwidth of possible actions by confining 'what is thought of at all, what is thought of as possible, and what is thought of as the "natural thing" to do in a given situation'.²¹ The stories we tell and acknowledge, and the representations of Selves, Others, situations and contexts to which we resort, shape our positions, processes and actions. A state seeking to be recognized as a 'peace nation' is likely to be more harshly confronted by critical audiences if it launches a war. Conversely, publics may find it easier to accept that an actor branded as 'evil', 'Nazi', or 'terrorist' is subjected to extraordinary security measures.²²

¹³ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and self-identity: self and society in the late modern age* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1991).

¹⁴ For an overview, see Filip Ejdus, 'Critical situations, fundamental questions and ontological insecurity in world politics', *Journal of International Relations and Development* 21: 1, 2018, pp. 883–908, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41268-017-0083-3>.

¹⁵ Steele, *Ontological security in International Relations*.

¹⁶ Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics'; Rosher, "And now we're facing that reality too".

¹⁷ Margaret R. Somers, 'The narrative constitution of identity: a relational and network approach', *Theory and Society* 23: 5, 1994, pp. 605–49, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF0092905>.

¹⁸ Kevin C. Dunn and Iver B. Neumann, *Undertaking discourse analysis for social research* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2016).

¹⁹ Charles Tilly, *Stories, identities, and political change* (Lanham, MD and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), p. 9.

²⁰ Lene Hansen, *Security as practice: discourse analysis and the Bosnian war* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 214.

²¹ Iver B. Neumann, 'Discourse analysis', in Audie Klotz and Deepa Prakash, eds, *Qualitative methods in International Relations: a pluralist guide* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 61–77.

²² Hansen, *Security as practice*; Julie Wilhelmsen, *Russia's securitization of Chechnya: how war became acceptable* (London: Routledge, 2017).

Below, we scrutinize how critical moments can push states into ontological insecurity, and how they subsequently respond to such situations.²³ Because states, like individuals, seek stability and meaning in their identity, they also seek to avoid existential anxiety, or 'a feeling of inner turmoil in the face of uncertainty'.²⁴ When faced with criticism that is potentially harmful to their identity and reputation, states may choose to avoid or ignore the criticism.²⁵ But they could also choose a more active response: to reject, counter, recognize or contain it.²⁶ If opting for rejecting or countering strategies, they will typically turn to established, familiar self-narratives and routines, thereby seeking to defend and preserve certain presentations of Self.²⁷ In the context of the argument and case-study presented here, we contend that in order for narratives to be effective in upholding or restoring ontological security, stories must occur in social and/or territorial spaces and contexts where they resonate with and make sense to the audience groups at which they are targeted. They need, in other words, to be meaningful and credible in the setting and under the circumstances in which they are told. Here, we refer to this as the home turfs of the states in question—sites serving as secure bases around which self-identities can be safely constructed.²⁸ On these home turfs, states 'can be themselves and therefore ontologically secure'.²⁹

Several studies have noted how insecurity about the UK's own past, and its role as an EU state, played an important part in the process leading up to the 2016 referendum result.³⁰ Our aim here is to add to these efforts by showing how ontological security concerns were also a driver in the recrafting of UK foreign policy after the Brexit referendum. While anxiety and ontological security concerns are important for understanding why the 'Global Britain' narrative emerged in the first place, we find that the last dimension identified above—what Lupovici terms 'designation of home'³¹—is key to understanding how the narrative evolved in the ensuing years, before it eventually faded from government discourse altogether.³² In the meaning-making struggle that emerged from the Brexit process, we leverage the argument that the UK experienced anxiety—insecurity of the Self due to uncertainties in the face of abrupt change.³³ As the May government embarked on the process of 'delivering Brexit' by triggering Article

²³ Browning, 'Brexit, existential anxiety and ontological (in)security'; Ejodus, 'Critical situations, fundamental questions and ontological insecurity in world politics'; Haugevik and Neumann, 'Reputation crisis management and the state'; Lupovici, 'Ontological security, cyber technology, and states' responses'.

²⁴ Filip Ejodus, *Crisis and ontological insecurity: Serbia's anxiety over Kosovo's secession* (Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 1–2; see also Krickel-Choi, 'The concept of anxiety in ontological security studies'.

²⁵ Lupovici, 'Ontological security, cyber technology, and states' responses'.

²⁶ Adler-Nissen, 'Stigma management in International Relations'; Haugevik and Neumann, 'Reputation crisis management and the state'.

²⁷ Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics'.

²⁸ Dupuis and Thorns, 'Home, home ownership and the search for ontological security', p. 29.

²⁹ Lupovici, 'Ontological security, cyber technology, and states' responses'.

³⁰ Browning, 'Brexit, existential anxiety and ontological (in)security'; Browning, 'Brexit populism and fantasies of fulfilment'; Manners, 'Political psychology of European integration'; Roshier, "'And now we're facing that reality too'"; Vucetic, *Greatness and decline*.

³¹ Lupovici, 'Ontological security, cyber technology, and states' responses'.

³² Richard G. Whitman, 'Are we seeing the slow death of Global Britain?', UK in a Changing Europe, 16 Dec. 2022, <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/are-we-seeing-the-slow-death-of-global-britain>.

³³ Steele, *Ontological security in International Relations*.

so of the Lisbon Treaty, the ‘Global Britain’ narrative became a coping mechanism for helping soothe anxiety and ontological insecurities—some resulting from the years of EU membership, and others products of the Brexit referendum itself and the subsequent withdrawal process. The notion of ‘Global Britain’ did allude to commonplaces ‘already present in the rhetorical field’, and which had already ‘been imagined, formulated, and disseminated’ in the British political discourse.³⁴ However, its initial operationalization—emphasizing global trade opportunities and a broader UK turn to the Indo-Pacific—proved difficult to communicate to relevant audiences, with the UK economy suffering and international trade deals not materializing. A ‘both, please’ approach to boosted diplomatic and military dispositions also turned out to be a demanding balancing act, as a more visible diplomatic and military presence in the Asia-Pacific made it challenging to play a leading role in the Euro-Atlantic region.

‘Global Britain’ as response to ontological insecurity

When the result of the UK referendum was clear, scholars and pundits around the world found it hard to envisage any positive effects for UK foreign policy. Few seemed swayed about the ‘Global Britain’ narrative. Hadfield described a ‘bewildered’ country, uncertain about its future.³⁵ Zappettini pointed out that the ‘Global Britain’ narrative was simultaneously one about ‘rupture and continuity of liberal international narratives’,³⁶ while Glencross and McCourt saw ‘Global Britain’ as an oxymoron—doomed to disappoint either a domestic or a foreign audience.³⁷ Turner and Beaumont both found a quixotic and nostalgic imperial narrative—domestically oriented, regressive and contradictory to the UK’s most important partners.³⁸ Saunders stressed that ‘Global Britain’ was expressive of imperial modes of thought present not only among ‘Leave’ voters, but all sides of the Europe debate in the UK.³⁹ Harrois argued that while ‘Global Britain’ was meant to accommodate domestic demand for great power status, post-Brexit foreign and defence policy instead confirmed and reinforced ‘Britain’s already-growing isolation on the international stage’.⁴⁰

The narrative about making Britain ‘global’ (again) had an inbuilt ambiguity to it, as it was premised on decoupling Britain from its deepest and arguably most

³⁴ Ronald R. Krebs and Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, ‘Twisting tongues and twisting arms: the power of political rhetoric’, *European Journal of International Relations* 13: 1, 2007, pp. 35–66 at p. 46.

³⁵ Amelia Hadfield, ‘Carry on, Global Britain’: recrafting post-Brexit security and foreign affairs’, *Politique Européenne* 70: 4, 2020, pp. 166–91, <https://doi.org/10.3917/poeu.070.0166>.

³⁶ Franco Zappettini, ‘The official vision for “global Britain”: Brexit as rupture and continuity between free trade, liberal internationalism and “values”’, in Veronika Koller, Susanne Kopf and Marlene Miglbauer, eds, *Discourses of Brexit* (London: Routledge, 2019).

³⁷ Glencross and McCourt, ‘Living up to a new role in the world’.

³⁸ Oliver Turner, ‘Global Britain and the narrative of empire’, *The Political Quarterly* 90: 4, 2019, pp. 727–34, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12739>; Paul Beaumont, ‘Brexit, Retrotopia and the perils of post-colonial delusions’, *Global Affairs* 3: 4–5, 2017, pp. 379–90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23340460.2018.1478674>.

³⁹ Robert Saunders, ‘Brexit and empire: “Global Britain” and the myth of imperial nostalgia’, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 48: 6, 2020, p. 1140–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2020.1848403>.

⁴⁰ Thibaud Harrois, ‘Towards “Global Britain”? Theresa May and the UK’s role in the world after Brexit’, *Observatoire de la société britannique*, vol. 21, 2018, pp. 51–73, <https://doi.org/10.4000/osb.2119>.

important international partnership: the one with the EU. Already in 2013, when he first presented the rationale for a referendum on Britain's future in the EU, David Cameron alluded to the illogicality in this line of reasoning. 'There is no doubt that we are more powerful in Washington, in Beijing, in Delhi because we are a powerful player in the European Union', he said.⁴¹ However, the political reality of the Brexit referendum was that the UK government needed to define a positive vision for Britain's role in the world after leaving the EU.⁴² This was the case in diverse areas such as defence and future conflict,⁴³ trade,⁴⁴ at the UN⁴⁵ and in human rights.⁴⁶ In the broader public debate, 'Global Britain' was relationally positioned as a response both to those fearing an 'isolationist', 'nationalist' or 'anti-European' Britain, and those wanting to leave 'EU Britain' behind. However, the Brexit campaign and referendum had left Britain with a divided government, parliament, electorate and union. While the government presented a vision of a more open, engaged and outward-looking state, key audiences needed convincing about the possibilities Brexit could help realize. As the *Guardian* noted in its editorial article the morning after the referendum:

Britain's place in the world must now be rethought. That will demand the kind of debate about our alliances that we have not had since the Suez crisis forced a post-imperial reality on Britain. Once again, the country's very idea of itself will have to be reimagined too. The deep strains on the nation's fabric that are partly expressed as a pro-European Scotland, Northern Ireland—and London—and an anti-European England and Wales must be urgently addressed. And a new relationship with a Europe that is in no mood to be generous must be negotiated.⁴⁷

Having lost the referendum, Cameron resigned. Theresa May inherited the task of steering Britain 'to its next destination'—to give meaning to the Brexit decision and identify a way forward.⁴⁸ What kind of role could the UK assume in European and world politics as an EU outsider? What kind of foreign and security policy repertoire could it resort to; what sort of influence could it hope to exert in the international arena? In her Lancaster House speech, delivered half a year after

⁴¹ UK Government, Cabinet Office and the Rt Hon. David Cameron MP, 'EU speech at Bloomberg', speech, 23 Jan. 2013, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/eu-speech-at-bloomberg>.

⁴² Richard G. Whitman, 'The UK's European diplomatic strategy for Brexit and beyond', *International Affairs* 95: 2, 2019, pp. 383–404, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz031>.

⁴³ Matthew Uttley, Benedict Wilkinson and Armida van Rijn, 'A power for the future? Global Britain and the future character of conflict', *International Affairs* 95: 4, 2019, pp. 801–16, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz101>.

⁴⁴ Steven Brakman, Harry Garretsen and Tristan Kohl, 'Consequences of Brexit and options for a "Global Britain"', *Papers in Regional Science* 97: 1, 2017, pp. 55–72, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pirs.12343>.

⁴⁵ Jess Gikins, Samuel Jarvis and Jason Ralph, *Global Britain in the United Nations* (London: United Nations Association UK, publ. online Feb. 2019), https://una.org.uk/sites/default/files/UNA-UK_GlobalBritain_20190207d.pdf.

⁴⁶ Sean Molloy and Rhona Smith, 'Advancing human rights in a post-Brexit era: Global Britain or wavering Britain?' *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 36: 4, 2022, pp. 578–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2022.2044756>.

⁴⁷ *Guardian*, 'The Guardian view on the EU referendum: the vote is in, now we must face the consequences', 24 June 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jun/24/the-guardian-view-on-the-eu-referendum-the-vote-is-in-now-we-must-face-the-consequences>.

⁴⁸ UK Government, Prime Minister's Office and the Rt Hon. David Cameron MP, 'David Cameron's departing words as Prime Minister', speech, 13 July 2016, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/david-camerons-departing-words-as-prime-minister>.

the referendum and some two months before the government triggered Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty, May proposed a way forward. It was time, she said, for the UK to ‘step back and ask ourselves what kind of country we want to be’ on the international stage:

I want this United Kingdom to emerge from this period of change stronger, fairer, more united and more outward-looking than ever before. I want us to be a secure, prosperous, tolerant country—a magnet for international talent and a home to the pioneers and innovators who will shape the world ahead. I want us to be a truly Global Britain—the best friend and neighbour to our European partners, but a country that reaches beyond the borders of Europe too. A country that goes out into the world to build relationships with old friends and new allies alike.⁴⁹

In the speech, ‘Global Britain’ was portrayed more as a lens and organizing device for reimagining and reorganizing UK foreign policy than as an operative recipe for the formulation and implementation of policies and actions. The core argument underpinning the speech was that the UK had once been, and would (therefore) again become, a global power—hence also alluding to existing rhetorical commonplaces in traditional UK foreign policy discourse.⁵⁰ As for policy domains, the speech centred mainly on economic aspects and possibilities for global trade—references to ‘trade’/‘trading’ appeared 49 times in all, and ‘economy’/‘economic’ ten times. By contrast, ‘secure’/‘security’ occurred only six times in the speech, and ‘defence’/‘defend’ only three times.⁵¹ In geographical terms, May assured that relations with European partners would continue to be key to UK foreign policy, but her speech focused mainly on arenas and networks outside Europe:

We want to get out into the wider world, to trade and do business all around the globe. Countries including China, Brazil and the Gulf states have already expressed their interest in striking trade deals with us. We have started discussions on future trade ties with countries like Australia, New Zealand and India. And President-elect Trump has said Britain is not ‘at the back of the queue’ for a trade deal with the United States, the world’s biggest economy, but front of the line.⁵²

In the ensuing months, the ‘Global Britain’ narrative increasingly manifested itself in government discourse on post-Brexit UK foreign policy. From 2018, the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) collected relevant speeches and policy documents on a designated web page under the heading ‘Global Britain: delivering on our international ambition’.⁵³ The target audiences, it seemed, were both

⁴⁹ May, ‘The government’s negotiating objectives for exiting the EU’.

⁵⁰ Krebs and Jackson, ‘Twisting tongues and twisting arms’, p. 46.

⁵¹ This was not entirely unexpected, since security and defence policy had played a subordinate role in the Brexit campaign. See Benjamin Martill and Adrian Rogstad, ‘The end of consensus? Folk theory and the politics of foreign policy in the Brexit referendum’, *Global Affairs* 5: 4–5, 2019, pp. 347–67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23340460.2019.1701950>.

⁵² May, ‘The government’s negotiating objectives for exiting the EU’.

⁵³ UK Government, Foreign & Commonwealth Office and Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, ‘Global Britain: delivering on our international ambition’, collection, last updated 23 Sept. 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/global-britain-delivering-on-our-international-ambition>. As part of the ‘Global Britain’ process, the FCO was merged with the Department for International Development in 2020, becoming the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office.

critics and backers of Brexit, at home and abroad. Rejecting narratives about a 'nationalist' or 'isolationist' UK in the making, the significant Others of 'Global Britain' were not only the UK's former Self as an EU member and the EU it left behind, but also its alternative future Self—had it remained inside the EU.⁵⁴ The credibility of the 'Global Britain' narrative and identity construction would be evaluated in relation to all of these. Through decisions, policies and practices, the May government was signalling that the UK was not a power in decline. However, the UK's success in vending this new vision hinged not only on the degree to which it had the available resources to live up to its stated aspirations and concrete achievements to report, but also on domestic factors allowing for agreement on contentious issues and relative order in the political landscape.⁵⁵

At the Munich Security Conference in February 2018, May briefly—and in broad terms—expanded the 'Global Britain' notion to include security and defence. 'We invest in global security knowing this is how we best protect our people at home and abroad', she said.⁵⁶ Around the same time, then foreign secretary Boris Johnson announced 'a major expansion of the UK's diplomatic service, an uplift of almost 15 per cent on the number of British diplomats overseas' as well as the establishment of new diplomatic missions.⁵⁷ Johnson's successor, Jeremy Hunt, also announced diplomatic expansions, primarily in Africa and Asia. In both cases, the increases were explicitly linked to the 'Global Britain' narrative and to Britain's past identity as a great power. 'We must build on the strengths that are rooted in our national character', Hunt said.⁵⁸ In the ensuing years, similar reasoning recurred in speeches and statements by government officials.⁵⁹ However, the task of 'delivering' Brexit and, by extension, offering a credible narrative about the 'Global Britain' that would now emerge, turned out to be a tall order for the May government. Having failed three times to get her negotiated deal with the EU through the British parliament, May resigned as prime minister in the summer of 2019. Johnson, her successor, saw the process through. While numbers generally suggested that not only Britain's economy, but also its diplomatic clout and relations with key allies, had weakened after Brexit, the 'Global Britain' narrative

⁵⁴ Svendsen, "Practice time!"

⁵⁵ Glencross and McCourt, 'Living up to a new role in the world'; Jamie Gaskarth and Nicola Langdon, 'The dilemma of Brexit: hard choices in the narrow context of British foreign policy traditions', *British Politics*, vol. 16, 2021; pp. 170–86, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-17281-6_4.

⁵⁶ UK Government, Prime Minister's Office and the Rt Hon. Theresa May MP, 'PM speech at Munich Security Conference', speech, 17 Feb. 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-speech-at-munich-security-conference-17-february-2018>.

⁵⁷ UK Government, Foreign & Commonwealth Office and the Rt Hon. Boris Johnson MP, 'Foreign Secretary announces 250 new diplomatic roles and ten new sovereign missions overseas', press release, 21 March 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-announces-250-new-diplomatic-roles-and-ten-new-sovereign-missions-overseas>.

⁵⁸ UK Government, Foreign & Commonwealth Office and the Rt Hon. Jeremy Hunt MP, 'An invisible chain: speech by the Foreign Secretary', speech, 31 Oct. 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/an-invisible-chain-speech-by-the-foreign-secretary>.

⁵⁹ See, for example, UK Government, Foreign & Commonwealth Office and the Rt Hon. Jeremy Hunt MP, 'Lord Mayor's Banquet 2019: Foreign Secretary's speech', speech at Mansion House, London, 14 May 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/lord-mayors-banquet-2019-foreign-secretarys-speech>; Dominic Raab, 'Global Britain is leading the world as a force for good', *Sunday Telegraph*, 23 Sept. 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/global-britain-is-leading-the-world-as-a-force-for-good-article-by-dominic-raab>.

lived on. A fortnight before the formal exit date, 31 January 2020, Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab envisioned ‘a bold new chapter for our country—ambitious, self-confident and global in its international outlook’.⁶⁰

Through the lens of ontological security theory, the May government’s launch and active use of the ‘Global Britain’ narrative can be seen as an identity-driven coping mechanism unleashed by the existential anxiety which followed from the 2016 referendum result. Leaving the EU meant unravelling a key arena for the UK’s foreign policy identity and practice. The government responded to this uncertainty by offering a new, positive vision for the UK’s role in the world as a non-EU member. In 1962, former US secretary of state Dean Acheson famously observed that Britain had ‘lost an empire and ... not yet found a role’.⁶¹ Now, this role had to be rethought once again. In the next two sections, we detail how the ‘Global Britain’ narrative evolved and took new direction in the years after the UK government’s triggering of Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty. Starting as a trade-oriented narrative centring on the Indo-Pacific, it gradually returned ‘home’ to, first, security and defence and, second, the Anglosphere and Euro-Atlantic. These narrative alterations, we suggest, helped soothe the existential anxiety that the Brexit process had brought about for the UK state and its foreign policy elites.

Returning home part I: ‘Making defence the spear of Global Britain’

In narrative terms, the narrative about ‘Global Britain’ wove a red thread from the UK’s past, as a global power,⁶² via the Brexit referendum to an optimistic future where the UK—freed from EU rules and regulations—would once again become ‘truly global’. In this sense, ‘Global Britain’ was simultaneously a narrative about continuity and rupture.⁶³ If this framing and narrative was generally accepted by the relevant audiences, then the Brexit critics would have been proven wrong and the UK would have restored its ontological security as a relevant and proficient foreign policy actor. However, a key challenge for the ‘Global Britain’ narrative, in the way it was initially presented in government discourse, was that developments in the British economy and the UK’s success in landing new trade agreements were closely monitored by analysts, and the national and international media.⁶⁴ While the May and Johnson governments signalled that they expected the economy to pick up momentum once the UK had actually left the EU, the forecasts were generally negative. The fact that the negotiations dragged on and were turning increasingly sour also constrained the UK’s room for manoeuvre in

⁶⁰ UK Government, Foreign & Commonwealth Office and the Rt Hon. Dominic Raab MP, ‘Foreign Secretary’s introduction to the Queen’s Speech debate’, speech, 13 Jan. 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/foreign-secretary-introduction-to-queens-speech-debate>.

⁶¹ Dean Acheson, speech at the United States Military Academy, West Point, NY, 5 Dec. 1962.

⁶² For a detailed analysis of how British foreign policy evolved in response to major international events and crises, see David M. McCourt, *Britain and world power since 1945: constructing a nation’s role in international politics* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2014).

⁶³ Zappettini, ‘The official vision for “global Britain”’.

⁶⁴ See, for example, Jeremy Shapiro and Nick Witney, ‘Beyond Global Britain: a realistic foreign policy for the UK’, policy brief, European Council on Foreign Relations, 15 Dec. 2021, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/beyond-global-britain-a-realistic-foreign-policy-for-the-uk/#conclusion>.

planning for future arrangements.⁶⁵ The anticipated trade deals with major players like China and the US had not materialized, despite Johnson's vision about the UK becoming a 'global champion' for free trade⁶⁶ and Foreign Secretary Raab's insistence that the Trump administration was 'poised "at the doorstep, pen in hand", ready to sign a deal'.⁶⁷

However, once the formal exit had taken place in January 2020, answers could no longer be postponed. Now, the 'Global Britain' vision and narrative needed to manifest itself in dispositions, actions, and observable outcomes. As noted, the economy and international trade had proved to be difficult playing fields, and the global outbreak of COVID-19 in the spring of 2020 complicated matters further. And, at this point, an observable shift did occur in the 'Global Britain' narrative. Prior to 2020, security and defence had played a subordinate part in the vision of UK foreign policy in the post-Brexit era. Correspondingly, Brexit had not featured prominently in UK security and defence discourse—which remained a story about continuity, also as far as relations with the EU and European partners were concerned. The UK would collaborate closely with its former partners in the EU, step up its engagement in NATO and encourage enhanced institutional cooperation between the two institutions. Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that references to 'Global Britain' only occurred sporadically and often indirectly in defence speeches and statements after the referendum, as when the Royal Air Force 'Red Arrows' set out to tour the Middle East in September 2017 and Defence Secretary Michael Fallon remarked that the UK was "'open for business", committed to peace and security, and a leading player on the global stage'.⁶⁸

With the formal exit date impending, security and defence were increasingly woven into the 'Global Britain' narrative, and the notion of 'Global Britain' manifested itself more frequently in security and defence discourse. From an ontological security theory perspective, this shift can be understood as a relocation of UK foreign and security policy to secure home turfs where its post-Brexit identity could be stabilized and safely reconstructed. In January 2020, Raab stressed that 'a truly global Britain is about more than just international trade and investment'.⁶⁹ And in March 2020, Defence Secretary Ben Wallace announced

⁶⁵ Tamsin Parnell, 'Unravelling the Global Britain vision? International relationships and national identity in UK Government documents about Brexit, 2016–2019', *Discourse and Society* 33: 3, 2022, pp. 391–410, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09579265221076588>; Øyvind Svendsen, 'Theorizing public performances for international negotiations', *International Studies Quarterly* 66: 3, 2022, pp. 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqac031>.

⁶⁶ UK Government, Prime Minister's Office and the Rt Hon. Boris Johnson MP, 'PM speech in Greenwich', 3 Feb. 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-speech-in-greenwich-3-february-2020>.

⁶⁷ Foreign & Commonwealth Office and Raab, 'Foreign Secretary's introduction'. As of March 2023, only three such agreements had been signed, with Australia, New Zealand and Singapore. Of these, only the last—with Singapore—had entered into force. See Dominic Webb, 'Progress on UK free trade agreement negotiations', research briefing, (London: UK Parliament, House of Commons Library, 2023), <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9314/>.

⁶⁸ UK Government, Ministry of Defence, 'World renowned RAF Red Arrows to tour Middle East', 27 Aug. 2017, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/world-renowned-raf-red-arrows-to-tour-middle-eastrows-to-tour-middle-east>.

⁶⁹ Foreign & Commonwealth Office and Raab, 'Foreign Secretary's introduction'.

that the government was about to make defence ‘the spear of Global Britain’.⁷⁰ These announcements came shortly before the release of the guiding policy document for the ‘Global Britain’ approach, *Global Britain in a competitive age* (hereafter the ‘Integrated Review’). The document formulated a vision for the UK to leave a stronger footprint across the globe, involved in an array of issues and processes. At centre stage stood a firm recommitment to security and resilience, at home and—‘in keeping with our history’—internationally.⁷¹ In the defence document which accompanied the principal document, defence investments were foregrounded as part of the ‘Global Britain’ ambition:

The Royal Navy will have new ships and missiles, the RAF new fighters and sensors, and the Army will be more deployed and better protected ... The armed forces, working with the rest of government, must think and act differently. They will no longer be held as a force of last resort, but become more present and active around the world, operating below the threshold of open conflict to uphold our values and secure our interests, partner our friends and enable our allies, whether they are in the Euro-Atlantic, the Indo-Pacific, or beyond.⁷²

Later in 2020, an increase in defence spending also followed—an increase which the prime minister linked to Britain’s past as a global power, and implicitly to ‘Global Britain’:

... Britain must be true to our history. To stand alongside our allies, sharing the burden and bringing our expertise to bear on the world’s toughest problems. To achieve this, we need to upgrade our capabilities across the board.⁷³

Seen through the lens of ontological security theory, and in light of the UK’s relative economic decline and limited success in securing new international trade deals, it made sense at this point to bring the ‘Global Britain’ narrative closer—to a domain where the UK had proficiency and comparative strength *vis-à-vis* significant Others (but which did not have much to do with the original narrative about why it was necessary for the UK to leave the EU). Foregrounding security and defence, the narrative about ‘Global Britain’ became more credible and (therefore also) more acceptable to audiences at home and abroad.⁷⁴ Unlike the new trade agreements, which had until this point proven difficult to deliver for both the May and Johnson governments, neither security nor defence was directly affected by Brexit. While some scholars found the Integrated Review ‘light on specific policies

⁷⁰ UK Government, Ministry of Defence and the Rt Hon. Ben Wallace MP, ‘Defence Secretary Ben Wallace gives a speech to the Atlantic Council’, speech, Washington DC, 5 March 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/defence-secretary-ben-wallace-gives-a-speech-to-the-atlantic-council>.

⁷¹ HM Government, *Global Britain in a competitive age: the Integrated Review of security, defence, development and foreign policy*, 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy>, p. 11.

⁷² UK Government, Ministry of Defence, *Defence in a competitive age*, CP 411, 2021, pp. 1–2, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/974661/CP411_-_Defence_Command_Plan.pdf.

⁷³ UK Government, Prime Minister’s Office and the Rt Hon. Boris Johnson MP, ‘PM statement to the House on the Integrated Review’, 19 Nov. 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-to-the-house-on-the-integrated-review-19-november-2020>.

⁷⁴ Krebs and Jackson, ‘Twisting tongues and twisting arms’, pp. 46–7.

and their delivery',⁷⁵ the reinforced focus on security and defence allowed the UK to cultivate and put on display longstanding partnerships with European partners while still carving out its future relationship with the EU's internal market.

Returning home II: foregrounding the Anglosphere and the Euro-Atlantic

While stating clearly that the UK's main aim was to bolster collective security in the Euro-Atlantic area ('[o]ur commitment to European security is unequivocal'),⁷⁶ the Integrated Review's so-called 'Indo-Pacific tilt' was the policy move which received the majority of the attention—at home and abroad.⁷⁷ In the Review, the tilt was specified as a re-engagement with Commonwealth partners through military, diplomatic, trade and investment initiatives in the Indo-Pacific region. When the UK Carrier Strike Group undertook 'a series of multinational exercises with global allies in the Philippine Sea' a few months later, Defence Secretary Wallace explicitly linked these to the 'Global Britain' narrative as portrayed in the Integrated Review:

Carrier Strike Group 21 embodies the Prime Minister's vision for the UK as an outward facing, modern and responsible international actor who also takes its global defence and security responsibilities seriously and invests in them accordingly.⁷⁸

A special feature in the *RUSI Journal* in 2022 details how the 'Indo-Pacific tilt' developed based on post-Brexit Britain's partnership-based approach to international cooperation.⁷⁹ The tilt remained a strategic priority in UK foreign policy, despite concerns that it risked spreading UK foreign policy engagements too thinly considering the vast range of challenges facing the UK and its allies.⁸⁰ In this context, scholars have noted how the 'Indo-Pacific tilt' amounts to a credibility problem for post-Brexit Britain, because despite the rhetoric of global commitment—identified in the 'Global Britain' narrative more broadly—implementation proved difficult.⁸¹ Indeed, the 2023 update to the Integrated Review (*Integrated Review refresh 2023: responding to a more contested and volatile world*) leaned

⁷⁵ Hew Strachan, 'Global Britain in a competitive age: strategy and the Integrated Review', *Journal of the British Academy* vol. 9, 2021, pp. 161–77, <https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/009.161>.

⁷⁶ HM Government, 'Global Britain in a competitive age', p. 72.

⁷⁷ Analyses and evaluations include: Ben Barry, Bastian Giegerich, Euan Graham and Ben Schreer, *The UK Indo-Pacific tilt: defence and military implications*, research paper (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2022), <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/research-paper/2022/06/the-uk-indo-pacific-tilt>; Scott Edwards, Rob Yates and Asmiati Malik, "'Tilting" or toppling: assessing the UK's Indo-Pacific policy one year on', *The Diplomat*, 16 March 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/tilting-or-toppling-assessing-the-uks-indo-pacific-policy-one-year-on>; Louisa Brooke-Holland, *Integrated Review 2021: the defence tilt to the Indo-Pacific October*, research briefing (London: UK Parliament, House of Commons Library, 2021), <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9217/CBP-9217.pdf>.

⁷⁸ UK Government, Ministry of Defence and the Rt Hon. Ben Wallace MP, 'UK Carrier Strike Group to exercise with Indo-Pacific partners', 19 July 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-carrier-strike-group-to-exercise-with-indo-pacific-partners>.

⁷⁹ Jamie Gaskarth, 'Introduction: the UK's tilt to the Indo-Pacific', *RUSI Journal* 167: 6–7, 2022, pp. 10–11, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2022.2160594>.

⁸⁰ John F. Bradford, 'US perspectives and expectations regarding the UK's tilt to the Indo-Pacific', *RUSI Journal* 167: 6–7, 2022, pp. 24–32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2022.2158628>.

⁸¹ Catherine Jones, 'Assurance and deterrence in the UK's East Asia policies', *RUSI Journal* 167: 6–7, 2022, pp. 54–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2023.2176918>.

on and emphasized the war in Ukraine in particular to reiterate the UK's ambition to remain a leading security provider in the Euro-Atlantic.⁸² Generally, however, initiatives, investments and presence under the broader 'Indo-Pacific tilt' homed in on the Anglosphere. In September 2021, Australia, the UK and the US announced that they had signed a new nuclear-powered submarine deal, which became known as AUKUS after the signatory parties.⁸³ Founded on the longstanding 'Five Eyes' intelligence collaboration, and excluding other close allied nuclear powers, the AUKUS deal led to a public diplomatic row with France, whose government signalled that it felt both sidelined and betrayed by it.⁸⁴ This suggested that the 'Indo-Pacific tilt' first and foremost prioritized existing partnerships in a specific region, and also that 'Global Britain', once Brexit had taken place, sought to strengthen partnerships beyond the EU member states.

The AUKUS deal notwithstanding, the 'Global Britain' narrative's most profound tilt after Brexit had taken place was arguably 'back' to the Euro-Atlantic.⁸⁵ During 2020 and 2021, UK government officials' speeches and statements increasingly came to focus on the Northern European region. If the narrative shift in focus from global trade to (global) security and defence made sense from an ontological security perspective, then the same logic could be applied to the reorientation from a broader focus on the 'Indo-Pacific' to a more targeted focus on the Anglosphere and Euro-Atlantic region *within* that defence turn. Both the Anglosphere and the Euro-Atlantic can be seen as the UK's geographical home turfs in several respects, and as chief arenas for its longstanding security and defence priorities and significant relationships. First, the Anglosphere and Euro-Atlantic have been core sites for exercising and strengthening the UK's strong bilateral ties and 'special relationship' with the US.⁸⁶ While the US-UK relationship is often framed as a global one, its firm anchoring has been in the Anglosphere and Euro-Atlantic, institutionalized in NATO. Conversely, and in the spirit of Brexit, the 2021 Integrated Review hardly gave notice to the EU, focusing instead on cooperation with European partners 'through NATO, the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) and strong bilateral relations'.⁸⁷

The second point and rationale relate to Russia, which at this stage had resumed its role as the chief antagonist Other in UK foreign, security and defence discourse. Russia's intervention in Georgia in 2008 and its annexation of Crimea in 2014 were game changers in this respect, along with the attempted assassination

⁸² HM Government, *Integrated Review refresh 2023: responding to a more contested and volatile world*, CP 811, 2023, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1145586/11857435_NS_IR_Refresh_2023_Supply_AllPages_Revision_7_WEB_PDF.pdf.

⁸³ Joseph R. Biden, Boris Johnson and Scott Morrison, 'Joint leaders' statement on AUKUS', 16 Sept. 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210927191438/https://www.pm.gov.au/media/joint-leaders-statement-aukus>.

⁸⁴ Jamal Barnes and Samuel M. Makinda, 'Testing the limits of international society? Trust, AUKUS and Indo-Pacific security', *International Affairs* 98: 4, 2022, pp. 1307-25, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iac111>.

⁸⁵ Although British bureaucrats point out that Britain did not 'return' to the Euro-Atlantic, as it never truly left in the first place. Background conversations, London, 13-14 June 2022.

⁸⁶ Kristin Haugevik, *Special relationships in world politics: inter-state friendship and diplomacy after the Second World War* (London: Routledge, 2018).

⁸⁷ HM Government, *Global Britain in a competitive age*, p. 11.

of high-profile Russian defectors on British soil (notably in the case of the 2018 poisoning of Sergey Skripal)—which the UK government also publicly linked to the Putin regime. Finally, the security of northern Europe—including security in the High North and Arctic—had already been rising in the global consciousness for some time, principally due to Russia's activities in its neighbourhood and China's growing presence as a global power.⁸⁸

NATO had at this point been in a process of returning to its 'near abroad' since the 2010s. As part of this overall picture, David Cameron's first government (2010–15) had sought to strengthen the UK's ties with and presence in the Nordic and Nordic–Baltic regions. During this period, constellations such as 'the Northern Group' and the abovementioned JEF emerged as forums for political consultation among 'like-minded' states.⁸⁹ With China's increasing engagement in the High North and around the Arctic circle, the US and UK also began to step up their engagement in these areas. The UK's growing emphasis on and presence in the Arctic and High North is illustrative of its return to the Euro–Atlantic home turf as the Brexit process advanced. Duncan Depledge points out that while the UK had played a role in the Arctic for centuries, it had been placed in the periphery of the Arctic due to increased 'circumpolarization'.⁹⁰ Now, due to the Arctic's heightened strategic importance and rapid transformation because of climate change, non-Arctic states like the UK had a role to play in the governance and future prosperity of the Arctic.⁹¹ Increasingly referring to itself as the 'nearest neighbour' to the region,⁹² the UK committed itself in government statements and policy documents to keeping the Arctic a peaceful and cooperative area.⁹³ In 2018, the UK government's Arctic policy framework document, *Beyond the ice*, stated that 'the UK holds fast to a vision of a Global Britain that is engaged in the world and working with our international partners to advance prosperity and security in the Arctic'.⁹⁴ While the UK's engagement in the Arctic has traditionally been centred on non-military aspects, scholars point out that after Brexit, the

⁸⁸ Andrew Foxall, *Russia's policies towards a changing Arctic: implications for UK security*, research paper no. 12 (London: Henry Jackson Society, 2017), <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Russias-Policies-towards-a-Changing-Arctic.pdf>; Duncan Depledge, 'NATO and the Arctic: the need for a new approach', *RUSI Journal* 165: 5–6, 2020, pp. 80–90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2020.1865831>.

⁸⁹ Kristin Haugevik and Øyvind Svendsen, 'Global Britain' and security in the near abroad: leadership through flexilateralism? NUPI research paper no. 3, 2022, https://www.nupi.no/en/content/download/26254/file/NUPI_Research_Paper_3_2022_Haugevik_Svendsen.pdf.

⁹⁰ Duncan Depledge, *Britain and the Arctic* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

⁹¹ Clive Murgatroyd, 'Defence and the Arctic: go with the floe?', *RUSI Journal* 154: 4, 2009, pp. 82–6, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071840903216528>; Evan T. Bloom, 'The rising importance of non-Arctic states in the Arctic', *Wilson Quarterly*, Winter 2022, <https://www.wilsonquarterly.com/quarterly/the-new-north/the-rising-importance-of-non-arctic-states-in-the-arctic>.

⁹² See, for instance, UK Government, Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, Polar Regions Department, 'Looking north: the UK and the Arctic', 2023, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1135186/looking-north-the-uk-and-the-arctic-the-uks-arctic-policy-framework.pdf, p. 8.

⁹³ UK Government, Ministry of Defence and the Rt Hon. Ben Wallace MP, *The UK's defence contribution in the High North*, 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-uks-defence-contribution-in-the-high-north>.

⁹⁴ UK Government, Foreign & Commonwealth Office, Polar Regions Department, *Beyond the ice: UK policy towards the Arctic*, 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/beyond-the-ice-uk-policy-towards-the-arctic>, p. 7.

'Global Britain' narrative progressed 'by reacting to regional developments and adding the military security dimension to its Arctic security policy'.⁹⁵

In recent years the UK has been devising an Arctic strategy that shifted the focus from climate change to hard security threats, including defence.⁹⁶ In 2022, the Ministry of Defence also issued a new strategy document, this time centring on the High North. This document, entitled *The UK's defence contribution in the High North*, was also explicitly linked to the 'Global Britain' narrative.⁹⁷ 'Security is becoming more prominent in British thinking about the Arctic', one insider has observed, adding that this includes 'a more joined-up approach across sectors' than had previously been the case.⁹⁸ At the same time, the UK recognizes that it is not an Arctic state, and has been mindful 'not to overstep' its Arctic ambitions.⁹⁹

Having long described its interest in the Arctic and High North as one of low tension and high cooperation, current geopolitical struggles for influence in the region challenge the saliency of the UK's traditional approach. It also adds—and raises the importance of—a strategically significant region to an already wide-reaching portfolio for 'Global Britain'. While some practitioners interpret the British accent in the High North and Arctic less as a matter of Britain *returning* to its near abroad, and more as evidence that Britain never left the Euro-Atlantic in the first place,¹⁰⁰ we find that the 'Global Britain' narrative has increasingly been devoted to increasing the UK's presence and activities in the Arctic and High North. This, in our view, also illustrates the importance of these regions in the UK's quest for ontological security after Brexit. At the same time, Brexit, the creation of 'Global Britain' and the redefining of the UK's role in the world have continued to partially impede the UK's relations with some partners in the Arctic and High North. In other words, 'Global Britain's' quest for ontological security as a player in the High North remains unsettled, not due to lack of ambition, but due to the relational constitution of post-Brexit Britain in its relations with Northern European allies. Despite this, consolidating its search for home turf in order to secure a stable foreign policy identity could understandably be focused on the Arctic periphery of the Euro-Atlantic and through increased and varying partnerships with Northern European states such as the Baltics and the Nordics.

⁹⁵ Agne Cepinskyte, *Global Britain's Arctic security policy: going forward while looking back*, Finnish Institute of International Affairs briefing paper no. 270, 2019, https://www.fiia.fi/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/bp270_uk_-arctic-security-policy.pdf, p. 3.

⁹⁶ Duncan Depledge, Klaus Dodds and Caroline Kennedy-Pipe, 'The UK's Defence Arctic Strategy: negotiating the slippery geopolitics of the UK and the Arctic', *RUSI Journal* 164: 1, pp. 28–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2019.1605015>; Duncan Depledge, Caroline Kennedy-Pipe and James Rogers, 'The UK and the Arctic: forward defence', in *Arctic Yearbook 2019* (Thematic Network on Geopolitics and Security of the University of the Arctic, 2019), https://arcticyearbook.com/images/yearbook/2019/Scholarly-Papers/18_AY2019_Depledge.pdf.

⁹⁷ Ministry of Defence and Wallace, *The UK's defence contribution in the High North*.

⁹⁸ Background conversations, London, 14 June 2022.

⁹⁹ Background conversations, London, 14 June 2022.

¹⁰⁰ Background conversations, London, 13–14 June 2022.

Conclusion

In this article, we have theorized and studied the emergence and evolution of the 'Global Britain' narrative after the 2016 referendum through the lens of ontological security theory. We have argued that the 'Global Britain' narrative emerged as a response mechanism for a UK state and government experiencing ontological insecurity in the transition to post-Brexit UK foreign policy.¹⁰¹ The narrative worked both to soothe domestic anxieties and to help restore and reframe the UK's self-identity at home and on the world stage. Brexit brought about existential anxiety that the May government—and later the Johnson government—sought to manage by presenting an optimistic future, where the UK would leave the EU, not to isolate itself, but to assume a greater role on the world stage. Britain needed to make sense of and add meaning to its own place in the world after Brexit. It needed to create and communicate new, sustainable stories about the Self which, dismissing negative forecasts from Brexit critics, presented an 'alternative future' where the UK would remain a regional and global foreign policy player outside the EU.¹⁰²

We have observed how the initial 'Global Britain' narrative—centring on trade deals and foregrounding 'the global'—did not immediately work to soothe those fundamental—and widespread— anxieties. The declining UK economy and the government's limited progress in landing new international trade deals made this initial framing less persuasive. Tracing how the 'Global Britain' narrative evolved after the May government triggered Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty, we observe how the narrative was adjusted in two important respects after its initial inception. First, from being broad in thematic orientation but with global trade as the stated priority, the UK's global ambitions gradually relocated to the security and defence domain. Second, during the same period, the geographical span of 'Global Britain' was altered from an expansive global ambition, especially focused on the 'Indo-Pacific tilt', to prioritizing the Anglosphere and—in particular—the Euro-Atlantic region. Both the turn to security and defence and to the UK's 'near abroad' are consistent with a theoretical assumption that successful mitigation of anxieties concerning the Self can best be done by designating a home turf. For UK foreign policy addressing status anxieties that followed from Brexit, the turn to security and defence and the Euro-Atlantic region and Anglosphere provided such a home.

Importantly, the defining and redefining of UK foreign policy identity post-Brexit is not settled with the narrative developments we have traced in this article. Instead, we have made the case that narratives play a key role in the ongoing process through which states restore and uphold their ontological security, but that these narratives can be both fluid and adaptable. Our wider conceptual contribution to ontological security theory is that we have specified a mechanism and device through which the management of existential anxiety may

¹⁰¹ Leslie Vinjamuri, 'How Brexit and Boris broke Britain', *Foreign Affairs*, 3 Aug. 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-kingdom/how-brexit-and-boris-broke-britain>.

¹⁰² Svendsen, "Practice time!"

occur, namely home turfs—spaces and contexts where narratives resonate with the audience groups they target. In the case of the UK, consolidation through relocation to home turfs emerged gradually as ‘Global Britain’ was being adjusted and filled with meaningful content domestically and internationally. We have unravelled empirically how Brexit destabilized British identity and notion of a stable Self on the global stage, and that policy outputs in the areas of foreign, security and defence policy have been altered in and through the emergence of ‘Global Britain’ in recent years. This remains an ongoing process, something which was effectively illustrated when Rishi Sunak’s government signalled that it would abandon the ‘Global Britain’ framing altogether.¹⁰³ In sum, we have shown how the UK’s post-Brexit foreign policy identity moved away from existential anxiety by making two crucial moves that consolidated the British Self domestically and internationally. The moves ‘home’ to security and defence and to the Anglosphere and Euro-Atlantic provided a sense of renewed stability of identity, which in turn sheds light on the trajectory of UK foreign policy priorities in the post-Brexit years.

¹⁰³ Richard Whitman, ‘Post-Global Britain: a new normal in British foreign policy’, UK in a Changing Europe, 9 May 2023, <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/post-global-britain-a-new-normal-in-uk-foreign-policy>.