

Peacekeeping after Brexit

Conference or Workshop Item

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Curran, David, Holmes, Georgina and Cunliffe, Philip (2018) Peacekeeping after Brexit. In: RUSI, 7 September 2018, London, pp. 1-18. Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/81116/>

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Published version at: <https://rusi.org/publication/conference-reports/peacekeeping-after-brexit>

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Conference Report

Peacekeeping After Brexit

David Curran, Georgina Holmes and Philip Cunliffe



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RUSI Conference Report, December 2018



Royal United Services Institute
for Defence and Security Studies



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Published in 2018 by the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies.



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RUSI Conference Report, December 2018. ISSN 2397-0286 (Online).

Royal United Services Institute
for Defence and Security Studies
Whitehall
London SW1A 2ET
United Kingdom
+44 (0)20 7747 2600
www.rusi.org
RUSI is a registered charity (No. 210639)

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Introduction

A ONE-DAY ROUNDTABLE EXAMINING the UK's relationship with UN peace operations in the context of Brexit was held on 7 September 2018 at RUSI. Organised by the British International Studies Association (BISA) Peacekeeping and Peacebuilding Working Group¹ in partnership with RUSI, the roundtable took as its starting point the broader question of the role of multilateral institutions in UK foreign and defence policy after the UK formally leaves the EU, and sought to identify and understand the role of peace operations within the framework of the 'Global Britain' agenda.²

Some 30 delegates from academia and the policy and NGO sectors provided perspectives on how different forms of engagement with UN peace operations could strengthen the UK government's commitment to supporting a rules-based international system. The roundtable provided an opportunity for more focused policy discussions pertaining to how the UK commits to UN operations, what the commitment should look like, and what opportunities and challenges exist in the varying ways in which the UK can approach UN operations. This conference report captures the key themes and issues raised by the participants.

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1. The British International Studies Association (BISA) Peacekeeping and Peacebuilding Working Group was established in March 2018 to provide a space for primarily UK-based international studies researchers to develop their work on the various aspects of peacekeeping and peacebuilding. The working group encourages interaction with different levels of analysis to understand the experience of those at the receiving end of such interventions, the views of deployed personnel and the strategic-level decision-making processes undertaken by policy elites. For information on the working group and details of how to join, see BISA, 'Peacekeeping and Peacebuilding Working Group', 2018, <<https://www.bisa.ac.uk/index.php/bisa-working-groups/peacekeeping-and-peacebuilding-working-group>>, accessed 14 November 2018.
 2. Gov.uk, 'Global Britain: Delivering on Our International Ambition', 13 June 2018, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/global-britain-delivering-on-our-international-ambition>>, accessed 19 November 2018.

I. Session One: Peace Operations in Global Britain

THE FIRST SESSION focused on the topic ‘Peace Operations in Global Britain’. As the UK restructures its relationship with Europe there is an opportunity to look at broader relations with global partners, both as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, along with China, France, Russia, and the US (known collectively as the P5), and among the wider UN membership. The term ‘Global Britain’ has gained popular use among particular policy communities, especially the UK government, which is reflected in a number of parliamentary enquiries into various aspects of UK engagement in the UN.

The discussion was led by two presentations reflecting contemporary policy and academic research into the UK’s foreign policy. Representing the policy community, Executive Director of the United Nations Association-UK (UNA-UK) Natalie Samarasinghe presented the organisation’s analysis of the UK in the UN and outlined aspects of their ‘Global Britain Scorecard’. The annual scorecard draws on impartial sources to examine the UK’s performance across a sample of policy areas that contain opportunities for stronger UK action, including peacekeeping, gender equality, human rights, arms trading, sustainable development, climate change, and atrocity prevention.³ Jess Gifkins from the University of Manchester then introduced the indicative findings of a British Academy-funded research project (alongside Jason Ralph, University of Leeds and Samuel Jarvis, University of Southampton) on ‘The UK’s Role and Reputation as a Permanent Member of the United Nations Security Council After the Decision to Leave the European Union’.⁴

During this session, it was acknowledged that at the time of the roundtable (and publication of this conference report) the UK still had not left the EU and there was some uncertainty around how policies would be affected by the outcome of the Brexit negotiations. Nevertheless, participants were confident that engagement in the UN was not going to diminish in light of the UK’s exit from the EU, and that there was an observable increase in the role of the UK’s permanent representatives to the UN.

3. UNA-UK, ‘Global Britain Scorecard’, <<https://www.una.org.uk/scorecard>>, accessed 26 October 2018.

4. For a more detailed discussion on these preliminary findings, see Jess Gifkins, Jason Ralph and Samuel Jarvis, ‘Diplomats Reveal Concerns over UK’s Waning Influence on UN Security Council’, *The Conversation*, 26 September 2018, <<https://theconversation.com/diplomats-reveal-concerns-over-uks-waning-influence-on-un-security-council-103043>>, accessed 30 October 2018.

The UK's Role in the UN

With this in mind, there was still an expressed desire for rigorous academic analysis on what makes the UK an effective actor within the UN, and the effects of UK policy in the development and implementation of UN programmes of work. There was a perception that the UK has given less priority to the UN over the years and that it has lost some of its influence. Brexit does not put any of the UK's key UN activities (such as P5 membership or penholder status⁵) into jeopardy and currently the UK represents 3.4% of the Secretary-General's senior leadership team. However, Brexit does risk the 'political capital' of the UK within the UN. Political capital is not self-sustaining and is relational and fluid. Therefore, in order to be seen as an important partner to other states within the UN context, there is a requirement for constant reinvestment.

Questions were raised as to the extent to which the UK is seen as a potential 'gateway to Europe' in a political sense within the UN. The UK has played a role predominantly in the General Assembly whereby countries such as Japan approach the UK to engage with the 'EU perspective' on a particular issue. With the UK's decision to leave the EU, other EU countries sense an opportunity to increase their diplomatic potential in the UN at the expense of the UK in this area. This becomes more important amid ongoing calls for UN reform. It was noted that African countries are creating a more coherent common position towards reform efforts and see the value of engaging with other EU countries (such as France and Germany) as opposed to the UK.

The UK's Relationship with EU Member States and the EU Within the UN

Questions were also raised concerning the extent to which the UK has benefited from being part of the EU 'bloc' within the UN, and what effects Brexit will have on this relationship. For instance, participants asked what impact the UK leaving the EU would have on the EU–UK relationship in the UN's committees that deal with peacekeeping (Fourth Committee, C34) and budgets (Fifth Committee). With unpredictability a central characteristic of the current US administration, an acknowledgement of relations and potential future relations with EU member states (and the EU itself) within the UN would be appreciated.

The future of the UK's influence in UN-supported initiatives in countries in the Global South was discussed. The UN's drive to develop stronger links with regional organisations and the financial and political power of the EU in that context were highlighted by participants. The example of Somalia was used, whereby the UK could find itself increasingly marginalised should future peacemaking and peace-building efforts be channelled through the EU. This led to a discussion on whether the Commonwealth could provide another arena for the UK to develop stronger partnerships with troop-contributing member states from the Global South. A view was held that the UK could do more to recognise the role of the Commonwealth in peace operations.

5. Penholding is an informal practice whereby a state takes ownership for drafting all decisions on a particular issue. See Jason Ralph and Jess Gifkins, 'The Purpose of United Nations Security Council Practice', *European Journal of International Relations* (Vol. 23, No. 3, 2017), pp. 630–53.

However, it was noted that as a networked institution, the Commonwealth has no funding for peacekeeping and that sharing good practice around peacekeeping, or developing programmes of work to promote, for example, the UN's Protection of Civilians (PoC) and Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agendas are not priorities for Commonwealth heads of government.⁶

Global Britain

Questions were raised about the role of Global Britain as a coherent policy to guide UK foreign policy (including policy in the UN) in the post-Brexit age. A lack of clarity exists in terms of what 'Global Britain' means. Participants noted that in their interactions with various policymakers, the Global Britain concept was seen as vague and has been described as 'an empty slogan'.⁷ The main focus of Global Britain appeared to be no more than an indication of an 'outward-looking country',⁸ in part developed as a response to concerns that Brexit would present the UK as isolationist. This sceptical perception of Global Britain was shared on both sides of the Atlantic, with the policy community based at the UN headquarters in New York seeing the Global Britain agenda as a tool primarily for domestic audiences. Participants also asked about the relationship between the EU External Action Service's Global Strategy⁹ and the UK's Global Britain agenda, suggesting that there may be some overlap.

Future Opportunities

Participants understood that there remains a number of opportunities for increased engagement with the UN, regardless of the decision to leave the EU. Increased resourcing of the UK's diplomatic efforts in the UN could still lead to positive outcomes and engagement with partner countries in New York and Geneva. This would include having 'good people in good places'¹⁰ and supporting the UN Secretariat's various reform agendas.

A reduction in funding and resourcing for UN peace operations was regarded as a potential backward step for the UK. In terms of military engagement, operational experience in South Sudan was highlighted as a positive factor, whereby the UK has been seen as prepared to share the peacekeeping burden, demonstrating a high degree of flexibility in theatre. The UK is still the strongest European military partner in NATO and engages in the bilateral training of African peacekeepers via the British Peace Support Training Team – East Africa. These aspects can be used to enhance the UK's standing within the UN in the future.

6. For a discussion on the Commonwealth's engagement in implementing the UN's Women, Peace and Security agenda, see Georgina Holmes, 'The Commonwealth, Gender and Peacekeeping', *The Round Table: Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs* (Vol. 106, No. 4, 2017), pp. 403–19.

7. Gifkins, Ralph and Jarvis, 'Diplomats Reveal Concerns over UK's Waning Influence on UN Security Council'.

8. Quote from a participant at the event.

9. European Union, 'European Union Global Strategy', <<https://europa.eu/globalstrategy/en/global-strategy-foreign-and-security-policy-european-union>>, accessed 19 November 2018.

10. Quote from a participant at the event.

II. Session Two: Challenges and Opportunities of Contemporary UN Peace Operations – Where Can the UK be Engaged?

THE SECOND SESSION considered the different types of engagement in peacekeeping that the UK currently offers or could offer in the future. The discussion focused on four elements: delivering on and informing the UN's PoC agenda; the WPS agenda; the strategic role of the UK in peacekeeping as a P5 member; and niche contributions.

David Curran from Coventry University's Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations opened the session with a presentation, reflecting on the history of the UK's engagement in peacekeeping¹¹ and the country's possible future trajectory. Rachel Grimes, WPS lead in the Ministry of Defence, then provided strategic and practitioner perspectives on delivering on the UN's PoC and WPS agendas.

While it was recognised that peacekeeping is confronted by perennial problems of planning and design, it was argued that there was a need to avoid an overt focus on numbers games, which are considered less important in reality than in perception. Experience needs to be built up extensively among senior officers, expanding from training to mentoring and co-deployment – alongside opportunities for lateral thinking to cultivate specialisms and niche capabilities. To help achieve this, the British Army should better incorporate peacekeeping operations into the military career structure. It was recognised that there is a need to plan for future possible deployments, for example to Ukraine, Syria and Libya. Currently, the UK does not deploy police contingents to UN operations and practical challenges concerning how to deploy police personnel remain.

The UK's Future Engagement in Peacekeeping

Since 2015 the UK parliament has shown no interest in discussing or overseeing peacekeeping. There was concern that peacekeeping is considered a minor activity of the British Army alongside training missions, even though British peacekeepers deploy to the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), one of the UN's most complex operations. This presented a mismatch between perceptions within parliament and the reality of the UK's engagement at the tactical level in peace operations. The lack of interest may be attributed to the fact that the

11. David Curran and Paul D Williams, 'The United Kingdom and United Nations Peace Operations', *International Peacekeeping* (Vol. 23, No. 5, 2016), pp. 630–51.

UK's re-entry into peacekeeping was an initiative spearheaded by former Prime Minister David Cameron, and peacekeeping may not be such a priority for the current government.

The perception that peacekeeping is not in the bloodstream of the British Army was a concern. The UNA–UK and RUSI organise the commemorative activities for the International Day of UN Peacekeepers, unlike in other countries where government is responsible for organising these activities. This has been taken as indicative of the lack of integration of the UN into national defence practice. The military component of peace operations – and peace operations themselves – has changed since the 1990s, with an increase in the use of force. However, politicians did not appear to be familiar with contemporary missions, in particular how they are conducted, assembled and designed. To overcome this issue, it was suggested that the narrative about UK–UN contributions in presentations to parliament and UK press reporting on blue berets should be strengthened.

A series of questions were raised relating to the UK vision for peacekeeping. These included:

- Is peacekeeping a tier 1 activity?
- How are decision-makers held accountable for the UK's performance in peace operations?
- What is the relationship between the UK's penholding activity in the UN Security Council and peacekeeping operations in the field?

It was suggested that the UK should become less opportunistic and more strategic, thinking ahead about where to deploy, which people to partner with, and how personnel experience could feed into mandate formulation. Instead, the approach taken by the UN and troop-contributing countries (TCCs) has been to identify tasks and then identify capabilities to deliver those tasks.

In line with this, the UK should consider its political competition to see where it could provide value-added contributions (including niche contributions) to UN peace operations and to the training of other TCCs led by the British Military Advisory Training Teams. A more strategic focus on capability training would help to dispel the common perception that 'you lead, we bleed' among troop-contributing member states of the Global South. However, more analysis of how the UK trains bilateral partners, such as those in the EU and the African Union, is required.

Delivering on Existing Agendas in Peace Operations

With respect to the WPS agenda, it was proposed that gender policies should be properly explained at all levels within the British military. Training should cover why female military personnel need to be integrated into peace operations; the importance of diversity and equal-opportunity peacekeeping workforces; the disproportionate effects on local women and girls within the host country who are targets of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) and conflict-related sexual violence; and the vital role local women play as sources of intelligence. Additionally, there needs to be a more concerted effort to get troops out of vehicles and talking to local populations in host countries.

A view was taken that much of the institutional memory of peacekeeping from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Sierra Leone has been lost, and was interrupted when the British Army deployed to NATO missions in Afghanistan and Iraq. As a result, British pre-deployment training is not attuned enough to developing the softer skills required for peacekeeping, such as negotiation and capacity-building, with emphasis placed on kinetic activity. Language and cultural-awareness training for military peacekeepers needs to be improved.

Niche Contributions

Specialist contributions by the UK could include delivering and developing niche capabilities, ranging from Marines doubling up as riverine units in deployments such as UNMISS, to the provision of UN radio stations in particular missions. The UK could also lead composite Euro deployments as blue helmets.

However, the UK's niche capabilities should not just be operational, but should also include a range of tactical initiatives such as developing an SEA investigative capacity; training and mentoring other TCCs to develop and mount mixed patrols (considered to enable better engagement with local populations); and the possibility of making military hospitals available to NGO staff. Here, the UK's experience in Afghanistan could be useful. Measuring the effectiveness and strategy of niche contributions and deployments should be considered. The UK could also help facilitate the rule of law by using engineers to rebuild local administration and courthouses to enhance the projection of state capacity within the host country.

A separate point was made that the UN Security Council could better reflect military components in mandates and resolutions and incorporate more military-specific language to reduce ambiguity during their implementation.

It was argued that the current approach to peacekeeping, which emphasises the use of force, is too militarised. Non-military peacekeeping could be added to the UK's existing contribution to peace operations to provide not just a civilian component but also direct peacekeeping by civilians, even in hot zones. How unarmed civilian peacekeepers can successfully negotiate with armed actors or deliver core tasks was discussed.¹² For example, in the case of South Sudan, unarmed civilian peacekeepers have developed strategies to help prevent sexual violence. Moreover, unarmed civilian peacekeepers come with the added advantage that they can be deployed where there is no formal or UN peacekeeping presence, such as in the Philippines and Myanmar.

A final point was made not to underestimate the reservoir of experience from the NATO mission in Afghanistan, which involved many peace-building and peacekeeping-related activities, as well as the UK's experience in operational tasks relevant for peacekeeping operations. For

12. See Rachel Julian and Russell Gasser, 'Soldiers, Civilians and Peacekeeping – Evidence and False Assumptions', *International Peacekeeping* (14 August 2018), doi:10.1080/13533312.2018.1503933.

example, the British are good at emergency field tasks, such as counter-improvised explosive devices (counter-IED) operations, although more training in UN doctrine is needed. British experience in traditional static operations should not be overlooked (such as the UK's role in the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus), not least for the political significance of being involved in certain missions.

Conclusion

THE ROUNDTABLE RAISED a broad sweep of questions concerning the UK's current engagement with the UN, where this may go in the future, and the possible impacts that leaving the EU will have on the ability for the UK to influence the UN's actions on a political level.

A challenge underlying the roundtable is that the UK has yet to formally leave the EU. Related to this is the limited understanding (beyond Global Britain) as to the UK's current foreign policy objectives, and what role the UN plays in them. There appears to be little policy which indicates how approaches to the UN will alter as a result of Brexit.

There is a need for a cross-governmental strategy to guide how the UK engages with UN operations, and the extent to which the UK could maintain or build upon its present commitment after 2020. The UK has built a modest but strong base of engagement in the field through UNMISS. When placed alongside the UK's political activities in the UN Security Council, and having effective people in key positions, the opportunity for stepping up engagement is clear. This, however, should be undertaken in a coordinated manner, based on where the UK can best complement UN requirements.

The BISA Working Group, alongside RUSI, intends to follow up this roundtable with a series of more focused policy workshops which engage in areas that affect UK participation in peace operations, whilst opening up new avenues for engagement between the academic and policy communities.

About the Authors

David Curran is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations, Coventry University. David's research investigates the interaction between the fields of conflict resolution and military peacekeeping. He has published on topics of training for military peacekeepers, the development of peacekeeping doctrine, and UK approaches to UN peacekeeping.

Georgina Holmes is a Leverhulme Early Career Research Fellow in the Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Reading. She is co-convenor of the BISA Peacekeeping and Peacebuilding Working Group and Visiting Research Fellow at the National University of Rwanda. Her research focuses on gender issues and norm implementation dynamics in peacekeeping, and gender and security sector reform in West and East African militaries.

Philip Cunliffe is Senior Lecturer in International Conflict at the University of Kent. He is Editor-in-Chief of *International Peacekeeping* and author of *Legions of Peace: UN Peacekeepers from the Global South* (Hurst, 2013).