

The irrelevance of Brexit (and Labour foreign policy)

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Just as surveys in the UK are starting to show a firm margin of Brexit regret – Bregret? – Brexit itself is becoming increasingly irrelevant. It pains me to tell all those newly pro-European belated converts that, once again, they're focusing on the wrong issues. Sure, seven years ago, Leave voters were relevant because they helped swell the populist torrent that brought us Trump and Johnson and that emboldened Russia and China, among others. But that genie cannot be put back into the bottle and re-joining will only make the tiniest of differences at this point. The damage has been done and we all have bigger fish to fry by now. From the actual frying that's happening to the world because of global warming to managing Russia and China, coping with the US spinning out of control and at the same time keeping politics sane in the face of deep fakes, AI manipulation and mostly right-wing nihilism.

If that sounds like a tall order, it is, and Brexit has become but one of the many irksome issues that will just have to (re)join the queue, somewhere towards the back. Having said that, dealing with this multitude of crises should see more or less like-minded democracies, such as they are, work together, or at least pull in the same direction. The biggest question in that respect is not whether the UK will play nice with Europe but whether America's loony fringe regains power or not. In hindsight, Brexit helped foreshadow Trump but a solid defeat of a Brexiteer-led Tory party by a cowed-Remainer-led Labour party is not likely to mean much either way. On the big issues that face the world, there seems to be very little difference between the two main UK parties. Both appear ready to drop significant climate action at the drop of a hat, or a seat, both follow similar lines on Russia and China and even on Europe, the differences appear to have narrowed.

Labour has been running determinedly domestic campaigns. The dictum 'it's the economy, stupid,' is said to be central to the party's path to victory in general elections that may come as early as the spring of 2024. That and reminders of Partygate and other callous Tory shenanigans, along with inevitable Tory-fatigue, should do the job. Fair enough, in order to rule, you first need to win an election. But in the case of Labour, it has so watered down its international programme that a change of power in Westminster is not likely to have much global impact at all. On the EU, Labour simply has caved, so it has on international development, with Keir Starmer now backpedalling on restoring the Department for International Development, DfID, which was axed by Boris Johnson in 2020. Even the pledge to return to spending 0.7 per cent of Gross National Income on international aid has been pushed into an uncertain future because of 'spending constraints', the magic words for cop-outs on all fronts.

The same goes for the most urgent of international issues, man-made climate change. Labour's much touted £ 28 billion green investment plan will now be postponed, if it forms the next government, also due to self-enforced "fiscal responsibility". Also, Labour will not revoke North Sea oil and gas licences that the current government is handing out like party favours. Of course, the energy and cost of living crises need to be addressed, but backtracking on green policy is not going to have much impact on either. The UK's domestic oil and gas production might be significant in terms of market share but had minimal impact on prices when they spiked after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Expanding production will not help domestic consumers. And Labour's 'fiscal responsibility' is not some set-in-stone economic stricture, it's a political one that serves to counter electoral scare tactics about tax and spend.

Global man-made climate change is an area in which, by definition, international action is required. That means that especially without China, the US, India and Russia, very little can be achieved. Of course, there are many other countries that play an important role, but involving the largest producers of industrial CO₂ is the bare minimum. None of the largest emitters, including the US, is certain to take firm action and stay the course. On this, it is probably coordinated action by the EU, as one of the world's main consumer markets, that could have some impact. The bloc's Green Deal aims to export some of its ambitions for carbon neutrality and sustainable food production to its trading partners. This is not uncontroversial and has caused anger especially among some developing countries who accuse it of simply being a protectionist move to raise trade barriers. Such concerns should be addressed but there seems to be very little alternative to using the bloc's heft to ensure its supply chains are carbon neutral. Close coordination with the UK on this could have some benefits, as it further increases the economic leverage of the bloc. The same goes for moves to safeguard the supply of raw materials needed for clean(er) technologies.

China, naturally, has its own agenda. In some areas, such as rare earth materials, it is a rival, in others, such as climate agreements, it has been a collaborator. Getting more cooperation from China on climate goals is likely to become part of the race for global dominance that is now taking shape, rather than be a common goal that is elevated above such rivalries. The realities of this new great-power competition the world is facing, will probably sweep all before it, despite much hand-wringing about a new Cold War. Decoupling the economies of Europe and North America from China is seen as unrealistic, de-risking has become the *mot du jour*. But even the latter acknowledges the realities of the contentious nature of the West's political and mercantile relationship with China.

Those who think this can be managed by appeasing Beijing, or Moscow for that matter, should bear in mind the chasm between the systems of government in the West and those in Russia and China. Already their influence on our affairs, whether through spreading disinformation etc. or through raw economic power, is pernicious. Interestingly, Labour in its foreign policy platform, may have a point in pledging to restore the UK's commitment to international law and treaty obligations. It's always helpful to set a good example, but rather doubtful that this will be enough to manage international relations. To deal with all those challenges, the UK, whether under a Labour or Conservative government, will have to look beyond Brexit and seek increased cooperation with its European partners, possibly even closer than before Brexit.