

The Journey of Global Britain

Ideas and British Foreign Policy adaptation in the context of Brexit

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As scholars, we devote our lives to the creation, refinement, and application of ideas. If we really thought ideas were irrelevant, our lives as social scientists would be meaningless. Our exploration of the impact of ideas on foreign policy is also a search for personal meaning and relevance in our own lives.

(Goldstein and Keohane 1993a, 30)

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ABSTRACT

The United Kingdom's departure from the European Union reignited long-standing debates about its international role, crystallised in the political vision of Global Britain. While frequently presented as a novel post-Brexit initiative, this thesis argues that Global Britain represents the rearticulation of deeper, post-1945 narratives about Britain's global role, adapted to the political and strategic conditions of the Brexit era. The research addresses the question: How has the idea of Global Britain influenced UK foreign policy in the context of Brexit? It identifies a gap in the literature on British foreign policy analysis by integrating a constructivist focus on ideas with a longitudinal examination of political discourse and institutional uptake.

Adopting a constructivist theoretical framework, the thesis conceptualises Global Britain as an ideational construct capable of shaping foreign policy by providing strategic narratives, framing decision-making, and embedding within institutions. The research design combines qualitative content analysis of government speeches, parliamentary debates, policy documents, and think tank reports with elite interviews involving policymakers, advisers, and intellectuals engaged in foreign policy debates. This mixed-methods approach enables the tracing of Global Britain across multiple sites of production and contestation, from its pre-referendum antecedents to its operationalisation and subsequent adaptation.

The analysis finds that under Theresa May and Boris Johnson, Global Britain primarily functioned as a rhetorical and strategic device rather than a coherent, actionable policy doctrine. It was employed to manage political uncertainty, legitimise Brexit, and signal continuity in global engagement, but its implementation was fragmented and often reactive. The concept's persistence nonetheless reflects its utility as a flexible repository of Britain's post-imperial ambitions, accommodating shifts in emphasis between soft power, trade diplomacy, strategic alliances, and commitments to security and defence.

This thesis contributes to the study of foreign policy by examining the tension between idealistic goals and policy pragmatics. By systematically reconstructing the genealogy, evolution, and operationalisation of Global Britain, the thesis advances constructivist foreign policy analysis by demonstrating how ideas operate simultaneously as normative frames, causal beliefs, and political instruments. It offers an empirically grounded account of post-Brexit foreign policy-making, highlighting the tension between discursive ambition and policy execution, and refines methodological approaches for tracing the life-cycle of foreign policy ideas across time and institutional contexts. In conclusion, the study suggests that the United Kingdom's global position will remain fluid, thereby enhancing understanding of its dynamic role in the international landscape.

Impact Statement

This thesis offers an original contribution to the study of British foreign policy by demonstrating how strategic ideas shape state behaviour in moments of disruption. It challenges the common assumption that Global Britain is merely a post-referendum slogan, tracing its historical genealogy and showing how it became institutionalised as a guiding foreign policy narrative between 2016 and 2023. By doing so, the study reorients academic and policy debates around Brexit and its aftermath, foregrounding the ideational mechanisms. Rather than treating foreign policy as the product of material constraints or institutional path dependency alone, the thesis argues that ideas – anchored in identity, memory, and status – play a constitutive role in shaping national strategy. This reframing is important not only for understanding the UK's international stance post-Brexit, but also for wider debates on how narratives influence policy-making.

The findings hold direct relevance for UK policy-makers, diplomats, and institutional actors involved in the framing and communication of foreign policy. By uncovering how ideas such as Global Britain circulate through informal elite networks and eventually shape formal doctrine, the thesis offers a diagnostic tool for understanding how foreign policy agendas are constructed, legitimised, and institutionalised. In an environment marked by rapid shifts in leadership, public distrust, and geopolitical uncertainty, this research underscores the importance of ideational clarity and narrative coherence. It demonstrates how ambiguous strategic visions can mobilise short-term political consensus but falter without sustained institutional embedding. As such, the thesis provides valuable insights into how UK foreign policy might better reconcile symbolic ambition with pragmatic direction – particularly amid contestation over Britain's global role.

Apart from its theoretical contribution to the ideational turn in International Relations, the thesis provides a methodological framework adaptable to other cases of strategic realignment. Its combination of genealogical and content analysis, with elite interviews, offers a replicable model for scholars aiming to trace the creation, dissemination, and operationalisation of foreign policy ideas. It has been presented at academic conferences and research seminars to invite critical feedback and ensure analytical robustness. By adopting inclusive citation practices and reflecting on positionality, the thesis also helps create a more diverse research culture in foreign policy studies. Amidst rising contestation of national identities and foreign policy doctrines, this research examines how ideas spread, gain influence, and affect outcomes. It offers insights for both academics and practitioners on the relationship between discourse, legitimacy, and strategy.

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INTRODUCTION

How does a country adapt its foreign policy during times of change? How do ideas emerge and evolve, transforming into a cohesive foreign policy? What is the origin of **"Global Britain"**, and how has this concept shaped the **United Kingdom's (UK) foreign policy** in the context of **Brexit**?

In January 2017, Prime Minister Theresa May stood before a room of diplomats and business leaders, declaring that the UK would emerge from the European Union (EU) as a more confident and outward-looking nation. She proclaimed that a 'truly Global Britain' would take shape.[2] The phrase was instantly repeated across headlines, policy documents, and parliamentary debates, yet its precise meaning remained vague.

Far from being a spontaneous creation of Brexit, this thesis argues that Global Britain was a revival of older traditions in British foreign policy, reimagined to meet the needs of a new political landscape. Tracing its conceptual roots and political deployment, the following chapters seek to understand how such ideas are constructed, legitimised and transformed into guiding narratives during strategic uncertainty.

Conversely, the origins and background of Global Britain were not questioned. Where did the idea of Global Britain originate? Who developed this concept? What did it mean, and what were its political purposes? Who had been lobbying for this direction, and why? How did it enter Theresa May's discourse and begin to be operationalised into a coherent policy framework?

. . . . . .

[2] Theresa May, "The government's negotiating objectives for exiting the EU: PM speech" (speech, Lancaster House, London, January 17, 2017).

This thesis's main argument is that the concept of Global Britain predates Brexit, having existed since the aftermath of the Second World War within the cross-party foreign policy debate concerning the UK's role in the world. It traces the concept of Global Britain using a genealogical approach and a mixed-methods framework that combines content analysis with elite interviews to study how this narrative evolved through various conceptualisations over time.

After uncovering the **origin and development** of this idea leading up to the 2016 referendum, this research examines **its role as a political discursive solution** employed by the consecutive conservative governments of Theresa May and Boris Jonhson to articulate the advantages of Brexit, offering an **alternative to a foreign policy** aligned with the EU, **refute isolationism**, and mitigate **the loss of the UK's international status**.

The **political elite** questioned the significance of this hollow slogan regarding the future of foreign policy after Brexit. Meanwhile, academics largely ignored it. Debates centred on explaining the referendum's results and future EU relations. Neither the elite nor academics took seriously the rise of Global Britain as a governmental narrative and its ensuing policy implications.

The **existing academic literature** has inadequately addressed the questions posited by this thesis. Scholars examining Brexit and British foreign policy have begun from the assumption that Theresa May originated the concept of a Global Britain and was the first to advocate for this vision following Brexit. While it is accurate to assert that Theresa May was the initial proponent of the idea of Global Britain in an official capacity (October 2016), a broader examination reveals a more sophisticated narrative. A reflective analysis of prior events suggests that it covers a richer historical setting.

CONCEPTUAL DIMENSIONS OF POST-BREXIT GLOBAL BRITAIN

Global Britain is a **foreign policy framework** used post-Brexit to re-establish the UK as a sovereign global player. This strategy emphasises economic liberalisation, strengthens security and military alliances, and expands diplomatic reach beyond Europe. It is rooted in historical continuity and a robust sense of national identity, leveraging trade networks, soft power, and strategic partnerships to manage decline and maintain Britain's global status. Global Britain represents the UK's efforts to redefine its position in international relations as a coherent narrative and strategic framework, striking a balance between national sovereignty and global leadership.

This rhetoric resonated with the Conservative and Unionist Party's shared political beliefs and values.[3] This thesis argues that Global Britain's **political narrative consists of four main strands**: sovereignty and national identity (**Strand 1**), security and global influence (**S2**), free trade and economic liberalism (**S3**), and soft power (**S4**).

The first strand (**S1**) emphasised "taking back control" to **reclaim agency** by restoring decision-making authority from Brussels, enhancing national identity, and affirming the **UK's autonomous geopolitical position**. It was a collective 'ambitious vision for Britain after Brexit', representing the solution for leaving the EU.[4] May mentions that the

. . . . . .

[3] The Conservative and Unionist Party will from now on be referred to as the Conservative Party or the 'Tories' as it is commonly used in the UK.

[4] Theresa May, "Britain after Brexit: A Vision of a Global Britain" (speech, World Economic Forum, Davos, January 19, 2017).

priority should be 'to talk about Global Britain' since '100 days ago, that is what the country voted for'.[5]

The second strand (**S2**) sought to position the UK as a **pivotal actor in international security**, leveraging its membership in NATO, fostering partnerships with the United States (US) and Commonwealth nations, and **engaging actively in world affairs**. It was closely tied to the abandonment of the European project to pursue independence and sovereignty to create a 'Britain we build after Brexit', which 'is going to be a Global Britain'.[6]

The third strand (**S3**) emphasised the need for an open UK to establish independent trade agreements beyond the EU, highlighting Britain's goal to become a **global trading power**. The idea of 'a confident Global Britain' relates to globalisation, involving active participation in the **global economy** through international trade and ensuring equitable distribution of benefits among all.[7]

The fourth strand (**S4**) illustrates the UK's strategic use of **influence**, **diplomacy, and international engagement** to maintain its **global standing**. It was believed that Brexit 'should make us think about our role in the wider world. It should make us think of Global Britain, a country with the self-confidence and the freedom to look beyond the continent of Europe and to the economic and diplomatic opportunities of the wider world'.[8] The main goal was to uphold its influence and status as a global power.

. . . . . .

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] Theresa May, "The new centre ground" (speech, Birmingham, October 5, 2016).

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] May, "Britain after Brexit".

THE CATALYST CONTEXT

The Brexit referendum represents a **quest for change** in UK politics. As Christopher Hill (1988, 24) argued more than thirty-five years ago, 'all the major points of debate over British foreign policy centre on change, which is inherently connected to ideas about the past, at once promising a break with history and being defined by it'.

The 2016 referendum represents the British people's decision to leave the EU after 40 years of membership. Due to inadequate preparation for the exit scenario, this thesis argues that the **UK government lacked a strategic plan** for international action and entered a foreign policy identity crisis. The leave faction's victory also signified complete freedom for the political elite to propose new foreign policy paths. Policymakers framed the sentiment of regaining legal and parliamentary sovereignty as an opportunity to pursue national priorities that conflicted with the interests of the EU. This momentum represented a **unique chance to redirect the country's ambitions** for the future decades.

Theresa May, who had campaigned for the remaining faction, faced the enormous task of leading the country through the process of leaving the EU after the referendum.[9] Consequently, May formed a government with ministers from both the leaving and

. . . . . .

[9] Following the resignation of Prime Minister David Cameron, who called and lost the referendum, Theresa May was swiftly elected as a leader of the Conservative Party and then invited by Queen Elizabeth II to form a new government.

remaining factions. Johnson was appointed Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, overseeing the foreign policy portfolio.[10]

With the arrival of the **new government of May and Johnson** at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), the **narrative of Global Britain emerged** in British political discourse. Government ministers began incorporating this concept into their public speeches, written communications, and discussions in the House of Commons (HoC).[11] This narrative was positioned as a counter to the idea of EU membership or a response to the crisis atmosphere created by Brexit. However, Global Britain was first referenced three weeks post-referendum in *a The Telegraph* article signed by Johnson, where the title clearly stated that *Brexit frees us to build a truly global Britain.*[12]

Johnson was a key minister in the Cabinet Office (CO) who had a prominent role in the Leave campaign. He stated that leaving the EU allowed the UK 'to think of ourselves once again as a truly global Britain, using our unique voice – humane, compassionate, principled – to do good around the world and to exploit growth markets to the full'.[13]

May presented this same idea during the **Conservative Party Conference**. She had the first opportunity to **develop key ideas** that define her leadership since being elected party leader and appointed Prime Minister. To lead the Brexit process, she needed to gain full support from the party and convey publicly the message that she had a plan. This task

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[10] The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs will from now on be referred as the Foreign Secretary as it is commonly used in the UK.

[11] UK Parliament.

[12] Boris Johnson, "Brexit Frees Us to Build a Truly Global Britain", *The Telegraph*, July 17, 2016.

[13] *Ibid.*

was even more challenging given that the Tories were a deeply polarised party, divided between leave and remain supporters. The party conference provided the perfect setting for May to present a more **ideological proposal** while emphasising the **strategic vision** for the future.

The Conservative Party was not the only one divided; Theresa May also led a split country, and the Union was at risk.[14] The First Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon, viewed the outcome of the Brexit referendum as a new opportunity to promote Scottish independence to preserve EU membership.[15] The Global Britain narrative appeared to function effectively in both spheres – communicating the vision of pursuing a global foreign policy while reassuring Britain's unity.

During this time, Global Britain began to take shape as an **official narrative**, particularly under Prime Minister May. In late 2017, the Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC) launched an inquiry into Global Britain, asking the FCO to define the government's goals and timeline.[16] This formal request pressured the government to clarify its vision, and subsequent parliamentary debates began to lay the basis for how the concept might have been operationalised.[17]

. . . . . .

[14] The term Union is used to mention England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland as one sovereign state, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

[15] Philip Stephens, "Brexit Is a Moment for National Reflection, Not Celebration", *Financial Times*, June 23, 2016.

[16] Tom Tugendhat, "Letter (Written Evidence) from Tom Tugendhat (Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee) to Boris Johnson (Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, FCO)" (London, 2018).

[17] The House of Commons (HoC) debates will be analysed in chapter VI.

By 2018, then-Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson had begun to advance this agenda more actively. Yet, despite efforts within the government and broader political debate, a clearly defined foreign policy strategy was still developing. What was clear, however, was that the Global Britain narrative played an **essential role in shaping both discourse and policy direction**.

Shortly after the referendum, the Government needed to start building a vision for the future. This thesis proposes that Global Britain was envisioned as addressing **the domestic turmoil** of a drastic shock to the system, **managing the decline** of the country's status, and maintaining the UK's role and power within the international community. In both spheres, to **sustain the economy** and minimise the **referendum's impact**, the political elite had to convey that the Government had a plan and that all was under control.

A new foreign policy and a new role for the country were being developed. Instead, **Brexit** is viewed and examined as a **catalyst for adjustments in foreign policy**. As a unique and unforeseen event, it compelled the government to adapt to a new reality by developing a fresh strategy for the UK's future in the international community. Brexit is a pivotal element of this thesis, as it triggered the introduction of Global Britain into the formal political discourse, which was then operationalised into policy.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

The central research problem addressed in this thesis concerns **how and why Global Britain became the dominant narrative framing the UK's international identity after leaving the EU** (**RP**)**.** Since 2016, Global Britain has served as the leading slogan

of post-Brexit foreign policy, associated with the premierships of Theresa May and Boris Johnson. It appeared in official speeches, white papers, and strategic reviews as an outward-looking vision to signal a confident re-engagement with the world outside the EU. As such, researchers and policy analysts have often treated it as a political response to the unique demands of the Brexit context – an attempt to craft a renewed sense of purpose and direction after the rupture of European membership. Yet, the deeper historical resonance has been overlooked in academic literature and policy debate.

This thesis argues that the concept of a Global Britain – a belief in Britain's enduring global role, commercial reach, and strategic autonomy – has been a recurring theme in British political discourse since at least the post-war period. Whether regarding imperial decline, Cold War realignment, or debates over European integration, this notion has repeatedly appeared in attempts to define the UK's place in the world.

This raises a more complex and **historically grounded research puzzle** than existing post-Brexit research has recognised. Rather than simply asking what Global Britain means in the contemporary moment, this thesis asks: What can the historical antecedents of Global Britain reveal about how foreign policy ideas emerge, evolve, are sustained over time, and are rebooted in moments of strategic change? The paradox at the heart of the research problem is this: Brexit marked one of the most significant shifts in Britain's international orientation in modern history. This moment demanded a bold rethinking of foreign policy strategy. And yet, the narrative that rose into the political sphere was not entirely new. It was, instead, a repurposed idea rooted in longer-standing traditions of British foreign policy. This tension between apparent rupture and underlying continuity forms the conceptual core of the thesis.

Theoretically, the research is guided by an **ideational approach to foreign policy**, drawing on social constructivist insights that foreground the role of political narratives, identity, and the circulation of ideas in shaping external action. It contributes to studying how ideas travel within political systems and how they gain traction in elite discourse. At the same time, it engages directly with policy debates, offering a genealogy of a concept that became central to the UK's foreign policy branding in the post-EU era. By tracing the emergence, transformation, and operationalisation of Global Britain from the mid-twentieth century to the present, the research provides a historical lens through which to interpret a contemporary strategic narrative.

This thesis moves beyond simply identifying a gap in the literature. It proposes that understanding Global Britain as a product of historical continuity and discursive reinvention offers valuable insight into how British foreign policy is made and remade, not only in times of crisis but through the ongoing negotiation of national identity and global ambition. This research problem thus sits at the intersection of academic theory and real-world strategy, examining how the past continues to shape Britain's political imagination for its future in the world.

So, why is this a **problem worth paying attention to**? This issue holds significance beyond mere academic curiosity. For scholars of Foreign Policy (FP) and International Relations (IR), tracing the historical roots and ideational power of concepts – particularly the concept of Global Britain – provides insight into how strategic narratives are constructed, sustained, and reactivated across various political eras. This study also offers insights into the operationalisation of ideas, decision-making, policy formulation, and implementation of new strategic thinking. It challenges reactive readings of foreign policy by demonstrating how long-standing ideas continue to influence national responses to

disruptions. Studying Global Britain carries significant intellectual weight regarding the role of ideas in foreign policy, contributing to our understanding of the formation of British foreign policy.

From a **societal and policy perspective**, clarifying the meaning and function of Global Britain is equally essential. This narrative has underpinned government messaging, informed strategic reviews, and shaped national and international public expectations about the UK's global role. Yet its ambiguity has also contributed to uncertainty about Britain's direction in world affairs. By uncovering the roots and evolution of the idea, this research supports a more transparent and informed debate about foreign policy choices in a post-Brexit context, both among decision-makers and the rest of British society.

Research Gaps

The emerging body of work on the Global Britain narrative and broader analyses of political traditions, particularly those grounded in Conservative ideology, offers a valuable foundation for this study. This thesis argues that any serious investigation into post-Brexit British foreign policy must contend with the deeper roots of the idea of Global Britain. While a growing number of scholars have reflected on Britain's future role on the global stage after leaving the EU, as discussed earlier, the specific concept of Global Britain has often been overlooked or treated superficially in the broader Brexit-related scholarship.

Nonetheless, modest literature has begun to form around the term in recent years. Much of it focuses on discourse analysis, examining how Global Britain is framed in political speeches and public narratives, particularly concerning Britain's role in the post-Brexit world order. What becomes apparent, however, is that the current literature tends to

reproduce older assumptions considering the same historical examples and debates – often echoing themes prominent during the latter half of the twentieth century. While contextualising the most noteworthy events is essential, it also reveals gaps that merit further exploration.

The first gap in the literature (**Gap 1**) concerns the study of British foreign policy. Much of the established literature centres around a limited set of recurring historical episodes, such as the Suez Crisis and the Falklands War. These events are frequently used as reference points for understanding shifts in national identity, interests, or strategic behaviour. Moreover, the role of political ideas as both causal and constitutive forces in foreign policy has not received sufficient attention. The British case is rarely considered, even among scholars who have examined ideational influences (Goldstein and Keohane 1993a; Checkel 1997; Hook 2008; Hart 2013; Ipek 2015a).

A second research gap (**G2**) concerns the treatment of British foreign policy in the aftermath of Brexit. There is an emerging body of research addressing post-referendum dynamics, but much of it engages with Global Britain without questioning its origins or development. For instance, Daddow (2019) explains how Theresa May articulated Britain's post-Brexit identity. However, the literature largely accepts that Global Britain was a creation of May's leadership without interrogating whether the idea predates her premiership or whether it emerged from deeper, perhaps more institutional or cultural, sources. To date, there has been little systematic effort to investigate the origins of the idea or its evolution into a strategic narrative within the government. This constitutes an empirical gap and a conceptual oversight in the study of British foreign policy within the context of ideological narratives.

A third overlooked area (**G3**) pertains to Britain's relationship with Europe. Many works acknowledge Britain's historical ambivalence towards Europe, but few engage deeply with the period between 1997 and 2010. While some studies briefly mention the coalition government that followed, the Labour years – under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown – remain under-examined despite being critical in shaping the EU-Britain dynamic that preceded the referendum (O'Donnell and Whitman 2007; Holden 2011; Gannon 2015). This period offers vital insights into how political narratives about sovereignty, integration, and identity were negotiated long before Brexit dominated the agenda.

A fourth gap (**G4**) relates to the lack of attention given to political actors outside the central leadership. Scholarship tends to focus on prime ministers, foreign secretaries, and high-profile figures, yet other voices within Parliament – particularly those from smaller parties and the House of Lords (HoL) – have received limited attention as usually the House of Commons (HoC) it is the focus of attention (Heath and Goodwin 2017; Gaskarth and Langdon 2021). This is important, as these voices often shape the political consensus and influence elite thinking, particularly in moments of national redefinition such as Brexit. Ignoring these actors, one risks missing a fuller understanding of how foreign policy ideas gain traction across the political spectrum.

Linked with this, most of the studies addressing the political discourse after the referendum focus on Theresa May only, ignoring the contribution of the rest of the government and, in particular, Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson (Meislova 2019; Daddow 2019; Atkins and Gaffney 2020; Atkins 2021; Byrne, Randall, and Theakston 2021; Roe-Crines and Jeffery 2023).

Another concern arises from the tendency to reduce the Global Britain narrative to a simplified evocation of imperial nostalgia (Daddow 2019; Turner 2019; Saunders 2020).

While references to Empire undoubtedly appear in public discourse, framing Global Britain through this lens risks overlooking the concept's complexity and strategic ambiguity. So far, the academic literature has yet to fully unpack how this narrative was constructed, adapted, and instrumentalised across different political contexts (**G5**).

The sixth and final gap (**G6**) relates to the narrow selection of primary sources used in much of the existing literature. Most studies rely heavily on high-level speeches, media coverage, and official government communications (Meislova 2019; Haugevik and Svendsen 2023). While these sources are undoubtedly important, they represent only a fraction of the available material. Sources such as political manifestos, think tank publications, memoirs, and elite interviews, as found in the Brexit Witness Archive, are often overlooked. These sources offer rich insights into the ideational underpinnings of Global Britain. This thesis will use these since they can help trace the concept's evolution over time.

Although the literature on British foreign policy and Global Britain continues to grow, substantial gaps remain regarding the origin, development, and strategic function of Global Britain as an idea. This research addresses these omissions by mapping the ideational trajectory of Global Britain and evaluating its significance in shaping the UK's foreign policy direction following its departure from the EU. The following chapter will provide a detailed literature review illustrating these research gaps.

Aims and Expected Outcomes

After a brief contextualisation of the thesis topic, the main problem being addressed, and the existing research gaps, it is crucial to define the research aims and expected outcomes.

This thesis's primary goal is to answer the proposed research question: **What is the origin of Global Britain, and how has this concept shaped the United Kingdom's foreign policy in the context of Brexit?** (**RQ**). Revealing the answer to this question requires several specific and detailed research objectives, which will be outlined below and should be defined at the beginning of the research process.

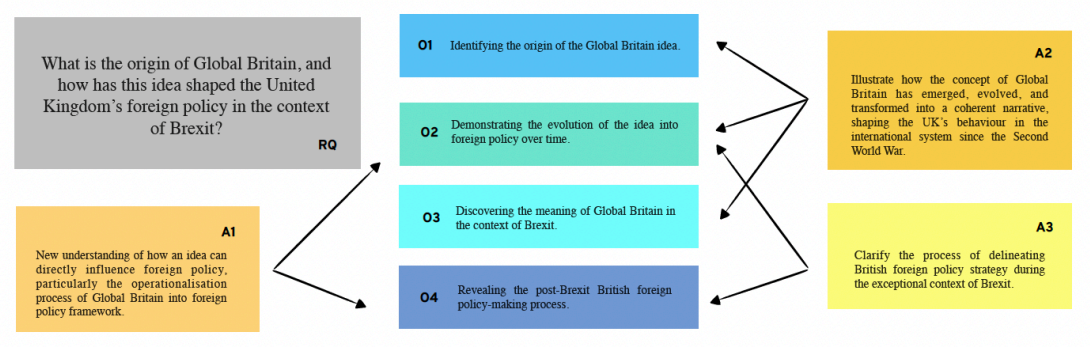


FIGURE 1 - OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY'S SCOPE AND INTENDED CONTRIBUTION.

The **primary aim** of the thesis is to present a new understanding of how an idea can directly influence foreign policy, particularly the operationalisation process of Global Britain within a foreign policy framework (**Aim 1**). Additionally, the thesis aims to demonstrate how the concept of Global Britain has evolved into a coherent narrative that has shaped the UK's behaviour in the international system since the Second World War (**A2**). Furthermore, it aims to clarify the process of delineating British foreign policy strategy during the exceptional context of Brexit (**A3**).

The aim is not to explain, evaluate, or critique the government's policy choices. The intention is to understand how ideas navigate through the strategic policy-making process. Vital (1968, 10) mentions that his book on foreign policy-making 'is not an account, still less a critique, of British foreign policy as such'. The same applies to this thesis.

The thesis anticipates **four outcomes**: identifying the origin of the Global Britain concept (**Outcome 1**), demonstrating how the idea evolved into foreign policy over time (**O2**), discovering the meaning of Global Britain in the context of Brexit (**O3**), and revealing the post-Brexit British foreign policy-making process (**O4**). A carefully considered research design is necessary to translate these objectives into concrete findings.

This introduction has already contextualised the topic and examined the central research puzzle – how and why Global Britain became the defining narrative of the UK's post-Brexit foreign policy. It also outlined the academic and policy relevance of solving this research problem, reviewed the main gaps in the literature, and clarified the thesis's aims and expected outcomes. The subsequent section outlines the methodological choices and strategic approaches that underpin this investigation.

Strategy and Research Design

This section explains how the study is structured methodologically, tracing the historical development, political function, and discursive evolution of Global Britain, and how its findings are grounded in a robust combination of qualitative methods and a historically informed analytical approach.

This research adopts a **historical research design**, focusing specifically on historical events. The objective is to untangle the influence of specific events on others, particularly in understanding how EU membership affected British foreign policy strategy and how Brexit incited the development of the concept of Global Britain, leading to a readjustment of foreign policy. Analysing this as a unique event, historical events research is pursued through an exploratory research question.

Employing a **mixed-methods approach** that combines **content analysis** and **elite interviews**, this approach enables the tracing of foreign policy ideas within the context of Brexit and the narrative of Global Britain, allowing for an understanding of the architecture of the British political system and the process of foreign policy operationalisation.

Analysing the concept from a **genealogical perspective** since the triggering event of Brexit aids in untangling the meanings and perceptions attributed to Global Britain within British foreign policy discourse over time. It illuminates the causal relationships between idea producers and political actors, clarifying the motivations of government officials and decision-makers in the foreign policy-making process.

Content analysis of official documents produced by the government and parliament and reports from mainstream think tanks will help identify contexts of political discourse, enhance the understanding of foreign policy strategy in light of Brexit, and evaluate the meaning of the Global Britain idea. To better understand the process of political decision-making in British foreign policy, gain deeper insights into the political perceptions of Global Britain, and examine whether there is an association between Brexit and foreign policy change, the data obtained from the content analysis will be triangulated with information collected from **elite interviews** with British political actors. The initial pilot study, which used only content analysis, showed that the addition of elite interviews could aid in deconstructing formal narratives, providing insight into influence processes and informal connections.

The hand-coded content analysis scrutinises the presence of Global Britain in UK documents. It examines the most significant documents produced by the Government, Parliament, the Conservative Party, the Labour Party, and various think tanks. Elite

interviews typically involved politicians, policy advisers, and researchers from think tanks. The historical research design and mixed-methods approach effectively address the proposed research question.

Furthermore, this approach aligns with the theoretical perspective of Social Constructivism within the literature on ideas in foreign policy. This research is theoretically grounded in the literature of **foreign policy ideas**. It examines the role of ideas at the domestic level in foreign policy change while exploring the emergence of ideas in society and their circulation among the political elite. The notion that ideas influence policy is already well-established and is the starting point (Goldstein and Keohane 1993a).

In addition to drawing on the literature that examines the role of ideas in foreign policy, this research is also informed by a social constructivist perspective. **Social Constructivism** offers a valuable lens for understanding how meanings, identities, and preferences are not fixed but are shaped through social interaction and shared understandings. This approach is particularly relevant to studying foreign policy in the context of Brexit, where the political narrative of Global Britain has played a leading role in redefining the UK's external identity.

By situating this analysis within a constructivist framework, the research is attentive to **how ideas emerge, gain legitimacy, and circulate** among political actors and institutions. Rather than treating interests as given, this perspective helps to explain how foreign policy preferences are constructed over time and how they become **embedded in strategic thinking**. In this sense, the research shares common ground with scholars who emphasise the ideational foundations of international politics and the role of discourse, norms, and identity in shaping state behaviour.

This research is divided into **two main phases**, with the Brexit referendum representing the break. The period spanning from the post-World War II era (1945) to the Brexit referendum (2016) is analysed (**Phase 1**), alongside the referendum and the Integrated Review Refresh of Rishi Sunak's Government (March 2023) (**P2**). The starting point for studying both periods is consistently the referendum. This research was conducted between 2020 and 2025, indicating that many aspects and events examined were still unfolding. As will be demonstrated in the following chapter, the literature on the process of foreign policy-making following Brexit and the concept of Global Britain was nearly non-existent, in stark contrast to the literature on the Brexit referendum, electoral politics, party dynamics, and domestic political aspects like parliamentary sovereignty and the practicalities of constitutional law.

The UK presents a compelling case for exploring the role of ideas in foreign policy. As a country with a long-standing and often contested international identity, Britain's foreign policy discourse has historically been shaped by competing visions of its global role. The emergence of Global Britain in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum offered a rare opportunity to study how ideas surface and are reactivated in moments of strategic uncertainty. The case is especially pertinent because Global Britain was not the product of a well-defined policy framework but rather a politically charged narrative that evolved into a strategic motif. This thesis does not assess the effectiveness or success of the policies associated with this concept, nor does it provide a comprehensive overview of the Brexit process or British foreign policy after 2016. The focus is intentionally narrow, concentrating on how the concept of Global Britain emerged and the circumstances that enabled it to gain traction and acceptance.

While the findings are grounded in the British context, the theoretical insights developed here are relevant to broader debates on foreign policy change and the power of ideas in international politics. While studying the UK offers important insights, this thesis does not claim that its findings are universally applicable. Instead, it aims to provide a thorough, historical perspective on one foreign policy idea, using this examination to shed light on how narratives survive over time and acquire significance and power amid political change.

CONTRIBUTION AND ORIGINALITY

Having reviewed the significant strands of literature on British foreign policy and outlined the key gaps in existing scholarship, it is now necessary to articulate the original contribution this thesis seeks to make. Understanding how ideas shape foreign policy is not merely of academic interest – it also **speaks to real-world questions of legitimacy, strategy, and identity**. In a period marked by geopolitical uncertainty, shifting alliances, and contested narratives of national purpose, exploring how states craft and recraft their roles in the world becomes increasingly urgent. The journey of Global Britain offers insight into how political actors appeal to tradition, reinterpret history, and reframe national ambition in times of disruption. This thesis contributes to ongoing debates about the strategic use of narratives in international politics and how ideas can serve as instruments of both continuity and change. Additionally, it invites reflection on the ideological foundations that underpin foreign policy more broadly and on how those foundations shape states' decisions and world order.

This research engages with and **contributes to two specific and interrelated academic debates**: first, the question of who defines and shapes the foreign policy agenda in the UK (**Contribution 1**), and second, how political ideas emerge, circulate, and influence the state's positioning on the global stage (**C2**). As Goldstein and Keohane (1993a, 12) assert, 'Ideas help to order the world. By ordering the world, ideas may shape agendas, which can profoundly shape outcomes'. This assertion forms a theoretical foundation for the thesis.

The project falls within British foreign policy scholarship, specifically in the literature exploring the **redefinition of Britain's global role and the evolution of strategic narratives** following EU withdrawal. At the same time, it responds to the relative absence of work that addresses the ideational dimension of British foreign policy – a topic that remains underexplored, especially concerning how ideas influence foreign policy from within the domestic political sphere. In doing so, the thesis advances a more nuanced understanding of the actors involved in shaping foreign policy, with specific attention paid to those who generate, endorse, and promote policy-relevant ideas. This case provides a unique lens for studying ideational influence in a political system characterised by its institutional and historical features. While the findings are specific to the UK, the theoretical and methodological approaches may be adapted for use in other ideational case studies in foreign policy research.

The most distinctive contribution of this study lies in its **detailed tracing of the origins and development of Global Britain** (**C3**) – a concept that has, until now, mainly been treated as a slogan rather than a subject of critical analysis. The research develops a conceptual history that places Global Britain within a broader trajectory of British political discourse and foreign policy continuity by constructing a genealogy of the idea. While

Brexit is often considered a rupture, this thesis argues that Global Britain reflects continuity in British foreign policy traditions.

Thematically, the study situates **Brexit** not simply as a crisis or rupture but as a moment when **British identity and foreign policy narratives** were actively **contested and reconfigured**. The idea of Global Britain served as a vehicle through which this identity was articulated. By tracing the evolution of this narrative, the thesis contributes to a more historically informed and ideologically grounded account of Britain's foreign policy transition. This situates the research within the Global Britain scholarship, specifically, studies that analyse Brexit with future foreign policy trajectories. The contribution lies in introducing a **conceptual-historical approach** that combines political discourse, institutional practice, and ideational analysis (**C4**).

Ultimately, the thesis makes a significant contribution to the study of British foreign policy by providing a **multifaceted analysis of a contemporary event through the lens of ideas, discourse, and political agency** (**C5**). It also holds a particular societal relevance. The research consciously amplifies the voices of early-career and female scholars, both in its bibliographic choices and analytical framing, contributing to a more inclusive and balanced scholarly landscape in a field where such perspectives remain underrepresented. Thus, the project reflects an effort to **expand academic knowledge** and **diversify the epistemological space** in which British foreign policy is studied (**C6**). The following section will close the introduction by describing the thesis's structure.

STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

The ***Introduction*** outlined the conceptual foundations of the study, focusing on the emergence of Global Britain as a post-Brexit foreign policy idea. It began by establishing Brexit as a catalyst for foreign policy change and identifying the central research problem: **how and why 'Global Britain' became the dominant narrative framing the UK's international identity after leaving the EU** (**RP**). The literature review highlighted key research gaps, particularly the lack of attention to the ideational origins and operationalisation of Global Britain. The aims and outcomes of the study were defined, along with the justification for the chosen mixed-methods research design. The academic and methodological contributions the thesis intends to make were also presented.

The remainder of the thesis unfolds in two interconnected parts. **Part I — *Debates on the UK's Foreign Policy, the Global Britain Discourse, and the Role of Ideas in Foreign Policy*** develops the theoretical foundations and methodological groundwork. In contrast, the analysis and empirical findings are presented in **Part II — *Unveiling the Origin of Global Britain and Its Impact on the UK's Foreign Policy***.

The first three chapters establish the foundation. **Chapter I — *British Foreign Policy and the Global Britain Discourse*** surveys the literature on British foreign policy, Brexit, and the discourse surrounding Global Britain, identifying the key academic conversations and the gaps this research addresses. **Chapter II — *Ideas and Foreign Policy*** provides a theoretical framework for studying Global Britain, drawing on Social Constructivism and literature on ideas in foreign policy, alongside concepts such as emergence, diffusion, success, and failure of ideas. **Chapter III — *Tracing Global Britain*** presents the research design, detailing the mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative content analysis with elite interviews while explaining the selection of primary sources.

The second half of the thesis comprises four empirical chapters, which follow the evolution of Global Britain across different historical and political phases. **Chapter IV — *The Genesis of Global Britain*** and **Chapter V — *Building Brexit: The Journey of a Strategic Idea*** trace the idea's roots from 1945 to the Brexit referendum, exploring its development within conservative and Eurosceptic discourse. **Chapter VI — *Managing Decline: The Meaning of Global Britain*** analyses the mainstreaming of Global Britain under the May and Johnson governments. **Chapter VII — *The Concretisation of Global Britain*** examines its strategic function in post-Brexit foreign policy, including its adaptation and decline in official narratives.

The **Conclusion** revisits the research questions, synthesises the main findings, reflects on the thesis's contributions and limitations, and suggests avenues for future research. This thesis concludes by explaining how Global Britain emerged, evolved, and shaped the UK's foreign policy direction.

In the following chapters, **the reader is invited to untangle** how **Global Britain** – a term often uttered with more enthusiasm than clarity – came to frame the UK's foreign policy in the wake of Brexit. By tracing its historical antecedents, examining its discursive construction, and exploring its institutional endorsement, this thesis demonstrates that Global Britain is not simply a post-referendum invention but a repurposed narrative with deep roots in British political traditions. In doing so, it engages broader questions about how states construct meaning in the face of strategic uncertainty and how ideas persist, resurface, and take on new life in the corridors of power.

At its core, this is a study of continuity dressed up as change. What follows is an invitation to rethink how ideas shape the world and how understanding the past might offer a straightforward path through the uncertainty of the present.

Part I – Debates on the UK's Foreign Policy, the Global Britain Discourse & the Role of Ideas in Foreign Policy

CHAPTER I

DEBATES ON BRITISH FOREIGN POLICY AND THE GLOBAL BRITAIN DISCOURSE

It is part of the habit and furniture of our minds that Britain should be a great power.

(Lord Franks 1954, quoted in Hill 1988, 26)

INTRODUCTION

In the context of Brexit, discussions about the future direction of British foreign policy have often been sidelined in both political debate and academic scholarship. Public discourse has been saturated with speculation about the UK's global role after leaving the EU, and the media has echoed this uncertainty with commentary that, while intense, is often fleeting. Yet academic production on the topic, while growing, has been slower to provide systematic or ideologically grounded analyses of post-Brexit foreign policy strategy. This thesis addresses that gap by examining how Global Britain emerged not only as a rhetorical gesture, but also as a narrative with deeper historical and political roots.

This literature review chapter is guided by the need to map out, critically and analytically, the key bodies of scholarship relevant to this inquiry. Unlike other research areas with decades of foundational literature, Brexit remains a relatively recent political phenomenon. Mapping its intersections with British foreign policy, and especially with the evolving discourse of Global Britain, presents specific challenges. These include the

difficulty of assessing rapidly changing developments, the often-reactive nature of post-Brexit academic engagement, and the tendency to analyse foreign policy either through institutionalist or partisan lenses that underplay the role of ideas. Nevertheless, Brexit literature must be read not just as academic output, but also as a reflection of the narratives, assumptions, and dilemmas that have animated UK political life since 2016.

This chapter, therefore, draws together four distinct but overlapping strands of literature: classic studies of British foreign policy, emerging research on Brexit's international dimensions, scholarship on the Global Britain narrative, and contributions that theorise the role of ideas in shaping foreign policy. Through this lens, the thesis situates itself within the discipline while clearly outlining the conceptual and empirical voids it intends to fill.

The aim here is not to present a neutral synthesis of existing work. Instead, the chapter foregrounds the analytical assumptions embedded in these literatures, showing how they shape – or fail to shape – our understanding of Global Britain as both discourse and strategy. As the thesis demonstrates, Global Britain cannot be fully understood without examining the longer trajectory of British foreign policy, the strategic and identity dilemmas it has faced historically, and the ideational debates that resurfaced after 2016.

The chapter is structured in five sections. The first section outlines the main traditions and recurring tensions in the study of British foreign policy, including how identity, decline, and global ambition have shaped strategic thinking. The second section turns to how Brexit has reconfigured these debates, analysing how post-2016 scholarship has addressed the foreign policy implications of leaving the EU. Thirdly, it focuses on the discourse of Global Britain, considering how the idea has been articulated, adopted, and critiqued. One then identifies the empirical and conceptual gaps that persist, particularly

the lack of genealogical or ideational analysis of Global Britain. Finally, the last section clarifies how this thesis makes an original contribution to the field.

In sum, this chapter not only reviews the existing academic landscape but also establishes the foundation upon which the rest of the thesis is built. It provides the analytical framework needed to investigate how a loosely defined phrase became a central organising principle of post-Brexit foreign policy – and how its journey reveals the political work that ideas can do in times of domestic transformation.

1.1. Reframing the Research Agenda on Global Britain

Despite the considerable attention paid to Brexit and British foreign policy in recent years, the academic field has yet to fully account for the origins, evolution, or ideational function of Global Britain. While often treated as a slogan coined by Theresa May in the aftermath of the referendum, little effort has been made to trace its deeper conceptual lineage, its diffusion across institutions, or its strategic utility. This thesis contends that Global Britain is not a rhetorical artefact of the post-2016 period, but the latest expression of a longer tradition in British foreign policy discourse – one shaped by a persistent search for global relevance in a shifting international system.

The omission is striking given the volume of post-Brexit scholarship. Analyses of the UK's withdrawal from the EU proliferate, yet few interrogate the broader ideational frameworks underpinning the post-referendum shift in foreign policy. Historical treatments still revolve around a narrow canon of episodes, and the limited studies of Global Britain's symbolic dimensions are often decontextualised, empirically thin, or overly focused on the performative speech acts of political leaders. This has left six

interconnected absences in the literature – each less a discrete gap than a missed opportunity to address how ideas structure British foreign policy over time.

In this context, this section identifies six core gaps in the literature, each of which reflects not just a missing perspective but a more profound lack of theoretical and empirical engagement with ideas as structuring forces in British foreign policy:

G1 – The marginalisation of ideational analysis in British foreign policy studies

Even in otherwise rich historical and political analyses of British foreign policy – from the Suez Crisis to the Falklands War – the role of ideas is frequently sidelined in favour of material drivers, institutional configurations, and crisis diplomacy. The British case remains peripheral in the broader literature on ideas in foreign policy (Goldstein and Keohane 1993a; Checkel 1997; Hook 2008; Hart 2013; Ipek 2015a), despite its potential to illuminate how enduring narratives shape strategic choice. Without such an ideational lens, recurring narratives of Britain's place in the world risk being misread as ad hoc responses rather than embedded frameworks.

G2 – The unexamined origins of Global Britain

Post-Brexit research has tended to accept uncritically the notion that Global Britain originated with Theresa May. Daddow (2019) explains her narrative of a renewed post-Brexit role, but the genealogy of this concept remains untraced. This matters because treating Global Britain as a sudden invention obscures how political narratives derive authority from their embeddedness in earlier traditions – and how that embeddedness shapes their strategic effectiveness.

G3 — The silence interlude

Historical framings often leap from the pre-1997 period directly to the referendum or else focus on the coalition government (H. D. Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley, 2017b; Meislova, 2019; Avril, 2021; Haugevik and Svendsen, 2023). The Blair–Brown years, with their pro-EU rhetoric, Iraq rupture, and post-crisis recalibrations, are largely absent (O'Donnell and Whitman 2007; Holden 2011; Gannon 2015). Omitting this phase severs the link between post-Cold War strategic thinking and the nationalist-populist turn of the 2010s, masking continuities and tensions that are central to understanding the later re-emergence of globalist rhetoric.

G4 — Institutional tunnel vision

Analyses overwhelmingly centre on party leaders in the Commons, particularly Conservatives, and often reduce parliamentary perspectives to that chamber alone (Meislova 2019; Daddow 2019; Atkins and Gaffney 2020; Atkins 2021; Byrne, Randall, and Theakston 2021; Roe-Crines and Jeffery 2023). The role of other parties, the House of Lords, and figures such as Boris Johnson as Foreign Secretary, remain understudied, despite their influence in reframing post-referendum discourse (Heath and Goodwin 2017; Gaskarth and Langdon 2021). Neglecting these actors misrepresents our understanding of how foreign policy narratives are generated, contested, and legitimised.

G5 — The imperial reduction

While connecting Global Britain to imperial nostalgia is valuable (Daddow 2019; Turner 2019; Saunders 2020), reducing the concept to this singular historical referent risks flattening its complexity. Contemporary articulations also mobilise other registers – from free trade to technological leadership – that interact with, rather than replicate, imperial

narratives. Overemphasis on empire narrows the interpretive frame, missing the layered ways in which ambition is constructed.

G6 – The limited evidentiary base

The reliance on leaders' speeches and media commentary (Meislova 2019; Haugevik and Svendsen 2023) assumes the direct authorship of ideas and privileges highly mediated texts. This sidelines manifestos, memoirs, committee records, and think tank publications, all of which are crucial for tracing the diffusion and institutionalisation of strategic narratives. Such evidentiary narrowness risks mistaking performance for origin.

These absences are not merely academic: they obscure the mechanisms through which ideas such as Global Britain gain traction, evolve into strategy, and shape the institutional architecture of foreign policy. Existing research too often treats Brexit as an unprecedented rupture, failing to recognise how narratives of national renewal and global ambition have long underpinned British diplomatic thinking. By foregrounding the ideational construction of Global Britain, this thesis offers an alternative lens for analysing the UK's post-Brexit foreign policy – one attentive to continuity as well as change, and to how strategic narratives are forged, contested, and sustained across time.

1.2. British Foreign Policy: Continuities, Status, and Strategic Identity

The Second World War is regarded as one of the most significant events of 20th-century history; therefore, most studies use this historical moment as the starting point of their analysis. This also occurs when examining the international order. It represents a significant shift that triggered a snowball effect of other events, ultimately defining the future of international relations. Understanding the historical events that constructed

British foreign policy in the second half of the 20th century and the first years of the 21st century is essential.

Alongside the main arguments debated within British foreign policy that will be explored in this section, this study can identify several strands of literature. Some authors investigate the making of British foreign policy, examining the structures and actors (Vital 1968; Barber 1976; Wallace 1977). Special attention is given to Britain in the world and its status and relations in the international environment, engaging at the same time in the debates around tradition and change (Frankel 1975; Wallace 1977; M. Smith, Smith, and White 1988; M. Clarke 1992), and in the debates on decline through Britain's political economy (Gamble 2021a). Furthermore, the UK's role as a global power is examined through a structured analysis of key foreign policy events (Bennett 2013; D. M. McCourt 2014; Fisher, Pedaliu, and Smith 2016; Garnett, Mabon, and Smith 2018).[18]

Some authors started to unveil the connections between foreign policy and the establishment of a British identity as well as the concept of national interest when offering a historical analysis the special relationship, the defence policy, the international economy dimension, the ethics of British foreign policy and the strategic culture regarding security (Sanders 1990; Hadfield 2010; Gaskarth 2013; Edmunds, Gaskarth, and Porter 2014; Sanders and Houghton 2017). Gaskarth (2013) systematically analyses foreign policy in the UK, summarising the actors with influence, the strategy construction, the decision process, and the construction of its identity. Through a thematic distinction, the author

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[18] The core events considered in the literature are the building of the Commonwealth (1949) linked with the decolonisation process, the Suez Crisis (1956) and the posterior withdrawal (1971), the joining of the EU (1973), the Falklands War (1982), the Gulf War (1990), the presence in Afghanistan (2001), the Iraq intervention (2003), and Syria (2015).

focuses on the ethics of the policy and the issues in defence and economic policies while contributing to unravelling the construction process of British foreign policy in general (Gaskarth 2013).

Hill (1988, 24) has advanced the argument that historical thinking is crucial to British society and that, therefore, 'modern British foreign policy cannot be explained without the careful attention to the dual impact of the past, both through events themselves and through the conceptions of history (general and particular) held by decision-makers'. The following paragraphs of this section will be dedicated to the debates that constitute the historical heritage of British foreign policy, with the Second World War as a starting point for the discussion.

The period after the war was primarily dominated by a sense of cooperation in Europe. For the UK, there were five fundamental issues that the country needed to deal with: the recovery from war, the fall of the Empire and the decolonisation process, the economic crisis, the redefinition of the country's identity, and national confidence. Therefore, it makes sense that these were the focus of the British foreign policy scholarship at the time.

After the Second World War and the loss of the Empire in the context of the decolonisation process, the entry into the EU (1973) and the strategic withdrawal of the East of Suez (1971) are seen as the two key events that marked a moment of change in British foreign policy. This is one of the core arguments established in the literature between the 1960s and 1980s (Vital 1968; Frankel 1975; Wallace 1977; M. Smith, Smith, and White 1988; Gamble 2021a). The argument for change is based on the idea that the UK was losing status in the international sphere (Vital 1968; Wallace 1977; M. Smith, Smith, and White 1988; Little 1988; Barber 1976). The UK was therefore being seen as a secondary or regional actor in world affairs (Barber 1976; M. Smith, Smith, and White

1988), 'a "major power of the second order" (…) [with] commercial orientation appropriate to a middle power' (Wallace 1977, 4), or a declinist 'regulating state' (Vital 1968, 29).

The studies developed between 1960 and 1990 (Vital 1968; Frankel 1975; Wallace 1977; M. Smith, Smith, and White 1988), also looking at the UK foreign policy in this period, discuss the modification of the international environment and how that influenced the British external relations and policy-making. The idea that there was a decline in the UK's international power and its role is advanced based on a new perspective of seeing British power relative to other states' power. Alongside, the UK had many global commitments to stand up to, and therefore, it is argued that leaders were working to sustain status or manage the country's decline. However, maintaining a status-seeking approach and actively maintaining global commitments demands resources and a strong economic justification.

The period between 1945 and 1975 is seen as a period of change regarding international role and status. As stated by Lord Franks in 1954, 'it is part of the habit and furniture of our minds that Britain should be a great power' (quoted in Hill 1988, 26). However, 'Britain undoubtedly lost much of her power and influence between 1945 and 1973' (Frankel 1975, 313). According to Barber (1976, 40), Britain significantly changed 'from a major power with worldwide commitments (emphasizing traditional "high" policy) to a regional actor in which domestic economic goals are predominant (with their emphasis on "low" policy)'. This loss of status, combined with the change within the structure of international relations based on increasing interdependence between actors, had as an outcome Britain's membership of the EU, which 'itself changes the framework within which foreign policy is conducted' (Barber 1976, 40).

Britain's post-war foreign policy can be explained as decentralising various conceptions of the country's world role (Frankel 1975, 153). The notion of imperial power was still very much accepted, and until the late 1950s, Britain still had to secure imperial and post-imperial duties (Frankel 1975, 153). This can be linked with the idea that Britain had to perform a world role and exercise its influence within the international system.

Vital (1968, 13–14) argues that the combination of the Second World War setting, the decolonisation processes and the power shifts in the Cold War context had the 'effect of reducing the influence which anyone state – however powerful – may exercise over any other'. In 1968, he argued that Britain was a second rank state where 'there is today little room left for manoeuvre as of right' (Vital 1968, 14). It is argued that 'Britain's difficulties in sustaining her role as a "regulating state" in the world can be seen as having followed a radical change in all three parameters' (Vital 1968, 29): the reduction of resources, the struggle of maintaining political influence overseas and the reluctancy of the domestic environment to support the international efforts.

To Vital (1968, 29), the development of the international environment evolved in a way until 1968, accompanied by an increase in the magnitude of difficulties of Britain's influence in the world. He also points out that Britain's international prestige represents a minor role in domestic politics, accompanied by political leaders' avoidance of engaging assertively in the foreign sphere (Vital 1968, 29). However, the exception advanced to this is 'the attempt to re-assert British authority in the Middle East' in 1956 (Vital 1968, 29).

Vital (1968, 24) discusses two spheres of foreign policy – the physical defence of the UK and the maintenance of economic and social welfare – as dictated by the British policymakers' setting. In the physical defence of the UK, NATO membership and its special relationship with the US are highlighted. Regarding the maintenance of economic

and social welfare, internal and external British politics are considered. The author links this second sphere with the UK applications in 1961 and 1967 to the EEC, saying it represents 'the most spectacular departure from the norm in recent times' (Vital 1968, 24–25).

As mentioned by William Wallace (1977, vii), David Vital produced one of the first pioneering studies on the process of making British foreign policy. This study (Vital, 1968) is crucial because it was one of the pioneers, developed before the UK joined the EU, and after the first two applications to the community in the 1960s. The EU membership as a foreign policy strategic decision was already part of the scenario.

Vital (1968, 31,36) mentions two examples of mutual incompatibility between central elements of British foreign policy that need to be reconciled: 'the cost of defence in terms of economic resources' and the balance between the 'settled principle of maintaining the closest possible political and military association with the US' and the will of 'entering a lasting and economically fruitful association' within the EEC. There was one threat to the physical defence of Britain at the time: Russia, even if 'by direct attack or by attack on those countries in western Europe' (Vital 1968, 32). There was also the idea that Britain needed to be defended in Europe, and regarding this, the military effectiveness of NATO is mentioned (Vital 1968, 33).

Vital's (1968, 41) argument is that Britain could no longer maintain its influence in the world and in specific overseas regions where it still had a political or military autonomous presence. The author links this to Britain's persistence in entering the EEC, suggesting that a 'reversal of priorities' was being settled. Vital drafted this book in 1968, before the UK joined the European Communities. He proposed that if the UK successfully joined the EEC, the special relationship 'may therefore fade away completely' (Vital 1968, 42).

This illustrates how the European sphere of British foreign policy was being portrayed at the time, in contrast to the investment and maintenance of another vital sphere, the special relationship with the US.

Vital also reflects on the idea that there might have been a 'reassertion of the traditional primacy of economics and finance in Britain over diplomacy and defence' that can be observed in the UK's pursuit of joining the EEC. The reason advanced for this is 'the influence of the Treasury and other institutions of economic and financial administration on the making of foreign policy' (Vital 1968, 42).

Wallace (1977) argues that joining the EC was a turning point for foreign policy and should have transformed the British context of foreign policy making. Entering the EC was, in principle, Britain's 'abandoning the pursuit of an independent foreign policy' (Wallace 1977, 268). Frankel (1975, 160) has argued that Britain transitioned from an aspiration to maintain a position as a third-tier superpower to becoming a powerful second-rank state. In alignment with this adjustment, British foreign policy shifted from a global to a regional focus. The notion that Britain's actual position in the world might be differently perceived by others is also an important aspect mentioned by Frankel (1975, 153).

Despite the arguments being proposed against the abandonment of a global foreign policy, 'successive governments of different parties have accepted (if sometimes reluctantly) the necessity and desirability of an increasing multilateralization of Britain's foreign relations and extension of multilateral relations to areas of policy previously regarded as matters of domestic politics' (Wallace 1977, 268).

Wallace (1977) argues that the change in Britain's international position has affected this redefinition of foreign policy goals. In the 1970s context, it was already established within British policy-makers that the UK could 'no longer aspire to world status, but was rather a "major power of the second order"' and the country's foreign policy national interests should be orientated to a commercial approach characteristic of a middle power Wallace (1977, 4). Frankel (1975, 173) also mentioned that situational interests had been replaced with commercial ones, as was stated in the Duncan report since it seemed implausible that Britain would 'continue to pursue vague, global aspirations to the neglect of her immediate interests, as in the past' and therefore moving to 'pursue narrowly conceived immediate interests to the neglect of global policies'.

M. Clarke (1992, 266) has argued that 'the British role that emerged in the 1970s was one that might be described as an "Atlantic manager"' due to the entry into the EU. By the end of the 1970s, 'Britain's role in the international system had been replaced with a new set of realities' due to a pivotal shift that had occurred in British foreign policy (M. Smith, Smith, and White 1988, xiii). The transformation of British foreign policy between the Second World War and the 1970s was seen as a 'resolution of uncertainties and abandonment of untenable policies' (Frankel 1975, 329). Britain could no longer maintain its role in the world and pursue a global policy.

One interesting point regarding this reorientation of foreign policy is that there is a time lag during the foreign policy-making process and that this is extended 'by the rhetorical language still used for foreign policy: sovereignty, independence, national interest, security' (Wallace 1977, 5). The idea of having an 'independent world role' was replaced by the idea of pursuing national interest while shifting from 'the global system to the "area

of concentration", from relations with superpowers to those with Britain's continental neighbours' (Frankel 1975, 329).

However, the 1980s brought a sense of scepticism by the Thatcher Government and the 'conception of a role came under severe scrutiny' refuting the idea of a solely European role and leading to a disagreement – within the country and in the international community – concerning the role of the UK should take in the world (M. Clarke 1992, 266–67). At the end of the decade, it is argued that Britain faced two complex foreign policy challenges: the decline in the international hierarchy of states and the evolving nature of the interdependent international system to which Britain needed to adapt (Little 1988, 245).

An interesting idea advanced is that in this period, the 'domestic consensus which enveloped British foreign policy at the end of the Second World War has been largely dissipated' and 'almost every aspect of British foreign policy can now engender political controversy' (Little 1988, 245; M. Smith, Smith, and White 1988). Within the political elites, there was also the dilemma of wanting to 'preserve Britain's status in the international power hierarchy of states' and, at the same time, develop a 'successful modern society integrated into an interdependent international community' (Little 1988, 256).

On the decline, Gamble (2021a, 37) has argued that this concept lacks a single meaning. It has always been a contested term dependent on the vision of Britain's place in the world. Therefore, it has been used by many politicians, "from Joseph Chamberlain to Margaret Thatcher (…) to understand the world around them and urge particular courses of action" (Gamble 2021a, 37). Despite this idea of British power decline, some authors (White 1988, 149; Hill 1988, 26) argue that British policy-makers still believed (in the late

1980s) that the UK could play an effective global role in world affairs. At the time, this argument was profoundly shaped by the Cold War context and the assumption that the UK could actively mediate the tension between the US and the Soviet Union (White 1988, 149).[19]

The attempts by the Thatcher Government to foster a closer relationship with the US during this period were also viewed as a strategy to revitalise Britain's global role (Sanders 1990, 291). The investment in restoring Britain's global military role due to 'Thatcher's "wider view" of Britain's interests' increased the difficulty for the UK to sustain the pursuit of a European role as a priority (Sanders 1990, 293). In the 1980s, the US and the UK shared the same worldview, with the Thatcher Government's perceptions 'consistent with Britain's post-imperial position as a power with primarily European interests' (Sanders 1990, 294).

Similarly, the combination of nostalgia and the anachronistic way of thinking in foreign policy has led to the idea of great power being maintained by the political elites (Hill 1988, 26). Despite this, the reluctant commitment, engagement, and coordination with the EU in the 1980s is seen as an opposition to Britain pursuing a global role (Allen 1988, 169–70). Britain's global perspective is then associated with Churchill's three majestic circles of foreign policy, as the global outlook 'was in fact exercised through three distinct

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[19] Sanders (1990, 290–91) has argued that the UK's decision to retain its independent nuclear deterrent worked as a gateway to maintaining its great power status. Britain's attempt to secure its independence regarding the nuclear deterrent was 'made possible only by the emergence of a residual great power role' and the perception that this role was essential to other actors, namely the US (D. M. McCourt 2014, 167).

"circles" of influence', with the special relationship and post-imperial Commonwealth relations being prioritised over the European dimension (Allenen 1988, 169).[20]

Frankel (1975, 173) mentions that 'one of the fundamental difficulties of British foreign policy, while it centred upon the performance of a world role, appears to have lean in a dispersion of interests (…) which is prerequisite for rational strategy' and that 'the three circles and a diffuse global policy have been replaced by a regional, Western European orientation'. In fact, between the late 1980s until the end of the 20th century, it is argued that 'British foreign policy strategy would continue to straddle the European and Atlantic circles' (Sanders 1990, 294).

More recently, D. M. McCourt (2014, 2) advanced the argument that since 1945, British foreign policy 'has been based on the emergence of a role in its international interactions over the period', a role that the author believes is a residual great power one. After consecutive Conservative governments, Tony Blair's New Labour assumed office in 1997. It is part of the consensus that New Labour actively contributed to a change in Britain's role in the world by implementing a liberal internationalist approach pushing towards an interventionist agenda (D. M. McCourt 2014, 169). However, D. M. McCourt (2014, 170) claims that 'the expectations attached to Britain in world politics in 2010 remained very

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[20] The idea of the three majestic circles of foreign policy influence can be found in the following speech: Winston Churchill, "Why Not the United States of Europe," News of the World, May 29, 1938.

much the same as those the party inherited in May 1997' and therefore 'it cannot be concluded that one of these was a fundamental change to Britain's role in the world'.[21]

The period between 1997 and 2016 lacks studies on the British role in the world and its status as a great power. Despite this, some studies focus on ideological choices that touch on foreign policy priorities. Some research focuses on conservatism, the Conservative Party's modernisation, and Cameron's leadership in the opposition (Heppell 2013; Kerr and Hayton 2015) or focused on labour's foreign policy approach (Heffernan 2000; Wallace 2005; Vickers 2011; Daddow and Gaskarth 2011; Dyson 2011; McCourt 2011; Daddow and Schnapper 2013; Hall 2013; Honeyman 2017). All these studies were

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[21] Morris (2011) has studied the meaning of great power status and how Britain is considered a great power in the 21st century. In 2011, he argued that the idea that Britain is a great power was still a factor influencing the government's shaping of foreign and defence policy (Morris 2011, 326). In the aftermath of the 2010 General Election, he advanced the idea that the Conservatives' ideas, particularly those of David Cameron and William Hague, indicated a future vision of the UK with a significant power role in the international scene (Morris 2011, 338). However, this notion was not only linked to conservative ideology. Morris (2011, 335) notes that in the context of the 2003 Iraq intervention, Tony Blair conveyed the notion that the UK was obligated to act due to its responsibility as a great power.

published before 2016, so none of them make a connection with Brexit or the narrative of Global Britain.[22]

Some have studied the 2015-2016 renegotiation (J. Smith 2016; Kroll and Leuffen 2016), but even this period remains understudied due to the referendum's significant impact on British politics in academic literature. Since 2016, studies examining the Brexit context have proliferated in the scholarly literature on British foreign policy. The following section focuses on some of the research that actively contributes to the development of this study.

In summary, scholarship on British foreign policy offers a robust and often sophisticated account of post-war transitions, particularly in tracing the decline of imperial influence, the recalibration of strategic priorities, and the redefinition of Britain's international role. Foundational works have been especially effective in mapping the structural and geopolitical constraints that shaped policy choices, and in unpacking the interplay between identity and ambition during the Cold War and its aftermath. Yet this strength is also its limitation: by concentrating analytical attention on the mid- to late-20th century, the literature has tended to cement a historical canon that risks treating specific episodes – Suez, the Falklands, the end of the Cold War – as definitive reference points, while

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[22] Some studies provide a brief account of the historical legacy of Europe, and some have concisely contextualised the referendum through the coalition government. Research on Blair's and Brown's foreign policy is not vast on the relationship with the EU (O'Donnell and Whitman 2007; Holden 2011; Gannon 2015), perhaps due to the lack of evident division regarding the membership and the friendly relationship developed by Blair, the high impact of the Iraq case (2003) (Henke 2018) or the financial crisis and economic calamity of Brown's premiership. Even studies that address Brexit and Labour with a historical overview often overlook Labour's governments and opposition during the period from 1997 to 2016 (Beech 2021).

leaving later periods comparatively undertheorized. The decades preceding Brexit, particularly 1997–2016, receive far less sustained ideational analysis, despite being formative for the discursive and strategic terrain in which Global Britain emerged. The absence of such work is not merely a chronological gap, but a missed opportunity to assess whether the explanatory frameworks built around earlier periods can capture the dynamics of more recent foreign policy narratives. Addressing this lacuna is essential for understanding how political ideas, historical memory, and strategic storytelling intersect in contemporary British foreign policy – a task to which the following section now turns.

1.3. Intersecting Debates: Brexit and the Reconfiguration of Foreign Policy

Building on the historical foundations and conceptual tensions outlined above, this section examines how the Brexit referendum reconfigured British foreign policy debates – not simply by reviving older anxieties about national status and autonomy, but also by catalysing new strategic narratives, most notably Global Britain.

A long-standing tension between change and continuity has framed much of the British foreign policy debate. Brexit, as both a political rupture and a constitutional reordering, intensified this tension and generated an unprecedented volume of scholarship. The most valuable contributions have moved beyond narrow institutional or transactional accounts to interrogate the broader strategic implications of withdrawal. Yet, while the literature on the future of British foreign policy and its historical traditions is rich, it is also uneven: strengths lie in mapping the post-referendum policy landscape, but weaknesses emerge in the limited engagement with the ideational underpinnings of those changes.

Much of the literature focuses narrowly on the immediate aftermath of 2016 (H. D. Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley 2017b; Meislova 2019; Avril 2021; Haugevik and Svendsen 2023). These works provide fine-grained accounts of political manoeuvring but frequently detach post-referendum discourse from its longer ideational lineage. The strength of this short-term focus is empirical precision; its weakness is interpretive bias, which risks portraying Brexit as an analytical reset rather than as an inflection point within enduring patterns of strategic self-conception.

The more historically oriented contributions (Lynch and Whitaker 2018; Xu and Lu 2021; Ashcroft and Bevir 2021), are more successful at embedding Brexit in a longer trajectory, sometimes drawing useful parallels to 1975 or the 2010s Eurozone crisis (Saunders 2016; J. Smith 2016; Adam Evans 2018; Rogstad and Martill 2022). Yet these too exhibit blind spots: they often bypass the Blair–Brown decade, leaving unexamined how pro-Europeanism, interventionism, and global ambition interacted during a period that decisively shaped Britain's subsequent foreign policy narratives. In this sense, their strength lies in historical contextualisation, but their selectivity narrows their explanatory reach.

Among those who explicitly link past and present, some authors offer a compelling analysis of how nostalgia and unresolved status anxieties re-emerge in the Brexit era (Stephens 2021; Gamble 2021a). This work is strongest when connecting the East of Suez moment to contemporary debates, showing that Brexit's symbolism taps deep historical reservoirs. Yet his treatment risks flattening variation, implying a cyclical reappearance of themes without thoroughly interrogating how they are reframed to meet new strategic contexts. Ricketts (2021), by contrast, diagnoses the collapse of Britain's dual strategic pillars – the US alliance and EU leadership – and offers a cogent case for a new national

strategy. This analysis is policy-relevant and structurally grounded, but comparatively inattentive to the narrative and identity work that such a strategy would require to gain domestic and international legitimacy.[23]

Forward-looking accounts contribute a necessary corrective to declinist narratives, highlighting the UK's enduring assets and institutional leverage (Owen and Ludlow 2017; Hill 2019). Yet their optimistic framing can verge on prescriptive, interpreting over the strategic and political trade-offs inherent in repositioning outside the EU.

Scholarship on Brexit and post-Brexit foreign policy has, to a large extent, overlooked the concept of Global Britain. Where it is acknowledged, the term is often treated superficially, frequently dismissed as an empty slogan lacking substance or strategic coherence. In many cases, it is omitted entirely from serious academic inquiry. Such a view underestimates its function as an organising framework in the post-Brexit search for coherence, and it leaves unexplored the mechanisms through which the idea was consolidated and translated into policy. The near three-year lag between its political reintroduction and serious academic engagement reflects a broader reluctance to treat discourse as analytically central to foreign policy change. This thesis, however, contends that Brexit served as a critical juncture for the revival of this idea, reinvigorating it as a central narrative framework through which Britain's post-EU international posture was

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[23] Specifically, some of these analyses examine the impact of Brexit, future routes for the UK, and the new strategy being implemented (Evans and Menon 2017; Owen and Ludlow 2017; Hill 2019; Whitman 2020). Furthermore, the key element in these dialogues appears to be the concept of role adaptation, role reorientation, and role contestation (Oppermann, Beasley, and Kaarbo, 2020; Beasley, Kaarbo, and Oppermann, 2021; Dee and Kienzle, 2023; Cladi, 2023).

reimagined. As such, Global Britain warrants focused and rigorous analysis within the broader context of Brexit's impact on UK foreign policy.

Taken together, this body of work succeeds in projecting the institutional and structural terrain of post-Brexit foreign policy. Still, it leaves critical questions about narrative construction, ideational continuity, and strategic legitimation insufficiently addressed. This thesis builds on the empirical strengths of the existing literature while directly engaging with its analytical blind spots, using the case of Global Britain to assess how strategic narratives emerge, adapt, and acquire authority in moments of political rupture.

In sum, the literature on British foreign policy in the Brexit era reveals both a revival of long-standing concerns around national identity, global standing, and strategic coherence, as well as the emergence of new conceptual frameworks and uncertainties. While some scholars perceive Brexit as a disruptive break from tradition, others view it as a continuation of Britain's enduring ambivalence about its international role. Central to this evolving debate is the contested vision of Global Britain, which, despite its ambiguous character, has emerged as a focal point in both political rhetoric and policy formulation. As such, the following section explores in greater depth how this narrative has been constructed, mobilised, and contested across academic and policy domains.

1.4. GLOBAL BRITAIN

Although initially dismissed as a vague slogan, Global Britain has become a recognisable focal point in post-Brexit foreign policy scholarship. Academic engagement falls broadly into two strands: work on its discursive construction and historical resonances, and work situating it within the UK's enduring search for a coherent international role. Four themes recur: the search for a global role, evocations of empire, nostalgia, and status-seeking in the face of relative decline. These studies collectively anchor Global Britain in deep-rooted debates, yet they vary widely in how they assess its coherence, policy substance, and strategic utility.

Analyses linking Global Britain to Britain's post-imperial "search for a role" (Owen and Ludlow 2017; Hill 2019; Gamble 2021a; Stephens 2021; Ricketts 2021; Beasley, Kaarbo, and Oppermann 2021; Dee and Kienzle 2023; Cladi 2023) effectively situate the concept in long-standing status dilemmas. The mention of the UK looking for a direction, searching for a foreign policy strategy, or mentioned as a narrative that should be studied and linked to the UK's need to find a role in the world (M. Smith 2019; Daddow 2019; Gifkins, Jarvis, and Ralph 2019; Greenstock 2019; Oppermann, Beasley, and Kaarbo 2020; Gamble 2021a; Hadfield and Whitman 2023; Hill 2023). Similarly, studies framing it as a form of status-seeking or decline management (Gifkins, Jarvis, and Ralph 2019; Greenstock 2019; Saunders 2020; Devanny and Berry 2021; Gamble 2021b; Foley 2023) highlight the persistence of identity-driven aspirations despite material constraints. Some of the discussions on isolationism also address the idea that there is a post-Brexit world status insecurity and that the Global Britain foreign policy can be seen and studied as a form of international status-seeking (Hill 2019; Cladi 2021; Hadfield and Whitman 2023). The strength of this body of work is its historical continuity. Still, it often treats "role"

and "status" as static categories rather than contested and adaptable constructs – a limitation that underplays the performative dimension of Global Britain.

The literature on nostalgia and "Empire 2.0" (Turner 2019; Drea 2019; Saunders 2020; Boussebaa 2020; Stephens 2021; Foster 2022; Foley 2023; Sèbe 2023) exposes how imperial memory shapes Brexit-era rhetoric. Turner's (2019) claim that Global Britain is a regressive, domestically oriented narrative usefully foregrounds its inward-facing elements, yet risks overlooking its international signalling function. Saunders (2020) adds a valuable corrective by showing how empire is often excised from official histories, reframing Britain as a "global" rather than imperial actor. Together, these works deepen the historical framing, but their emphasis on imperial nostalgia can flatten the concept's heterogeneity, neglecting strands rooted in trade liberalisation, technological leadership, or security alliances.[24]

A smaller set of studies links discourse to concrete policy moves – from the 2021 Integrated Review (Strachan 2021), to the trade agreements (Brakman, Garretsen, and Kohl 2018; Egan and Webber 2023) and defence strategy (Uttley, Wilkinson, and Van Rij 2019; Devanny and Berry 2021). These works demonstrate that Global Britain is more than a rhetorical flourish, yet their narrow sectoral focus means they cannot fully assess whether the concept coheres across policy domains. Leadership-focused analyses reinforce this picture: Daddow's (2019) discourse analysis of Theresa May's rhetoric is

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[24] As mentioned previously, Hill (1988) argues that nostalgia is one of the ways the conceptualisation of history affects British foreign policy. Nostalgia is defined as 'the reluctance to abandon anachronistic ways of thinking' (Hill 1988, 26). The concept of nostalgia is also employed to explain post-Brexit foreign policy, particularly the notion of imperial nostalgia (Turner 2019; Drea 2019; Saunders 2020; Foster 2022; Foley 2023).

methodologically rigorous and attentive to source selection, but leaves the origins and policymaking process underexplored; Atkins (2021) captures the selective appeal to "Britishness" in May's speeches, but her reception analysis is thin and her dataset is limited. Stephens (2021) and Gamble (2021a) provide sharp critiques of Johnson's contradictory agendas – global openness versus "Britain First" – yet stop short of tracing how such tensions are managed over time.[25]

One of the recent articles on Global Britain, from Haugevik and Svendsen (2023, 2388), states the main argument is that for the 'Conservative governments in charge after the 2016 referendum, the "Global Britain" narrative became a way not only of rebuffing international critique and shaming but also one of soothing domestic existential anxiety and helping reframe the UK's foreign policy identity in the post-Brexit years'.[26] Hadfield and Whitman (2023) also suggest that 'the UK's post-Brexit political discourse remains defiantly focused on the UK's credentials as an important international actor—a "global" rather than simply a regional power'.

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[25] The idea that Global Britain was inconsistent with the Government's broader strategy was not a mainstream argument in the academic literature. Despite this, Gamble's (2021a) arguments align with Stephens's (2021) when mentioning that Johnson's Government was proposing contradictory agendas. Gamble (2021a, 32) believes that the Johnson Government were proposing a radical new agenda. The Government were invested in pursuing the idea of 'making Britain "Global Britain" once more (…) but also to "Britain First"' (Gamble 2021a, 34). Britain First was focused on 'the pledge to level up and rebalance the economy, shrinking the inequalities which emerged so starkly as a consequence of the Global Britain policies pursued by the Thatcher Government in the 1980s' (Gamble 2021a, 34). Gamble (2021a) concludes that it would be impossible for the Johnson Government to reconcile these two vastly different agendas, constituting Global Britain and Britain First.

[26] The same argument was proposed in the conference paper *Truly Global Britain* (2021).

Hill (2019) and Oppermann, Beasley, and Kaarbo (2020) position Global Britain within a post-Brexit identity crisis, using strategic questioning and role theory to capture its ambiguities. Their conceptual framing is strong, but empirical follow-through on how roles are performed remains limited. M. Smith's (2019) comparative discourse analysis situates Global Britain within a broader post-EU globalist narrative, underlining the need to match rhetoric with credible policy – a central concern of this thesis.

The diverse contributions outlined above converge on a few key insights. First, Global Britain cannot be dismissed as mere rhetoric; it has gradually evolved into a contested but recognisable component of British foreign policy discourse. Second, the literature exposes both a conceptual ambiguity and a strategic tension at the heart of the idea. While some view it as an opportunity to craft a new post-EU identity, others see it as an attempt to revive an anachronistic global role. Finally, the post-Brexit literature remains fragmented, often treating Global Britain as secondary to broader discussions of identity, role theory, or institutional adaptation.

Across these strands, the literature's main strengths are its historical anchoring, its identification of symbolic resources such as empire, and its willingness to connect rhetoric to selected policy outcomes. Its limitations lie in the fragmented treatment of the concept, the tendency to silo analyses by sector or leader, and the lack of longitudinal tracing from slogan to policy. This thesis addresses these weaknesses by examining Global Britain's life cycle – from discursive consolidation to strategic design and institutional embedding – to show how it has been adapted, contested, and operationalised in the UK's post-Brexit foreign policy.

This section has reviewed the main scholarly approaches to Global Britain, assessing their contributions to debates on national identity, strategic direction, and foreign policy

narratives. The scholarship considered here not only informs this thesis's empirical investigation but also highlights critical gaps in the literature, particularly concerning the operationalisation and lifecycle of Global Britain as an idea. Building on the conceptual tensions and empirical spaces identified in the existing literature, the following section outlines this thesis's original contribution to the field, specifying how it advances current debates on British foreign policy by offering a systematic and theoretically grounded analysis of Global Britain as an ideational construct.

1.5. Advancing the Debate: Original Contribution to Foreign Policy Studies

Following the review of the core strands in British foreign policy literature and the identification of persistent gaps, this section outlines the original contributions this thesis seeks to make. To do so, it develops a theoretical framework that foregrounds the role of ideas in shaping foreign policy direction during periods of uncertainty and change. Broadly, the research advances two intersecting but distinct academic conversations: the ideational turn in foreign policy analysis and the transformation of British foreign policy in the wake of Brexit.

At the theoretical level, the thesis contributes to the growing body of literature on the role of ideas in foreign policy. While this field is relatively well-developed in other national contexts – particularly the US – the UK case remains conspicuously understudied, especially in the Brexit context. This thesis addresses that lacuna by applying ideational frameworks to the UK as a case study, offering an empirical analysis of how ideas emerge, gain traction, and become operationalised in British foreign policy.

The research also deepens our understanding of Brexit as a generative political moment, not just a rupture in policy, but also as a window through which ideational realignment can be observed. By examining how the idea of Global Britain travelled within the British political elite – from its ambiguous post-referendum formulation to its strategic articulation under the Johnson Government – this study provides a genealogy of a concept that has come to shape Britain's post-Brexit foreign policy orientation. In doing so, it fills a notable gap in the scholarship, which has either treated Global Britain as an empty slogan or bypassed it altogether.

This thesis traces Global Britain not merely as a slogan but as a policy idea that was progressively defined, adapted, and embedded in political discourse and institutional strategy. It adopts a mixed-method content analysis of key texts produced by governmental bodies, political parties, and British think tanks to map how the concept was internalised and externalised in official narratives. By doing so, it identifies how specific ideas are elevated within the policymaking environment – who advances them, how they gain institutional foothold, and the historical and ideological context in which they are legitimised.

Notably, the analysis contends that Brexit did only create a space for foreign policy change but also activated longer-standing ideas that draw from Britain's historical foreign policy identity. This study thus challenges linear or wholly disruptive interpretations of Brexit by arguing that Global Britain embodies both change and continuity – a rearticulation of Britain's world role rooted in post-imperial aspirations, institutional path dependencies, and status-seeking tendencies.

Methodologically, the thesis is innovative in its fusion of conceptual history with foreign policy analysis. It employs genealogical methods to trace the ideational development of

Global Britain, while engaging in discourse analysis to demonstrate how the concept was shaped and contested over time and among various actors. The British case, with its distinctive institutional traditions and elite-driven foreign policy apparatus, provides a compelling and underexplored context for this kind of analysis.

Moreover, the research offers a societal contribution by explicitly engaging with diversity in scholarly voices. Care has been taken to foreground the work of early-career scholars, particularly women, in the literature and analysis. This inclusive citation practice reflects a commitment to broadening the epistemic community in British foreign policy studies and contributes to a more pluralistic research environment.

In sum, this thesis offers a novel analytical lens through which to understand the ideational underpinnings of post-Brexit foreign policy. It traces how Global Britain evolved from a diffuse rhetorical gesture into a partially operationalised strategy, shaped through political contestation, historical reference, and institutional negotiation. By approaching the idea genealogically and analysing its circulation across formal and informal arenas, the research addresses the persistent gap in British foreign policy scholarship regarding how ideas materialise, take hold, and shape international behaviour.

This demands a theoretical framework attentive to how political actors use ideas not only to make sense of disruption but also to project authority, legitimise direction, and reassert identity. The following chapter develops this framework by engaging constructivist and ideational approaches to foreign policy, outlining how ideas function as strategic resources in times of political disjuncture such as Brexit. It provides the conceptual platform through which the thesis investigates the evolution, uptake, and institutionalisation of Global Britain in the chapters that follow.

CONCLUSION

This literature review has mapped the complex evolution of British foreign policy debates from the post-war period to the post-Brexit landscape. It has shown how the academic field has historically engaged with Britain's status, strategic orientation, and international role – from imperial decline to regional adaptation and, more recently, the search for a post-Brexit identity. While much has been written on structural transformations and geopolitical shifts, fewer studies have examined how ideas actively shape foreign policy narratives, agendas, and institutional behaviours.

The review then examined the growing body of literature explicitly focused on Brexit as a moment of rupture and redefinition. It highlighted how Brexit has prompted renewed academic attention to core themes such as sovereignty, autonomy, international positioning, and role reorientation. However, despite the richness of this debate, many of these works tend to overlook the ideational dimension of this transformation, particularly the role of ideas and strategic narratives in shaping foreign policy responses to Brexit.

Considering this setting, the chapter reviewed the emerging literature on Global Britain, noting the evolution from an ambiguous slogan to a policy framework central to the UK's post-Brexit foreign policy narrative. While some studies critically engage with the discursive and strategic use of Global Britain, most analyses treat the term superficially, rarely investigating how the idea itself came to structure policy priorities or gain political traction. Furthermore, few studies offer a systematic examination of how ideas like Global Britain are formed, circulate within elite networks, and become operationalised as foreign policy strategies.

Brexit served as a critical juncture that revived longstanding anxieties about sovereignty, decline, and national purpose. Yet the re-emergence of the Global Britain narrative also revealed how foreign policy ideas can evolve from abstract slogans into partially operationalised strategies. Across the literature, ten core strands of meaning associated with Global Britain were identified – from sovereignty, national identity and values (S1), security and global influence (S2), free trade and economic liberalism (S3), soft power (S4), to broader debates around globalism versus isolationism (S5), Britain's role in the world (S6), decline and status (S7), relationship with Europe (S8), actorness through Foreign Policy (S9), and strategic alliances (S10). These strands inform the ideological fabric through which Global Britain is being projected and contested.

However, significant gaps remain: few studies systematically trace how such ideas originate, circulate, and are translated into policy action, particularly within the British case. Furthermore, Global Britain is often dismissed as an empty phrase rather than examined as an ideational vehicle with material consequences. This thesis intervenes by focusing precisely on this ideational dimension, offering a genealogical and discourse-analytical approach to uncover the mechanisms through which Global Britain has taken shape in the context of Brexit.

By identifying these conceptual and empirical gaps, this chapter has established the analytical foundation for the thesis's central claim: that Global Britain is best understood not merely as a policy slogan, but as a strategic idea shaped through a complex interplay of historical memory, political identity, and institutional context. In doing so, the chapter responds directly to the research question by demonstrating that existing scholarship has yet to account for how ideas like Global Britain emerge, gain traction, and inform foreign policy direction over time. This underscores the need for a theoretical framework capable

of capturing the role of ideas in shaping policy – not only as normative claims or rhetorical tools, but as structuring forces in moments of uncertainty.

Building on this, the next chapter sets out the theoretical framework through which the thesis approaches these dynamics. It engages with ideational and constructivist approaches to explore how political actors use ideas to navigate strategic uncertainty, reassert state identity, and reimagine foreign policy goals – particularly in moments of disjuncture such as Brexit. This theoretical framework provides the necessary conceptual tools to trace the evolution, uptake, and institutionalisation of Global Britain in the chapters that follow.

CHAPTER II

IDEAS AND FOREIGN POLICY

Ideas help to order the world. By ordering the world, ideas may shape agendas, which can profoundly shape outcomes. (Goldstein and Keohane 1993, 12)

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the theoretical framework that guides the analysis of how Global Britain emerged, evolved, and influenced UK foreign policy. As the previous chapter demonstrated, academic accounts of British foreign policy have primarily overlooked the ideational dimension, particularly the role of ideas in shaping strategic narratives. This thesis aims to understand better how ideas – often taken for granted or treated as rhetorical campaigns – can directly shape foreign policy outcomes (**A1**).

In doing so, it follows the argument advanced by Goldstein and Keohane (1993a, 30), who contend that 'as scholars, we devote our lives to the creation, refinement, and application of ideas. If we really thought ideas were irrelevant, our lives as social scientists would be meaningless'. Therefore, at the heart of this thesis lies the claim that ideas matter – and that understanding the concept of Global Britain is essential to making sense of Britain's foreign policy recalibration in the post-Brexit period.

Studying the influence and role of ideas on British foreign policy is vital, as it highlights a gap in the literature concerning British politics and the study of ideas. Moreover, it can clarify the influence of ideas during a political crisis. It can provide case-specific

explanations to achieve three core aims that drive this theoretical orientation: first, to trace how Global Britain emerged and circulated within political discourse (**A1**); second, to examine how it shaped the UK's behaviour in a context of strategic uncertainty (**A2**); and third, to explain the broader dynamics of foreign policy-making during a moment of political rupture (**A3**).

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework that underpins the study. To investigate how the concept of Global Britain has influenced UK foreign policy, it is essential to engage with the dynamics of the foreign policymaking process itself. Central to this process is the role of ideas – not only in shaping perceptions and agendas but also in being translated into concrete policy. Therefore, this chapter examines how ideas emerge, circulate, and become operational within foreign policy frameworks, establishing the foundation for the analytical approach used in the following empirical chapters.

This theoretical chapter is structured in seven sections. It begins with methodological reflections on the challenges of studying foreign policy in the context of Brexit and Global Britain, particularly the complexity of tracing ideational influence in a highly politicised environment. The second section briefly highlights literature adopting similar ideational frameworks – especially those informed by Goldstein and Keohane (1993) – and considers other theoretical approaches commonly used to study Global Britain, such as role theory, discourse analysis, and strategic narratives. The third section turns to the constructivist theory of IR and its relevance to understanding how ideas shape foreign policy through the social construction of meaning, identity, and interests. The fourth section sets the ground for understanding the role of ideas in foreign policy. It explores the literature on foreign policy construction and the institutional processes through which ideas become embedded in strategic thinking. The fifth section shows the causal pathways

applied to the case of Global Britain. The sixth section engages with ideational innovation and foreign policy entrepreneurship, examining how ideas are introduced, gain traction, and become policy-relevant. Finally, the seventh section draws these strands together to present an analytical framework for studying Global Britain as both a political idea and a strategic narrative. This framework is the foundation for the empirical analysis presented in the following chapters.

2.1. Brexit as a Critical Juncture for Ideational Change

As outlined in the Introduction, this thesis does not set out to examine the causes of the Brexit referendum or the complexities of the withdrawal process itself. Instead, Brexit is approached here as a critical juncture – a moment of rupture that opened space for foreign policy readjustment and, importantly, for new or revived ideas to gain traction within political discourse.[27] Even though the referendum is not the central object of analysis, certain clarifications must be made when studying political narratives that emerged in its wake, particularly the idea of Global Britain. Brexit is more than just a date on the political

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[27] Hill (2016, 4-6) defines foreign policy as 'the sum of official external relations conducted by an independent actor (usually but not exclusively a state) in international relations', and it 'may also attempt to project the values that the society in question thinks are universal'. Wallace (1977, 2) argues that the concept of foreign policy is usually defined in narrow terms, considering aspects of high diplomacy, and explicitly dedicated to relations with other states in political terms. To Kubálková (2001, 17–18), foreign policy 'encompasses the complicated communications within governments and amongst its diverse agents, plus the perceptions and misperceptions, the images of other countries, and the ideologies and personal dispositions of everyone involved'. S. Smith (2001, 51) goes further and argues that 'there is no need to look into the black box of the foreign policy process' since 'foreign policy is what states make it'.

calendar; it is better understood as a process – and that distinction is worth interrogating on both theoretical and methodological grounds.

The existing literature has mostly treated Brexit as an isolated moment – the 2016 referendum – or a prolonged period of political turbulence between 2016 and 2020. Some authors, such as Reinisch (2019) and Saunders (2023), have adopted a more historical approach, viewing the referendum as an event within a broader continuum. Nonetheless, there remains a lack of clarity in academic debates: should Brexit be viewed solely as the referendum itself or as the extended political process culminating in the UK's formal exit in 2020? In much of the Political Science (PS) and FP literature, Brexit is presented as the outcome of domestic tensions, often framed through immigration, identity, or elite politics (H. D. Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley 2017a; 2017b; Bale 2021). Yet the strategic consequences of Brexit, particularly regarding foreign policy, demand a broader lens.

This thesis argues that Brexit created a policy window through which Global Britain evolved from a political slogan to a strategic narrative. While Brexit disrupted institutional continuity, it also presented a rare opportunity to revive a long-standing idea. As such, the question arises: did the idea of Brexit give rise to Global Britain, or was Global Britain already present, and did Brexit provide the context in which it could re-emerge and mature? The relationship between these two concepts is central to the research puzzle, and understanding that relationship requires engaging with how ideas evolve within political systems.

Methodologically, one of the key challenges in studying Brexit as a context for ideational change is the need to consider diverse levels of analysis. Most FP literature has approached Brexit as a matter of domestic politics (Wilson 2017; Bell and Vucetic 2019; Tudoroiu 2018; Oppermann, Beasley, and Kaarbo 2020; Wellings 2021; Ewers-Peters

2021; Urbanovská, Chovančík, and Brusenbauch Meislová 2022). However, as Saunders (2023, 231) rightly argues, the domestic and international levels cannot be dissociated. This thesis engages with the domestic context because it shaped foreign policy after Brexit and because it is within this domestic space that the idea of Global Britain was formed, debated, and legitimised.

To trace the development of Global Britain, this thesis adopts a genealogical approach as it has been adapted within IR, particularly within constructivist and historical institutionalist traditions. Rather than deploying genealogy as a poststructuralist critique in the Foucauldian sense, the method used here follows scholars who have employed genealogical techniques to investigate how foreign policy ideas emerge, evolve, and acquire legitimacy over time. In this usage, genealogy is concerned less with destabilising power/knowledge regimes and more with tracing the historical trajectories of political ideas as they are shaped, rearticulated, and embedded within policy discourse.[28] It is

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[28] Although Foucault (2002) is often credited with introducing the concept of genealogy into the social sciences – particularly through his historical analyses of discourse, knowledge, and power – this thesis does not adopt a Foucauldian approach in a strict sense. Foucault's genealogical approach is a flexible methodology 'that draws from a multiplicity of sources and is applicable to a variety of questions' and 'to study the history of the very things we believe do not have a history' (Oksala 2011, 86–87). However, his use of genealogy was embedded within a poststructuralist critique of epistemology and institutional power, aimed at deconstructing the foundations of truth and authority and the aim of this thesis is not to challenge the ontological foundations of knowledge, but rather to trace the historical development and strategic mobilisation of a political idea within the context of British foreign policy. Foucault's insights into discourse are acknowledged, but this study remains anchored in a more pragmatic, empirically grounded approach to ideas in foreign policy-making.

beneficial for examining ideas that are perceived as novel but are, in fact, reconfigurations of earlier narratives, institutional logics, or identity claims.

In the case of Global Britain, the genealogical method allows us to ask how and why this idea – often treated in the literature as a post-Brexit innovation – returned as a central organising narrative in foreign policy. Rather than assuming its emergence in 2016, this thesis investigates the deeper roots of Global Britain in British foreign policy traditions, showing how the idea draws on longstanding conceptions of national identity and Britain's global role. In this context, a genealogy approach offers a structured understanding of ideational continuity in moments of perceived strategic rupture.

The genealogical method complements broader constructivist approaches by focusing on the formation, adaptation, and legitimation of ideas.[29] Drawing on Mendieta (2011, 112–13), genealogy does not take the object of analysis as a given but instead asks how it came into being and what its emergence reveals about the political moment in which it gained prominence. It enables one to explore how specific ideas achieve 'discursive fit' (Vucetic 2021, 20–21), resonating within prevailing political contexts and legitimating particular strategic directions. Rather than suggesting a strict link between national identity and

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[29] For genealogical approaches in IR that engage more with the tracing of discourses and ideas over time than with poststructuralist critique, see Vucetic (2021). While poststructuralist work such as Hansen (2012) or D. Campbell (1998) provides foundational perspectives, this thesis does not adopt a poststructuralist research design in a strict sense. Bleiker (2015; 2018) work demonstrates the methodological flexibility of poststructuralist approaches. The genealogical approach employed in this thesis is therefore closer to constructivist and historical institutionalist traditions, where the focus is on how ideas evolve, gain resonance, and are operationalised over time within political discourse and institutions.

foreign policy, this approach examines how prevailing narratives influence what we consider politically feasible.

This thesis thus combines the genealogical method with an ideational lens grounded in IR theory. Historical studies of foreign policy (Wallace 1977; 1991; 2005; Hill 1988; Vucetic 2021) and more recent work on Brexit (Ludlow 2019; Deighton 2019; Olesen 2019; Conway 2019; Saunders 2023) provide valuable examples, but few have examined the construction of a foreign policy idea like Global Britain through this lens. Thus, this research offers an account of the origins of Global Britain and its evolution – how it persisted and ultimately shaped the UK's post-Brexit foreign policy identity. As one acknowledges that a country's national identity and foreign policy are not static, the historical approach is crucial to understanding the dynamics of the British summary, Brexit should be studied as both a historical event and a strategic window of opportunity, as this thesis argues that it argues it was a moment when older ideas could be rebooted. The idea of Global Britain is the central object of analysis in this thesis, and its development will be traced through a genealogical method that connects historical discourse, political practice, and ideational transformation. The following section provides a brief survey of literature that adopts similar ideational frameworks, situating this study within other theoretical approaches commonly applied to the analysis of Global Britain.

2.2. Towards an Ideational Framework

Before outlining the constructivist framework that guides this thesis, it is essential to situate the study within existing theoretical approaches used to analyse British foreign policy and the idea of Global Britain. While this research is grounded in an ideational

perspective, it engages with a broader landscape of scholarship that has examined Global Britain through different lenses. This section, therefore, highlights literature that adopts ideational frameworks – particularly those influenced by the work of Goldstein and Keohane (1993) – and considers other prominent approaches, including role theory, discourse analysis, and strategic narratives. This helps clarify the analytical positioning of this thesis and demonstrate where it aligns with or diverges from existing theoretical contributions.

While much of the existing literature on Global Britain focuses either on the analytical side of historical retrospectives (Turner 2019; Drea 2019; Saunders 2020; Foster 2022; Foley 2023) or analyses of policy documents (Strachan 2021; Rauta and Monaghan 2021), other contributions adopt a more normative stance – outlining what Britain's future foreign policy should look like (Whitman 2016; M. Smith 2019; Hadfield and Whitman 2023; Webber 2023). Although both perspectives are valuable, they often overlook the deeper ideational roots of the narrative itself, particularly the question of where Global Britain comes from, how it gained traction, and why it re-emerged so persuasively after the referendum.

A common presumption in academic literature is that Global Britain originated with Theresa May's post-referendum leadership. This thesis challenges this view by arguing that the concept predates Brexit and that its presence in British political discourse reflects a broader pattern of continuity in foreign policy thinking. While Brexit is often viewed as a moment of strategic rupture, the revival of Global Britain suggests that old ideas have been repurposed to address new circumstances. This observation raises significant questions about the nature of foreign policy change – whether it is transformative or whether it often relies on familiar narratives to understand unfamiliar circumstances.

Consequently, this study positions itself within the broader debate regarding continuity and change in foreign policy, paying specific attention to the ideational factors habitually overlooked in such discussions.

Despite the growing interest in discourse analysis and role theory for studying Global Britain, these approaches alone cannot entirely elucidate the choices made in post-Brexit foreign policy. They tend to concentrate on the strategic use of language or external role-seeking behaviours instead of exploring the deeper ideological structure that allows such narratives to resonate. This thesis suggests that the concept of Global Britain was not merely a reaction to Brexit but may have also fuelled its political momentum. The ideational component – especially its historical continuity – warrants closer scrutiny.

Some British foreign policy scholars have touched on the influence of ideas, but often as secondary elements. For example, Evans (2014) notes the role of ideas in FCO planning, while Garnett, Mabon, and Smith (2018) point to the importance of non-governmental organisations in shaping foreign policy discourse. Mainly related to the role of ideas, foreign policy think tanks in Britain 'provide policy-relevant information and serve as convenient venues for the exchange of ideas' (Garnett, Mabon, and Smith 2018, 43). Yet these studies rarely centre ideas as primary causal factors.

Drawing on the framework proposed by Goldstein and Keohane (1993), this thesis perceives ideas as beliefs that shape preferences, inform institutional choices, and produce tangible political outcomes. It draws further on authors examining how ideas emerge within society and circulate through elite networks and public discourse (Checkel 1997; Hook 2008; Hart 2013; Ipek 2015a). Most of them (Hook 2008; Kitchen 2010; Ipek 2015a) discuss the role of ideas on foreign policy based on the work and definitions produced by Goldstein and Keohane (1993). These studies demonstrate the value of

investigating how ideas emerge, gain traction within institutions, and are operationalised into concrete policy choices.[30]

This thesis builds on this tradition by applying Goldstein and Keohane's (1993) framework to the idea of Global Britain – a narrative often treated as a post-Brexit rhetorical device, but one that this research considers an ideational structure with historical depth and policy relevance. By examining how Global Britain evolved from a loosely defined concept into a strategic narrative underpinning UK foreign policy, this study explores the ways in which ideas can shape perceptions of national identity, inform foreign policy preferences, and structure state behaviour during moments of strategic change.

Like the examples of big concepts such as neoliberalism or humanitarian intervention mentioned above and in the respective footnote, Global Britain will be analysed not simply as discourse but as an idea capable of producing real-world effects – one whose emergence, persistence, and eventual transformation requires careful ideational analysis. So, the thesis contributes to the literature on British foreign policy and the broader field of ideational studies in IR. The following section turns to constructivist theory to examine

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[30] Since the publication of Goldstein and Keohane's (1993) influential work Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change, this approach has been applied to a wide range of major foreign policy concepts, including neoliberalism, democracy promotion, humanitarian intervention, Atlanticism, and energy security. For example, Ipek (2015a) explores how elite beliefs shaped Turkey's energy diplomacy, while Kitchen (2010) traces the enduring ideational basis of Atlanticism in British strategic culture. Other scholars have applied this framework to analyse the role of ideology in the Bush Doctrine or US post-9/11 foreign policy, where causal and principled beliefs served as central organising ideas.

how ideas influence foreign policy more broadly and how they become embedded in institutional and strategic settings.

2.3. The Constructivist take on Idealism and Foreign Policy

The central argument of this thesis is that ideas matter. As established in the first section, the core object of analysis is the idea of Global Britain – its origins, evolution, and impact on UK foreign policy. Tracing this process through a genealogical approach requires an IR framework that places the ideational dimension at the centre of analysis. Constructivism offers such a framework, emphasising the role of ideas, identities, and norms in shaping foreign policy behaviour.[31]

This section explores how Social Constructivism accounts for the social construction of beliefs and the conditions under which these beliefs inform state action.[32] In contrast to theories prioritising material capabilities, Constructivism argues that socially produced meanings shape state behaviour. These emerge from interaction, are embedded in discourse, and form the foundation of political identities and strategic choices. Given its emphasis on ideational dynamics and its compatibility with a genealogical approach, Social

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[31] Nicholas Onuf (2013) was the first IR scholar to coin the term Constructivism in 1989.

[32] Alexander Wendt (1999) is one of the leading theorists of Social Constructivism, notably contributing to the discipline with his work *Social Theory of International Politics*.

Constructivism provides a fitting theoretical lens through which to study the development and political utility of Global Britain as a foreign policy concept.[33]

Ideas play a significant role at the domestic level and, under certain conditions, can lead to meaningful changes in foreign policy. Over time, a wide range of theories and scholars have approached the study of foreign policy through different lenses. In recent decades, however, the field has experienced what has been described as an "ideational turn", particularly within constructivist scholarship, which emphasises the role of identity, beliefs, and social meaning in shaping state behaviour (Kaarbo 2003, 159).[34]

This shift has led to growing interest in how ideas emerge within societies and circulate among public opinion and political elites. There is a growing focus on the circumstances in which specific ideas gain enough influence to shape foreign policy strategies, aligning with national interests and actively informing the definitions of those interests pursued.

To comprehend how foreign policy strategies are formed requires carefully considering how national interests are constructed and defined. In IR theory, the concept of national interest is traditionally viewed as the aggregation of national values in both state and societal contexts. As Frankel (1969, 36) puts it, national interest may 'describe the

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[33] As argued by Kubálková (2001, 19), which defends the constructivist approach, Waltz's reformulation of Realism 'abstracted from the picture everything internal to states: subjective influences, ideas, unique events – all of which affect actual foreign policies'. Waltz (1979) advanced Defensive Realism, arguing that 'preserving power, rather than increasing it, is the main goal of states' since the international system promotes the maintenance of the already determined balance of power (Mearsheimer 2014, 21).

[34] The distinction between theories of foreign policy is made and emphasised by Zakaria (1998, 24), who explains that a 'theory of foreign policy explains why different states, or the same state at different historical moments, have different intentions, goals, and preferences toward the outside world'.

aspirations of the state', but it can also serve 'operationally, in application to the actual policies and programmes pursued'. This dual character makes it both a normative guide and a practical foreign policy tool.[35]

Constructivism presents an alternative to materialist theories by emphasising the social origins of interest formation. Within this framework, national interest is not given but constructed, closely tied to the state's identity. Interests are viewed as ideational rather than fixed, shaped by norms, culture, and political context, which influence how they are articulated. Constructivist thinkers argue that such interests are neither permanent nor universally shared but vary across time and political space (Burchill 2005, 212–13). Accordingly, interests are shaped by non-material concerns such as collective self-esteem, legitimacy, and normative expectations. Notably, while economic well-being and autonomy remain relevant, Constructivism departs from Liberalism by not prioritising globalisation or free trade as goals (Burchill 2005, 212).[36]

In this context, identity and interest are interdependent notions. Constructivism suggests that a state's interests in foreign affairs are constructed 'at least in part on the basis of their identity' (D. M. McCourt 2014, 8). However, while many constructivist studies focus on

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[35] To Nye (2003, 48), 'the definition of the national interests depends in large part on the type of domestic society and culture a state has'. Nye (2003, 48) also adds, 'liberals and constructivists argue that national interests are defined by much more than the state's position in the international system, and they have a richer account of how state preferences and national interests are formed'.

[36] Burchill (2005, 213) recognises problems regarding the constructivist view. The three main presented are the question of whether states are moral agents – with Wendt arguing that the state is a moral agent and Weldes (quoted in Burchill 2005, 205) arguing that actions and words of individuals in state power matter the most –, the dichotomy between material and ideation interests, and the role of nationalism.

the role of identity in this process, this thesis is primarily concerned with the relationship between ideas and national interests. The question, then, is whether ideas give rise to strategic interests or whether interests create the conditions for the development and mobilisation of certain ideas.

Within Social Constructivism, the role of ideas is central. Unlike Realism, which tends to treat ideas as minor, Constructivism holds that 'foreign policy developments have origins in powerful ideas and beliefs' (Kaarbo 2003, 159). Ideas play a crucial role in shaping perception and creating the intellectual framework state actors use to interpret the world. The idealist turn of constructivism emphasises how shared beliefs shape social reality, whereas the structuralist variant highlights how social structures influence political actions Wendt (1999, 1). Wendt (1999, 1) asserts that 'structures of human association are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces', and that identities and interests are 'constructed by these shared ideas rather than given by nature'. In this view, the international system is seen 'as a distribution of ideas', reflecting the constructivist commitment to 'an idealist ontology' (Wendt 1999, 5).

Constructivism is based on the premise that identities, interests, and political cultures evolve from shared ideas. According to Kubálková (2001, 34), the structure of the system cannot be separated from the elements that make up identity and interest. Similarly, S. Smith (2001, 52) points out that Wendt envisioned a different kind 'of social world' that is guided not by sheer power but by language, rules, and interpretive practices. Constructivism rejects the generalisation of power or interests; it focuses on how ideas influence political behaviour through normative structures.

Some scholars have built on this foundation to develop constructivist approaches centred on the actors. D. M. McCourt (2014), for instance, explores British foreign policy using

micro-interactionist Constructivism that highlights the role of societal action and foreign policy roles. However, even within this model, ideas are often subordinated to role expectations. More recent constructivist research has moved away from a strict focus on norms, identity, and culture and instead emphasises practices and relations in world politics (D. M. McCourt 2014, 9).[37] Kaarbo (2003, 160) also mentions that more recent research has distanced the constructivist approach from the adaptation of identity at the state level to explain foreign policy.[38] It should be clarified that this thesis uses Constructivism without giving prominence to identity but with a focus on domestic influences on foreign policy.

This thesis uses a constructivist approach but does not focus on identity as other theories. While identity is still important, the main emphasis here is how ideas shape foreign policy domestically, primarily through discussions among elites. This differs from frameworks like Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), which usually looks at leaders' preferences, public opinion, or how bureaucracies work. While FPA helps understand decision-making

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[37] D. M. McCourt (2014) mentions the Structural Realism as the one of the approaches emphasising the UK's "special relationship" with the US and the 'balancing' behaviour aspect. While the classical realist approach encompasses the desire to maintain military power to influence the world stage, the liberal view focus on institutions and the economic interests of domestic groups, and the Marxist draws 'attention to the influence of the press, the academy, and think tanks on the formulation of UK foreign policy' (D. M. McCourt 2014, 5).

[38] It is also worth distinguishing identity and foreign policy from the tradition of FPA since both can be 'easily placed in the context of institutional decision-making and domestic influences on foreign policy' (Kaarbo 2003, 162).

processes, this study is more about how ideas like Global Britain emerge, circulate, and become operational within elite discourse.[39]

Role theory has become a dominant frame for studying British foreign policy, especially concerning Global Britain. Scholars have often focused on the UK's search for a role and a place in the world (Gaskarth 2013; D. M. McCourt 2014; Glencross and McCourt 2018; M. Smith 2019; Oppermann, Beasley, and Kaarbo 2020; D. M. McCourt 2020; Beasley, Kaarbo, and Oppermann 2021; Webber 2023; Egan and Webber 2023). D. M. McCourt (2014, xvi), for example, conceptualises role as fundamentally social and ideational, mediated through 'role-taking', 'role-making', and 'alter-casting'. He argues that 'state action in international politics is fundamentally role-based. That is, the sphere of action within which leaders engage in foreign policy making leaders engage in foreign policymaking is a function of the expectations' that 'take the form of roles such as ally,

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[39] Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) is a subfield of IR that focuses on understanding how foreign policy decisions are made by examining the internal processes, actors, and institutional dynamics within states (Hudson and Day 2014). Rather than treating states as unitary actors, FPA explores the roles of political leaders, bureaucracies, public opinion, and domestic political structures in shaping external behaviour. While this thesis does not adopt a full FPA framework, it draws selectively on its insights to better understand how domestic political actors and institutional dynamics shaped the formulation of Global Britain.

great power, alliance leader, and others' (D. M. McCourt 2014, 1).[40] This model helps understand how the UK repositions itself on the world stage. However, one would argue that even roles depend on underlying interests, and those interests, in turn, are often shaped by ideas.[41]

Role theory's limitations lie in its narrow focus on leadership and its tendency to reduce strategic direction to identity-seeking. It overlooks the influence of political discourse and how ideas can act as catalysts for strategic change. As M. Smith (2019, 85) notes, role

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[40] Great power is used interchangeably in this thesis and the academic literature since the differences are subtle. A great power can have a more global reach, while a major power might have a more regional sphere of influence. The central aspect of great power is its relative military capability: 'To qualify as a great power, a state must have sufficient military assets to put up a serious fight in an all-out conventional war against the most powerful state in the world', as well as having 'a nuclear deterrent that can survive a nuclear strike against it' and 'formidable conventional forces' (Mearsheimer 2014, 5). The problem with this definition is that it ignores a state's political, economic, and even cultural influence, which can impact international politics globally.

[41] One of McCourt's (2014, 2) main arguments is that since the end of the Second World War, British foreign policy and the country's interactions with other countries have been constructed on the emergence of a role in the world. This new role is what McCourt (2014, 2) defines as residual great power. This idea of residual great power considers not only the material power and military capabilities but also the influence in world politics through diplomatic expertise. British policymakers have, therefore, continued to maintain the idea that the UK is a great power. Despite this, it has been argued that the country did not have the economic resources to maintain its great power policy, and with the increase of the British economic decline, maintaining this narrative would become impossible (D. M. McCourt 2014, 4–5). McCourt (2014) studies the UK as a great power through the role concept, considering the expected behaviour of great powers, 'a status that can be understood as a social role' (D. M. McCourt 2014, 13). States have distinct roles linked with their status in international politics. States can, therefore, have the role of great power. However, having the role of great power differs from being considered a great power.

theory tends to be 'based on ideas of international roles' while giving little attention to ideas in themselves. This critique also applies to McCourt's (2014) work. While role theory helps illuminate Britain's historical self-conception, it does not fully account for how specific ideas – like Global Britain – are introduced, legitimised, and operationalised within policy circles. Foreign policy strategy involves more than the search for a role; it is about constructing a coherent direction that resonates politically and ideationally within a particular context.

Role theory and FPA help understand foreign policy behaviours, but Constructivism offers a broader framework for examining how ideas shape strategic direction. It emphasises the importance of ideas in policy-making, which is relevant for analysing how narratives like Global Britain become politically influential. As Wendt (1999, 1) has established, Constructivism operates as 'a kind of structural idealism' – explaining not only identity but also the cultural and normative foundations of foreign policy.

While Constructivism effectively explains the emergence of ideas, it struggles to explain how these ideas spread through elite networks or become politically actionable. To fill this gap, this thesis draws on the framework developed by Goldstein and Keohane (1993a), which treats ideas as both causal and operational. Their work provides the conceptual tools necessary to understand the origins of ideas and their dissemination through institutions and actors. Constructivism does not centre international interaction as its primary variable; in this regard, it aligns with this thesis's focus on the domestic political landscape. Ultimately, Constructivism offers a valuable foundation for investigating how foreign policy narratives are constructed. Still, it must be complemented by more targeted analytical tools to fully account for the trajectory of Global Britain within British political discourse.

Having outlined the key principles of Constructivism and its relevance for analysing the ideational dimensions of foreign policy, it is now essential to turn more directly to the role of ideas themselves. The following section explores the literature on ideas in foreign policy, with particular attention to how scholars have conceptualised the system of causal pathways by which ideas can affect policy. This provides the necessary tools to examine the political life of Global Britain not merely as a rhetorical device but as an idea with historical depth and strategic consequence.

2.4. The Role of Ideas In Foreign Policy

For centuries, ideas have moved among individuals, transcended social boundaries, and been exchanged between civilisations. Frequently, they have endured beyond political systems, influenced revolutions, and served as catalysts for transformative change. As Fukuyama (2015, 535) notes, ideas have been 'often the main agents of social change'.

In foreign policy, ideas not only reflect worldviews but also help structure strategic action. As previously mentioned, Goldstein and Keohane (1993) have asserted the influence of ideas on policy. To understand how states delineate their foreign policies – particularly in times of uncertainty or strategic adjustment – one must consider how ideas emerge, gain traction, and become embedded in political discourse and institutional practice. This section investigates how ideas shape foreign policy and, more specifically, how they become embedded in the domestic political landscape. This is a necessary step in tracing the evolution of Global Britain as both a strategic narrative and a political plan within UK foreign policy.

In the context of British foreign policy, ideas have been approached through various interpretive lenses, most prominently through discourse and identity. Scholars such as Vucetic (2021, 24) have examined 'how discourses of Britishness influenced the shape of British foreign policy performances in certain historical contexts' and how these discursive performances constitute national identity. As he puts it, 'reconstructing the habit and furniture of British minds' can help explain why some narratives resonate, become adopted, and influence policy while others are disregarded (Vucetic 2021, 22). In this thesis, the unit of analysis is not identity per se but rather the idea of Global Britain – its origins, its development, and the process through which it became a formalised foreign policy choice in the post-Brexit landscape.

While the academic literature has succinctly considered some British policy ideas – such as Thatcher's "New Right", Blair's "New Labour", "Liberal Internationalism", "Global Network", "Awkward Partner", or the recurring image of British decline – most analyses operate within a general constructivist framework without explicitly engaging with the theoretical literature on ideas in foreign policy (P. A. Hall 1989b; Weir 1989; Larsen 1997; Seldon 1996; Dockrill 2002; Gaskarth 2006; I. Hall 2013; Daddow and Schnapper 2013; Ludlow 2019; D. M. McCourt 2020; James, Kassim, and Warren 2021). Although these works provide valuable historical and conceptual insights, they often lack a clear analytical model to trace how ideas evolve and exert influence. The approach adopted in this thesis is more directly influenced by the framework proposed by Goldstein and Keohane (1993), which centres ideas as causal variables in the policy process.

A growing body of IR scholarship has examined how specific ideas – such as "revolution", "democracy", "human rights", "international law", "collective security", and "international society" – have shaped foreign policy choices across different national

contexts (Goldstein and Keohane 1993b; Checkel 1997; McNamara 1998; Jabko 2006; Hook 2008).[42] Each of these studies demonstrates the importance of tracing ideas and how they move through political systems and institutional frameworks.

The public policy literature, too, has developed sophisticated typologies of ideas and their functions. Swinkels (2020, 283–92) outlines four primary conceptions of ideas: as heuristics, as strategic tools, as institutional frames, or as composite frameworks combining these elements.[43] She also believes that ideas might come from three processes: individual-level cognition (micro-foundations), the interaction and entrepreneurship between policy actors, and institutionalisation. In the scope of this thesis, the concept of Global Britain is analysed as a strategic instrument. This constructed narrative has evolved from elite political discourse and has garnered policy influence through the dynamics of interaction and entrepreneurship within the political elite.

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[42] For instance, Sikkink (1993) traces the adoption of human rights norms in the US and Western Europe; Katzenstein (1993) explores how ideas have shaped internal security policies in Germany and Japan; McNamara (1998) and Jabko (2006) investigates the role of ideational framing in the creation of the European single market. Others have focused on strategic adjustment (Dueck 2006), foreign aid (Hook 2008), and post-Cold War realignment (Checkel 1997).

[43] As ideas can be used as strategic tools, the same happens with narratives. The concept of strategic narratives has been defined by Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle (2013, 2) as 'a tool for political actors to extend their influence, manage expectations, and change the discursive environment in which they operate'. They also argue that 'strategic narratives are means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors' (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle 2013, 2). Oppermann and Spencer (2023) developed an analytical framework and provided a coding scheme to study strategic narratives, dividing them into three aspects: setting, characterisation, and emplotment.

There is also a rich literature exploring the relationship between the explanatory power of ideas and discourse, particularly within the framework of Discursive Institutionalism (Schmidt 2008; Ross 2013; Rosamond 2020; James, Kassim, and Warren 2021). While discourse analysis contributes meaningfully to understanding political language and framing, it often lacks the explanatory scope to connect macro-level ideas to concrete policy change (Hansen 2012, 105). In contrast, this thesis focuses not on discourse per se but on the causal power of ideas – how they shape, constrain, or enable foreign policy strategies. Goldstein and Keohane (1993) argue that diverse ideas lead to diverse policy outcomes. This means that ideas influence policy. Their framework highlights the interaction between beliefs, institutions, and political change, offering a structured lens to examine ideational influence.[44]

According to their model, ideas function as beliefs individuals hold, shaping their interpretation of the world and guiding their actions within it (Goldstein and Keohane 1993b, 3). However, this definition is open to interpretation. Are ideas simply personal beliefs, or can they be broader visions of the world embedded in culture, memory, and institutions? Wendt (1999, 1) offers a complementary perspective by arguing that the social structures in which ideas are embedded must be considered. First, one should study the social structure to determine which shared ideas are present at a particular time (Wendt 1999, 1). As these shared ideas construct the identities and interests of specific actors, one will identify this in prominent political actors. Following his reasoning, one can describe

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[44] Hansen (2012, 105) claims the dynamics of change and continuity in foreign policy can be explored by including the historical aspect of political discourse.

Goldstein and Keohane's (1993) view as 'individualist' since they reduce social structures to the sum of individual beliefs (Wendt 1999, 1).

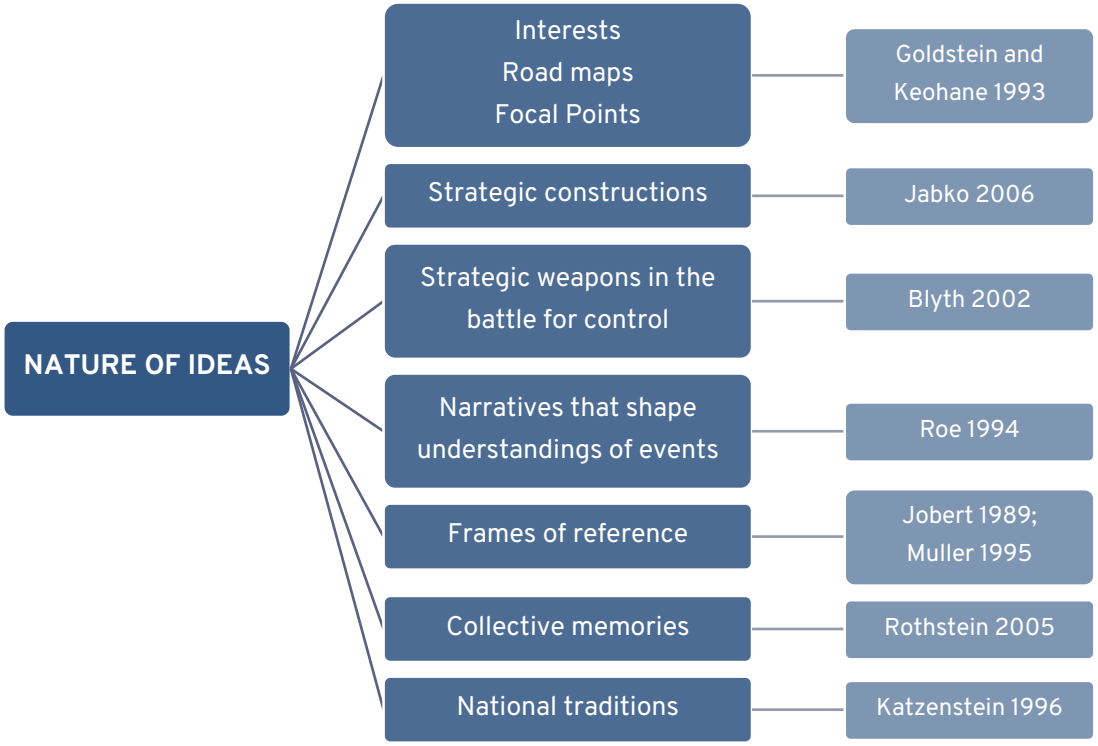


FIGURE 2 - NATURE OF IDEAS, BASED ON SCHMIDT'S (2008) REVIEW.

Ideas also take many forms and can have different natures. As shown in **Figure 2**, Schmidt (2008) has identified nine distinct functions ideas can serve, from road maps and heuristics to national traditions as narratives that shape the interpretation of events. They can be seen, and have been studied, as interests, road maps, focal points, strategic constructions, strategic weapons in the battle for control, narratives that shape understanding of events, frames of reference, collective memories, and national traditions. One idea may simultaneously function as a frame of reference, a strategic weapon in the struggle over agenda-setting, and a repository of collective memory.

This thesis suggests that Global Britain has taken on distinct roles at different moments in the recent British political context. In the post-referendum years, it functioned both as a strategic weapon and a narrative through which events were interpreted and legitimised. The empirical chapters that follow will explore these multiple dimensions in depth.

2.5. From Belief to Policy: Ideational Pathways

One has defined ideas and understood their diverse nature. Nevertheless, how do ideas influence policy? Answering this question requires tracing their emergence, institutionalisation, and causal impact. Goldstein and Keohane (1993a, 3) argue that ideas influence policy through three main causal pathways: first, when they constitute principles or causal beliefs that provide roadmaps that clarify actors' goals; second, by helping actors navigate situations with no unique strategic equilibrium; and third, by becoming embedded in political institutions. Therefore, ideas have a causal role in the process (Goldstein and Keohane 1993b, 3).

It should be emphasised that actions depend on the 'substantive quality of available ideas since such ideas help clarify principles and conceptions of causal relationships, and coordinate individual behaviour' (Goldstein and Keohane 1993a, 5). Importantly, they maintain that ideas remain influential even after institutionalisation as long as no strong alternative emerges: 'ideas continue to guide action in the absence of costly innovation' (Goldstein and Keohane 1993a, 5). This understanding is essential for examining how Global Britain was introduced, persisted, and evolved as a strategic framework.

The primary delineation of a system of causal pathways by which ideas can affect policy is based on the categories of ideas. Goldstein and Keohane's (1993a, 3) framework

distinguish between causal beliefs, principled beliefs, and worldviews – each playing a different role in shaping behaviour.[45] This thesis proposes that Global Britain incorporates all three categories, though their relative importance varies across time and political context. This is reflected in **Figure 3**, which sets out the pathways through which ideas may influence foreign policy.

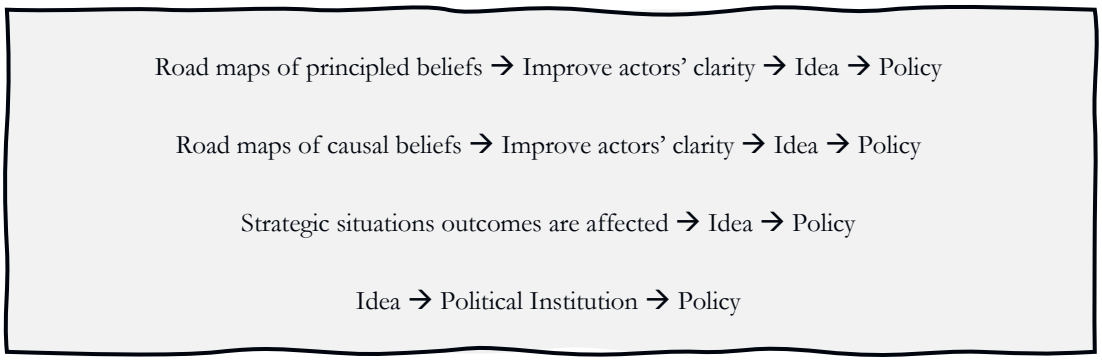


FIGURE 3 - ROUTES FOR IDEAS INFLUENCING POLICY, BASED ON GOLDSTEIN AND KEOHANE (1993).

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[45] The beliefs of leaders about the environment where they are inserted, combined with 'the cognitive processes that affect how new information is processed and incorporated into existing belief system', have been 'one of the strongest contributions foreign policy analysts have made to our understanding of world politics' (Kaarbo 2003, 161).

Moreover, Goldstein and Keohane (1993b, 11) propose a three-step method for assessing foreign policy change: identifying the idea, tracing institutional change or policy outcomes, and identifying the existent causal connections between the ideas and policy outcomes (**Figure 4**).

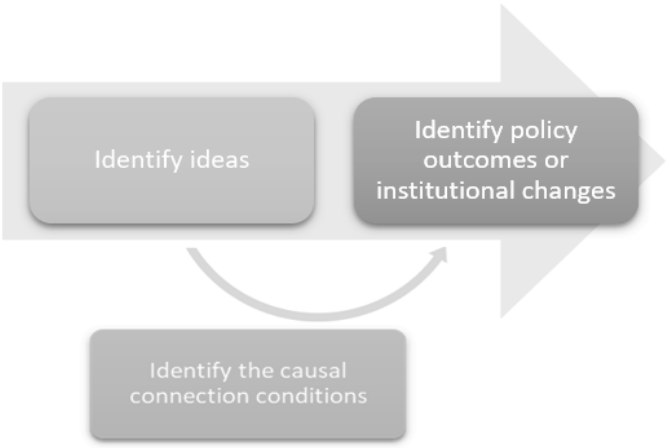


FIGURE 4 - GOLDSTEIN AND KEOHANE'S (1993) ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK TO PERCEIVE FOREIGN POLICY CHANGES.

This process forms the basis of the analytical approach used in this study. It involves determining how Global Britain is represented in political discussions, recognising the policy changes and outcomes of the post-Brexit foreign policy consolidated in the 2021 Integrated Review and the 2023 Integrated Review Refresh, and assessing the factors that enabled the concept to be incorporated into foreign policy.[46] The post-referendum

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[46] The 2021 Integrated Review set out the UK's overarching strategy for security, defence, development, and foreign policy in the post-Brexit era. The 2023 Integrated Review Refresh updated these priorities considering changing geopolitical conditions, including Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine and rising strategic competition. See HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy* (London: Cabinet Office, March 2021); and HM Government, *Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a More Contested and Volatile World* (London: Cabinet Office, March 2023).

governmental reshuffle and the establishment of new Whitehall departments suggest the presence of institutional transformations that this thesis might be able to identify in the subsequent empirical analysis.

Ipek (2015, 189) refines this process, arguing that two conditions must be met for ideas to influence foreign policy: shared normative beliefs among a small, recognised elite and a conducive political environment – typically involving a strong government able to appoint key policymakers. As applied to the Brexit context, these conditions help explain how Global Britain gained traction and became operationalised in government strategy.

Ipek's (2015, 189) contribution is helpful for the third step of the analysis. When identifying the causal connection conditions between the idea of Global Britain and the post-Brexit foreign policy strategy, one needs to recognise the normative beliefs shared by the elite and portray the political environment that created a window of opportunity.

Nonetheless, Goldstein and Keohane's (1993a) framework has limitations. It does not fully account for ideas historically embedded in institutions nor contemplates the cultural and normative context within which ideas circulate. As Checkel (1997, 125) notes, the role of ideas is not only defined by individuals' beliefs since there are 'ideas that were historically rooted in particular organizations and agencies' which have also had a decisive role in international political change. Some ideas are not merely held by individuals but embedded in long-standing institutional cultures. This is particularly relevant for Global Britain, which draws on more profound traditions in British foreign policy thought.

Furthermore, one must acknowledge that ideas do not operate in a vacuum. Goldstein and Keohane (1993) do not consider the cultural element as crucial to the influential process of ideas on foreign policy. Zakaria (1998, 26) alerts that foreign policy theories

must consider 'domestic politics, national culture, and individual decision-makers'. Nevertheless, other factors, such as national interest and perceptions of power, influence the process of ideas influencing policy.[47] To Goldstein and Keohane (1993, 13), policy outcomes can only be explained based on understanding beliefs, interests, and power. Wendt (1999), for example, suggests that power is constructed and transformed by interactions as ideas that shape perceptions.

While most foreign policy theories debate the dynamics between material and ideational factors, the tension is in the dichotomy of interests and ideas in Social Constructivism and the ideational approach. The long-standing academic debate about whether ideas precede interests – or are products of strategic interest – remains unresolved:

> Are ideas mere tools of convenience, with political elites instrumentally seizing upon them to legitimate a policy change made for interest-based reasons? Or are changes in preferences and interests caused by changes in ideas, with elites adopting new ideas as they puzzle and learn? (Checkel 1997, 129).

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[47] Power can be defined as 'the currency of great-power politics, and states compete among themselves. What money is to economics, power is to international relations.' (Mearsheimer 2014, 12). Mearsheimer (2014, 2) argues that 'great powers are rarely content with the current distribution of power' and that there are incentives to change the current balance of power and look for opportunities. States have, therefore, revisionist intentions and aspirations of greater power and influence in the world. However, Mearsheimer (2014, 3-5) also questions why this happens and why great powers have this behaviour and focus on great powers since they impact international politics the most. With his theory of Offensive Realism, the answer is shaped by a structuralist approach. He believes that 'the structure of the international system forces states which seek only to be secure nonetheless to act aggressively toward each other' (Mearsheimer 2014, 3). This aspect considers fear but does not include cooperation or the pursuit of economic interests. This sub-theory of Realism, as acknowledged by the author, does not also accommodate for domestic factors.

The rationalist view defends the idea that elites use ideas only to expose their interests; in this sense, interest emerges before ideas (Goldstein and Keohane 1993b, 4). To Goldstein and Keohane (1993), ideas and interests combine to move the world and have a causal relation when explaining human behaviour. The differentiation between interests and ideas is discussed through conceptualising the notion of an idea and the clear differentiation between ideas and interests. However, these authors believe it is an error to assume a causal connection between policymakers' ideas and policy choices. The choices of specific ideas only reflect these actors' interests. Checkel (1997, 127) also defends that in the battle of ideas *versus* interests, interests win since this author sees interests as the origin of ideas. So, in this sense, one cannot dissociate ideas from interests.[48]

Goldstein and Keohane (1993a, 7) state clearly that they 'do not seek to explain the sources of these ideas' but 'focus on their effects'. However, this thesis seeks to trace the origins of this idea and explain its evolution until it becomes mainstream in the context of Brexit. Goldstein and Keohane (1993a) fail to include the historical approach of explaining the source of an idea. This thesis posits that a comprehensive understanding of an idea's role or effects on foreign policy necessitates an examination of its origins. The historical context, particularly within the framework of British foreign policy traditions, is pivotal in elucidating the decision-making processes during periods of crisis and uncertainty. Consequently, it is essential to integrate this analytical framework with a

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[48] As Weber (quoted in Eastwood 2005, 90) suggests, interests may themselves be either material or ideal. Hook (2008, 151–52) similarly observes that causal and principled beliefs shape ideas, which are then combined with material interests in the formulation of foreign policy. In this regard, ideas and interests cannot be meaningfully disentangled.

policy entrepreneurship perspective – which constitutes one of the theoretical contributions of this thesis.

The following section builds on these insights, turning more directly to ideas' emergence, diffusion, and political stimulation within elite networks. While this section has outlined the theoretical basis for understanding ideas and their influence on foreign policy, several questions remain: Where do ideas come from? How are they introduced into the political system? How do they gain legitimacy and become embedded in institutions? And how can one evaluate whether an idea succeeds or fails? These questions guide the next section, which focuses on policy entrepreneurship and ideational diffusion dynamics.

2.6. Mapping the Lifecycle of Ideas

This section plays a vital role in the theoretical framework of the thesis. Having established that Global Britain is not merely a rhetorical slogan but an idea with strategic and institutional consequences, the next step is understanding how such ideas appear, evolve, and ultimately translate into foreign policy. The thesis follows the trajectory of the Global Britain narrative while paying close attention to the political actors and institutional conditions that enabled its progression at each phase. To do so, exploring the broader processes through which ideas travel within political systems is essential.[49]

Particular attention is paid to the concept of policy entrepreneurship, which provides a valuable analytical lens for understanding how political actors adopt, promote, and embed ideas within decision-making structures. Understanding the role of actors – as carriers, translators, and sometimes architects of ideas – is essential in evaluating the trajectory of Global Britain. In short, this section connects theory to practice, establishing the conceptual tools that will later be used in the empirical chapters to explain how and why a specific idea shaped UK foreign policy following a historic political rupture.

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[49] This section also contributes by engaging with literature on political ideas' emergence, diffusion, and success or failure, extending beyond foreign policy theory to incorporate key insights from public policy, institutionalism, and political sociology. While previous sections have examined what ideas are and how they function within constructivist IR and ideational frameworks, this part shifts focus to the mechanisms of ideational influence – that is, the conditions under which ideas gain traction, how they circulate through elite networks, and what factors determine their longevity or marginalisation.

THE ROLE OF POLITICAL AGENCY

According to Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell (2016, 70), 'Ideas can intervene through several different means, including state leaders, institutions (including epistemic communities, and formal rules and procedures) and the broader cultural preferences of a state'.[50] In their view, these ideas are often mediated through institutional variables that directly affect the construction of foreign policy. Among these, they include executive-legislative relations, party systems, voting rules, government quality, government administrative proficiency, method of decision-making, political culture in implementing policy, and the power of executives in undertaking an independent foreign policy. Each of these may shape the power of the executive to pursue an independent foreign policy (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 78–79).

This thesis takes seriously the idea that ideational influence is exercised across diverse levels of governance and through multiple actors. Given the complexity of the British foreign policy environment post-Brexit, adopting a perspective of "multi-level

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[50] The concept of "epistemic communities" was developed most notably by Peter M. Haas (1992) to describe networks of professionals with recognised expertise and competence in a particular domain. The concept of epistemic communities is relevant here as it highlights the role of expert networks in shaping policy ideas under conditions of uncertainty. These communities, defined by shared causal beliefs and normative commitments, can play a crucial role in legitimising and circulating strategic concepts like Global Britain, especially when formal policy direction is lacking.

policymaking" is appropriate.[51] Drawing on Cairney (2019, 5), five core features help identify whether policy emerges in a multi-level setting. First, diverse actors influence policy in distinct venues across levels of government. Second, behaviour within those venues is conditioned by both formal and informal rules. Third, policy networks emerge based on trust and information exchange. Fourth, dominant narratives tend to reinforce accepted policy frames, which may, in turn, shape how actors perceive problems and formulate responses. Finally, shifts in attention often occur in response to external shocks or changes in political conditions (Cairney 2019, 5).

Each of these elements will be identified and analysed in the context of Global Britain. The analysis will assess whether its formulation involved actors operating across multiple venues, whether institutional norms helped shape the policy's evolution, and whether specific arguments or narratives gained dominance in political discourse. This analysis also considers the broader policy conditions and moments of disruption that shaped how Global Britain was framed and eventually implemented. While Cairney's (2019) model offers a helpful overview, it pays insufficient attention to the later phases of the policy cycle – particularly implementation and evaluation – which are crucial in assessing whether an idea ultimately translates into successful foreign policy. These stages are particularly relevant for Global Britain and will be revisited in the final empirical chapter.

One must turn to the concept of policy entrepreneurship to investigate how ideas influence policy and how they are mobilised. Vries and Hobolt (2020, 42) highlight the

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[51] The concept of "multi-level policymaking" refers to the interaction of various actors across different levels of governance – from local to supranational – in the formulation and implementation of public policy. It captures the complexity of contemporary decision-making structures and is useful in analysing how ideas such as Global Britain move through overlapping institutional and political arenas.

role of political parties in translating structural change into strategic innovation. By looking particularly at "challenger parties", these authors defend that these are often effective at introducing new and contentious issues into the political mainstream by deploying rhetorical innovation that challenges dominant political elites. In this approach, parties respond to political conditions and actively shape public demand for specific policies (Vries and Hobolt 2020, 44). If Brexit is taken as a structural rupture, the Conservative Party's task became to convert this disruption into a coherent strategic vision. It is also known that 'dominant parties owe their advantageous position in the system to the mobilization of existing issues' (Vries and Hobolt 2020, 54). In this context, Global Britain gained salience – as a rhetorical and strategic vehicle through which a dominant party could mobilise existing issues while appearing to offer innovation.

Vries and Hobolt (2020, 57) also highlight anti-establishment rhetoric as a discursive tool, positioning new ideas as challenges to an entrenched elite. This thesis does not suggest that Global Britain was necessarily anti-establishment. Still, it does argue that it was a politically convenient idea framed to symbolise national renewal and international autonomy. In this sense, its emergence can be understood through the concept of "political entrepreneurship" – a process whereby political actors select and elevate certain ideas to respond to moments of uncertainty and contestation (Vries and Hobolt 2020, 55).

POLICY WINDOWS

One must first examine the political conditions that enabled this shift to understand how Global Britain has shaped the UK's foreign policy since the Brexit referendum. The rise of specific ideas does not happen by chance; it relies on specific institutional, political, and time-based factors. In this context, the Brexit referendum created a turbulent policy setting, disrupting established strategic beliefs and opening doors for innovative ideas. This subsection uses the concept of "policy windows" and discusses enabling conditions to show how the post-referendum period encouraged the revival of Global Britain.

Kingdon's (2014, 165) model of policy windows remains foundational in this regard. According to his framework, policy change becomes feasible when three streams – problems, policies, and politics – converge. The 2016 referendum result can be viewed as a moment of such convergence: the problem was the perceived strategic vacuum following the UK's decision to leave the EU; the politics were influenced by elite turnover and increased uncertainty; and the policy stream was completely open, as no coherent foreign policy direction had yet been established. Among this convergence, the concept of Global Britain entered formal political discourse.[52] Prime Ministers May and Johnson operated in contexts of increased centralisation and elite circulation. Moreover, their respective governments had the political authority to translate conceptual narratives into strategic commitments.

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[52] As it was mentioned previously, there are two necessary conditions for ideas to influence foreign policy: first, the existence of a small group of political elites who share normative commitments; and second, a political environment conducive to ideational entrepreneurship.

These conditions and the lack of a comprehensive foreign policy framework led to what Checkel (1997, 124) calls it an "ideational receptivity" moment. During these moments, decision-makers are not just responding to external pressures but actively seeking new ways of thinking. He argues that 'nearly all recent work in the ideas literature argues that uncertainty, failure, or crisis (…) creates greater room for ideas as determinants of change' (Checkel 1997, 128). This entrepreneurial thinking about ideas becomes particularly evident during strategic uncertainty or institutional change. Older or previously overlooked ideas may come back into political discussions in these situations, often revised to fit current circumstances.[53]

In the case of the appearance of the idea of Global Britain after the Brexit referendum in the political elite discourse, two explanations seem plausible. First, the unexpected nature of the "leave" result meant that no comprehensive foreign policy strategy had been developed in advance. The referendum was primarily conceived as a mechanism for managing internal divisions within the Conservative Party rather than as a critical juncture in Britain's external relations. As such, there was little anticipation of its broader foreign policy consequences. Second, there was no consensus on which direction the UK's foreign policy should pursue in the aftermath, nor were there compelling alternative ideas available to fill the strategic vacuum. This lack of preparation and consensus created fertile ground for the emergence and subsequent consolidation of Global Britain as a unifying –

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[53] Garnett, Mabon and Smith (2018, 44) argue that governments 'continue to depend upon the advice of foreign policy "experts" at times of crisis; but they also indicate that in such instances they tend to look outside the FCO for advice'. The government might explore ideas beyond the standard governmental framework; therefore, innovative concepts are more likely to be introduced and implemented.

albeit initially vague – narrative capable of projecting coherence during a time of institutional and strategic uncertainty.54

The Global Britain narrative has effectively taken advantage of specific structural and political conditions, as will be shown in the empirical chapters. While this idea is not entirely new, having been present in various forms since the post-war era, it has never been so deeply embedded in the UK's strategic vision. Brexit acted as both a catalyst and a significant opportunity for the revival and formal adoption of an idea previously part of mainstream discussions on the UK's role in the world. This integration represents a notable change in the UK's strategy, emphasising the critical role of Global Britain in the contemporary world.

How Ideas Travel Through the Elite

After establishing the conditions that enabled Global Britain to participate in the post-Brexit political landscape, it is essential to analyse how this idea was communicated, gained acceptance, and eventually influenced policymaking processes. Ideas do not spread in isolation; their adoption is influenced by the actors who advocate for them, the venues in which they are debated, and the institutional pathways that facilitate their incorporation. In this context, understanding elite networks is crucial.

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[54] Even Global Britain lacked substance, as many politicians and Members of Parliament (MPs) have claimed, it received vital support from the government and relevant lobby groups in London. One example is that think tanks began producing policy reports to advise on the operationalisation and implementation of a new Global Britain foreign policy. This will be explored in detail in the empirical chapters.

J. L. Campbell and Pedersen (2014) provide an insightful framework for understanding how policy ideas are formed and shared. They introduce the concept of "knowledge regimes", which refer to the network of think tanks, civil servants, advisers, academic institutions, and media commentators that influence which ideas gain visibility, credibility, and actionable status. The authors see these relationships of policy construction as 'some of the most important power dynamics in advanced capitalist countries insofar as actors in all three regimes struggle within various institutional and resource constraints to influence the production and dissemination of policy-relevant ideas' (Campbell and Pedersen 2014, 17). Notably, the policymaking process and the knowledge regime are not static; they evolve and adapt in response to institutional changes and political pressures (J. L. Campbell and Pedersen 2014, 17).

Think tanks play a significant role in this regime. As J. A. Smith (1991) noted in his early work on "idea brokers" in the US, a broad group of actors forms the pillar of the policy elite.[55] British think tanks, such as Chatham House, are typically seen as a key component of the UK'S knowledge regime, often acting as intermediaries between academic expertise,

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[55] Despite the diverse political systems in the US and the UK, some aspects of the research on the US think tank's environment can be adapted to fit the British case. J. A. Smith (1991, 224–25) includes in this broad group of actors: 'experts who have held prominent public positions in the cabinet or high-level posts' (as advisers of national security or economic affairs), policy specialists with 'long-standing research commitments within a given area of policy', policy consultants who are 'distinguishable more by their institutional settings than by academic' skills, government experts, policy interpreters (such as media professors or instant experts), and finally, policy entrepreneurs which constituted in the 1980s and 1990s the 'new policy elite'.

political elites, and public debate.[56] They have also been instrumental in shaping discussions around foreign policy. The influential Chicago speech by Tony Blair and the Iraq intelligence dossier drafted with input from the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) illustrates the power these institutions can exert on government strategy.[57]

Despite several of these organisations turning their attention after the referendum to shape what a post-EU British foreign policy might look like – often framed around the Global Britain narrative – the post-Brexit period presents an important departure from

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[56] Exploring the academic literature on how think tanks produce ideas and how ideas navigate within the political community in the UK, one should mention the study of Denham and Garnett (1998) on *British think tanks and the climate of opinion*. However, more representative studies on the British case need to be developed, particularly in the context of the Brexit referendum.

[57] Historically, their influence has been evident in significant foreign policy moments – such as the *International Institute for Strategic Studies* (IISS) and its assessment of Iraq's threat capabilities, or the role of think tank-linked advisers shaping Tony Blair's Chicago speech on Liberal Interventionism. These cases demonstrate the potential of think tanks to shape strategic narratives and embed ideas within the policymaking culture.

Sir Lawrence Freedman's ideas influenced the speech, and it was linked to the *Chatham House* and the IISS (Garnett, Mabon, and Smith 2018, 44). The Chicago speech was delivered in 1999 and explored critical issues deeply connected with the orientations on foreign policy at that time. Interestingly, Blair describes the UK's position regarding foreign policy alliances with Europe and the US: 'For the first time in the last three decades we have a government that is both pro-Europe and pro-American' (Tony Blair, "Doctrine of the International Community" (speech, Economic Club of Chicago, Chicago, April 22, 1999). This can be seen as a confirmation that as the UK joined the European Communities (EC), it was forced to leave aside the aim to pursue a more intense relationship with the US. Blair claimed, 'We have finally done away with the false proposition that we must choose between two diverging paths – the Transatlantic relationship or Europe' (Blair, "Doctrine of the International Community").

this pattern. Instead of being guided by traditional foreign policy think tanks, the early articulation of Global Britain arose primarily from the Conservative leadership itself, with little intellectual framing from external expertise.[58] This absence stresses the distinctive nature of the post-referendum environment, where the need for domestic political consolidation often buried long-term strategic planning.[59] This thesis will explore how, only once the narrative gained political traction, specific think tanks initiated the publication of proposals to put the idea into practice rather than developing its conceptual basis from scratch.[60]

While these actors contribute to the circulation of ideas, their influence depends on the broader political receptivity discussed in the previous section. As Cairney (2019, 5) observes, multi-level policymaking often involves a complex interaction of formal and informal rules, cross-institutional trust networks, and dominant frames that guide what counts as a "legitimate" idea. Political elites often operate within these discursive boundaries, reinforcing dominant narratives while marginalising alternatives. Global Britain's success cannot be solely attributed to its rhetorical appeal – it was also the result of its strategic diffusion across elite networks and institutions.

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[58] This analysis is detailed and demonstrated in chapter VI.

[59] Mearsheimer and Rosato (2023, 54) argue that despite being a credible theory, Constructivism rarely guides policymakers' 'grand strategic or crisis decision-making', even if it is 'a logical explanation derived from realistic assumptions and backed by substantial empirical evidence'.

[60] When studying the development of ideas, one must also mention the strategy formation process. Foucault (2002, 71) argues that 'the problem is to discover how they are distributed in history' since strategies might be linked together by necessity or they might make them unseen, calling 'them to their right places one after another' and making them 'successive solutions to one and the same problem'.

Nonetheless, not all types of diffusion are similar. Some ideas emerge from above via executive power or media promotion, while others develop through a more collaborative form of elite agreement. This distinction is crucial for understanding how deeply a specific idea has truly integrated into political frameworks. In the case of Global Britain, the idea first circulated through party conferences and leadership speeches. Still, it quickly resonated in ministerial briefings, parliamentary discussions, and FCO documents. It was transformed and restructured as it progressed, evolving from a mere slogan into a strategic framework.

Discourse clearly plays a part in this process, but discourse alone does not explain the transformation of an idea into a guiding principle of government policy. The limitations of discourse analysis lie in its tendency to prioritise text over context and narrative over agency. While it helps map rhetorical shifts, it often fails to capture the institutional, relational, and power-based dynamics that determine whether an idea survives the policy process (Goldstein and Keohane 1993a; Schmidt 2008). Hence, this thesis adopts a broader approach that accounts for the circulation of ideas through both discursive and institutional channels, while paying attention to the actors and structures that facilitate this process.

In summary, the trajectory of Global Britain reflects a broader pattern where political ideas gain traction not only through rhetorical appeal but also through their integration into elite networks and policymaking structures. The following section examines the final stage of this ideational journey – assessing the success or failure of these ideas once they have entered the strategic landscape.

Evaluating Success and Failure

After reflecting on how political concepts like Global Britain arise and spread, one must confront a more complex – yet fundamentally important – question: When does an idea succeed? Conversely, what signifies the failure of an idea? Success cannot simply be measured by how often something is repeated, nor can failure be defined merely by a lack of a concrete policy. Instead, one must view success as a complex process that involves institutional acceptance, political consistency, strategic durability, and alignment within discourse.

The literature has offered several approaches to evaluate this. A foundational contribution comes from (Boucher, David, and Prémont 2020, 42), who argue that an idea's success is best measured by its capacity to produce actual policy change or innovation in the context of US foreign policy. From this standpoint, failure is not simply rejecting an idea but also maintaining the *status quo* in the face of an attempted shift. This framework is useful in contexts of strategic rupture – such as Brexit – where the demand for new ideas is high, but not all ideas translate into policy.[61]

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[61] Diverse ways have been proposed to study policy entrepreneurship when looking at US foreign policy. If one draws on the literature on national security entrepreneurship, Boucher, David, and Prémont (2020, 42) propose a model of policy entrepreneurship which starts with a focusing event that leads to a policy window. This policy window can subsequently be softened and lead to a sphere where the entrepreneur's profile plays a determinant role. This sphere considers that there is a cycle between idea, opposition and framing. Any of these can come after the policy window. Additionally, there is a relationship between these three elements and the cycle between strategy creation and opposition. These will eventually lead to the success or failure of an idea. One can bring about policy change or innovation if this process is successful. If this process fails, one can maintain the *status quo*, or it can lead to another idea appearing.

Other scholars focus more specifically on how political and institutional contexts condition success.[62] Weir (1989, 54) researched how ideas transformed into policy by examining the national contexts of the UK and the US to analyse their spread of "Keynesianism". In assessing potential policy innovation, it is suggested that a key element is simply the number of concepts that include a strong 'rationale for policy departures' (Weir 1989, 54). Weir (1989, 56) contends that a crucial factor behind the 'acceptance of Keynesian policies in the United States and Britain' seems to be the influence of highly relevant social groups either 'supporting or opposing policy innovation'.

Similarly reflecting on the diffusion of Keynesianism, Hirschman (1989, 350) stresses that the success of an idea is not just about the substance of the idea itself but also about timing, political opportunity, and the receptiveness of key actors. He notes that Keynesianism, though developed in Britain, only truly gained policy traction in the US

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[62] One of the examples used to explain the emergence, spread, and success of an idea is Keynesianism – an economic idea, in this case. It is a crucial idea studied in the academic literature regarding ideational innovation (Weir 1989; Hirschman 1989; P. A. Hall 1989a). Arose in England 'but won its most significant battle for influence over domestic policymaking in the United States during the 1930s and the Second World War, and then was spread primarily from that country after the war's end' (Hirschman 1989, 348).

due to an 'extraordinary constellation of circumstances' – including economic crisis, elite turnover, and ideological openness (Hirschman 1989, 350, 353–54).[63]

These conditions are reiterated in the work of Checkel (1997, 24), who identifies three main factors that shape whether an idea becomes embedded in state behaviour: the presence of a policy window, the centralisation of authority structures, and the presence of entrepreneurial actors who can bridge ideational and institutional gaps.[64] Importantly, Checkel (1997, 24) warns that success cannot be assumed simply because an idea is

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[63] As Kaarbo (2003, 160) has argued, Goldstein (1988) has also demonstrated that 'beliefs are powerful factors behind US foreign economic policy', but this research has been developed by international political economy rather than by FPA or an integration of both.

Checkel (1997, 129) also uses this example to explain the link between ideas and policy change, as 'the quick adoption of Keynesian ideas' was possible due to 'the openness of American policymaking structures' and in specific, 'strategic places in the government' which became 'occupied by academics' that had deep knowledge of the Keynesian principles.

Considering Keynesianism and the British case, Peter Hall (quoted in Checkel 1997, 129) argues that 'key state leaders and the media played important roles in empowering new ideas on macroeconomic policymaking under Margaret Thatcher', which might also be related to the autonomy and centralisation of the UK system. It should hence be noted that Keynesian policies are considered to have failed in the 1930s after their emergence. Still, the post-war period provided the structural environment for the success of the ideas later.

[64] Another example of an idea's emergence, spread, and success in the academic literature is the case study of Soviet behaviour at the end of the Cold War, a notable study of ideas and international political change from Checkel (1997).

introduced. What matters is the idea's institutional traction – the extent to which it reshapes policy frameworks, strategic priorities, or bureaucratic practice.[65]

This thesis uses a layered approach to analyse Global Britain's trajectory. The Brexit referendum represented a significant policy window, creating an unforeseen shift that required a redefinition of Britain's global role. During this period, Global Britain emerged as a leading idea advocated by political leaders. However, its effectiveness must be evaluated along three dimensions: first, whether it informed the government's strategic planning (such as the 2021 Integrated Review and its 2023 Refresh); second, whether it impacted the institutional frameworks overseeing foreign policy; and third, whether it developed a discursive coherence that could uphold political legitimacy over time.

Here, Vivien Schmidt's (2008) work on Discursive Institutionalism becomes particularly valuable. She argues that the power of an idea is not simply a matter of its content. Still, of its discursive fit, which comprehends its ability to resonate with existing political traditions while also offering a response to current conditions. An idea succeeds when it both fits and reshapes the dominant narrative. In the case of Global Britain, the question

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[65] Discussing the success of ideas can make one reflect on whether ideas are enough. In this case, one can question whether ideas are enough to generate foreign policy change. The literature on Constructivism 'would assume that a lack of agreement surrounding a particular idea would indicate that the idea is weak and therefore not able to exude causal force' (Cross 2007, 1019). Jabko's (2006) approach – Strategic Constructivism – assumes that if there is consensus within an institution, this tends to maintain the *status quo*. Therefore, Jabko (2006) explains that if consensus reproduces continuity, one must observe institutional tensions to observe change. Jakbo (quoted in Cross 2007, 1019) also argues that how political actors use ideas to achieve their goals is more influential than the nature or prominence of ideas, meaning that ideas can be instrumentally used.

is whether it successfully articulated Britain's post-Brexit identity in a way that linked past traditions of global engagement with the future vision of an outward-facing nation.

A related concept is temporal durability. Some ideas may be relevant only for a limited time – perhaps even politically beneficial – but they often lose their impact due to a lack of substance or changes in the political landscape. In contrast, some ideas persist despite changes in government, becoming fundamental to the core principles of foreign policy. This thesis examines whether Global Britain demonstrates this level of coherence and longevity or if its trajectory suggests a more temporary and strategic approach.

Finally, one must also consider whether the success of Global Britain was rhetorical, strategic, or both. Was it a case of political actors using a vague slogan to fill a vacuum, or did the idea produce tangible foreign policy outcomes? Did it shape elite perceptions, institutional structures, or Britain's engagement with the world? The empirical chapters will unpack these questions using this theoretical framework's conceptual and analytical tools.

2.7. Guiding Propositions & Analytical Framework

Having explored the theoretical foundations underpinning this research – from constructivist approaches to the ideational dimensions of foreign policy and the mechanisms by which ideas emerge, diffuse, and consolidate – this final section brings the chapter's conceptual strands together into a coherent analytical framework. In line with a constructivist orientation, the framework is not intended to predict outcomes but to illuminate how meaning is produced, contested, and embedded within policy. Building on the arguments developed throughout the chapter, it sets out a series of guiding

propositions that orient the empirical investigation, providing interpretive anchors for tracing the trajectory of the Global Britain narrative across different moments in time. Conceived as a dynamic and context-sensitive tool, the framework follows Global Britain from its discursive articulation to its strategic uptake and policy operationalisation, attending to the interplay between agency, institutional setting, and historical reference. In doing so, it equips the reader with a clear set of conceptual stages that will structure the subsequent research design and empirical analysis.

Grounded in the ideational, constructivist, and genealogical framework advanced here, this thesis is guided by four interlinked propositions. Together, they capture the relationship between ideas, political context, and foreign policy formation in the post-Brexit UK, offering a systematic way of examining how strategic narratives are constructed, adapted, and legitimised over time.

The propositions outlined below emerge directly from the synthesis of the literature review in Chapter I and the theoretical discussions developed in this chapter. The literature review traced how Global Britain has been interpreted, contested, and embedded in debates on the UK's role in the world, highlighting recurring themes such as the tension between globalism and isolationism, the politics of status, and the legacy of imperial narratives. These patterns, combined with the constructivist insights on how ideas are generated, adopted, and transformed in foreign policy, form the basis for the analytical framework developed here. By concentrating these debates into four interlinked propositions, the framework provides a coherent bridge between the empirical gaps identified in the literature and the interpretive tools needed to analyse Global Britain's trajectory in the post-Brexit context.

P1. Ideational Foundation

The concept of Global Britain predated the Brexit referendum, originating as a Conservative Party discourse that evolved through various conceptualisations within cross-party Eurosceptic debates. This ideational development played a formative role in shaping both the conditions for and the outcome of the referendum.

P2. Political Uptake

Following the referendum, the May Government mainstreamed Global Britain as a central narrative of UK foreign policy. The concept subsequently gained broader political traction, including partial adoption by the Labour Party.

P3. Strategic Reframing

Global Britain functioned as a strategic narrative designed by the May Government to reframe the implications of Brexit – emphasising renewed global engagement, countering narratives of British isolationism, and reasserting the UK's international status.

P4. Post-Brexit Foreign Policy Transformation

In the aftermath of Brexit, UK foreign policy underwent significant adjustment, reflecting structural change and ideational innovation rooted in historic traditions of British foreign policy thought traditions.

The historical and discursive insights drawn from the literature reviewed in Chapter I directly inform **Proposition 1**, which traces the ideational foundations of Global Britain before the Brexit referendum. By situating the concept within longer-standing Conservative and cross-party Eurosceptic debates, and by recognising the formative influence of imperial memory, global role conceptions, and strategic identity narratives, this proposition builds on established scholarship (Hill 1988, 2019; Daddow 2019;

Gifkins, Jarvis, and Ralph 2019; Turner 2019; Saunders 2020) to anchor the empirical analysis in a historically grounded understanding of how the idea emerged and evolved.

The patterns of elite discourse and policy framing identified in the literature inform **Proposition 2**, which examines the political mainstreaming of Global Britain under the May Government and its partial uptake by other political actors, including the Labour Party. This proposition draws on studies of foreign policy narratives, political identity construction, and cross-party adaptation (Oppermann, Beasley, and Kaarbo 2020; Atkins 2021; Hadfield and Whitman 2023) to investigate how the concept was embedded within official rhetoric and parliamentary debate during the immediate post-referendum period.

Research on strategic narratives and foreign policy communication informs **Proposition 3**, which considers Global Britain as a deliberate reframing of Brexit's implications. Building on analyses of post-referendum identity work and efforts to counter isolationist interpretations of Brexit (Hill 2019; Turner 2019; Gamble 2021a), this proposition examines how the May Government sought to project renewed global engagement and reassert international status, while managing competing domestic and international expectations.

Finally, studies linking ideational change to structural adjustment in foreign policy underpin **Proposition 4**, which explores the transformation of UK foreign policy after Brexit. This proposition connects the enduring influence of British foreign policy traditions to the ideational innovations that accompanied structural shifts (Uttley, Wilkinson, and Van Rij 2019; Gaskarth and Langdon 2021; Devanny and Berry 2021), enabling an assessment of how Global Britain was institutionalised, contested, and adapted in the post-Brexit policy environment.

To investigate these propositions, this thesis draws on an analytical framework that integrates the theoretical and conceptual tools developed throughout the chapter. These four propositions are embedded within a staged framework that structures the empirical analysis across seven distinct phases in the ideational life cycle of Global Britain: origin, introduction to political discourse, political consolidation, strategy delineation, policy operationalisation, policy implementation, and policy evaluation. This sequencing reflects the genealogical commitment to tracing how ideas emerge, evolve, and are embedded in practice, while remaining attentive to moments of contestation, reinterpretation, and decline. It enables the research to identify not only when and where Global Britain is articulated, but how its meaning shifts as it moves between political arenas and policy domains.

Each phase is associated with a set of key mechanisms that connect ideational development to political action. The catalyst context situates Brexit as a critical policy window, creating the political space for ideational innovation. Idea emergence captures the early embedding of Global Britain within elite discourse. At the same time, policy entrepreneurship highlights the strategic framing work undertaken by political leaders, advisers, and aligned networks to secure traction. Operationalisation tracks the translation of narrative into policy proposals and institutional processes. At the same time, diffusion examines how the idea circulates through formal and informal channels – including think tanks, party networks, and parliamentary settings. Finally, evaluation considers the discursive fit, strategic coherence, and degree of institutionalisation achieved over time.

Mapping these propositions against the seven phases and six mechanisms clarifies the empirical strategy. For example, **Proposition 1** is explored through the early phases of origin and discourse introduction, focusing on actors in the Conservative Party, cross-

party Eurosceptic circles, and affiliated think tanks. **Proposition 2** moves into the phase of political consolidation, examining how the May Government and, to a limited extent, the Labour Party adopted and reframed the narrative. **Proposition 3** centres on strategy delineation, where ministerial speeches, government documents, and media interventions are analysed for their reframing of Brexit's meaning and Britain's post-EU identity. Finally, **Proposition 4** covers operationalisation, implementation, and evaluation, following how the Johnson Government and key foreign policy institutions translated the narrative into practice and assessed its viability.

By explicitly linking propositions, phases, mechanisms, and actors to specific empirical chapters, this framework (**Figure 5**) operates as both an analytical map and a guide for the reader. It ensures that the empirical chapters do not stand as isolated case narratives but are understood as interconnected stages in the longer trajectory of Global Britain. This approach remains consistent with a constructivist commitment to interpretation over prediction, emphasising the situated, contested, and historically informed character of foreign policy ideas.

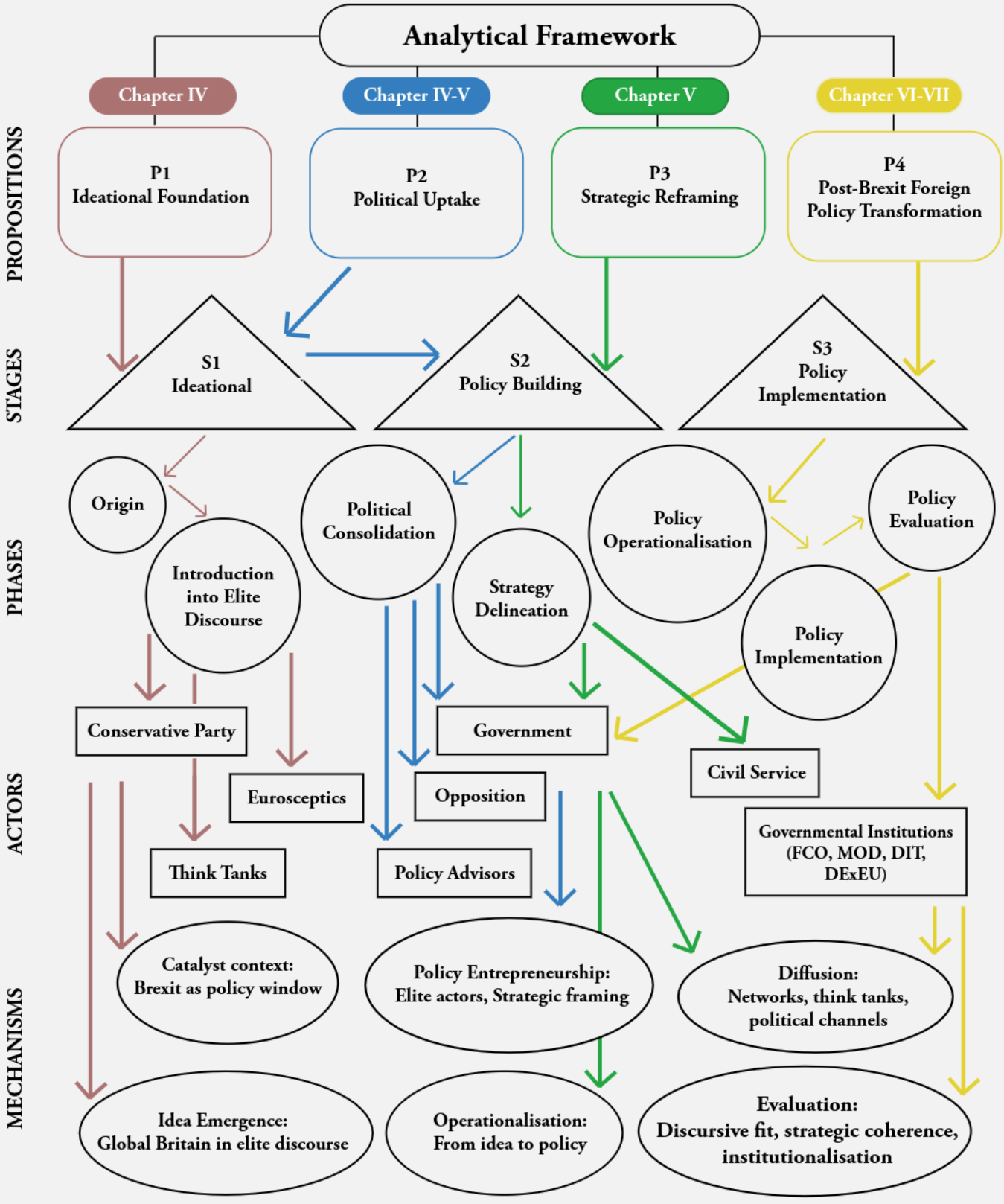


FIGURE 5 - ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK TO TRACE THE IDEA OF GLOBAL BRITAIN.

Alongside the structural sequencing of propositions, phases, and mechanisms outlined above, the analysis is organised around seven interrelated strands that capture the substantive ideational content of the Global Britain narrative. These strands were informed by two key sources: first, the thematic patterns identified in the literature review, which revealed recurring conceptual touchpoints in both academic and policy debates; and second, insights from a pilot exploratory study that assessed these categories against a small corpus of empirical material, helping to refine their scope and operational relevance. Together, they provide the thematic framework through which the narrative's internal logic can be unpacked. Each strand captures a distinct, yet often overlapping, dimension of meaning, allowing the analysis to trace not only the presence or absence of particular ideas, but also their evolution, interaction, and relative salience across political contexts. They function as the core analytical categories for the content analysis, guiding the systematic coding of speeches, policy documents, party manifestos, and elite interviews. In operational terms, each strand is further disaggregated into coding dimensions that capture specific discursive markers, strategic framings, and policy referents. This dual structure – linking broad conceptual strands to fine-grained coding indicators – ensures that the empirical chapters can identify both macro-level patterns and micro-level shifts in the articulation of Global Britain, thereby providing a robust evidentiary base for the interpretive claims advanced in this thesis.

The seven strands identified through the literature review and refined in the pilot content analysis form the thematic backbone for tracing the Global Britain narrative across time and political actors. To integrate both their empirical and theoretical value, **Table 1** merges the analytical focus and illustrative coding dimensions for each strand with their corresponding placement within Goldstein and Keohane's (1993a) typology of ideas – *principled beliefs*, *causal beliefs*, and *worldviews*. This consolidated presentation offers a single

visual reference point, showing not only how each strand will be operationalised in the content analysis, but also how it functions as an idea within a constructivist framework. By combining coding guidance with theoretical mapping, the table anchors the subsequent empirical analysis while maintaining attentiveness to the interpretive flexibility, political utility, and historical embeddedness of these strands.

In doing so, the framework also provides a methodological structure for integrating the multi-sited and multi-temporal dimensions of the evidence. This ensures that the analytical process remains alert to both continuity and change across the developmental trajectory of Global Britain. It anchors the empirical inquiry in a coherent set of analytical reference points, while allowing space for the contingencies, contradictions, and reinterpretations that inevitably accompany the political use of ideas. At the heart of this structure are seven thematic strands – *globalism versus isolationism; Britain's role in the world; declinist perspectives and the politics of status; relations with Europe; identity and values; actorness through foreign policy instruments (trade, security, diplomacy); and the role of strategic alliances* – distilled from the literature review and refined through pilot exploratory studies. **Table 1** consolidates these strands with their analytical focus, illustrative coding dimensions, and corresponding place within Goldstein and Keohane's (1993a) typology of ideas. Presenting them in this integrated form establishes the conceptual bridge between the theoretical discussion in this chapter and the empirical investigation that follows. Combined with a mixed-methods approach – content analysis of political and policy texts alongside elite interviews – this framework enables the tracing of the mechanisms outlined above through both discursive records and actor perceptions, revealing how Global Britain was articulated, institutionalised, and contested across multiple arenas of UK foreign policy-making

TABLE 1 – THE SEVEN STRANDS OF GLOBAL BRITAIN: ANALYTICAL FOCUS, CODING DIMENSIONS, AND IDEATIONAL TYPOLOGY.

Strand	Analytical Focus	Illustrative Coding Dimensions	Ideational Register	Constructivist Relevance
S1 Globalism vs. Isolationism	How UK's foreign policy discourse balances openness to global engagement with inward-looking or isolationist tendencies.	References to global leadership; open trade; cooperation vs. sovereignty-first rhetoric; opposition to "isolation" labels.	Worldview: broad assumptions about the UK's place in the international order	Frames the overarching discursive space in which all other strands are negotiated
S2 Britain's Role in the World	Conceptions of status, responsibility, and positioning in the international order.	Descriptions of Britain as a great/middle power; leadership claims; global influence.	Worldview: foundational beliefs about Britain's identity as a global actor	Anchors the narrative in a long-standing repertoire of global identity claims
S3 Declinist Perspectives & Politics of Status	Narratives of decline, loss, or resurgence in Britain's international standing.	"Decline" language; restoration rhetoric; exceptionalism; nostalgia for past influence.	Principled Belief: normative framing of status, prestige, and responsibility	Shapes legitimacy claims and the moral vocabulary of Britain's foreign policy
S4 Relations with Europe	The UK's positioning towards the EU and Europe more broadly.	Cooperation vs. divergence; sovereignty arguments; Europe as partner/rival; Brexit as rupture/continuity.	Causal Belief: assumptions about how European relations shape UK interests	Defines relational positioning and perceived constraints/opportunities in Europe
S5 Identity and Values	The role of national identity, political values, and cultural narratives in foreign policy.	References to democracy, rule of law, liberal values; British exceptionalism; national pride.	Principled Belief: normative commitments linked to democracy, liberty, human rights	Sustains ideational coherence through appeals to shared values and traditions
S6 Actorness through Foreign Policy Instruments	Use of trade, security, and diplomacy as means of exerting influence.	Mentions of defence capabilities, trade policy, diplomatic networks, development aid.	Causal Belief: instrumental logics linking tools (trade, security, diplomacy) to influence	Connects material capabilities with the symbolic projection of power
S7 Role of Strategic Alliances	Relationships with key allies and multilateral groupings.	UK–US "special relationship"; NATO; Commonwealth; Indo-Pacific partnerships.	Causal Belief: strategic assumptions about alliances as multipliers of influence	Link historical partnerships to contemporary strategic positioning

CONCLUSION

This chapter has established the theoretical foundations needed to trace the influence of ideas on foreign policy, using the case of Global Britain as an empirical example. In line with **Proposition 1 (*Ideational Foundation*)**, the central assertion is that ideas are not peripheral embellishments but formative conceptual frameworks that shape the conditions under which policy is made. Consistent with **Proposition 3 (*Strategic Reframing*)**, such ideas can command strategic decisions and recast the policy agenda in moments of political change. Finally, echoing **Proposition 4 (*Post-Brexit Foreign Policy Transformation*)**, they can become embedded within institutions, structuring the ways in which policy is formulated, communicated, and sustained over time.

The chapter began by addressing the methodological and conceptual difficulties of studying foreign policy within the context of Brexit, a pivotal moment that blurred the lines between continuity and change. It contended that Brexit should be seen not as a one-time event but as a policy opportunity that created space for new narratives – or old narratives presented in a fresh semblance – to emerge and gain traction.

The discussion then engaged with relevant theoretical approaches that have studied British foreign policy through an ideational lens. While role theory, discourse analysis, and strategic narrative studies have enriched the debate, this thesis follows a different path – one more directly grounded in the ideational framework developed by Goldstein and Keohane (1993a). Their distinction between worldviews, principled beliefs, and causal beliefs offers a conceptual architecture for understanding how ideas inform foreign policy preferences and behaviours, especially during strategic reorientation. Ideas do not operate in isolation; they require political actors, institutional support, and cultural resonance to survive the policy process. The chapter explored the literature on ideational innovation

and policy entrepreneurship to understand better these dynamics and the mechanisms of diffusion, uptake, and eventual institutionalisation.

The chapter then turned to Social Constructivism, arguing that this theoretical tradition is best equipped to explain how ideas, identities, and meanings are socially constructed and politically mobilised. Constructivism allows us to trace how shared understandings are formed, how they become embedded in policy frameworks, and how they interact with institutional and cultural variables. It also helps to clarify the relationship between ideas and national interests – an essential move when evaluating the ideational content of Global Britain.

Building on this theoretical base, the chapter advanced a broader conception of foreign policy construction. This involved recognising that the delineation of foreign policy strategy does not begin with selecting material instruments but with formulating ideas about Britain's identity, its place in the world, and the ends and means of its international engagement. In this sense, ideas are not epiphenomenal but constitutive of strategy itself. The chapter also discussed ideational innovation, focusing on how ideas emerge, diffuse, and become policy-relevant. Concepts such as policy entrepreneurship, policy windows, and knowledge regimes were examined to understand the pathways through which political actors – inside and outside government – convey, interpret, and challenge ideas.

The final sections synthesised these threads into an analytical framework that will guide the empirical analysis in the next part of the thesis. It outlined the conditions under which ideas succeed or fail, highlighting the importance of political timing, institutional alignment, and elite endorsement. It also highlighted the conceptual tools needed to assess ideational success – from the spread of a narrative to becoming the focus of official strategies such as the 2021 Integrated Review and the 2023 Integrated Review Refresh.

In short, this chapter has provided the conceptual framework for the empirical analysis that follows. By outlining a framework for tracing the trajectory of Global Britain – from its historical antecedents to its post-referendum institutionalisation – it has proposed a way of understanding the idea not as a coherent doctrine but as a dynamic narrative shaped through interaction between political actors, institutional settings, and moments of strategic disruption. This framework directly supports the thesis's central inquiry into how ideas gain influence in foreign policy-making. The next chapter turns to the question of how this framework is applied in practice, detailing the research design, data sources, and analytical procedures used to investigate the emergence, transformation, and operationalisation of Global Britain within the post-Brexit British foreign policy system.

CHAPTER III

TRACING GLOBAL BRITAIN

Ideas matter, but only if we can trace the processes through which they are selected, reframed, and institutionalised. (P. A. Hall 1989a, 4)

INTRODUCTION

The preceding chapter laid the conceptual foundations for this thesis by proposing a theoretical framework rooted in Social Constructivism and the ideational turn in foreign policy analysis. It argued that ideas are not peripheral to policymaking but central to shaping strategic thinking, institutional behaviour, and political discourse. Through this lens, Global Britain will be viewed as an idea with historical roots and strategic significance, whose evolution into a guiding post-Brexit foreign policy narrative requires close empirical examination.

This chapter sets out the methodological framework for tracing the emergence, diffusion, and institutionalisation of Global Britain. As established in **Proposition 1 (*Ideational Foundation*)**, the concept did not materialise spontaneously in the aftermath of Brexit but reflects a longer trajectory of political discourse and historical positioning. In line with **Proposition 2 (*Political Uptake*)**, its consolidation involved processes of institutional negotiation and adoption by political actors across government and party lines. Consistent with **Proposition 4 (*Post-Brexit Foreign Policy Transformation*)**, the analysis also recognises how this narrative became embedded in the institutional machinery of foreign policy-making during a period of strategic change. To investigate these dynamics – and,

in keeping with **Proposition 3 (*Strategic Reframing*)**, to examine how the idea was mobilised to recast the implications of Brexit – the thesis adopts a mixed-methods approach designed to capture the complexity of ideational influence across both discursive and institutional arenas.

The thesis deploys a three-phase framework – ideation, policy building, and policy implementation – broken down into six stages that trace the journey of Global Britain from conceptual origin to policy execution.[66] Distinct groups of actors populate these stages: ideational entrepreneurs, policy architects, and governmental engineers. The aim is to map how this idea entered political discourse, gained traction across institutional settings, and was operationalised in strategic documents such as the Integrated Review (2021) and its Refresh (2023).

The chapter justifies the use of two complementary methods: content analysis and elite interviews. Each contributes uniquely to the research aims. Content analysis enables the systematic examination of discourse across key political texts, revealing how the idea of Global Britain was articulated, contested, and reframed over time. Elite interviews provide insight into how the idea was interpreted, adopted, or challenged by decision-makers, advisors, and policy influencers operating within the British foreign policy machinery.

Together, these methods offer a triangulated approach that supports operationalising the analytical framework introduced in the previous chapter. This chapter also addresses the methodological challenges of studying ideational change – particularly the longstanding critique of anti-empiricism often directed at constructivist research. As Goldstein and

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[66] Please refer to **Figure 5** for a visual representation of the three-phase framework outlined in this paragraph.

Keohane (1993b, 6) argued, there is both a need and a possibility to empirically study the influence of ideas 'with the tools of social science'. This chapter embraces the imperative by treating ideas as observable and traceable elements in political life and through empirical inquiry through a mixed-methods design.

The remainder of the chapter is structured as follows: it outlines the research design and methodological rationale before presenting an overview of the research sample. It then discusses the individual methods employed – their strengths, limitations, and integration into a cohesive research strategy. Subsequent sections address data collection and management, the analytical process, ethical considerations, and the delimitations of the study. While this chapter presents the overarching logic of inquiry, further methodological details will be provided at the beginning of each empirical chapter to reflect the specific methods applied in each research phase.

3.1. Research Design & Analytical Scope

This thesis employs a qualitative historical research design to trace the origin, development, and operationalisation of the idea of Global Britain within UK foreign policy. While anchored in Social Constructivism, the analysis is empirically grounded and methodologically pluralist, combining content analysis and elite interviews to examine how this idea travelled through the political system and shaped policy direction in the post-Brexit context.

A historical lens is essential since the study concerns events and processes going on for several decades. This approach facilitates mapping ideas across time and political space, allowing one to trace connections between key political narratives, institutional

developments, and elite-level decisions. Instead of concentrating on a single event, this research follows a broader idea – examining the evolution of foreign policy from the post-war period to the rise, acceptance, and eventual integration of Global Britain during the Brexit era.

The methodological structure was developed to investigate a single case – the idea of Global Britain – while placing it in a broader historical and institutional context. The study is deductive in that it begins with a set of theoretical assumptions, derived from Constructivism and ideational literature, and then tests those through empirical observations. Initial propositions were informed by exploratory reading, but the core analytical work is designed to assess and refine those propositions using qualitative evidence.

The methods deployed – content analysis and elite interviews – are complementary in capturing the discursive dimensions and actor-centred processes that reinforce the development of Global Britain. While discourse is crucial to this inquiry, the study moves beyond discourse analysis by investigating the relational, institutional, and political mechanisms that gave the idea traction. This responds to the common critique that Constructivist research is overly interpretivist or insufficiently empirical.

TEMPORAL FRAMEWORK

The temporal scope of this thesis is extensive, stretching from the post-Second World War period to the publication of the Integrated Review Refresh in 2023. While the core focus lies in the post-referendum period (2016–2023), tracing the genealogy of Global Britain required revisiting earlier discursive and strategic formulations in British foreign

policy. The aim is to locate Global Britain within a broader historical trajectory, examining its emergence not as a spontaneous invention but as an ideational evolution shaped by decades of elite-level discourse and institutional development.

The temporal framework was also structured to reflect the multi-phase nature of Brexit. Four interrelated phases were considered:

- **Foundational Phase (f-phase):** This phase encompasses the post-Second World War period and the first UK referendum on European membership in 1975. It represents the foundational moment in which the UK grappled with the loss of Empire, the construction of a new global identity, and early tensions between Atlanticist and European orientations.
- **Eurosceptic Phase (e-phase):** Beginning with the 1975 referendum and spanning to 2012, this phase charts the emergence of Euroscepticism and its entanglement with debates over Britain's international role.
- **Referendum Phase (r-phase):** From Cameron's Bloomberg Speech in 2013 to the triggering of Article 50 in March 2017, this phase includes the formal referendum process and the ideological groundwork that made Brexit politically viable.
- **Negotiation Phase (n-phase):** Between March 2017 and January 2020, this stage covers the UK's official negotiations with the EU and the foreign policy ambiguity that defined this period.
- **Post-Brexit Phase (p-phase):** Beginning in February 2020 and continuing through to 2023, this phase captures the operationalisation of Global Britain in foreign policy, culminating in strategic documents such as the Integrated Review (2021) and its 2023 refresh.

The selection of 2023 as the study's endpoint was not incidental. It captures the publication of the Integrated Review Refresh, the geopolitical recalibration prompted by the Russian illegal invasion of Ukraine, and the apparent disappearance of Global Britain from official discourse. It also marks a new institutional inflexion point with the return of

David Cameron as Foreign Secretary, symbolising a shift in narrative tone and foreign policy emphasis.[67]

GENEALOGICAL LOGIC

Although the research followed a genealogical approach – tracing discursive continuities and ideational reconfiguration – the empirical chapters are structured chronologically. This ordering allows for a more intuitive understanding of the evolution of Global Britain from marginal rhetoric to strategic narrative. It also reflects the core guiding proposition that Global Britain's influence was not constant but changed over time, shaped by different political actors and institutional conditions.

The genealogical tracing was used primarily to reconstruct the ideational lineage and historical layers of meaning attached to Global Britain. However, for the purposes of demonstration and analysis, a chronological narrative was adopted to illustrate moments of introduction, consolidation, transformation, and decline. It is important to note that this thesis does not claim to offer an exhaustive genealogy of the idea across every political moment between 1945 and 2023. Instead, a purposive selection of moments has been made, grounded in their political salience and relevance to foreign policy transformation or re-articulation of the UK's international role.

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[67] David Cameron was appointed Foreign Secretary by Prime Minister Rishi Sunak in November 2023, returning to government seven years after resigning as Prime Minister in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum.

This methodological choice reflects a pragmatic constraint – the impossibility of tracing a single idea through every instance of political discourse across nearly eight decades – and an analytical commitment to focus on key ideational and institutional change junctures. The moments selected for close analysis represent episodes of strategic reflection, redefinition, or contestation in UK foreign policy. These include, among others, the Suez withdrawal (1956), the 1975 referendum on EC membership, the foreign policy realignment following the election of New Labour in 1997, and the ideational recalibration following the Brexit referendum in 2016.

Focusing on these junctures, the thesis evaluates whether and how Global Britain surfaced in each context, identifying continuities, ruptures, and reconfigurations in the discourse. This genealogical logic – paired with a chronological narrative – allows for historical depth and analytical clarity, tracing how an idea is inherited, reinterpreted, and eventually institutionalised within the UK's foreign policy structures.

The following sections will describe how the two methods – content analysis and elite interviews – were applied to study the development and institutionalisation of Global Britain. These methods are further contextualised in each empirical chapter, where their specific application and contribution to the study are laid out.

3.2. Methodological Rationale

This research employs a mixed-methods approach that integrates two complementary methods: content analysis and elite interviews. This section outlines the selection and refinement of these methods, clarifying how each supports the research aims and aligns with the analytical framework introduced in the previous chapter.

The research design and methodological choices outlined in this chapter are directly aligned with the research question: What is the origin of Global Britain, and how has this idea shaped the UK's foreign policy in the context of Brexit? (**RQ**) – and with the four propositions (**P1-P4**) developed in the theory chapter. Content analysis helps identify when and where the narrative of Global Britain originated, how political actors framed it, and how its importance changed over time. Elite interviews offer valuable insights into how decision-makers understood the concept, its impact on strategic thinking, and how internal debates influenced its acceptance or rejection. Together, these methods enable a thorough examination of ideational emergence, political uptake, strategic reframing, and foreign policy change, directly addressing the four main propositions. The use of multiple sources ensures rigorous methodology and that each empirical chapter is based on solid evidence to support the research goals.

Understanding how the literature on ideas and foreign policy has developed methodological frameworks is essential for grounding the research design. Swinkels (2020, 298) proposes a systematisation of how policy ideas can be studied, offering three dominant positions: ideas as heuristics, strategic tools, and institutional frameworks. The approach adopted in this thesis draws upon a hybrid conceptualisation of ideas, which reflects how Global Britain has operated both as a rhetorical strategy and as a frame embedded in political and institutional practices.[68]

In Swinkels' (2020, 298) typology, different methodological tools align with different conceptual approaches: interviews are often employed to study ideas as heuristics, while content analysis is commonly used to explore ideas as institutional frameworks. This

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[68] As discussed in chapter II.

study's selection of elite interviews and content analysis reflects this logic. It establishes a robust methodological foundation for tracing the emergence, evolution, and institutionalisation of the concept of Global Britain across different political phases and contexts.

In post-Brexit British foreign policy, discourse analysis has been the dominant methodological approach (Daddow 2019; M. Smith 2019; Gaskarth and Langdon 2021). Many such studies have taken a narrative-focused or rhetorical perspective. However, few have combined this with systematic content analysis, and fewer have incorporated elite interviews. While the literature is rich in discursive analyses of Global Britain, a gap exists in understanding how this idea travelled through political institutions and networks – particularly from the policymakers' perspective.

To address this, the research followed a phased methodological process, outlined in **Figure 7**, which captures the sequence of key stages, from source exploration to final triangulation and analysis. The research began with a literature review (**Step 1**), followed by source mapping (**S2**) to determine the viability of parliamentary debates, governmental documents, and public speeches as primary sources. The aim was to capture both the discursive presence and temporal frequency of Global Britain across political texts.[69]

A preliminary research design was developed (**S3**), followed by the creation of a content analysis codebook (**S4**). This was assessed through an initial pilot study (**S5**), which

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[69] If one thinks broadly about foreign policy strategy, one can consider the example of the National Security Strategy, which was only published for the first time in 2008 by the Labour-led government of Gordon Brown. Documents proposing security policies or strategies were not evident and easy to find before 2008. However, this does not mean the UK had no security strategy before this date.

analysed a sample of Brexit-related speeches in Parliament to refine search filters and thematic categories. After integrating feedback (**S6**), a revised second pilot study was conducted (**S7**), extending the analysis to a broader period (2016–2021) and including manifestos and think tank publications. These studies highlighted the limitations of content analysis alone in capturing the entire ideational trajectory of Global Britain.

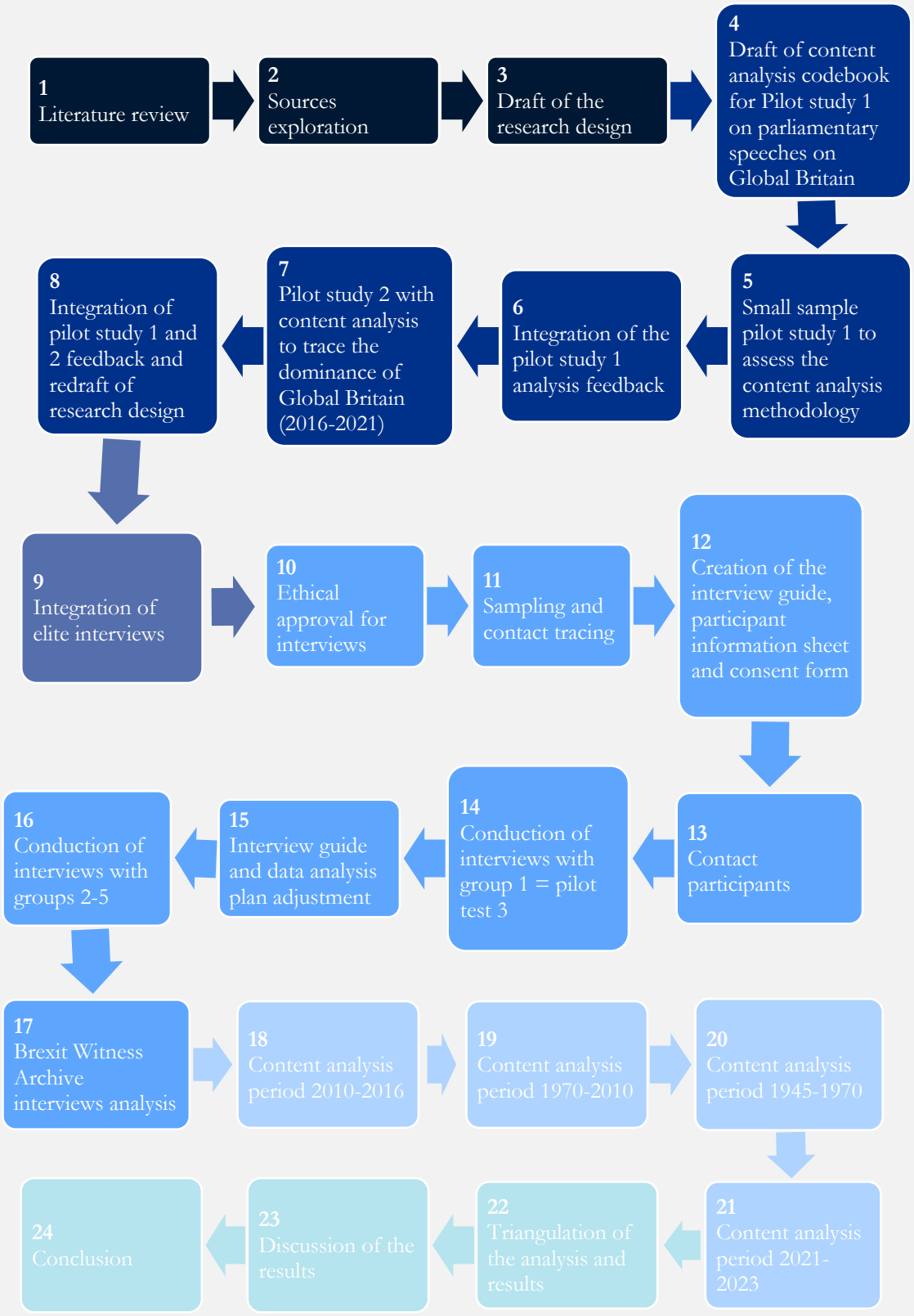


FIGURE 6 - METHODOLOGICAL PROCESS FOLLOWED.

Consequently, the research design was updated (**S8**) to integrate elite interviews as a second method. While content analysis allowed the mapping of how Global Britain was presented in discourse, interviews provided critical insight into why specific ideas gained traction, who promoted them, and under what institutional conditions. This qualitative complement helped overcome the limitations of textual data – particularly regarding informal dynamics and behind-the-scenes decision-making.[70]

After securing ethical approval (**S10**), the sampling and planning began (**S11**). Interview protocols, participant information sheets, and consent forms were developed (**S12**), and participants were contacted (**S13**). A small first wave of interviews (**Group 1**) served as a pilot (**S14**), refining the interview guide and validating the data analysis strategy (**S15**).[71] The process continued with interviews across four additional groups (**S16**), though low response rates prompted a methodological adjustment. The *Brexit Witness Archive* was integrated (**S17**) to supplement the primary data, offering access to elite interviews with high-level politicians relevant to the thesis.[72] The content analysis of political texts continued in parallel, conducted in four chronological phases (**S18-21**) using a genealogical

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[70] It should be noted that current informal narratives navigate through informal technological platforms like WhatsApp, X (previously known as Twitter) or Substack.

[71] The section on elite interviews further in this chapter categorises interviewees into five distinct groups.

[72] More detail follows in the section on elite interviews.

approach. In the final stages, the findings were triangulated (**S22**), and a synthesis of findings was developed (**S23**), leading to the research conclusion (**S24**).[73]

The mixed-method approach adopted in this thesis allowed for a more layered understanding of ideational development. Content analysis revealed the discursive evolution of Global Britain, while elite interviews offered critical insight into its political uptake, institutional embedding, and strategic adaptation. Although the methods were not used in equal proportion, they served distinct and complementary roles. Content analysis provided a longer historical arc, while elite interviews deepened the interpretation of more recent developments.

In line with an interpretive approach, particular attention was paid to how the researcher's positionality might have influenced both the generation and interpretation of data. Awareness of potential preconceptions and their impact on question framing and data interpretation informed the design and conduct of interviews. Reflexive transparency was maintained throughout, recognising that meanings emerge through interaction and are not simply captured or transmitted.

This section has traced the methodological process, integrating two distinct but complementary methods to ensure a rigorous and multi-dimensional analysis of Global

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[73] This methodology can be applicable to other contexts in future research, allowing for inferences to be made about other countries. The significant contributions of this case to existing literature will support its internal validity. By proposing methodological frameworks that can be generalised and applied to other cases, one can achieve external validity. Additionally, it is essential to guarantee the reliability of the analysis, which can be assessed through three criteria: stability, reproducibility, and accuracy.

Britain as an idea in motion. The following section provides a detailed explanation of the contribution of each method.

3.3. A Mixed-Methods Strategy

This thesis employs a mixed-methods research strategy, combining content analysis and elite interviews to study the emergence, diffusion, and institutionalisation of the idea of Global Britain in the context of Brexit. These two methods are not applied equally in scope but serve complementary purposes, each contributing to the core objective of tracing how Global Britain evolved from rhetorical formulation to policy narrative.

Content analysis is used for three primary purposes: to understand British foreign policy discourse in the context of Brexit, to measure the content and meaning of Global Britain across time, and to identify political actors, institutional contexts, and discursive patterns that inform the operationalisation of the idea. As Weber (1985, 9) explains, content analysis enables researchers to draw inferences about the political actor and the message, identify actor intentions and characteristics, 'reflect cultural patterns', and 'describe trends in communication content'. Berelson (1952) also draws attention to the possibility of comparing levels of communication and untangling attitudes, interests, and values. This is particularly valuable when analysing large volumes of political text, such as parliamentary debates, manifestos, government strategies, and think tank reports.

As Krippendorff (2013a, 52) adds, 'extrapolations are inferences of unobserved instances in the intervals between or beyond the observations'. In this case, extrapolation is employed not to speculate about individual statements but to identify broader ideational patterns across time. As one example, Krippendorff (2013a, 55) highlights 'the analysis of

genealogies within a body of literature through patterns of citation'. Similarly, this thesis traces Global Britain through reference patterns and reinterpretation in political speech and policy documents.[74]

Moreover, Krippendorff (2013a, 120) outlines a clear protocol for sampling in content analysis: beginning with a conceptual hierarchy and reducing the number of units analysed systematically – even where they do not constitute the entire text population – to focus on the subset most relevant to the inquiry. Accordingly, the sample was refined through a keyword-based approach. Lacy *et al.* (2015, 794) advise that 'to limit the role of individual subjectivity, researchers should draw upon literature and previous studies to assemble

TABLE 2 – MAIN KEYWORDS AND PROXIES USED FOR SAMPLING AND CONTENT ANALYSIS.

Main keyword	global britain	foreign policy	brexit	european union	trade	economy
Proxy	global	common-wealth	referendum	EU	common-wealth	business
	globalisation	alliance	deal	union	free market	market
	world	security	euroscepticism	membership	single market	monetary
	tradition	defence	control		trading nation	austerity
	identity	development	sovereignty		free trade	fiscal
	values	aid				Eurozone
	empire	isolationism				tax
	anglosphere	democracy				
	global power					
	leadership					

[74] Krippendorff (2013a) gives examples of studies that created a thriving association of patterns. The first study worth mentioning is from Bale (1950) (quoted in Krippendorff 2013a, 55), where his 'interaction process analysis yielded patterns of communication' and decision-making. The second study was developed by Holsti, Brody and North (1965) (quoted in Krippendorff 2013a, 55) and focussed on the study of 'public statements made by major decision-makers in the United States and the Soviet Union during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis'. Content analysis is a method for approaching ideas as institutional frameworks (Swinkels 2020, 299). It is given the example of Bratberg's (2011) study, which analyses Blair and Chirac's speech in the context of the Iraq war, aiming 'to observe how their actions were guided by pre-existing guiding principles' (Swinkels 2020, 299).

multiple keywords or keyword strings that offer more than face validity'. In this thesis, the keyword universe shown in **Table 2** was derived from the Brexit and Global Britain literature and used to construct a codebook supported by software to assist mixed-method textual analysis.[75]

Content analysis also contributed to method integration by identifying key actors, discursive frames, and political moments. This enabled a targeted sampling process for elite interviews, allowing for the empirical exploration of gaps, silences, and informal interpretations inaccessible in written records. The diverse steps for conducting the content analysis – detailed in **Figure 8** – were considered based on advice suggested by the literature (Insch, Moore, and Murphy 1997; Halperin and Heath 2020, 377–79).

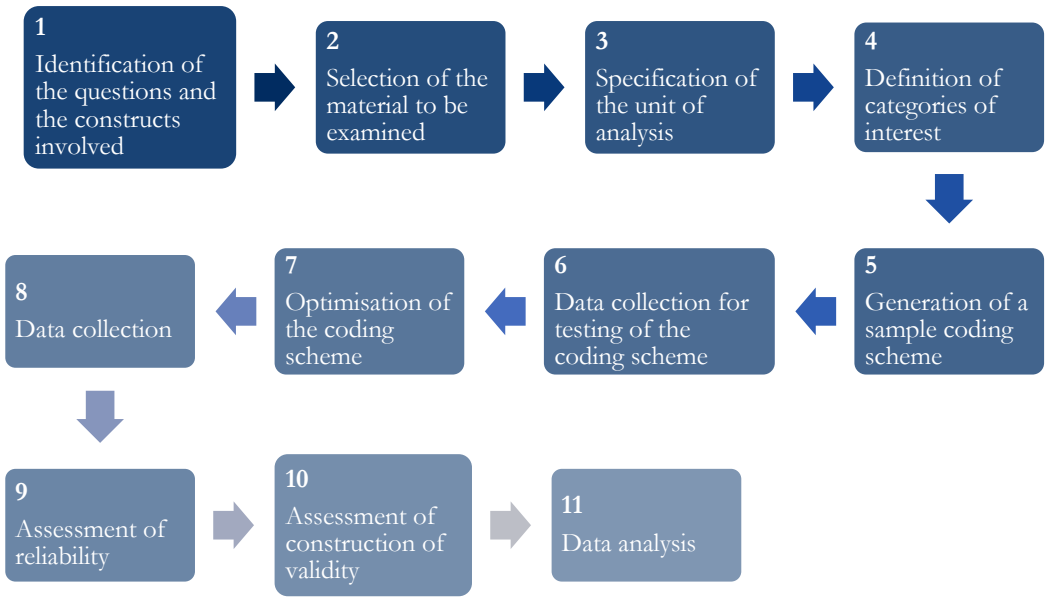


FIGURE 7 - MAIN STEPS FOLLOWED IN CONDUCTING CONTENT ANALYSIS.

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[75] As Weber (1985) argues, 'the best content analytic studies utilize both qualitative and quantitative operations on texts', which is what this thesis does in the empirical analysis. As the analysis comprised a large scale of documents, using software such as ReadMe/R was fundamental for mixed-method text analysis.

One key aim of conducting content analysis was to identify the main political actors to be interviewed. A solid understanding of the documents and characteristics of the political discourse facilitated a more transparent comprehension of the gaps in tracing the concept of Global Britain. Interviews with specific politicians of interest help to fill these knowledge gaps. The following paragraphs discuss using semi-structured interviews in research and the elite interviewing process.

Elite interviews were used for three key reasons: to disentangle the transformation of the UK's foreign policy strategy, to understand how interviewees interpreted Global Britain in light of Brexit, and to trace the role of decision-makers, advisers, and insiders in shaping the narrative. As Halperin and Heath (2020, 333) mention, elite interviews are valuable for accessing 'information that might not otherwise be available to a researcher' and for confirming 'the accuracy of the information that has previously been collected from other sources'.[76]

Alongside the content analysis, elite interviews 'can enable a researcher to make inferences about the beliefs or actions of a wider population of political elites' (Halperin and Heath 2020, 322). These interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions to 'enable participants to present their individual understandings and experiences' (King, Horrocks,

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[76] In parallel, Swinkels (2020, 299) identifies elite interviews as a method aligned with studying ideas as heuristics – where interviews are used to 'uncover self-reported assumptions, beliefs and ideas of individuals'. For example, Radaelli and O'Connor's (2009) work on governance belief systems in EU committees illustrates how interview data can illuminate shared assumptions and ideational consensus within institutions.

and Brooks 2019, 17). This interpretive flexibility allowed respondents to articulate their own interpretation of what Global Britain meant in policy and strategic terms.

The sampling strategy initially sought to engage five distinct groups of participants (see **Figure 9**), including political elites, civil servants, and members of the think tank community. The pilot phase included interviews with participants from **Group 3**, which helped refine the protocol. Thereafter, participants from the remaining groups were approached during the second phase of interviews.

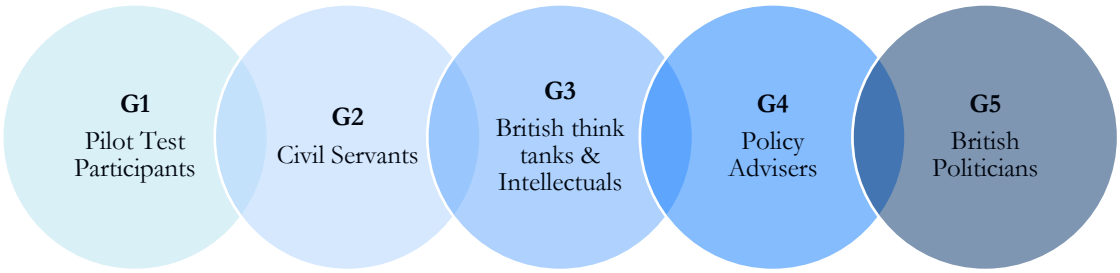


FIGURE 8 - SAMPLED PARTICIPANT GROUPS FOR THE ELITE INTERVIEWS.

Several limitations were anticipated and encountered. First, online interviews offered flexibility and broader access but presented risks – including reduced engagement and spontaneity.[77] Second, some interviewees – particularly those with active political roles – were cautious due to the controversial and polarised nature of content associated with Brexit. Third, the researcher's positionality as a non-British but EU early-career scholar

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[77] All participants preferred an online meeting. Interviews were planned for 30 minutes, but some went until 50 minutes. Were contacted at least hundred participants.

without personal or professional ties within the Westminster setting limited access to elite participants, as predicted.

Two key strategies were implemented to address these constraints. First, secondary sources – including political memoirs – were used to supplement original interviews. Second, the *Brexit Witness Archive* curated by the UK in a Changing Europe was incorporated. This repository includes detailed interviews with political actors already targeted in the study's sample universe.[78] Their inclusion enhanced data triangulation and ensured coverage of relevant perspectives even where primary interviews proved challenging to secure.

Together, content analysis and elite interviews provided a complementary research design well-suited to the analytical goals of the thesis. Content analysis traced the language and evolution of Global Britain, while elite interviews offered insights into the strategic motivations and interpretive agency behind the narrative. In combination, they create a methodology capable of evaluating ideas as abstract concepts and politically contested tools within institutional, rhetorical, and relational contexts. The following section outlines the study's sample and data, followed by details on analytical procedures, ethical protocols, and issues of trustworthiness.

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[78] Even though few interviews were available in the repository, 20 matched the ones in our sample of 300 individuals, which led to integrating their interview transcriptions into the analysis.

3.4. Research Sample & Data Overview

Since this thesis aims to understand where the idea of Global Britain comes from, the research sample was constructed to reflect a genealogical inquiry. It begins in 2023 and moves retrospectively to trace the ideational evolution of Global Britain through earlier periods of British foreign policy discourse. This tracing process included post-Second World War narratives, constituting the analytical starting point. As such, the temporal scope of the study spans 78 years, from 1945 to 2023.

The diversity of sources included in this research – from official government documents and parliamentary debates to think tank reports, memoirs, and elite interviews – reflects a deliberate effort to capture distinct discourse typologies, as Hansen (2012) emphasised. While institutional narratives often dominate foreign policy scholarship, Hansen (2012, 375–80) argues that meaningful discourse analysis requires engaging with competing and overlapping discursive formations. Consequently, the research aims not only to examine the formal structure of the Global Britain narrative within government institutions but also to compare and contrast its mobilisation, challenges, and reinterpretations across different political and discursive contexts. This diverse methodology allows for a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the evolution and dispute of ideas over time.

The research population is divided into two main categories. The first comprises written textual sources analysed through content analysis, and the second consists of elite

interview participants.[79] Combined, these two categories form the foundation of the empirical investigation and are illustrated in **Figure 10**.

In terms of primary and secondary sources, the study incorporates a wide range of written materials, including government speeches, official strategy documents (mainly from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office), parliamentary debates, party manifestos, reports by Brexit campaign organisations, and outputs from prominent UK-based think tanks. Think tanks are especially valuable in this context, as they often serve as 'idea brokers' within the policy process, providing strategic frames for foreign policy decision-makers (Brozus and Maull 2018).[80]

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[79] Primary and original data were also collected through the interviews, which were recorded and transcribed via *Microsoft Teams*. For more information regarding confidentiality, please consult the ethical considerations.

[80] The importance of informal data collection should also be mentioned. The reading of national newspapers and the use of *Twitter* revealed particularly suitable methods to gain knowledge on the people involved in the Government or connected to members of the Government and Parliament, but also collaborating closely with civil servants (like in the FCO) or policy advisers. These names and correspondent roles were confirmed, and some were part of the purposive sample chosen for sending an interview request. Platforms such as *LinkedIn* or *Rocket Reach* were vital not only for confirming their roles and the accuracy of information but also for collecting contacts.

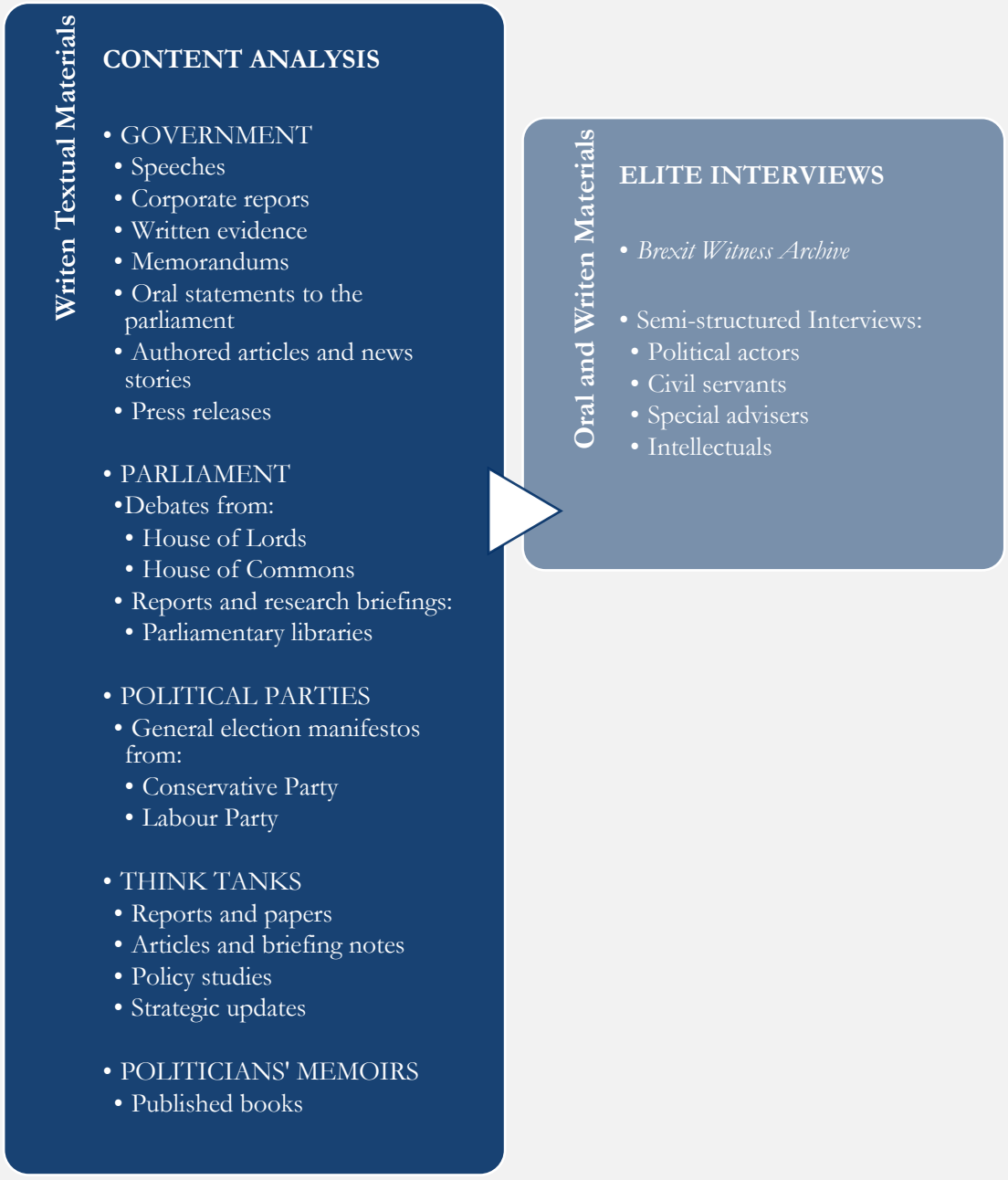


FIGURE 9 - RESEARCH POPULATION USED IN THE STUDY.

To complement these, the research also draws on political memoirs authored by key actors such as politicians, policy advisers, and civil servants. Given their retrospective selectivity and potential for self-justification, as noted by Hill (1979, 26) noted, such sources were treated cautiously. They provide first-person insights into the ideational climate and internal political intentions influencing foreign policy decisions. Their inclusion, therefore, is driven by a critical reading strategy that recognises both their value and limitations.

Non-Probability Sampling

The study adopts a consistent non-probability sampling approach for both methods to ensure coherence across methodological stages. This form of sampling allows for greater control over the selection process. It ensures the inclusion of key political actors, institutions, and discursive outputs deemed essential to reconstructing the ideational trajectory of Global Britain and corroborating findings across data sources.

For the content analysis, purposive sampling was employed to select documents from five main political actors: the Government, Parliament, the Conservative and Unionist Party, the Labour Party, and a targeted selection of British think tanks. The focus was on textual units directly relevant to the research question, particularly those that engage with or reference Global Britain in the context of Brexit or broader foreign policy strategy. Documents were selected based on their potential to help trace the evolution of this idea and its institutional uptake. Regarding think tanks, selection criteria were based on their prominence within the British policy landscape and their known engagement with foreign policy and Brexit-related topics.

As Krippendorff (2013a, 120–21) states, 'the resulting sample is defined by the analytical problem at hand' – a point that justifies relevance sampling, also known as purposive sampling. However, it is worth acknowledging the limitations associated with this approach. First, issues of representation may arise, not about the broader textual universe, but concerning the selected subset of relevant texts. Second, the abundance of digital content and archival sources can make identifying pertinent materials particularly challenging due to a large volume of irrelevant material (Krippendorff 2013a, 120–21).

Regarding elite interviews, sampling also followed a non-probability logic. In the first phase, positional criteria were applied to identify individuals in government, parliament, political parties, and think tanks whose formal roles indicated relevance to British foreign policy or the Brexit process. This phase followed a preliminary content analysis round, allowing the building of sufficient contextual knowledge to inform this selection, as suggested by Tansey (2007, 770).

Subsequently, reputational criteria were introduced through a snowball sampling technique. As Tansey (2007, 770) notes, when researching elite environments, it is often impossible to know which individuals exert the most significant influence in advance. As such, early interviewees were asked to suggest others whom they believed had played a key role or held valuable insights into the narrative construction and policy shaping around Global Britain. This chain-referral process enhanced the sample while maintaining its relevance to the analytical objectives.

Figure 11 synthesises sampling selected and used in the study. The advantages of non-probability sampling, particularly purposive and snowball approaches, lie in the ability to include strategic respondents and ensure that elite perspectives are adequately captured. However, these benefits are limited by certain factors. First, the sample cannot be

generalised statistically. Second, there is an inherent selection bias, particularly if the chain-referral process favours institutional or ideological networks (Tansey 2007, 768–69).

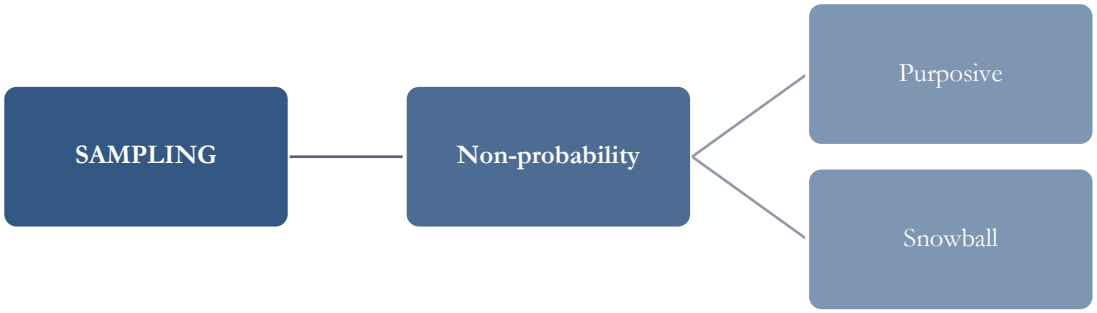


FIGURE 10 - SAMPLING TYPES USED IN THE STUDY.

In practice, the primary challenge regarding elite interviews was not participant rejection but access. Even where contact details were identified, many political actors did not respond or expressed discomfort discussing Brexit or foreign policy, citing limited expertise or political sensitivities. Some viewed Brexit as a topic outside their immediate domain, even if they were institutionally involved in broader processes. Personalised follow-ups were sent to address this, emphasising how their specific experience or institutional position related to the thesis aims. While respondents were often willing to name relevant organisations, they were less inclined to share individual names or contact details – an obstacle overcome through targeted searches of organisational directories and public-facing staff lists.[81]

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[81] Anticipating the potential for high rejection rates – given the political sensitivity of Brexit and the difficulty of accessing serving or recently retired political actors – a large pool of over two hundred individuals was targeted.

Two complementary non-probability sampling strategies, purposive and snowball, were employed. Initially, a sample was built using documentary evidence and the relevance of actors; subsequently, recommendations from participants were sought to include lesser-known yet influential figures. Although this method lacks statistical representativeness, it produced a theoretically informed and analytically robust dataset for exploring the emergence, circulation, and influence of the concept of Global Britain on British foreign policy following Brexit.

Data Analysis & Management: Ensuring Reliability and Validity

The analysis phase commenced after data collection, organisation, and sampling. It consisted of two stages. The first stage involved content analysis of written documents, while the second concentrated on interview transcripts obtained from elite interviews. Both stages followed a systematic data reduction process, coding, and interpretation. Data reduction entailed systematically selecting, organising, and preparing textual materials, including political speeches, parliamentary debates, policy reports, and interview transcripts. The procedure involved standardised steps to filter, categorise, and adapt the material for analysis. This included the application of predefined coding schemes and the extraction of thematic content. This step allows for the interpretation of information using categories, themes, and motifs that reveal 'patterns and relationships', ultimately helping to 'summarize patterns of similarities', identify 'significance of any differences between specific groups', and provide 'in-depth explanations for patterns of behaviour' (Halperin and Heath 2020, 329).

The final step in preparing the data for empirical analysis was the inductive identification of the thematic components that guide the content analysis of the Global Britain narrative across different historical moments. These seven components emerged initially through two pilot studies (with a sample between 2016 and 2020), which helped structure the categories and codes used in textual analysis. Their relevance was further validated through reference patterns found during the literature review (Chapter I), which repeatedly emphasised issues such as Britain's global role, its perceived decline, relationships with international alliances, and tensions between isolationism and internationalism. Together, these themes create the foundation for tracing Global Britain in the empirical chapters, facilitating a structured but adaptable evaluation of both continuity and change in ideas over time.

To ensure reliability in the coding process, several measures were taken at different stages. First, an initial round of exploratory coding was conducted on a pilot sample to assess the clarity, distinctiveness, and operational relevance of each code. Where overlaps or ambiguities appeared, codes were refined, split, or merged to ensure they were mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive for the research questions.

To strengthen reliability, the coding process followed an iterative approach. After the pilot phase, the refined codebook was applied to a larger exploratory sample, and results were compared to verify whether similar patterns and categories emerged consistently. While the coding was primarily carried out by the researcher, internal consistency checks were performed by revisiting previously coded materials at regular intervals to ensure that the same coding decisions were applied systematically across documents and time periods. This self-checking process, sometimes called intra-coder reliability, is particularly important in single-researcher projects and was complemented by maintaining detailed

coding memos that documented interpretive decisions, edge cases, and emerging sub-themes. Contradictory passages were not forced into codes but retained as evidence of narrative contestation, which was analytically significant in tracing competing interpretations of Global Britain.

In addition to internal checks, the initial findings and coding strategy developed during the pilot studies were presented at research seminars and relevant academic conferences between 2021 and 2023. This allowed for external scholarly feedback on the appropriateness, clarity, and interpretive coherence of the coding framework and thematic components. Critical questions and suggestions from peers and experts informed further refinements to the codebook and confirmed the relevance and analytical rigour of the categories used. This step ensured that the coding structure was not only internally consistent but also peer-reviewed within the broader academic community, enhancing the methodological transparency and credibility of the content analysis.

Finally, the established version of the codebook was only finalised after multiple exploratory rounds and thematic saturation was reached – that is, when no new categories emerged from the data. By combining pilot testing, iterative refinement, and systematic consistency checks, the study sought to ensure that coding decisions were robust, transparent, and justifiable. This systematic approach underpins the validity of the content analysis and ensures that the empirical claims made in the thesis rest on a transparent and replicable analytical process.

Data management was crucial in preserving the study's rigour, transparency, and reproducibility. A detailed database was created to organise all documents used in the content analysis, including metadata that specifies information about the collection and

production.[82] Interview data were managed and stored securely using the University of Kent's *OneDrive* system, the researcher's encrypted personal laptop, and a password-protected external hard drive.[83]

The content analysis codebook and source database used for the content analysis will be made available in Appendix A to enhance research reproducibility. While anonymised interview transcripts cannot be publicly released due to confidentiality agreements, the sampling logic and interview protocol are included in the appendix, enabling other researchers to replicate the approach with similar participants or themes.[84]

To ensure transparency and strengthen the credibility of the findings, this thesis includes a detailed account of the analytical process for the qualitative content analysis in Appendix D. While qualitative, interpretive research does not aim for replication in the positivist sense, outlining the analytical process step-by-step enhances reproducibility in the sense of allowing other researchers to follow and understand the methodological pathway taken. This contributes to the validity of the research by making explicit the interpretive decisions, coding procedures, and analytical moves that underpin the study's conclusions. The structure of the process draws on the principles outlined by Halperin and Heath (2020, 377–379), adapted to fit the constructivist and genealogical approach of this study.

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[82] This structured method facilitated eliminating duplicate materials and enabled the precise categorisation of sources based on actor type, period, and relevance to the analysis framework.

[83] All data was managed in accordance with ethical protocols approved by the University of Kent Ethics Committee, ensuring confidentiality and secure handling of sensitive material. Participants may require the elimination of the data at any moment by sending an email to the researcher.

[84] The data collected during the interviews has also been used in scientific publications, as well as oral presentations at international academic conferences.

Providing such detail aligns with best practices of research transparency in qualitative political science, ensuring that the analytical process is open to scrutiny, that claims can be traced back to the evidence, and that other scholars can adapt or build upon the approach in future studies.

Methodological triangulation was employed to strengthen interpretive credibility. Elite interviews, policy documents, and archival materials were systematically compared to verify claims and reinforce thematic coherence. Coding categories were developed inductively but validated against the theoretical framework, ensuring that both expected and unexpected patterns could emerge and be accounted for within the analysis.

Contradictory or ambiguous data, especially in elite interviews where political sensitivities are pronounced, were treated not as anomalies but as analytically significant positions of contestation. Vague or politicised responses were approached through iterative cross-checking with other interviews and corroborating documentary evidence. Rather than being excluded, such inconsistencies were examined for what they reveal about competing narratives and discursive tensions within the case study.

Having outlined the composition of the research sample and the types of data collected, it is essential to address the ethical responsibilities associated with conducting this type of research. The combination of elite interviews and content analysis, mainly when dealing with politically sensitive topics such as Brexit and UK foreign policy in this period, raises essential questions of confidentiality, consent, and responsible data management. The following section outlines the ethical framework that guided the research process, including the approval procedures followed, the measures taken to protect participants, and the strategies adopted to ensure transparency and integrity of the study.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

Ethical safeguards were implemented throughout the research process, with particular emphasis on the elite interview phase, which involved human participants and the collection of potentially sensitive information. The study adhered to the ethical guidance issued by the University of Kent. It complied with the Ethics Guide of the Portuguese Government's Foundation for Science and Technology [Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (FCT)], which addressed concerns related to human participation, data protection, and research conducted in third countries

All participants were provided with a detailed information sheet outlining the project's aims, the nature of their potential involvement, and the data management plan. This enabled them to make an informed decision about whether to participate. Informed consent was obtained via a signed consent form before each interview, and verbal confirmation was requested at the beginning of each recorded conversation to ensure clarity and agreement.

Participants were also given the option to remain anonymous. In cases where this was requested, data collected during interviews were fully anonymised using a coding system of numeric identifiers. Some interviews addressed politically sensitive topics, and any participant's request for exclusion or redaction of information was respected.

Ethical reflexivity was understood to extend beyond procedural concerns of consent and anonymity to encompass transparency about the interpretive limitations and the constructed nature of the knowledge produced. The research upheld key ethical principles concerning the interpretation and dissemination of findings. These included careful reflection on the limits of interpretation, sensitivity to the context in which interviews

were conducted, and a secure data management process. Upon the project's completion, the results were shared with interviewees, and participants were given the option to receive future updates related to the research. It is also important to note that participation in the study was voluntary and unpaid. The FCT funded the project, and no external influence shaped the ethical procedures or the handling of the collected data.[85]

CONCLUSION

This chapter justified the methodological approach adopted in this thesis, explaining how the research design was developed to address the research question and support the analytical framework introduced in the theory chapter. A mixed-methods approach – combining content analysis and elite interviews – was selected to enable a multi-dimensional analysis of the emergence, evolution, and institutionalisation of Global Britain.

Informed by **Proposition 1 (*Ideational Foundation*)**, content analysis traces how the idea was articulated in formal political discourse across different periods and actors. In line with **Proposition 2 (*Political Uptake*)** and **Proposition 3 (*Strategic Reframing*)**, elite interviews probe the informal networks, strategic framing, and political calculations

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[85] This research adhered to the ethical standards outlined by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) and complied with the institutional procedures of the University of Kent. Three categories of the FCT Ethics Guide were applicable: human participation (category 2), involving voluntary consent without intervention; protection of personal data (category 4), requiring safeguards for politically sensitive information; and research in third countries (category 6), with the UK as the primary non-EU research site.

that facilitated the idea's consolidation and adaptation in the wake of Brexit. Finally, consistent with **Proposition 4 (*Post-Brexit Foreign Policy Transformation*)**, this approach allows the thesis to examine how *Global Britain* became embedded in policymaking processes and institutional routines. The mixed-methods design aligns with the interpretive and genealogical orientation of the study, ensuring both empirical depth and conceptual nuance.

Importantly, these methodological decisions were also guided by a commitment to ethical research practices, particularly in managing politically sensitive material and obtaining informed consent from elite participants. While access constraints and participant reluctance posed challenges, these were lightened by diversifying sources, including public memoirs and the *Brexit Witness Archive*.

Unlike much of the existing literature on Brexit and British foreign policy, which primarily relies on discourse analysis or archival methods, this thesis integrates various data types. It provides a more comprehensive perspective on how ideas circulate, gain traction, and influence strategy. The combination of methods offers a solid foundation for assessing the guiding propositions presented in the theory chapter while also making a methodological contribution to studying ideas in foreign policy.

In conclusion, this chapter has sought to do more than ensure methodological rigour and ethical compliance; it has been grounded in core academic values of transparency, integrity, and critical reflexivity. In a research field often shaped by institutional proximity and political sensitivities, maintaining independence and intellectual openness was essential. Throughout the process of analysing political discourse and engaging elite actors, particular attention was given to the constraints of access, the situated nature of political narratives, and the researcher's positionality within the field. These reflections

were not secondary but central to the analytical strategy: to respect the complexity of the policy process, recognise the contested nature of ideas, and foreground the diversity of actors who shape them. With the conceptual and methodological architecture now in place, the thesis moves into its empirical core. The following chapter begins this analytical inquiry by tracing the early discursive and strategic foundations of Global Britain across the post-war period, setting the stage for understanding how the idea was reactivated and redefined in the context of Brexit.

Part II – Unveiling the Origin of Global Britain & How it Shaped the UK's Foreign Policy

CHAPTER IV

THE GENESIS OF GLOBAL BRITAIN (1945-1997)

I have no doubt that the strong Britain that will emerge will be a global Britain – not a Britain of European isolationists.[86]

INTRODUCTION

This chapter marks the beginning of the empirical analysis by tracing the early origins and conceptual evolution of the idea of Global Britain. While the term gained prominence in political discourse following the Brexit referendum, the analysis here builds on **Proposition 1 (*Ideational Foundation*)** by demonstrating that its underlying conceptual roots lie in much earlier debates about Britain's global role, national identity, and foreign policy orientation. By examining key political moments from the aftermath of the Second World War to the end of the twentieth century (1997), the chapter reconstructs the intellectual and discursive lineage of Global Britain as both a recurring motif and a flexible strategic signifier. In doing so, it anticipates **Proposition 3 (*Strategic Reframing*)** by showing how these historical narratives and identity claims have provided the building blocks for later attempts to reinterpret Britain's post-Brexit international position. Rather than treating Global Britain as a wholly new invention, the chapter situates it within a broader genealogy of British exceptionalism, imperial nostalgia, and Euroscepticism –

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[86] "East of Suez Defence Pledge by Thomson," Daily Mail (Hull), June 11, 1968, British Newspaper Archive.

themes that have long shaped, constrained, and occasionally reimagined the UK's foreign policy vision.

This chapter does not attempt to offer a comprehensive history of British foreign policy between 1945 and 1997. Instead, it selects moments of heightened political significance to examine how recurring ideas associated with Global Britain – such as global leadership, strategic autonomy, imperial legacy, and Eurosceptic sentiment – surfaced in elite discourse. The analysis draws on primary sources of public political discourse and formal narratives, namely high-profile political speeches, archival newspaper material, and party manifestos.[87] These were selected not for exhaustive coverage but to trace how political actors articulated Britain's global identity during ideological contestation or institutional transition. This chapter highlights discursive patterns across these materials. It offers a genealogical reading focused on ideational continuity, strategic reframing, and the selective reactivation of Britain's past as a resource for shaping foreign policy narratives.

As set out in the theoretical and methodological chapters, the thesis follows a genealogical approach to studying foreign policy ideas – not to trace a seamless line of causality but to uncover how historically sedimented ideas re-emerge in new forms. The analytical focus is, therefore, on discursive elements rather than chronological coverage: this chapter selects historically significant episodes where the UK's international identity, alliances, and global ambitions were actively debated, contested, or reframed. The aim is to map

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[87] The Brexit Witness Archive does not include interviews that provide an account of European membership during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s and the influence of this history on Brexit. For this reason, the material analysed in this chapter is centred on political manifestos, speeches, memoirs, historical documents (some collected through archival research), think tank reports, other information made available by the think tanks, and data collected on the Company Information Service of the UK Government.

when and how the constituent components of the Global Britain idea – identified in earlier empirical analysis – began to crystallise as recognisable strands in elite discourse.

These components include: (1) globalism versus isolationism; (2) Britain's role in the world; (3) declinist perspective and the politics of status; (4) relations with Europe; (5) identity and values; (6) actorness through foreign policy instruments (trade, security, diplomacy); and (7) the role of strategic alliances. Rather than treating Global Britain as a post-2016 invention, the chapter assesses the guiding proposition that it emerged through a longer ideational trajectory shaped by both formal and informal actors.

These seven strands did not emerge subjectively. They were inductively distilled during two pilot studies focused on the 2016–2020 period, which served to establish the dominant thematic indicators associated with the Global Britain narrative in political discourse. Their continued salience was reinforced through the broader literature on British foreign policy traditions and Brexit debates reviewed in Chapter I. These components thus function as an analytical lens for tracing ideational resonance across time, allowing the empirical chapters to assess whether, and how, earlier political moments anticipated or helped shape the later articulation of Global Britain.

Methodologically, the chapter draws on content analysis of elite political documents and speeches, complemented by insights from elite interviews and archival materials. While interviews covering this period were more limited due to temporal distance, the content analysis revealed critical discursive moments. Sources were selected purposively: not to reflect general opinion but to capture the voices of actors historically positioned to shape or contest foreign policy narratives – including governments, opposition leaders, parties, and policy-producing institutions such as think tanks. A complete account of source selection and sampling criteria is outlined in the methodology chapter.

The chapter's historical lens also provides the empirical basis which contributes to evaluating the guiding proposition proposed in the theory chapter: **P1**, that Global Britain predated the Brexit referendum, originated as a Conservative Party discourse that evolved through the cross-party Eurosceptic debates, shaping both the context and outcome of the Brexit referendum; **P4**, which argues that Brexit triggered significant foreign policy change grounded in a reactivation of long-standing traditions. By demonstrating how earlier discursive patterns resonate with post-Brexit narratives, this chapter frames Global Britain not as an innovation arising from rupture but as an ideational maturation made politically viable during a moment of crisis.[88]

Finally, this chapter adopts a reflexive stance on the limits of what can be known. The time frame selected – 1945 to 1997 – provides fertile ground for observing the discursive formation of Britain's global identity, not simply as a matter of foreign policy positioning but as a recurring attempt to reconcile narratives of decline, exceptionalism, and sovereignty. These decades include the Suez crisis (1956), the first European membership referendum (1975), the Conservative return to power in 1979, and the emergence of a New Labour global vision in the late 1990s. These moments are treated not as causes of Brexit but as windows into the discursive and ideological conditions that later allowed Brexit – and Global Britain – to become politically actionable.

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[88] The maturation term is used here following Maurer, Raube, and Whitman's (2024) conceptualisation regarding the EU as a foreign policy and security actor. The first type of maturation includes the 'processes of self-reflection, learning and resilience in regard of its own identity' (Maurer, Raube, and Whitman 2024, 348). In this case, 'it is about the ability and the possibility to collectively reflect' on the UK's foreign policy decisions and 'to learn from past experiences and to be able to adjust to new circumstances without losing sight of one's core identity' (Maurer, Raube, and Whitman 2024, 348).

By tracing the presence or absence of the constituent elements of Global Britain across these moments, the chapter adopts a genealogical approach focused on ideational persistence. In doing so, it establishes the historical framework needed to understand how Global Britain could be revived and rebranded in the Brexit era.

The chapter is structured in four sections. It starts by exploring the post-war foundations of Britain's global identity, tracing early themes of power decline and international ambition. The second section focuses on the period of economic crisis and European integration between the 1960s and 1980s. It then examines the redefinition of Britain's global role under Thatcher and early New Labour. Finally, it investigates the emergence of a cross-party Eurosceptic ecosystem and its alternative global vision. These sections map the historical roots and ideological strands that later shaped the Global Britain narrative.

The central argument of this chapter is that Global Britain did not emerge spontaneously in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum but evolved from a more profound, historically rooted set of ideas about Britain's global role. Its key components were already present in earlier discourses across both main political parties. By tracing these themes through political texts and elite rhetoric from 1945 to 1997, the chapter demonstrates how Brexit-era actors reactivated a pre-existing ideational reservoir to construct Global Britain as a post-Brexit foreign policy narrative.

4.1. Foundations of Britain's Global Identity (1945-1960s)

To understand how the idea of Global Britain later gained traction as a guiding narrative, it is essential to return to the immediate post-war period – a moment of profound strategic reckoning for the UK. This section revisits the foundational decades after 1945, tracing how Britain's shifting global status, decolonisation pressures, and alliance recalibrations shaped early discursive patterns around national role and ambition. While the term Global Britain was not in use, the ideational foundation – including tensions between imperial nostalgia and new international alignments – was already being laid.

A sense of cooperation defined the period immediately after the Second World War, particularly within Europe. However, the war also left the UK with four core strategic and political challenges: recovering from the devastation of war; managing the fall of Empire and the decolonisation process; confronting economic crisis; and redefining both national identity and confidence. This section traces the post-war ideas that characterised British foreign policy thinking, especially the resurgence of the declinist narrative – a central thread in how elites imagined the UK's global role.

Power Decline & Alliances: Legacies of Churchillian Internationalism

Despite ideological shifts and changes in government, the narrative of decline persisted as a consistent line in British foreign policy discourse across the second half of the

twentieth century.[89] Initially tied to the dissolution of Empire, this narrative also expanded to comprehend anxieties about economic stagnation. Epstein (2015, 319) argues that the belief in Britain's decline as a world power was already rooted in the aftermath of the First World War, and that older accounts of British strategic thinking have underestimated the continuing relevance of Britain's financial and commercial structure in shaping its international posture. He notes that whereas older strategic assessments focused on hegemonic decline relative to rising powers, more recent interpretations have examined the capacity of financial underwriters to sustain global systems – a role Britain played historically, and that the US occupies today (Epstein 2015, 321).

Blake (1997, xi) similarly argues that Britain may have ceased being a global power in 1945 but continued to behave as one for another decade. This illusion, he suggests, disappeared only after Churchill departed from political leadership. Churchill's legacy remains central

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[89] Three primary ideological waves characterised the second half of the 20th century British politics: "The Attlee Revolution", "Thatcherism", and "Blairism". Associated with these three tidal waves, three main ideas were the guiding principles for each one of these strands. Socialism for the Attlee Revolution in the post-war period, the 19th-century Liberalism for Thatcher's middle 1970s and 1980s, and the Newism or "Third Way", characterised by the abandonment of the ideology and old socialism by Blair in the late 1990s and 2000s (A. Wright 2003, 44; McAnulla 2010, 287).

The Attlee Revolution was based on Clement Attlee's premiership as prime minister after the war and succeeding to the first government of Winston Churchill. Some of the reasons Labour won the General Election of 1945 are that there was a sentiment and an 'impetus of socialist utopianism inspired by the anti-capitalist writings of a whole intellectual generation' (Blake 1997, 266). In 1951, Churchill was again elected, leading the Conservative Party back to power. Since then, the British political system has been polarised between Labou's Socialism and Tories Conservatism, despite the within-party ideological strands and differences adopted by the leaders. Blake mentions that 'the Labour Party had lost its near monopoly of intellect and ideas' (Blake 1997, 262).

to any account of British post-war foreign policy. His famous "three majestic circles" – the Commonwealth and Empire, the English-speaking world, and a united Europe – provided an early blueprint for Britain's self-conception as a global actor.[90] These overlapping roles allowed Britain to imagine itself as simultaneously European and international, mediating between the US and Europe while maintaining imperial prestige.[91]

Since 1945, successive governments – both Labour and Conservative – sought to manage Britain's perceived decline by reinforcing its influence and asserting its relevance on the world stage. Maintaining global status, managing diminished capacities, and leading on international issues became recurring priorities (Frankel 1975; Hill 1988; D. M. McCourt 2014). Devanny and Berry (2021, 2) summarise this enduring tension: 'Britain's persistent post-war problem has been reconciling a legacy of global commitments with the reality of straitened economic circumstances and middle power status'.[92]

A key vehicle for sustaining Britain's post-imperial identity was the so-called "special relationship" with the US.[93] While this relationship reflected strategic pragmatism, it also

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[90] Winston Churchill, "Why Not the United States of Europe," News of the World, May 29, 1938.

[91] As mentioned in *Chapter I – British Foreign Policy and the Global Britain Discourse* (page 31), British foreign policy studies between 1960 and 1990 discussed the modification of the international environment and how that influenced British external relations and policy-making (Vital 1968; Frankel 1975; Wallace 1977; M. Smith, Smith, and White 1988).

[92] Cladi (2021, 2–5) argues that a country needs two conditions to maintain status: the actor's desire for status and international recognition from other actors in the system. Using this argument in the context of Brexit, Cladi (2021, 5) also explains the UK's status-seeking behaviour while pointing this out as an external factor causing the UK's status insecurity.

[93] The special relationship between the UK and the US has its roots in the 19th century and was solidified during the 20th century.

symbolised Britain's desire to remain one of the "big three" global powers, alongside the US and the Soviet Union.[94] Early post-war foreign policy decisions, including the UK's active role in shaping the United Nations (UN) – which leveraged its Security Council seat to influence global affairs – and the development of its own nuclear weapons programme, were informed by this aspiration (Baylis 1989, 39; Young 1995, 54–56).

The term "special relationship" itself was first articulated by Churchill[95], but the FCO and wider government had already recognised the need to formalise wartime alliances into enduring diplomatic architecture (Reynolds 1985, 132). The creation of NATO in 1949 exemplified this trajectory. Rather than marking American hegemony per se, Callaghan (2007, 180) argues that NATO codified an existing wartime balance and invited Britain to participate in 'an empire by invitation' under US leadership. Ernest Bevin, Labour's Foreign Secretary, shared this strategic view, imagining a world order in which Britain and its Commonwealth would remain central to American global ambitions (Callaghan 2007, 181).[96]

Despite Labour's ideological distance from Churchill, Atlee's government maintained the special relationship while striking a balance with cautious engagement in European security frameworks (Callaghan 2007, 187–88). Both the 1947 Dunkirk Treaty and the 1948 Brussels Treaty laid the foundation for collective European security but also

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[94] The special relationship with the US was one of the UK's global commitments, which could help manage the country's decline (Allen 1988, 169).

[95] Winston Churchill, "The Sinews of Peace ('Iron Curtain Speech')" (speech, Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri, USA, March 5, 1946).

[96] Ernest Bevin was Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs of Clement Atlee's Labour Government between 1945 and 1951.

underlined Britain's longstanding uncertainty regarding foreign policy and European integration (Young 1993, 45–47).[97] This strategic tension between Atlanticism and Europeanism would remain a defining feature of British foreign policy.

Understanding this historical context also requires attention to the discursive traces left in key sources – speeches, memoirs, archival documents such as Cabinet Papers and Defence Reviews, and other public materials. These sources have helped reconstruct how ideas travelled within political networks. For example, these memoirs provide firsthand insights into policymaking processes and elite perceptions of Britain's global role during strategic reorientation, such as the Suez withdrawal, the nuclear programme, or the initial approach to European integration.

Post-war British foreign policy thinking was profoundly shaped by Winston Churchill's articulation of Britain's global role, not as a fixed doctrine but as a strategic vision responsive to rapidly changing geopolitical conditions. While Churchill famously advocated for a "United States of Europe", this support for continental unity was reinforced by a specific geopolitical logic: the need to prevent renewed Franco-German hostility and promote stability in Western Europe. As Reynolds (2004, 387–91) notes, Churchill envisioned Britain not as a participant in this European federation but as a supportive power "outside but with" Europe, capable of guiding integration without being institutionally absorbed by it.

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[97] These treaties aimed to forge a collective European security framework independent of American influence and responsive to Soviet aggression. This idea seems increasingly updated and relevant given the current (2025) state of world affairs.

This distinction was not incidental. Churchill's internationalism was layered: He backed multilateralism in defence, primarily through the Atlantic alliance and NATO, but was deeply cautious about political supranationalism. As Nutting (1960, 62–66) details, Churchill was prepared to share sovereignty in military matters – especially under Anglo-American leadership – yet remained sceptical of delegating political authority to European institutions. His speeches consistently affirmed that British parliamentary sovereignty must remain intact, even while Britain supported cooperative ventures abroad.

The enduring framework most closely associated with Churchill's worldview – the so-called "three circles" of Europe, the Commonwealth, and the United States – offered a conceptual grammar through which Britain could reconcile its overlapping post-imperial, continental, and Atlantic identities. Far from being obsolete, this model retained considerable analytical traction in the following decades. As A. May (1998, 17–21) argues, the three circles operated not as mutually exclusive options but as interdependent arenas of influence, allowing Britain to exercise power through networked diplomacy instead of relying on more rigid bloc commitments.

However, while the three circles framework has proven adaptable to different moments in British strategic thinking, its conceptual flexibility also makes it vulnerable to overextension. Churchill's internationalism was situated within a particular set of historical conditions: an Empire still largely intact, an emergent Cold War order, and the US actively shaping the post-war global system. As Baylis (1989, 29) points out, Churchill's rhetoric was often aspirational, functioning as much as a diplomatic signal to allies as a blueprint for domestic policy.

Thus, Churchill's internationalism represents less a settled doctrine than a strategic vocabulary – a set of ideas mobilised to navigate the postwar reordering of global power.

Its influence on later British foreign policy thinking lies not in institutional prescriptions but in its conceptual framework: the idea that Britain could and must operate simultaneously across multiple spheres of influence. This legacy continues to inform elite strategic imaginaries, though its operational viability has changed profoundly after decolonisation and the European integration project.

Moreover, the discursive persistence of Churchill's foreign policy language – particularly the metaphor of Britain as a bridge power – reveals the symbolic weight of his legacy in shaping elite imaginaries. As Young (1993, 35–38) contends, the Churchillian ideal of Britain's global vocation has functioned less as a policy template than as an anchoring myth: a rhetorical device that grants coherence to often incoherent or contradictory policy directions.

By the mid-1960s, many assumptions supporting British foreign policy were being re-evaluated. The Suez Crisis (1956) revealed the limits of unilateral British power. Strategic decisions – such as the East of Suez withdrawal and debates over European Economic Community (EEC) membership – reflected an ongoing struggle to reconcile imperial legacy with economic constraint. Authors such as Frankel (1975, 313) and Barber (1976, 40) note that between 1945 and 1973, Britain transitioned from a global power to a regional actor with increasingly inward-facing priorities.

As Sanders and Houghton (2017, 91–92) explain, the Wilson government's decision to withdraw from military commitments east of Suez marked a significant departure from imperial assumptions. This transition did not consistently redefine Britain's role in the world; divisions remained about the compatibility of deeper European integration with its longstanding Commonwealth and US relationships. These changes did not resolve the contradicting foreign policy, but they signalled a gradual shift toward a more Europe-

centred and economically constrained international strategy. These conflicting priorities led to a reactive foreign policy, lacking the ideological clarity that emerged later under Thatcher and Blair when clear frameworks aimed to restore Britain's global aspirations (Baylis 1989, 63). Still, many of the foundational beliefs – managing decline, sustaining international leadership, maintaining status – remained ideational constants.

This section has traced the early discursive formations that would later inform the concept of Global Britain. These include the enduring narrative of decline, the framing power of Churchill's foreign policy thought, and the foundational tension between global ambition and regional entanglement. The following subsection turns to the emergence of the Global Britain narrative in its early conceptual form, examining how the post-war inheritance of British foreign policy gave rise to the strands that would later define the post-Brexit discourse.

THE GENESIS OF GLOBAL BRITAIN

The genesis of the idea of Global Britain cannot be pinpointed to a single policy document or political speech, nor can it be attributed to the post-referendum context alone. Rather, it emerges from a deeper and historically embedded set of narratives that have long underpinned British foreign policy thinking. In particular, the post-1945 period marks a moment of discursive reorientation in which Britain – confronting the realities of imperial decline and shifting global hierarchies – sought to reassert its relevance through a reformulated vision of global leadership. This vision was articulated through material strategies, such as Commonwealth diplomacy and Atlantic alliances, and normative claims about Britain's moral standing, liberal values, and international responsibility.

This section traces not the full-fledged articulation of Global Britain as a political slogan but rather the underlying ideational foundations that made such a slogan later possible. These include recurring motifs of global centrality despite relative decline, the enduring trope of Britain as a transatlantic or global "bridge", and the persistent tension between European integration and a broader outward-facing role. Together, these elements form the early strands of an identity project that combines nostalgia with aspiration and continuity with strategic recombination.

By recovering this discursive lineage, the section shows how Global Britain is not an invention of the Brexit era but a strategic repackaging of earlier imaginaries of Britain's place in the world – revived and adapted in moments of perceived crisis or transformation. Understanding this historical environment is crucial to interpreting how the idea gained traction after 2016 and why it resonated across different factions of the political elite.

While the expression "Global Britain" would only gain political prominence much later, the ideational undercurrents that made such a formulation logical can be traced back to the strategic reorientations of the post-war decades. This period did not produce a coherent doctrine of globalism, nor did it abandon the longstanding tensions between imperial habit and strategic realism. Instead, as Britain confronted the two-fold challenges of imperial decline and bipolar order, political elites navigated these shifts through a range of strategies, institutional reforms, and symbolic narratives that gestured toward continuity as much as change.

The end of the Second World War opened up the possibility of a more global outlook in British foreign policy, even as the immediate postwar context remained defined by regional pragmatism. While rhetorically committed to peace and reconstruction, the Attlee government adopted what Dockrill (2002, 14) describes as a 'pragmatic approach towards the Soviet Union, nuclear weapons, the Empire/Commonwealth, Europe and the formation of the Atlantic Alliance'. The creation of the Commonwealth Relations Office in 1947 and the merger of the Dominions and India Offices reflected a broader restructuring of imperial governance. Concurrently, establishing the Ministry of Defence and replacing the Committee of Imperial Defence with the Cabinet Defence Committee was an attempt to modernise military governance in line with shifting strategic imperatives (Dockrill 2002, 14).

Yet the rise of Cold War bipolarity profoundly shaped how these ambitions could be framed. As Rosenboim (2017, 13) notes, 'thinking of a new global order had little support with the rise of the Cold War mentality', which displaced earlier wartime visions of cooperative globalism with a narrower discourse of containment and competition. While the globalist aspirations of the 1940s never entirely disappeared, they became marginal to

the dominant logic of security policy. Rosenboim (2017, 13) argues that 'the central ideas of the globalist ideology of the 1940s remained present in the political debate', suggesting an essential undercurrent in Britain's foreign policy imaginary that persisted alongside realist adjustment.

A longer view, following Dockrill (2002) and others, reveals that the conceptual framework for a global strategy had been under discussion since at least 1919. The significance of that moment – symbolised by the Treaty of Versailles, the League of Nations, and the mandate system – was not merely institutional but ideological. As Northedge (1986), Steiner (2007), and MacMillan and Holbrooke (2007) have documented, Britain's commitment to these mechanisms was shaped less by idealism than by a desire to manage power transitions and protect imperial interests under the veneer of internationalism. These early postwar arrangements thus reveal the ambivalence that would continue characterising Britain's approach to global engagement.

By 1948, as Dockrill (2002, 14) outlines, 'Britain's global strategy was firmly centred on deterrence by strategic air and naval power, with only a secondary role for the British Army' – a continuation of the interwar model rather than a radical departure. This pattern persisted across successive administrations. In 1952, Churchill requested a comprehensive review of the UK's global defence posture, culminating in the *Defence Policy and Global Strategy* report (Dockrill 2002, 16). That report did not signal a new strategic vision so much as a codification of Britain's post-imperial ambition to retain global reach through concentrated technological and diplomatic investments.

This outlook was also framed discursively through Churchill's three majestic circles of foreign policy – Europe, the Empire/Commonwealth, and the US.[98] Allen (1988, 169) describes this as a model in which the global outlook was 'exercised through three distinct "circles" of influence', with priority given to transatlantic and imperial ties over Europe. The durability of this vision would inform the contours of Britain's global policy well into the 1980s. The 1957 Defence White Paper's emphasis on nuclear deterrence and the 1968 East of Suez decision – marking Britain's withdrawal from permanent military bases in Southeast Asia – represented moments of strategic recalibration, not abandonment.[99] These decisions reinforced a shift toward fewer but symbolically powerful commitments, sustaining the narrative of Britain as a globally relevant actor despite reduced military presence. These reviews, alongside establishing Britain's independent nuclear deterrent and its NATO integration, highlight how periodic assessments and reforms shaped a vision of British foreign policy that would continue to evolve until the 1980s.[100]

The conceptual language of Global Britain emerged intermittently throughout this period, but explicit early usages can be identified. It did not emerge fully formed in a single policy document or speech; instead, it appears often ambiguously across a wide range of post-war political and intellectual materials. As part of this research's effort to trace the discursive prehistory of the term, not as a fully articulated strategy, but as an ideational

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[98] The idea of the three majestic circles of foreign policy influence can be found in the following speech: Winston Churchill, "Why Not the United States of Europe," News of the World, May 29, 1938.

[99] United Kingdom, Ministry of Defence, "Defence: Outline of Future Policy," London: HMSO, 1957; United Kingdom, Ministry of Defence, "The East of Suez Withdrawal," London: HMSO, 1968.

[100] United Kingdom. Ministry of Defence. "The Falklands Campaign: Lessons for Defence Policy" (1981 Nott Review). London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1981.

motif, a targeted search was conducted in the British Library archives. The aim was to identify whether there were early public uses of Global Britain in media and political commentary. The goal was not to fix a definitive origin point but to identify moments when the phrase began to carry symbolic weight in broader strategic or cultural debates.

It was in this context that an article by historian Arthur Bryant was encountered, published in the *Illustrated London News* on February 23rd, 1957.[101] Writing during a period of domestic political unease, economic constraint, and public anxiety about immigration, Bryant invoked themes of freedom, justice, Britain's global positioning, the Commonwealth, and the Anglo-American alliance. He concluded with a striking provocation: 'What we have to learn to do is to substitute for Great Britain a Greater – and global-Britain'.[102] While

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[101] Arthur Bryant, "Our Notebook," Illustrated London News, February 23, 1957, British Newspaper Archive.

[102] Bryant, "Our Notebook".

rhetorical, Bryant's phrasing reveals the symbolic charge carried by the notion of globalism as both remedy and aspiration in postwar discourse.[103]

A more grounded restatement emerged in 1968, following Britain's announced withdrawal from mainland military bases in Southeast Asia, led by Harold Wilson and Denis Healey.[104] George Thomson, Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs, used the phrase "global Britain" in a speech that drew widespread media attention and,

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[103] As Dockrill (2002, 28) mentions, the UK's global policy was characterised by continuity since Churchill and until the first mandate of Macmillan: 'Britain tried hard to maximise its nuclear, military and diplomatic strengths in order to sustain its power and influence in the world'. Anthony Eden followed Churchill in office and led the country solely for two years—between 1955 and 1957—before being followed by Harold Macmillan, prime minister until 1963. The Conservative Party managed to remain in power.

During the second term of Macmillan, and in the Cold War atmosphere, a closer tie with the US was established, strengthening the special relationship and the UK's link with Western Europe. This moment represents a re-evaluation of the future of British foreign policy. Macmillan created, in 1959, the "Future Policy" group which defined the conservative British global policy and was constituted by senior officials who advised Macmillan's directive in 1961. This group aimed to assess the 'future British defence together with overseas policies by taking into account the country's political commitments, economic strength and military capabilities' (Dockrill 2002, 28).

This context led to an institutional reorganisation, and in 1963, the Cabinet Defence and Overseas Policy Committee (DOPC) was created, replacing the Cabinet Defence Committee and Overseas Policy Committee – both made during the war in 1940. This new structure was a sign that Downing Street aimed to play an active role in shaping the defence and global policy by influencing the orientation of interests. Dockrill (2002, 29) argues that this new committee 'was particularly significant in that it indicated Whitehall's willingness to formulate its global policy on a much wider basis than hitherto'.

[104] Harold Wilson was Labour Prime Minister between 1964 and 1970 and during a second term between 1974 and 1976. Denis Healey was Defence Secretary between 1964 and 1970.

therefore, came up in our archival search.[105] Speaking in Kuala Lumpur, Thomson insisted the withdrawal did not signify disengagement:

> Britain said today that it was not turning its back on the defence of the Indian Ocean and Pacific areas. The Commonwealth Secretary, Mr George Thomson, told the five-nation Commonwealth defence talks in Kuala Lumpur that Britain's withdrawal by 1971 from South-East Asia would be only from mainland military bases. (…)
>
> MORE UNANIMITY
>
> "It does not imply we are turning our back on the Indian Ocean and the Pacific areas," he said. (…)
>
> GLOBAL POWER
>
> Mr Thomson emphasised that the harsh unpopular economic policies the British Government was applying in all fields was a sign of determination, not a lack of will.
>
> "I have no doubt that the strong Britain that will emerge will be a global Britain – not a Britain of European isolationists," he said.
>
> "British policy will remain globally orientated – but the means of achieving it will change to reflect changing realities."[106]

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[105] George Thomson, Baron Thomson of Monifiet, was Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs between 1967 and 1968. He was a Member of Parliament between 1952 and 1973. He also served as Minister of State at the Foreign Office from 1964 to 1966, then as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster from 1966 to 1967, and again from 1969 to 1970, and as Minister without Portfolio from 1968 to 1969, as Shadow Secretary of State Defence between 1970 and 1972, and European Commissioner for Regional Policy from 1973 to 1977 in the Ortoli Commission.

[106] "East of Suez Defence Pledge by Thomson," Daily Mail (Hull), June 11, 1968, British Newspaper Archive.

An article entitled Britain states defence role in S.E. Asia[107] stated:

> The outline of a new defence structure emerged from a communique issued here [Kuala Lumpur] by five Commonwealth partners after a day and a half of deliberations on how to meet problems posed by Britain's withdrawal.
>
> Britain, Australia and New Zealand, with Singapore and Malaysia, pledged themselves to continuing roles in the area without drawing up formal defence agreements at this stage. (…) Mr. George Thomson, the Commonwealth Secretary told delegates that Britain's withdrawal by 1971 would be only from mainland military bases.
>
> 'I emphasise this strongly,' he said. 'It does not imply we are turning our back on the Indian Ocean and Pacific areas. I have no doubt that the strong Britain that will emerge will be a global Britain – not a Britain of European isolationists.'
>
> TROOPS STAY
>
> Britain's chief delegate, Defence Secretary Mr. Denis Healey, told a Press conference tonight that a substantial number of troops would remain until the very end to provide an umbrella for the growth of new arrangements.[108]

Thomson's broader political profile – across roles as Secretary of State, shadow minister, and European Commissioner – further affirms his status as a figure shaping, not merely reflecting, post-imperial strategic imagination. His remarks signal an effort to re-narrate Britain's position in a globalising world by drawing on its imperial past while responding to emerging economic and political constraints. Rather than retreating into nostalgia, this vision sought to reposition Britain as an adaptable, globally networked actor.

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[107] "Britain states defence role in S.E. Asia," Birmingham Post, June 12, 1968, British Newspaper Archive.

[108] "Britain states defence role in S.E. Asia".

While it is noteworthy that the term Global Britain found its place in the political lexicon as early as 1957, as Bryant references, this thesis contends that Thomson fundamentally shaped and articulated the ideological underpinnings associated with this concept. Thomson's vision extended beyond mere terminology; he sought to weave the narrative of Global Britain into the fabric of a post-imperial identity that embraced globalisation while simultaneously acknowledging Britain's historical legacy.

In the context of the post-war world, Thomson's Global Britain proposed a proactive approach to engagement with established and emerging powers, reflecting a responsive and adaptive foreign policy that recognised the shifting dynamics of international relations. By emphasising cooperation, diplomacy, and trade, Thomson laid the groundwork for a Britain that would not merely retreat from its imperial past but actively seek to redefine its position in an increasingly interconnected world.

This intervention deserves emphasis for four reasons. First, it situates the idea of Global Britain within a foreign policy context, not merely as a rhetorical slogan. Second, it connects the concept directly to Britain's global security presence – specifically its role in the Pacific. Third, it marks the first identifiable use of the term in the postwar foreign policy archive. Fourth, it defines Global Britain explicitly against Europe, suggesting that a Eurocentric orientation might be understood not as engagement but as a form of constraint or isolation. This opposition between globalism and European entanglement will prove central to later restatements of the concept.[109]

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[109] "East of Suez Defence Pledge by Thomson," Daily Mail (Hull), June 11, 1968, British Newspaper Archive.

Nevertheless, not all political currents aligned with this vision. In the late 1960s, during Wilson's Labour government, segments of the Conservative Party interpreted Britain's post-imperial foreign policy through a prism of pragmatism tangled with imperial nostalgia. Many on the right viewed the withdrawal from Suez and the broader East of Suez region as a strategic recalibration and a symbolic decline of Britain's global vocation. Enoch Powell was among the most vocal critics, asserting that disengagement from areas such as the Persian Gulf and Southeast Asia would erode Britain's status as a world power and geopolitical influence (Young 1993, 120; Baylis 1989, 56). Powell and other backbench Conservatives regularly challenged the government's policies on military withdrawal, arguing that they signalled an abandonment of Britain's responsibilities in maintaining global order (Young 1993, 120–21).

This was not merely nostalgia. As Baylis (1989, 56) notes, Conservative concerns often reflected an enduring belief in the strategic necessity of military presence in former imperial regions – not only for geopolitical leverage but to uphold international partnerships and commercial influence. The fear was that withdrawal would signal to allies and adversaries alike a retreat from global leadership, undermining Britain's credibility as a reliable security partner. Powell, in particular, argued that this reflected a crisis of national self-belief – a retreat both in presence and purpose.

These critiques were not isolated but resonated with broader debates over Britain's role following imperial decline. While the official discourse was increasingly shaped by economic realism and Atlantic alignment, a parallel strand of elite opinion maintained that Britain remained a global actor by history and nature. That vision, articulated through speeches, parliamentary interventions, and defence white papers, was rooted in a

conception of Britain's international identity as distinct – uniquely capable of mediating between continents and upholding liberal values abroad.[110]

This historical analysis does not provide a straightforward story of Global Britain's rise but offers a deeper understanding of its complex history and discussions. The term itself may have surfaced intermittently, but the deeper tropes – of global centrality despite the decline, of transatlantic bridge-building, and ambivalence toward Europe – formed a pool of ideas that would be revived and reformulated in later moments of national reorientation. The following section explores how these imaginaries re-emerged during the European debates of the 1970s and were articulated by elite actors within and beyond the Labour Party.

4.2. The Economic Decline & The European Opportunity (1960s-1980s): Economy and Trade Meet Foreign Policy

The following decades saw Britain confronted with mounting economic pressures and a growing awareness of relative decline. This period brought renewed urgency to questions

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[110] Yet by the early 1970s, even Conservative-led governments were pursuing alternative means to preserve Britain's international standing. The 1971 signing of the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) under Edward Heath – linking the UK with Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, and Singapore – shows the persistence of a strategic global presence even as imperial formalities faded. As Nailor (1973, 235) notes, this recalibrated presence posed new challenges for defence architects.

Edward Heath was Prime Minister of a Conservative Government between 1970 and 1974, leading the opposition as leader of the Conservative Party during Harold Wilson's Governments, between 1965 and 1970 and then again between 1974 and 1975.

about the UK's international orientation, particularly regarding trade, competitiveness, and access to European markets. As economic concerns increasingly intersected with foreign policy choices, Europe emerged as a pragmatic opportunity and a contested symbol of Britain's shifting global identity. This section explores how these dynamics shaped the competing narratives of isolation, adaptation, and integration that would later influence the framing of Global Britain.

This thesis argues that understanding the ideational genealogy of Global Britain demands a thorough examination of the UK's evolving relationship with European integration. Not because Global Britain and European membership are conceptually synonymous –they are not – but because the tensions and ambiguities within the pro-European and Eurosceptic debates often turned on questions of Britain's global identity, international vocation, and economic orientation. European membership became a discursive position through which competing visions of Britain's place in the world were articulated, tested, and reimagined. To recover this environment, the chapter foregrounds how formal documents – policy speeches, manifestos, parliamentary records – interacted with informal elite discourse to shape the ideational boundaries of post-imperial British strategy.

This approach resists clarifying the familiar and used often institutional history of UK-European relations. Instead, it positions the accession debates as a crucial moment when economic recovery imperatives, geopolitical anxieties, and symbolic narratives about Britain's international standing overlapped. While much of the secondary literature has offered structural or institutional analyses of this period (Hill 1988; M. Smith, Smith, and White 1988; Sanders 1990; Higgott and Stone 1994; Baker 2001; Wallace 2005; Allen 1988; Seldon 1996; Gamble 2003; 1996; Baker, Gamble, and Seawright 2002; Heffernan 2000;

Wei, Burnham, and Kerr 2023; Daddow 2013; Bale 2016), this thesis questions how these dynamics were made politically logical, particularly in the context of a foreign policy elite managing relative decline.

This thesis argues that foreign policy and economic interests were merged during this period due to the post-war context. The economy influences foreign policy strategy decisions, resources, and capabilities, and the context of foreign policy also impacts many international economic policy choices. The decision to join the EC demonstrates this argument. The UK's degree of commitment to it is not simply a foreign policy interest chasing. It is also the pursuit of options for the economic recovery. In this case, it can also be argued that foreign policy decisions and interests were used to accommodate economic priorities.

Europe as Economic Strategy: Trade, Decline, and Multilateral Engagement

The decision to join the EC was not merely an act of foreign alignment. It represented a broader attempt to reconcile economic strategy with Britain's enduring claims to global relevance. This dual logic – foreign policy as an economic recovery tool and economic multilateralism as a foreign policy rationale – structures much of the late 1950s through the 1970s discourse. The self-image of the UK was that it was crucial to be in the centre of Europe to structure its core politics and, therefore, advance Britain's political interests (Bulpitt 1996, 217–18). Wallace (1973, 263) captured this relationship early on, noting that foreign policy had come to encompass the 'preservation and promotion of national

prosperity' as trade, investment, and domestic growth became increasingly entangled with international strategy.

While Churchill had approached foreign affairs with a primarily geopolitical orientation, the post-war period demanded a recalibration (Blake 1997, 258–71). The Commonwealth no longer anchored Britain's international identity, and the Cold War pressed for new strategic alignments. As Aughey (1996, 204) argues, by the early 1960s, 'the Conservative leadership began to re-assert British freedom of manoeuvre in foreign policy unconstrained by deeper obligations to the Commonwealth idea'. The Macmillan government's 1961 application to the Common Market was emblematic of this shift – a move that framed European engagement not as a betrayal of sovereignty but as an updated vehicle for pursuing national interests within a multilateral framework (Aughey 1996, 206).[111]

In the early 1970s, Britain's attempt to balance domestic economic priorities with international strategic commitments began to fracture. Frieden (2007, 359–60) observes that 'the compromise between the international and the national was fraying. Trade competition, capital flows, and currency movements impeded domestic economic performance, and a backlash set in'. While earlier foreign policy had accommodated economic protectionism and post-war trade controls, the resulting frameworks were increasingly criticised for exacerbating instability. Byrd (1973, 175) situates this critique in

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[111] The implementation of trade policies was a way of pursuing national economic interests. The strategy of building strong economic relations with other European countries was already in place since the UK joined the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) in 1959 and the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC) in 1961. Until then, NATO was the main alliance where 'national interests were aligned into a wider pattern of objectives' during a period of peace (Nailor 1973, 238).

a longer historical curve, noting that wartime and post-war trade policies were perceived as contributing factors in the international breakdown of the 1930s – thus reinforcing elite support for multilateral trade liberalisation by the 1970s.

In this period, trade functioned as a key instrument through which these ambitions were operationalised. Byrd (1973, 175–76) notes that by the late 1960s, the UK had become a vocal advocate for global trade liberalisation and had begun institutionalising its role in multilateral trade governance: 'Trade took the lead within Whitehall in the formulation and administration of policy at GATT until 1970, when it became part of the Department of Trade and Industry'.112 This bureaucratic reorganisation reflected more than administrative reform – it marked a growing recognition that Britain's international relevance depended increasingly on its ability to shape global economic frameworks. As D. M. McCourt (2014, 112) succinctly puts it, the pillars of earlier foreign policy – the US-UK special relationship, the East of Suez military role, and membership in the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) – could 'no longer assure Britain a seat at the top table of international politics'.

Political Contestation and Discursive Realignment: European Membership as Ideational Battleground

This use of foreign policy as a domestic political instrument was evident in how Conservative elites positioned European entry. As Aughey (1996, 205) shows, pro-

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112 Byrd's (1973) administrative history offers insight into the growing centrality of international trade policy in British statecraft.

European conservatives advanced two principal arguments: that foreign policy should reflect Britain's dominant economic interests and that integration into the EC would provide the platform needed 'to remain a power of world stature'. European membership was framed not as a retreat from global ambition but as the means through which that ambition could be sustained in a different environment.

Such claims were not limited to the right. The Labour Party's position during this period was defined by profound internal conflict – especially after the Suez Crisis. On one side were pro-European figures such as George Thomson and Roy Jenkins, who advocated EC membership as a strategic recalibration. They saw integration as a pathway to economic renewal and embedding Britain within a stable multilateral order. Their positions were shaped by practical concerns and a normative vision of Britain as an outward-facing, globally engaged actor. In this reading, Europe was not a constraint on British agency but a stage on which it could be exercised.

The politicisation of European membership during the 1970s gave rise to new coalitions, campaign vehicles, and elite alliances that crossed conventional party boundaries. One of the most prominent was *Britain in Europe*, a cross-party campaign advocating a 'Yes' vote in the 1975 referendum. As Crewe and King (1995, 10) observe, the campaign 'brought together prominent figures from all three parties, notably Edward Heath, Roy Jenkins and David Steel, and they worked together in conspicuous harmony'. While such cooperation was politically pragmatic, it also reveals the degree to which Europe had become a referent for broader strategic questions: economic modernisation, national identity, and the pursuit of influence in a rapidly changing world. At this stage, the debate was not framed in binary terms – as it later would be between Europeanism and Global Britain – but rather, as D. M. McCourt (2014, 112) rightly puts it, as a choice 'for the world through

membership in a closer European union'. The idea that Britain could reconcile global ambition with European integration remained an open possibility – an ambiguity that would persist, unresolved, in the political discourse for decades.[113]

Edward Heath's leadership marked a decisive shift in the trajectory of British foreign policy.[114] As both opposition leader and Prime Minister, Heath consistently positioned European integration as a strategic necessity that responded to Britain's diminishing imperial footprint and the perceived inadequacy of existing alliances. In parliamentary debates and speeches, he articulated a vision of Britain as a full participant in European institutions, not merely to preserve economic interests but to regain influence in shaping the international system. According to archival accounts and press reports from the period, Heath argued that exclusion from the European project would fragment the

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[113] When comparing the two British referendums of 1975 and 2016 by looking at Wilson's management of the Labour Party and Cameron's political decisions inside the Conservative Party, MP's positions, and factions' movements, Saunders (2016, 318–19) argues that there was a strong emphasis on Euroscepticism and Wilson had clear aims during the 1975 referendum. The society of the 1970s had a memory of the war and economic crisis, whilst the 2016 society had nothing to lose. There were gains in losing some sovereignty due to the affective memory of Europe in the 20th century.

[114] Edward Heath's leadership of the Conservative Party (1965–1975) and his premiership (1970–1974) were pivotal in reshaping Britain's post-imperial foreign policy through European integration. The UK's formal accession to the European Economic Community on 1 January 1973 reflected Heath's long-standing conviction that Britain could no longer sustain international influence through bilateral or imperial means alone (A. May 1998).

Western alliance and undermine security cooperation across the continent. In his framing, Europe was not opposed to global engagement but its enabler.[115]

Heath's rhetoric explicitly asserted that Britain should not stand outside a 'rich man's club' but join it to help shape global development and aid priorities.[116] He connected EC membership with economic recovery and international responsibility, claiming that participation in the Community's decision-making structures was essential to safeguarding British sovereignty – not weakening it. While anchored in economic pragmatism, his discourse was conditioned with geopolitical urgency: to remain outside Europe, he suggested, was to surrender a voice in the governance of the post-imperial global order.[117] Although the language of Global Britain had not yet entered political usage, Heath's framing of EC membership as a vehicle for influence beyond Europe prefigures several of the later claims embedded in the post-Brexit foreign policy agenda.

One of the elite interviews conducted for this research – Ann Widdecombe, then a student at Oxford during the referendum – offers further insight into the ambiguities surrounding Britain's relationship with Europe in this formative period.[118] Widdecombe recalled engaging in debate at the Oxford Union, expressing initial scepticism towards EC

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[115] Heath visited the Oxford Union for an "A question of Europe" debate where "This House would say 'Yes' To Europe" two days before the 1975 referendum ("A question of Europe", BBC, June 3, 1975).

[116] A question of Europe", BBC, June 3, 1975.

[117] *Ibid.*

[118] Ann Widdecombe was a member of the Conservative Party and a Member of Parliament (MP) between 1987 and 2010. She was a part of Major's government between 1990 and 1997. She then became a Brexit supporter and joined the Brexit Party in 2019. She kindly agreed to participate in this research (Ann Widdecombe, interviewed by Catarina M. Liberato, February 6, 2023).

membership but concluding, albeit tentatively, that remaining in offered strategic advantages. Her remarks suggest that for many, the European project was still intelligible primarily in economic terms, understood as a 'tariff agreement' rather than a political union.[119] She admitted that had it remained such, she 'would never have campaigned to come out'.[120] However, in retrospect, she frames the EC as having gradually shifted toward a federalising logic – invoking the emergence of symbols, institutions, and narratives associated with statehood: 'It became about, sort of, the United States of Europe. It became about being a single state with an anthem, an army, etcetera, etcetera. That was not what I wanted and was not what I thought I was waiting for'.[121] Her commentary illustrates a broader unease with perceived 'control of our own policies', a concern echoed across parts of the Conservative grassroots at the time.[122]

While later political happenings necessarily shape her reflection – and must be treated with caution as a retrospective account – it nevertheless captures the discursive ambiguity of Britain's 1970s European engagement. For some, like Widdecombe, Europe was both a pragmatic option and a latent threat: an instrument for economic coordination that risked becoming an ideological project. Notably, she acknowledged that the framing of the debate at the time did not yet present Europe and global ambition as a binary choice. Instead, membership was viewed – at least within parts of the political elite and public – as compatible with Britain's outward-looking posture. She argues that the merging of

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[119] Ann Widdecombe, interviewed by Catarina M. Liberato, February 6, 2023.

[120] *Ibid.*

[121] *Ibid.*

[122] *Ibid.*

European integration with political centralisation has emerged as a major critique, particularly among future Eurosceptic leaders, but only when viewed retrospectively.[123]

OUTWARD, NOT INWARD: PRO-EUROPEANISM AND THE CONTINUITY OF GLOBAL ASPIRATIONS

Britain's eventual entry into the EEC marked a significant reconfiguration of strategy but not a renunciation of global ambitions. As Dell (1995, 132) argues, proponents often framed European membership as a means of modernising Britain's economy and amplifying its international influence, not subordinating its sovereignty. Even as structural alignments changed, the belief in Britain's capacity to shape global affairs through cultural, diplomatic, and military instruments remained deeply embedded in political discourse.[124]

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[123] *Ibid.*

[124] Conservative governments in the post-war period consistently advanced a vision of Britain as a globally relevant actor, even in the context of decolonisation and strategic retrenchment. This was evident in military diplomacy – most notably the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) signed under Heath, in 1971, as means of preserving Britain's defence commitments in Southeast Asia after the East of Suez withdrawal.
In economic terms, the Conservatives worked to sustain preferential Commonwealth trading ties even as the UK pursued EEC membership, suggesting an attempt to layer global influence across multiple economic spheres.
Persistent interest in the Gulf region and broader Indian Ocean was framed as both a strategic necessity and a moral duty, with commentators describing this stance not as nostalgia, but as a rational posture of extended responsibility. Cultural instruments such as the BBC World Service and the British Council were also maintained as vehicles of soft power, especially valued for their resonance in post-imperial contexts. (Nailor 1973, 235; Baylis 1989, 56; Dell 1995, 132)

George Thomson's discourse in this period is especially relevant. As noted earlier, his formulation of 'a strong Britain that will emerge… a global Britain' following the East of Suez withdrawal encompassed the option of further integrating with the European neighbours.[125] When Wilson appointed Tomson Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster in 1967, he gave the task of managing Britain's EC negotiations, signalling institutional support for this reorientation (Dockrill 2002, 158).[126]

While George Thomson's articulation of a Global Britain emerged in the context of imperial military withdrawal and Commonwealth diplomacy, figures such as Roy Jenkins simultaneously framed European integration as a pathway to renewed global relevance. Roy Jenkins was among the most articulate proponents of Britain's entry into the EC within the Labour Party during the early 1970s. His support was grounded in a vision of Europe as both an economic modernisation project and a geopolitical stabiliser. Meanwhile, Roy Jenkins's pro-Europeanism is documented extensively in his memoirs and academic analyses. While political memoirs risk retrospective rationalisation, Jenkins's consistency over the decades highlights the strength of their evidence.

In parliamentary debates and public speeches, Jenkins consistently framed EC membership not as a retreat from Britain's global role, but as a recalibration of it – one that acknowledged shifting power dynamics while offering a platform for renewed influence (Jenkins 1991, 446–59). As Deputy Leader of the Labour Party and later President of the European Commission (1977–1981), Jenkins maintained that Britain's

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[125] "East of Suez Defence Pledge by Thomson," Daily Mail (Hull), June 11, 1968, British Newspaper Archive.

[126] In 1967, the Labour government led by Harold Wilson applied for full EEC membership.

future influence would depend on its willingness to engage with transnational institutions rather than rely on residual imperial ties (Ludlow 2016, 11–17). While controversial within Labour, his position anticipated many ideas later associated with Global Britain, particularly the belief in Britain's capacity to project influence through multilateralism, economic interdependence, and shared sovereignty.

This thesis argues that the pro-European discourse advanced by George Thomson and Roy Jenkins in the early 1970s should be understood as a response to Britain's economic stagnation and a revaluation of Britain's international role within a shifting geopolitical order. Their support for EC membership was underpinned by the belief that integration could offer a credible framework through which Britain might reassert its global relevance – economically, diplomatically, and ideologically. For both figures, Europe was not a constraint but a platform; not a rejection of Britain's post-imperial identity, but an attempt to rearticulate it.

Jenkins consistently argued that joining the EC would help modernise the British economy and restore national confidence through shared sovereignty in a multilateral framework. During the 1971 parliamentary debates on EC accession, his speeches framed European unity as a vehicle for geopolitical stability in a world marked by shifting power hierarchies and American retrenchment (Jenkins 1991, 446–59). Similarly, Thomson – having previously invoked the idea of a 'global Britain' in the Pacific context – recast European integration as part of a broader post-imperial repositioning, aligning with Britain's interests as a transatlantic and global actor.[127] While operating within a different institutional and rhetorical register than later Global Britain advocates, both Jenkins and

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[127] "Britain states defence role in S.E. Asia".

Thomson contributed to a discursive logic that decentres Europe as a bounded region and instead imagines it as an outward-facing nation in a broader geopolitical system.

This thesis argues that both positions – though institutionally distinct – share an underlying logic: they reflect a Labour-led rethinking of Britain's international role not as diminished but as needing to be re-scaled through collective frameworks. Jenkins viewed EC membership as an instrument of economic modernisation and multilateral leadership, and later, as Commission President, embodied this logic within the institutions of European governance (Jenkins 1991, 446–59). Together, these interventions laid the discursive basis for a version of Global Britain that would re-emerge – under different ideological conditions – in later decades.

By situating their pro-European advocacy within this ideational trajectory, this thesis contends that the groundwork for Global Britain was not laid solely in the context of Brexit but in the post-Suez efforts to reconcile decline with international ambition. For Jenkins and Thomson, European membership was not an end – it was a means of re-establishing Britain's claim to leadership in a world where old imperial certainties had fractured. However, this interpretation must be regarded carefully: the capacity to support this vision was often limited by domestic political constraints, economic fragility, and deep ideological cleavages within their respective parties.

For example, The Labour Party's left wing, represented by Tony Benn and Michael Foot, rejected European integration because it undermined national sovereignty and subordinated British industry to continental capitalism (Benn 1980; Young 1993, 98–100; Dell 1995, 126–28). These critiques positioned Europe not as a platform but as a threat, rendering the EC incompatible with the socialist principles of national self-determination and industrial planning. The ideological fracture inflamed during George Thomson, Roy

Jenkins, and Harold Lever's 1972 resignations and became fully visible in the 1975 referendum when the party permitted members to campaign on either side (Owen 1986; George 1994, 56–58; Crewe and King 1995, 9).[128]

This discursive fragmentation helps explain why European membership never offered a settled anchor for Britain's international identity. If Global Britain's post-Brexit form invokes a nostalgic and assertive nationalism, its earlier iterations were shaped by more cautious attempts to accommodate decline, recalibrate ambition, and lead economic recovery to multilateral frameworks. In this regard, the European question functioned more as a reflective analysis of Britain's complex and unresolved self-perception – oscillating between regional embeddedness and global ambition.

The preceding period, stretching from Britain's initial applications to the EEC through the 1975 referendum, reveals a contested but persistent attempt to reconstitute British internationalism within a framework of economic interdependence and strategic constraint. What emerges is not a coherent doctrine of Global Britain but rather a diffuse set of discursive resources – some pro-European, others more ambiguous – through which elites attempted to navigate the realities of post-imperial adjustment. However, by the early 1980s, the parameters of this debate began to shift. Under Margaret Thatcher's leadership, the Conservative Party advanced a more assertive global vision: one that rejected integrationist logic in favour of sovereignty, liberalised trade, and a return to

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[128] Due to the British entrance negotiations, the Labour Party's divisions on the European question became evident in 1970 in the context of the recently elected Heath conservative government. The pro-European faction advocated for negotiations to enter the EC, while the left-wing rejected the proposed terms. George Thomson, accompanied by other members of the shadow cabinet – Roy Jenkins and Harold Lever – resigned in 1972 (Owen 1986, 27; Crewe and King 1995, 9).

strong state authority. The following section explores how this political project – discursively and materially – redefined Britain's foreign policy posture and laid key foundations for the later rearticulations of Global Britain.

4.3. Redefining UK's Role in the World (1980s-1990s): The British Revival & The Conservative Global Vision

By the 1980s, narratives of national decline were increasingly challenged by a renewed political ambition to restore Britain's global status. Under Margaret Thatcher, the Conservative government sought to redefine the UK's international role through assertive foreign policy, market liberalism and renewed Atlanticism.[129] This period marked a shift in discourse from managing decline to projecting revival. This section examines how this conservative global vision rearticulated Britain's external identity, embedding long-standing strands of exceptionalism and sovereignty in a new ideological register that would later echo in post-Brexit foreign policy debates.

The rise of Margaret Thatcher to the premiership in 1979 marked a reconfiguration of this discursive field. Her election marked a new phase not only in British politics and Conservatism, as commonly stated, but also in the alignment of British foreign policy, as broadly discussed in the literature (Sharp 1997; E. J. Evans 2004; Daddow, Gifford, and

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[129] Margaret Thatcher assumed the leadership of the Conservative Party in 1975 and was prime minister between 1979 and 1990. John Major took office between 1990 and 1997, maintaining a conservative government in power. Tony Blair became the leader of the Labour Party in 1994 and won the 1997 General Election. The government became Labour after 18 years of conservative governments.

Wellings 2019). During Margaret Thatcher's time in power, the influence of economic liberal ideas became more apparent (Clark 2012, 88). Conservative politicians adopted "liberal lines of argument" and grew suspicious of the state's role in the economy, which then became an ideological driver of policy (Clark 2012, 88).[130] The Thatcherite political views profoundly influenced this generation of political entrepreneurs, who actively reconsidered the UK's role in the world and its trajectories to achieve this position.[131]

While often interpreted as a decisive turn away from Europeanism, Thatcher's early foreign policy priorities complicate this reading. Her 1983 general election manifesto emphasised three core objectives: securing peace within NATO, reaffirming Britain's transatlantic commitments, and consolidating its position as a global trading nation.[132] These themes aligned with what would later be branded as Global Britain, particularly the emphasis on economic competitiveness and international commerce as core foreign policy instruments. Under the 'Road to Recovery' banner, the manifesto declared that

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[130] In fact, 'Thatcherism represented a departure from earlier "one nation" themes' but ultimately became the prevailing perspective accepted by the party (Clark 2012, 62).

[131] In the 1970s, Thatcher broke from the traditional One-nation Conservatism, calling for a new Neo-liberal Conservatism. The primary intellectual mentors of Thatcher's neo-liberal Conservatism were Friedrich A. von Hayek (on the reduced state perspective) and Milton Friedman (on monetarist economics). Wright (2003, 42) argues that 'It was Friedman who once described Mrs Thatcher as not being a Tory at all, but really "a nineteenth-century liberal"'. As Wright (2003, 42) asserts, 'Their model was the United States; their enemy was continental Europe'.

[132] It is worth considering Thatcher's ideas in the 1983 manifesto, considering the emergence of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) in 1981. Owen (1986, 27–28) suggests that the political realignment following the formation of the SDP could 'lead to greater stability, better government and the reverse of our relative economic decline'.

future British influence would depend on 'to defend Britain's freedom, to keep faith with our allies in Europe and NATO, and to keep the peace with justice'.[133]

Though often remembered for her confrontations with the EC in later years, Thatcher's early discourse still positioned Britain as a European and global power – not in opposition, but in tension. At this point, the Conservatives supported the EC membership, in contrast to the position of the Labour Party. If the UK were to leave the EC, it 'would be a fateful step towards isolation, at which only the Soviet Union and her allies would rejoice' for the Conservatives.[134] The idea of becoming an isolated nation is proposed in opposition to European membership.

This dual posture became particularly visible during the UK's presidency of the European Community in 1986. A Foreign Office (1986) briefing from the period, alongside a policy report authored by Simon May (1986), outlined Britain's agenda as one that balanced internal EC reform with external trade diplomacy.[135] According to May (1986, 1), the presidency's influence 'resides in its rights of initiative, conciliation and the formation of agendas'. The proposed focus areas included: reforming the Common Agricultural Policy, reducing regulatory burdens on business, and advancing a European position in the forthcoming GATT negotiations. Notably, May (1986, 5) warned that free trade could not be assured 'by negotiations addressed to trade alone' – signalling an awareness that international competitiveness required broader structural adjustments. The Foreign

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[133] Conservative Party, "The Conservative Manifesto" (manifesto, 1983).

[134] Conservative Party, "The Conservative Manifesto".

[135] May's paper (1986) was prepared specifically for the basis of a conference organised by the Centre for Policy Studies and is accompanied by a second paper also on the British presidency of the EC (July – December 1986) prepared by the Foreign Office and circulated to members of the conference.

Office, for its part, framed the presidency as an opportunity 'to enhance the standing of the Twelve as a voice in International affairs', particularly through the growing mechanism of European Political Cooperation (Foreign Office 1986).

These developments suggest that Thatcher's early European diplomacy was driven less by an outright rejection of integration than by an attempt to reposition Britain within it. Her emphasis on liberalisation, deregulation, and competitiveness reflected a desire not to exit Europe but to reshape it in line with British economic values. This was a vision in which sovereignty and multilateralism could coexist, so long as the latter did not threaten the former. In this regard, Thatcher's approach foreshadowed some of the ideological tensions that would later characterise Global Britain: a simultaneous assertion of national autonomy and outward engagement, grounded in a belief that Britain could still project power through trade, diplomacy, and institutional leadership.

The entanglement of economic performance and foreign policy legitimacy became increasingly explicit in the political discourse of the 1980s. David Owen, writing in the context of the 1987 general election, offered one of the most direct articulations of this link.[136] The significance of this book lies in the fact that it served both as a manifesto for the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and as a broader diagnosis of Britain's international condition. Although its polemical style necessitates interpretive caution, Owen's text is useful not for predicting policy outcomes but for capturing elite anxieties about Britain's

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[136] In 1986, David Owen authored the book *A United Kingdom: An Argument and a Challenge for a Better Britain* during his leadership of the SDP, which he co-founded. It is interesting to note that George Thomson, previously mentioned as the first politician to introduce the idea of Global Britain and was active in the Labour Party and Parliament during the same period as David Owen, was a member of the SDP from 1981 to 1988.

diminishing capacity to act globally. He argued that 'Britain's economic decline has been accompanied and compounded by a political decline in which our capacity to respond to problems has become progressively weakened' (1986, 11). Economic underperformance, in this view, was not merely a domestic failure – it was a brake on diplomatic agency and strategic credibility.

Owen's reflections are particularly instructive for how they connect material conditions to national self-perception. 'Our self-esteem is boosted by our international status', he writes, before adding that 'it is easier to go on pretending that we enjoy a relative standard of living and a degree of global influence that we no longer have than to face reality' (Owen 1986, 15). This rhetoric reflects a discursive tension that persists in the post-Brexit Global Britain narrative: the need to reconcile aspirational globalism with the structural realities of economic constraint. For Owen, the path forward required not a return to empire nor a full embrace of Europeanism, but a recalibration grounded in an honest assessment of Britain's strategic and economic position.

In a particularly echoing passage, Owen rejected the oversimplified binary between Atlanticism and Europeanism, instead framing Britain's strategic posture as necessarily hybrid and historically contingent. 'Continental or blue-water diplomacy? One is as unrealistically confining as the other was romantically overstretching', he wrote, arguing that post-referendum Britain was 'committed to acting as a European power' while needing to 'build up our national economy on a European scale' (Owen 1986, 23). In his conclusion, he observed that Britain's diminished naval and economic capacities required urgent correction, warning that 'Western Europe's relative decline as an industrial and trading power' demanded coordinated action (Owen 1986, 97). Although Owen's outlook was fundamentally centrist, it nonetheless foreshadowed some of the later themes in

Global Britain – particularly the insistence that international influence depends not just on diplomatic ambition but on economic viability.

Conservative thinkers were making a similar point, albeit from a different ideological angle. A 1988 report from the Centre for Policy Studies (CPS) – *The New Britain: The Tide of Ideas from Attlee to Thatcher*, authored by Nigel Lawson – argued that Britain's restored economic strength under Thatcher was the precondition for its reassertion of global authority (Lawson 1988).[137] The report should be read less as a neutral analysis than as an ideological piece – intended to legitimate Thatcherism's restructuring of the British state – but its rhetorical architecture remains significant. Lawson (1988, 16) wrote that a strong economy 'has given the present government a solid platform on which to stand and on the basis of which we have been able to exercise effective power and influence in all aspects of international affairs'. The idea of a "New Britain" emerging from the ruins of the post-war settlement sought to position economic liberalism as the basis for moral authority and global engagement.

For Lawson, the distinctiveness of Thatcher's Britain was not merely policy-based, but cultural and almost civilisational. 'The New Britain which we have begun to create is inherently and intrinsically more durable and stretchable than the Britain which emerged from the post-War settlement', he argued, adding that this model was 'in line with the deepest instincts of the British people, and draws its moral authority from them' (Lawson 1988, 17). This articulation of national purpose – grounded in popular will, economic

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[137] Nigel Lawson was one of the many ideational developers of Thatcherism, having been Special Assistant to Prime Minister Alec Douglas-Home (1963-1964) and Special Policy Adviser of the Conservative Party (1073-1974). Lawson was elected as an MP in the House of Commons between 1974 and 1992, and then in the House of Lords between 1992 and 2022.

discipline, and global aspiration – directly anticipates the framing of Global Britain under Conservative leadership decades later. What Thatcherite rhetoric crystallised was a vision of Britain as a market-oriented, diplomatically assertive power, capable of shaping international outcomes through trade, values, and strategic flexibility. That this vision remained contested does not diminish its discursive potency: it provided one of the most coherent ideological foundations for later claims about Britain's global vocation.

Post-Thatcher Transition, The European Question & New Labour

By 1987, Thatcherism had crystallised a particular vision of Britain's global role – one that merged economic liberalism with a rhetoric of international leadership. The Conservative Party manifesto that year encapsulated this: Britain was 'to remain a key trading nation' within a competitive multinational system while maintaining a 'responsible leading role' in European integration –, so long as national interests were safeguarded.[138] What was framed as 'The British Revival' was, in fact, a recalibration of Britain's status in a post-imperial, Cold War-aligned world order: revival was not just economic but reputational, and global positioning remained a central measure of domestic legitimacy.[139] This period reaffirmed a foreign policy tradition that resisted isolationism but insisted on sovereign discretion, particularly in the context of European cooperation.

Yet, the formal narrative of Britain's role in Europe became increasingly fractious in the years that followed. The debates surrounding the Maastricht Treaty in the early 1990s introduced not just a legal and political turning point but a deeper cleavage in the political imaginary of Britain's future. For the Conservative Party, the Maastricht negotiations laid

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[138] Conservative Party, "The Next Moves Forward: The Conservative Manifesto" (manifesto, 1987).

[139] Conservative Party, "The Next Moves Forward: The Conservative Manifesto".

bare the limits of its own consensus: the party had moved from pragmatic Europeanism to open fracture. The resulting division – between those who saw EC membership as an economic platform and those who viewed political integration as an existential threat – shaped the conditions for a discursive realignment across the political spectrum. Labour, too, confronted internal ambiguity, although its repositioning was more strategic. By the 1992 general election, the European question had transcended policy and become a proxy for broader anxieties around sovereignty, decline, and Britain's future orientation.

John Major's 1992 manifesto attempted to stabilise this terrain by asserting a vision of Britain as simultaneously embedded and exceptional: active in the EC, NATO, G7, Commonwealth, and the UN Security Council.[140] This institutional multilateralism was framed not as entanglement but as evidence of global seniority. Major's claim that Britain 'had regained her rightful influence in the world gestured toward the same ideological discourse sustaining Global Britain decades later – status, agency, and leadership, with trade as the operational vehicle.141 Still, Major's appeal to tradition increasingly appeared to align with a shifting geopolitical landscape and a party struggling to resolve its internal conflicts.

It was in this space of perceived inertia that Tony Blair's New Labour offered a discursive rupture.[142] Blair's early interventions in opposition were framed not just in moral or domestic terms, but as re-articulations of Britain's global identity. He positioned Labour not as the party of retreat or integrationist orthodoxy but as the vehicle for a 'new moral

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[140] Conservative Party, "The best future for Britain" (manifesto, 1992).

[141] Conservative Party, "The best future for Britain"

[142] Tony Blair assumed the leadership of the Labour Party in July 1994 and became Prime Minister in the 1997 General Election.

purpose' that refused to reduce foreign policy to transactional alignment.[143] His critique of Conservative foreign policy – 'a disgrace' and 'a joke' – was paired with an alternative idiom of leadership, influence, and responsibility on the world stage. 'Britain is an important European country', Blair insisted, 'we should be leading reform in Europe, not tailing along behind'.[144] What emerged was an argument not for abstract pro-Europeanism, but for engaged multilateralism as a source of national renewal.

Blair's foreign policy rhetoric was grounded in the belief that domestic regeneration and international status were interdependent. His framing of 'a new Britain' – as both project and aspiration – echoed the discursive structure of Thatcherism. Yet, it did so through a politics of centrist managerialism rather than ideological combat. As Morgan (2010, 678-679) and McAnulla (2010, 287) argue, the ideological content of the Third Way was deliberately abstract. New Labour's narrative architecture was less about coherent doctrine than the consolidation of credibility through competence, moderation, and rhetorical modernity. Blair's affirmation that 'Britain can and will be a great country again'

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[143] Tony Blair, "Leader's Speech" (speech, Labour Party Annual Conference, Brighton, 1995).

[144] Tony Blair, "Leader's Speech"

was not merely a campaign flourish; it refracted the longer arc of post-imperial identity work, still unresolved in elite political discourse.[145]

What distinguished New Labour's approach to Europe, however, was its strategic reframing. The EU was no longer merely a market or threat – it became a stage on which Britain's modernity and leadership could be performed. Blair's insistence that being 'sidelined without influence' was not a betrayal of Europe, but of Britain itself, recast European engagement as a sovereign imperative.[146] It was an argument that reversed Eurosceptic logic on its head: disengagement, rather than entanglement, was what undermined British autonomy. This reframing was less a resolution of the European question than its depoliticization within a new symbolic order – one in which internationalism, modernisation, and prestige were inseparable.

At the same time, William Hague's leadership of the Conservative Party following the 1997 election reintroduced a distinct variant of the global narrative – one that amplified

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[145] Tony Blair, Let Us Face the Future: The 1945 Anniversary Lecture (London: Fabian Society, 1995);
The idea of having a *New Britain* has been critical to both Thatcherism and Blairism. Wright (2003, 44) characterises both leaders as 'self-styled modernizers' and advances that 'the key fronts in this struggle were class, race, and Europe, the salience of which varied at different periods'. Even if this was used in domestic politics, it was also applied in foreign policy choices, emphasising the involvement strategy in the European sphere. The European question was also linked with the managing decline narrative in the post-war period, which has been side by side in the discourse since then.

[146] Tony Blair, "Leader's Speech"

Britain's trading identity while warning against political union.[147] His oft-cited phrase – 'in Europe, but not run by Europe' – marked a rhetorical strengthening of Euroscepticism into what would later become a doctrinal core of Conservative foreign policy.[148] Hague's embrace of the 'global trading nation' and 'our unique global network' framed the Commonwealth as a counterweight to the EU, embedding sovereignty, commerce, and values in a single vision of British exceptionalism.[149] What had once been the suggestion of Conservative European policy – reluctance, conditionality, mistrust – became, under Hague, evident.

The convergence of these narratives – Blair's rebranding of engagement and Hague's consolidation of opposition – reflected a more profound structural transformation in the British foreign policy debate. Europe, no longer a neutral ground, had become the contested milieu against which competing visions of Britain's role in the world were projected. What emerged between 1990 and 1997 was not consensus but a bifurcation of

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[147] William Hague is a British Conservative politician who became Leader of the Conservative Party and of the Opposition in 1997, following the party's electoral defeat and amid efforts to redefine its ideological direction in the post-Thatcher era. Prior to that, he had held junior ministerial roles under John Major's government. A former President of the Oxford Union and considered a rising star within the party, Hague positioned himself in the late 1990s as a defender of national sovereignty and a critic of European political integration. His leadership coincided with the early articulation of a distinctively Eurosceptic strand within Conservative discourse, shaped in reaction to New Labour's pro-European orientation and the broader geopolitical changes following the Maastricht Treaty.

[148] Conservative Party, "Our vision for Britain" (manifesto, 1997); The 1997 Conservative Party General Election Manifesto includes a dedicated section on 'Europe and the World'.

[149] Conservative Party, "Our vision for Britain".

the foreign policy imagination: two futures, both invoking renewal, both claiming leadership, but anchored in radically different accounts of Britain's past and potential.

This discursive divergence helps explain the subsequent proliferation of informal Eurosceptic networks and campaigns during the late 1990s. In the context of a Labour government increasingly comfortable with European engagement and a Conservative opposition intent on redrawing the limits of integration, political entrepreneurs from outside the formal party system found renewed opportunity. As the following section will explore, these actors – think tanks, intellectuals, and advocacy groups – would come to play a central role in sustaining and radicalising the informal narrative of Global Britain in the decades that followed.

4.4. The Cross-Party Eurosceptic Ecosystem of Ideas & The Global Vision Alternative (1990s)

As the Cold War ended and European integration deepened, the 1990s saw a sharpening of domestic contestation over Britain's role within the EU. This period saw the crystallisation of a cross-party Eurosceptic discourse that challenged the dominant integrationist consensus and began to articulate a coherent alternative global vision. Rather than being confined to fringe political actors, this ecosystem of ideas infiltrated the mainstream, drawing on longstanding traditions of exceptionalism, parliamentary sovereignty, and global trade ambitions. This section maps this ideational landscape, tracing how competing narratives of British foreign policy merged around a critique of European entanglement and a reimagining of Britain's global vocation.

While the dominant foreign policy consensus in Britain during the 1980s and early 1990s remained broadly pro-European, this period also offered a permissive environment for alternative visions to merge. Far from being a uniformly integrationist moment, the years leading up to the 1997 general election revealed a growing strain of elite-level discomfort with the trajectory of European political union. This discomfort did not originate at the electoral level, nor was it always formally articulated within mainstream party manifestos. Rather, it unfolded more diffusely – across think tanks, student debating societies, policy reports, and emerging political groupings. The result was not a coherent counter-policy, but a fragmented ecosystem of actors, each engaging – explicitly or implicitly – with a 'globalist' alternative to deeper European integration. It is within this landscape that a more serious ideational framework of Global Britain began to take root.

This section focuses on the informal discursive level of foreign policy-making – what might be described as the creative thoughts and ideas that surround formal elite decisions. In doing so, it examines the emergence and influence of the Bruges Group (founded in 1989), the Anti-Federalist League (1991), UKIP (1993), and the Global Britain think tank (1997). These actors did not operate in isolation. Instead, they formed part of a wider political-intellectual network, often overlapping with London-based think tanks and rooted in an elite channel centred around the University of Oxford. While it would be overstated to assign direct causal agency to these organisations, their role in shaping the constraints of political possibility should not be underestimated. They offered intellectual

cover, reframed sovereignty as a moral imperative, and, crucially, seeded the idea that Europe was an obstacle, not a platform, for Britain's global role.[150]

Wallace's (1973, 280–81) classic account of foreign policy-making in Britain remains instructive here. He observes that informal influence often appears 'weak and intermittent', yet operates in a 'continuous, informal and multidirectional' manner that subtly alters how policymakers interpret the national interest. While interest groups may struggle to directly shape high-level national security decisions, their impact is more readily observed in adjacent domains, such as commercial diplomacy, cultural outreach, and normative agenda-setting. In such spaces, sustained relationships and discursive resonance matter more than institutional access. This thesis, therefore, justifies the inclusion of informal actors not based on direct policy impact, but on their ideational contribution to a broader reimagining of Britain's international vocation.

Indeed, the literature has increasingly acknowledged the epistemic influence of think tanks and advocacy networks on British foreign policy.[151] Gaskarth (2006, 328–30) argues that these actors often shape elite understandings of global crises through ethical framings, while Bevir, Daddow, and Hall (2013, 165–67) highlight how they mediate between public

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[150] As mentioned in Chapter III – Tracing Global Britain, key reports from British think tanks are analysed to trace the informal narrative. Think tanks are fascinating data sources in political discourse since they produce ideas for foreign policy decision-makers. The purposive sampling technique is used to select the think tank producers. The specific criteria used are the relevance and prestige of the think tanks and their coverage of foreign policy topics.

[151] The idea of epistemic community refers to Haas's (1992, 3) conceptualisation that 'a network of professionals with recognised expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue era'.

sentiment and institutional constraints. N. Wright (2017, 5–6) extends this to the Brexit era, highlighting the role of Eurosceptic think tanks in shaping a new post-EU strategic imaginary. What links these analyses is the suggestion that informal discursive labour does not simply respond to policy agendas – it helps constitute them. Yet, such influence remains difficult to quantify. This section, then, does not claim conclusive proof of impact, but instead traces the emergence of a discursive field where notions of sovereignty, trade autonomy, and global alignment were reinterpreted and politically repurposed.

A central figure in this area was the Oxford political network. Based on archival findings and elite interviews, Oxford – particularly the Union debating society – emerges as a significant incubator for Eurosceptic ideas. Ann Widdecombe, interviewed for this research, recalled frequent debates on European integration during her time at Oxford in the early 1970s, including visits from then-Prime Minister Edward Heath.[152] These debates, often televised and widely followed, provided a symbolic platform for testing the ideological tensions that would later animate formal politics. As Kupper (2022, 3)

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[152] Ann Widdecombe, interviewed by Catarina M. Liberato, February 6, 2023; Widdecombe referred to the Oxford Union debate entitled "A question of Europe" where "This House would say 'Yes' To Europe" two days before the 1975 referendum ("A question of Europe", BBC, June 3, 1975).
Ann Widdecombe is a British politician and writer who served as a Conservative Member of Parliament from 1987 to 2010. A prominent social conservative, Widdecombe held several ministerial positions under John Major's government, including Minister of State for Prisons. Her political stance was characterised by a strong emphasis on national sovereignty, law and order, and traditional values. During the 1990s, she was a vocal Eurosceptic and part of the broader Conservative resistance to deeper European political integration following the Maastricht Treaty. Widdecombe remained an influential figure in shaping Conservative discourse on Britain's identity and its relationship with Europe throughout the decade.

provocatively argues, Oxford operated as an 'independent variable' in the making of Brexit, producing a cohort – Johnson, Gove, Hannan, Cummings – whose opposition to Brussels would later shape national discourse. Significantly, this political elite developed in parallel with, and was reinforced by, a media class that passed through the same institutional spaces.[153]

In this setting, the Bruges Group was founded in 1989 by Patrick Robertson, then a student at the University of Oxford. Its intellectual framing was built directly on Margaret Thatcher's Bruges speech, albeit through a selective and highly strategic reading.[154] The group's founding figures, including Lord Harris of High Cross – also Chair of the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) –, positioned themselves against federalist ambitions, portraying Europe as not just politically constraining but normatively misguided.[155] While Thatcher herself did not publicly break with the EC at this stage, the Bruges Group's re-

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[153] Tory Brexiteers were, at this time, in fact, "a minority even among Oxford politicos" (Kupper 2022, 5). Politicians such as William Hague, David Cameron, George Osborn, Theresa May, Rishi Sunak, Liz Truss, Keir Starmer, Yvette Cooper, Ed Miliband, and David Miliband also went to Oxford in the late 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s. Another aspect that Kupper (2022, 5) mentions is that most of the 2020s media elite attended Oxford simultaneously with this political elite, highlighting names such as Emma Tucker from the *Sunday Times*, Zanny Minton Beddoes from the *Economist*, Nick Robinson from the *BBC's Today* programme, and editors from the *Guardian*, the *Telegraph*, and the *Daily Mail*.

[154] Thatcher's Bruges Speech 're-ignited the question of Britain's relationship with the EEC and marked the beginning of a new phase in that relationship' (Gardner 2014, 23–24).

[155] Margaret Thatcher was invited to be the group's first president. The Bruges Group has been characterised in the literature as 'the first major new Eurosceptic organization' that 'was formed to continue the challenge to European centralization that Thatcher had initiated at Bruges, using a selective reading of her words as a Eurosceptic manifesto' (Daddow, Gifford, and Wellings 2019, 14).

articulation of her rhetoric laid the groundwork for a more oppositional posture to emerge within Conservative politics. This position would harden following Maastricht, contributing to intra-party fractures that weakened successive governments.

As the European project moved toward political union in the early 1990s, organisational fragmentation followed. In 1991, Alan Sked founded the Anti-Federalist League, which would later evolve into the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) in 1993.[156] Gerard Betten, John Harvey, High Moelwyn-Holmes, Gerald Roberts, Tony Scholefield, and Alan Sked were present at the Committee meeting of the League when the party was formed. Interestingly, Nigel Farage apologised for not being able to be present. Farage and David Wilkinson were later members of the UKIP Executive Committee (Gardner 2014, 34).[157] Although still on the margins, these formations adopted increasingly adversarial rhetoric, portraying European integration as antithetical to British sovereignty.

Simultaneously, James Goldsmith launched the Referendum Party, explicitly campaigning in 1997 on the need for a national vote on any further European alignment (Gardner 2014, 53-55). The overlap between these initiatives was not merely ideological, but logistical – Robertson, previously of the Bruges Group, collaborated with Goldsmith, while figures such as David Wilkinson crossed between platforms (Gardner 2014, 55-56).

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[156] The aim of the anti-Federalist League was initially to 'sponsor parliamentary candidates at the General Election in 1992 if none of the major parties opposed European political and economic union' (Gardner 2014, 31).

[157] During the 1997 General Election campaign, Boris Johnson interviewed Alan Sked when he was still a journalist for the *Daily Telegraph* (Gardner 2014, 49).

Notably, Boris Johnson's early journalism engaged directly with these actors, anticipating the eventual acceptance of their arguments many years later.

The emergence of the Global Britain think tank in 1997 marked a pivot in the rhetorical register of the Eurosceptic movement. While earlier organisations emphasised institutional critique or anti-federalism, Global Britain advanced a technocratic, business-oriented vision of sovereignty and global reach. Founded by Lords Pearson, Stoddart, and Harris, its cross-party nature is significant: Conservative, Labour, and non-partisan economic voices aligned around the belief that Britain's prosperity required decoupling from the European customs union.[158] Between 1997 and 2013, the emphasis was not on grievance but on opportunity – articulating a 'positive business case' for EU withdrawal grounded in trade diversification, deregulation, and international partnerships.159

These actors – often dismissed as marginal at the time – were embedded in a wider London-based epistemic infrastructure. The *Centre for Policy Studies* (CPS), *Civitas*, *Business for Britain*, and the *European Foundation* formed an ideational ecosystem sustained by recurring personnel, shared funders, and associated boards.[160] As Potter (1961, 130) noted

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[158] Malcolm Pearson, the Lord Pearson of Rannoch, was a member of the Conservative Party (until 2007). David Stoddart, Lord Stoddart of Swindon, was a member of the Labour Party (1947-2001), and Lord Harris was an economist who worked in the Conservative Political Centre at the Conservative Central Office. Lord Pearson joined UKIP in 2007 and resigned in 2019, having led the party from 2009 to 2010. Lord Stoddart was chair of the Campaign for an Independent Britain from 1985 to 2007, with Brexit as its core focus.

[159] https://globalbritain.co.uk/history/

[160] As Potter (1961, 130) recognises, 'the circles of different groups in the same field overlap a great deal, especially among the most active members, since groups maintain liaison with one another by exchanging commitment'.

in an earlier context, such groups often survive prolonged periods of inactivity or partial success, focusing their influence at moments of political vulnerability or realignment. The 1990s were such a moment.

While it would be reductive to claim that this network shaped foreign policy outcomes directly, its cumulative effect on the discursive field was real. By the mid-1990s, the once-hegemonic Europeanist consensus was being openly contested – not only in party manifestos but in speeches, white papers, and think tank reports. A loose coalition of Conservative sceptics, disaffected Labour figures, and institutional outsiders began to articulate a different story: that Britain's global vocation required an exit from the EU institutional architecture. This network contested the prevailing narrative of European integration, promoting a global, outward-looking approach that prioritised sovereignty, free trade, and strategic alliances beyond Europe. By the mid-1990s, this fusion of intellectual and political activity significantly influenced public discussions, pressuring Major's Conservative government while exacerbating internal party conflicts and leading to electoral challenges. This was not a constant narrative, but it was increasingly coherent in tone and objective.

Closing the chapter's temporal frame in 1997 is analytically useful. Blair's election marked a return to European engagement, reinforced by the Third Way's emphasis on multilateralism and normative leadership. But it also marks the point at which Euroscepticism became dissociated from formal government and migrated into a parallel discursive space – maintained by informal actors, sustained through networks, and waiting for a moment of crisis to return to the centre. The ideas these groups developed – so often dismissed as marginal in their own time – would prove central to reshaping Britain's foreign policy narrative in the decades that followed.

The subsequent chapter delineates that return. It examines the evolution of Global Britain from the edges of elite discourse into more noticeable and recurrent political usage between 1997 and 2016 – a period during which the narratives outlined herein gained greater prominence and traction, although they remain conceptually fluid and institutionally unanchored.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has traced the early genealogy of Global Britain, examining how it was progressively assembled through decades of ideological sedimentation as both a political slogan and a narrative structure. By unpacking this lineage, and in line with **Proposition 1 (*Ideational Foundation*),** the thesis demonstrates that Global Britain did not emerge as a fully formed foreign policy doctrine but as an adaptable narrative – a repository of inherited ambitions, anxieties, and rhetorical tropes that successive governments drew upon when reimagining Britain's place in the world.

The premise guiding this analysis is that to understand the foreign policy strategy behind Brexit in 2016, one must first grasp the deeper legacies of British statecraft that made such a rupture politically thinkable. Political choices, especially on questions of international alignment, are never made in a vacuum; they are constrained and shaped by accumulated historical experience and institutional memory. By recovering the long prehistory of Global Britain – from early post-imperial debates to Eurosceptic contestation and competing visions of national influence – the chapter also lays the groundwork for **Proposition 3 (*Strategic Reframing*)**, showing how the concept's historical layers made

it a ready-made vehicle for reconciling Britain's persistent tension between European engagement and global ambition.

Understanding this pre-Brexit construction is crucial for recognising why Global Britain could so readily be revived as the principal narrative for making sense of Britain's dramatic break with the EU – not as a retreat into isolation, but as the latest chapter in a much older story about Britain's search for a renewed global role. By taking a genealogical approach, this chapter demonstrates how ideas about Britain's global role were continually reworked to navigate the tensions between European integration and broader international ambition. This perspective is vital because it reveals that Brexit did not mark an abrupt break with Britain's strategic past but rather a reactivation of older arguments and aspirations embedded in political memory. In tracing this lineage, the thesis highlights why Global Britain could so easily become the principal slogan for interpreting Brexit: it drew legitimacy and rhetorical force from a deep reservoir of inherited beliefs about Britain's identity and purpose in the world.

This chapter does not attempt to deliver a chronological history of Britain's entry into the EC. Instead, it constructs the historical framework necessary to analyse contemporary debates around Britain's global orientation. Through a thorough examination of Britain's post-war foreign policy, economic strategies, and trade priorities, the chapter has traced the ideational emergence of Global Britain, identifying early references, such as Arthur Bryant's symbolic invocation in 1957 and George Thomson's more pragmatic articulation in 1968. These moments are not simply historical footnotes but formative discursive interventions that planted the seeds of a globalist alternative to European integration. Thomson's contribution, in particular, is shown to be central in defining Global Britain

not as a nostalgic return to empire, but as a proactive vision for sustaining international relevance through strategic adaptation.

The analytical lens offered by the ten strands (S1–S10) has proven essential in distinguishing the recurring ideational patterns that cut across governments, ideologies, and institutional realignments. From Churchill's majestic circles to Wilson's trade diplomacy, from Thatcher's neoliberal assertiveness to Blair's normative internationalism, British leaders have consistently attempted to reconcile domestic political imperatives with a changing international landscape. What emerges is not a single doctrine, but a repertoire of narratives activated at moments of transition or crisis. Particularly prominent are the strands of sovereignty (S1), economic liberalism (S3), and Britain's role in the world (S6), all of which were reinterpreted in the light of perceived imperial decline and changing economic constraints.

A closer analysis of the **Figure 12** suggests that rather than evolving linearly, British foreign policy identity between 1945 and 1997 was shaped by recurring efforts to reconcile competing pressures: global ambition versus economic constraint; sovereignty versus cooperation; and Atlanticism versus European integration. The earlier periods – especially from 1945 to 1973 – were characterised by attempts to manage imperial retreat through multilateral entrenchment, notably within NATO, the UN, and eventually the European Communities. During this phase, strands such as strategic alliances (S10), global role (S6), and security (S2) were foregrounded. By contrast, the post-1973 period reflects a turn inward, marked by economic dissatisfaction, institutional experimentation, and growing contestation over Britain's position within the European project. The growing centrality of strands such as S3 (economic liberalism), S5 (globalism vs isolationism), and S8 (relationship with Europe) in the late 1970s and 1980s indicates the rise of a new

ideological architecture – one that would culminate in the discursive re-articulations of the 1990s.

The accompanying chart (**Figure 12**) to this analysis highlights several critical dynamics. First, it demonstrates that the concept of Global Britain was not invented in 2016 but rather assembled incrementally over decades of both formal and informal discourse. Political actors across parties – including Attlee, Wilson, Thatcher, Major, and Blair – repeatedly drew on similar ideational materials to redefine Britain's strategic posture. Yet it was the fragmentation of consensus in the 1990s, alongside the rise of think tanks and intellectual networks like the Bruges Group and Global Britain think tank, that opened new discursive space for Euroscepticism and other alternatives to flourish. These actors did not merely echo parliamentary debate; they restructured it, adding layers of economic justification, strategic reframing, and ideological contrast that moved the discourse beyond simple party lines.

What is particularly evident in the final two columns of **Figure 12** is the increasing diversification of political actors participating in foreign policy discourse. The inclusion of intellectual networks, think tanks, and political entrepreneurs marks a key shift in how foreign policy narratives were produced and legitimised. These actors did not merely echo existing party positions but sought to reframe them, often by aligning specific strands with new political vocabularies. For example, the Bruges Group embedded sovereignty (S1) and European scepticism (S8) within a civilisational and historical frame. At the same time, Global Britain recast economic liberalism (S3) and strategic alliances (S10) as the basis for a post-European, globally networked UK. The inclusion of these informal actors thus illustrates the growing permeability of the foreign policy narrative space, where influence was no longer solely the domain of Whitehall or party leadership, but

increasingly the product of ideological brokerage across epistemic and institutional boundaries.

One key insight is that ideational innovation has often been tied to domestic political maintenance. From Disraeli to Blair, leaders seeking to hold office have drawn upon or reframed foreign policy narratives to justify broader political strategies. This is not coincidental. The foreign policy discourse in Britain has long been a site of ideological signalling – whether invoking socialism in the post-war Attlee era, neoliberalism under Thatcher, or the Third Way under Blair. The early foundations of Global Britain reveal how these ideological legacies persisted across time, even as they were repackaged to suit changing global conditions.

The section on *Foundations of Britain's Global Identity* illustrated how narratives of decline and reinvention played out in early Cold War diplomacy. Churchill's three majestic circles, with their emphasis on Commonwealth, Europe, and the Anglo-American alliance, provided a conceptual grammar for reconciling imperial retreat with a continuing sense of international vocation. Post-imperial anxieties were matched by economic crises, prompting Britain to join the EC as a means of recovery. *The Genesis of Global Britain* argued that this idea was not a post-Brexit invention but had been deployed earlier in contexts of global strategic withdrawal, most notably East of Suez, to reassert agency on new terms. In this sense, 'Global Britain' emerged historically less as a strategy of expansion and more as one of ideological compensation – an attempt to restore status without overstretch.

Economic and trade dimensions were shown to be crucial in *Economy and Trade Meet Foreign Polic*y, where the merging of domestic recovery priorities and external trade strategies underpinned Britain's evolving relationship with Europe. The decision to join the EC was not purely a political move. Still, it is rather deeply rooted in economic pragmatism,

reflecting a broader tension between multilateralism and sovereignty that persists to this day. Elite actors – notably Jenkins and Thomson – attempted to reconcile economic interdependence with political influence, laying the basis for multilateral engagement as a means of preserving global identity.

The period after 1975 saw a marked shift. With EC membership secured, British leaders struggled to develop a coherent external identity. Thatcher's tenure reasserted certain strands – especially sovereignty and trade – but also revealed internal contradictions, particularly over the limits of European integration. As this chapter demonstrates, the 1990s marked a turning point, not only in terms of economic recession and Maastricht-related instability, but also in the proliferation of informal ideological activity outside Westminster. This includes the emergence of UKIP, the Anti-Federalist League, the Referendum Party, and the Global Britain think tank. These groups strategically activated strands such as S1 (sovereignty), S5 (globalism vs isolationism), and S10 (alliances) to contest the institutional legitimacy of EU membership. Notably, the chart reveals that the final years of the 1990–1997 period represented the most ideationally full moment in the history of Britain's post-war foreign policy.

Over the period examined in this chapter, several of the ten strands underpinning the Global Britain narrative were repeatedly activated and reinterpreted. Sovereignty remained a central and often contested theme, shaped by debates over the limits of European integration and the preservation of national decision-making autonomy. The security strand persisted through Britain's emphasis on NATO, defence commitments, and the Anglo-American alliance as strategic anchors. Economic liberalism and trade were consistently linked to foreign policy goals, from post-war recovery strategies to Thatcher's neoliberal agenda. The strand of globalism versus isolationism was invoked both by pro-

European leaders seeking to justify engagement and by Eurosceptic actors framing withdrawal as a return to global outreach. Britain's role in the world was a recurring rhetorical device, often tied to moral leadership, while relations with Europe oscillated between pragmatic cooperation and open contestation. Finally, strategic alliances endured as a pillar of Britain's external orientation, reinforcing the notion that global influence required a networked approach to diplomacy and security. Together, these reactivated strands created a durable ideational repertoire that would later provide the conceptual scaffolding for the post-2016 articulation of Global Britain.

Through its integrated analysis of both formal and informal discourses, this chapter has demonstrated that Global Britain was not a reactive invention of the post-referendum moment, but rather the layered product of long-running contestation over Britain's international identity. The ten-strand chart developed here is not merely descriptive; it reveals how specific ideational themes gained traction through shifting coalitions of actors across time, institutions, and ideological divides. This analytical framework now becomes central to the empirical inquiry that follows. The next chapter applies it to the period between 1997 and 2016, investigating how Global Britain transitioned from a peripheral intellectual proposition to a dominant narrative through which Britain's post-EU future began to be imagined, contested, and institutionalised.

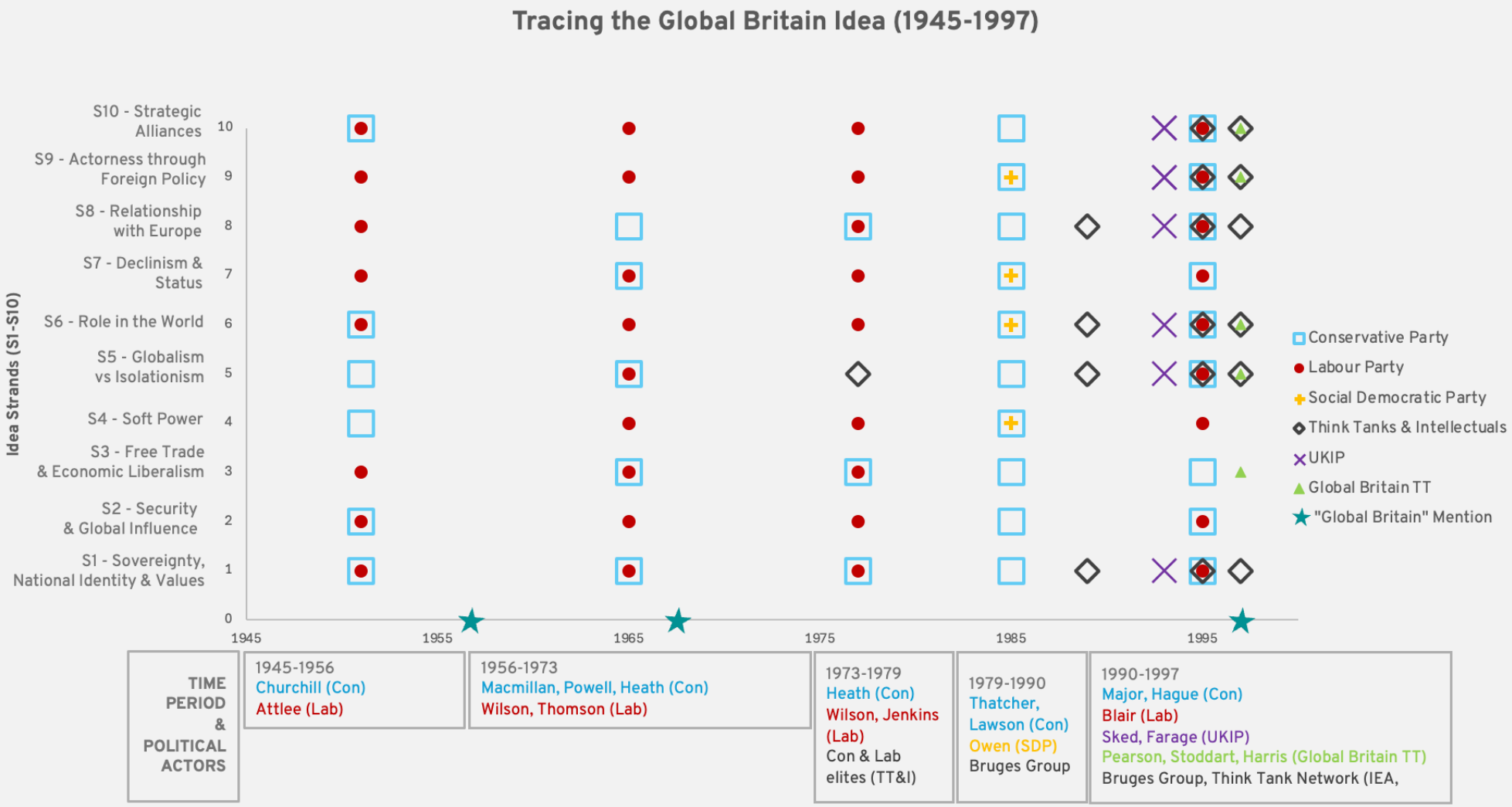


FIGURE 11- IDEOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE GLOBAL BRITAIN NARRATIVE, 1945-1997.

A longitudinal chart of actors and ideational strands in British foreign policy discourse.

CHAPTER V

BUILDING BREXIT: THE MAINTENANCE OF A STRATEGIC IDEA (1997-2016)

We want to be in Europe but not run by Europe.[161]

INTRODUCTION

The preceding chapter reconstructed the ideational roots of Global Britain, mapping how the term and its component strands emerged across post-war political discourse and elite foreign policy imaginaries. It examined, through content analysis, how different actors – from Arthur Bryant and George Thomson to successive post-war governments – contributed to its narrative framework. In doing so, it highlighted the overlooked longue durée of Britain's global positioning, arguing that comprehending the emergence of Global Britain necessitates examining far beyond the temporal shorthand that begins with David Cameron's 2013 Bloomberg speech.

This chapter builds on that genealogy by mapping how the Global Britain narrative was not only maintained but subtly developed during the two decades preceding the 2016 referendum.[162] In line with **Proposition 1 (*Ideational Foundation*)**, it examines how

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[161] Conservative Party, "Our vision for Britain" (manifesto, 1997).

[162] Some parts of the conference paper *Go Global or Go Home: Conservatism and British Foreign Policy after Brexit*, presented at the International Studies Association (ISA) Annual Conference 2022 and European Union Studies Association (EUSA) Biennial Conference 2022, were used in this chapter.

earlier debates and rhetorical themes persisted and evolved in political discourse, both formal and informal. Rather than providing a comprehensive history of British foreign policy during this period, the chapter interrogates the extent to which political actors carried forward, adapted, or rearticulated the strands previously identified. These strands (S1–S10) – ranging from sovereignty and trade to soft power and Britain's global role – structure the concept's discursive architecture. In doing so, the analysis also anticipates **Proposition 2 (*Political Uptake*)** by tracing how these themes, though not yet consolidated into a formal doctrine, were gaining visibility and resonance in elite discourse. What emerges is a picture of ideational sedimentation: a gradual layering of meanings and associations that prepared the ground for Global Britain's post-referendum elevation to a central policy narrative.

Particular attention is given to party manifestos, public speeches, memoirs, and elite interviews from the *Brexit Witness Archive*, sources that are notably underexplored in the academic literature. By combining these formal texts with an analysis of informal political narratives, this chapter highlights how ideas once perceived as marginal began to gain traction. It also seeks to answer an observable gap in the scholarship. Despite the now-extensive literature on Brexit and its foreign policy consequences, the period between 1997 and 2010 – especially under Labour governments – has received only minor

attention.[163] Research on Tony Blair's and Gordon Brown's foreign policy is not vast on the relationship with the EU (O'Donnell and Whitman 2007; Holden 2011; Gannon 2015).[164] Even the studies that address Brexit and Labour with a historical overview ignore Labour's governments and opposition between 1997 and 2016 (Beech 2021).[165]

Studies have tended either to focus narrowly on the 2016 referendum (H. D. Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley 2017; Meislova 2019; Avril 2021; Haugevik and Svendsen 2023) or to contextualise Brexit in terms of party leadership dynamics, economic populism, or the short-term politics of the coalition years. Some focus on contextualising the EU membership (Lynch and Whitaker 2018; Xu and Lu 2021), while others further develop the historical legacy up to the 1990s (Ashcroft and Bevir 2021). The parallel between the 1975 and 2016 referendums has been made (Saunders 2016; J. Smith 2016; Adam Evans 2018; Rogstad and Martill 2022) and Wellings (2021), who investigated Brexit considering the 2010s crisis until 2016.

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[163] Only three types of studies mention the period between 1997 and 2016. All of them were published before 2016, so none considered Brexit. Firstly, the EU focused on the Euro debate or the Nice and Lisbon treaties. Secondly, studies that scrutinise the rise of UKIP mention this period very sharply (Ford and Goodwin 2014; Tournier-Sol 2021). Thirdly, research focused on conservatism, the Conservative Party's modernisation, and Cameron's leadership in the opposition (Heppell 2013; Kerr and Hayton 2015) or focused on labour's foreign policy approach (Heffernan 2000; Wallace 2005; Vickers 2011; Daddow and Gaskarth 2011; Dyson 2011; McCourt 2011; Daddow and Schnapper 2013; Hall 2013; Honeyman 2017).

[164] Perhaps due to the lack of evident division regarding the membership and the friendly relationship developed by Blair, the high impact of the Iraq case (2003) (Henke 2018) or the financial crisis and economic calamity of Brown's premiership.

[165] Some have studied the 2015-2016 renegotiation (J. Smith 2016; Kroll and Leuffen 2016), but even this period is understudied due to the referendum's impact on British politics in academic literature.

The effect has been a divergence in the literature: on one hand, studies of Britain's entry into the EEC in the 1970s; on the other, work that focuses on the referendum period or its immediate run-up. This double absence obscures the fact that Global Britain was not suddenly born in 2016 but instead plotted and rehearsed over decades. Moreover, the analytical overreliance on political speeches and media commentary has meant that key sources – such as manifestos, think tank outputs, and interview-based primary material – remain underused.[166] This chapter addresses that gap by tracing the transmission of ideas across formal and informal discursive spheres, foregrounding the role of political entrepreneurs, advocacy networks, and party ideologues in maintaining the Eurosceptic narrative and repurposing Britain's global identity.

It is not the objective here to re-narrate governmental decision-making or provide a policy chronology. Instead, this chapter approaches foreign policy as an ideational project, wherein competing visions of Britain's international role are negotiated, challenged, and institutionalised. In doing so, it remains attentive to the productive tension between continuity and change, particularly in relation to fluctuations in political leadership and party realignments.

The chapter is structured thematically rather than chronologically, beginning with the political landscape of 1997 and the discursive realignment prompted by New Labour. It then examines how Blair's liberal interventionism and Brown's crisis-era diplomacy engaged (or neglected) foundational aspects of the Global Britain idea. The narrative then

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[166] Another criticism is the small sample and narrowed primary source selection of the existing literature. Authors (Meislova 2019; Haugevik and Svendsen 2023) focus primarily on political speeches made by leaders, assuming their authorship of the ideas being conveyed, as well as news articles or opinion articles published in the British media.

shifts to the modernisation of the Conservative Party under Hague and Cameron, tracing their articulation of Britain as a global trading nation within a reformed Europe. The coalition years are considered in the concluding section, culminating in the 2016 referendum – a moment at which the previously fragmented narrative of Global Britain entered the formal machinery of political strategy.

By revisiting this under-examined period, the chapter argues that many of the discursive elements of Global Britain were not only present but also increasingly prominent in the years preceding Brexit. While the narrative was not entirely coherent nor institutionally embedded until 2016, its constitutive strands (S1-S10) – such as sovereignty, status, open trade, soft power, and global leadership – had already gained salience. Tracing their evolution across texts and political platforms reveals how Global Britain transitioned from a latent rhetorical register to a mainstream strategic proposition.

5.1. Between Engagement and Exceptionalism

This section interrogates the evolving dynamics of British foreign policy under Labour between 1997 and 2010. These thirteen years of Labour governance are critical for three interrelated reasons. First, they constitute the only sustained period of Labour leadership amid the broader dominance of Conservative-led governments from the late 1970s to the present. Second, they offer a distinct approach to foreign policy, diverging from the patterns established by previous Conservative governments. Third, they encompass a phase of intensified engagement with the European Union, including the negotiations and domestic responses to the Treaty of Nice (2001) and, more prominently, the Treaty of Lisbon (2007–2009), which triggered renewed Eurosceptic mobilisation.

The broader political shifts of the 1990s set the context for these developments. While Margaret Thatcher had earlier moved away from traditional one-nation Conservatism to articulate a distinct neoliberal vision, Tony Blair similarly distanced the Labour Party from its ideological roots in socialism.[167] This realignment, characterised by the adoption of managerial pragmatism over doctrinal conviction, became associated with Blair's "Newism" or the so-called "Third Way" (A. Wright 2003, 44; McAnulla 2010, 287). In this regard, both Thatcher and Blair can be understood as political modernisers who recast the ideological identities of their respective parties while pursuing competing visions of Britain's international role.

The decade between 1990 and 1997 was one of political transition and institutional recalibration. Following Thatcher's resignation, John Major inherited the challenge of consolidating Conservative authority amid deepening intra-party conflict over Europe. His premiership coincided with a pivotal moment in European integration: the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty (1992–1993) and the establishment of the Single Market. These developments unfolded alongside an increasingly sceptical domestic public debate, foreshadowing the more deeply entrenched contestation that would emerge in subsequent decades.

Labour's electoral victory in 1997, which coincided with the signing of the Treaty of Amsterdam (effective from 1999), marked a recalibration in the UK's foreign policy

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[167] Between 1979 and 1997, the Conservative Party managed to remain in power. The successive governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major emerged in the country during 18 years of political and ideological continuity. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Thatcherism was one of the tidal waves that characterised the decades of the 1970s and 80s, led by the guiding idea of 19th-century liberalism (A. Wright 2003, 44).

orientation. Under Blair, the UK adopted a more assertive internationalist stance, characterised by a willingness to embrace multilateralism, humanitarian intervention, and closer cooperation with European partners. The launch of the euro, though not adopted by the UK, and the institutional reforms proposed by the Nice and Lisbon Treaties further tested the boundaries of Britain's European identity.

A growing body of scholarship has examined New Labour's foreign policy framework (Miskimmon 2004; Henke 2018; Eason 2023) as well as the continuity between Blair and Brown's premierships (Whitman 2010; Honeyman 2017). Others have explored ideological affinities and divergences between Blair and David Cameron (McAnulla 2010; Beech 2011; Daddow and Schnapper 2013; Honeyman 2017). Of relevance is Beech's (2021) effort to situate Labour traditions within the context of Brexit, a contribution that highlights the historical embeddedness of the party's foreign policy thought. However, much of this literature remains limited in scope when assessing how the New Labour period contributed to the conceptual scaffolding of Global Britain.

Indeed, one of this section's central aims is to address this analytical void. It contends that Labour's tenure between 1997 and 2010 was instrumental not only in sustaining Britain's active global posture but in advancing a narrative of national influence, institutional leadership, and economic modernisation that later underpinned the post-Brexit Global Britain discourse. While Labour did not articulate Global Britain as an explicit foreign policy doctrine, many of its component strands – including the emphasis on global engagement, trade liberalisation, and liberal internationalism – were actively promoted and normalised within elite discourse. As the section will show, New Labour's foreign policy legacy helped structure the discursive conditions in which Global Britain could later be formalised as a post-referendum strategy.

BLAIR'S LIBERAL INTERVENTIONISM

This subsection focuses on Tony Blair's articulation of Liberal Interventionism as a central pillar of New Labour's foreign policy. Rather than constituting a radical departure from prior traditions, Blair's approach reframed existing narratives of British global influence – particularly internationalism, moral leadership, and strategic autonomy – into a renewed doctrine of active international engagement. While often situated within the distinct post-Cold War context, Blair's foreign policy rhetoric and practice warrant closer examination for the way they prefigure the later Global Britain discourse, particularly in their rejection of isolationism and insistence on Britain's leadership role in international affairs.

The 1997 Labour manifesto marked the beginning of a discursive reorientation. It asserted that 'Labour wants a new era of international influence and respect for Britain', positioning foreign policy not as an external function of statehood but as constitutive of domestic renewal and national pride.[168] The criticism of the Conservative Party comes regarding "the loss of Britain's influence" that has misused the country's assets. Conversely, Major's conservative manifesto mentioned that 'Britain is a world leader as well as a European nation. Our economic strength, our history and our language, make us a global trading nation with links right around the world'.[169] Resonating earlier Conservative references to Britain as a 'global trading nation', the Labour manifesto introduced the notion that a re-energised British identity was dependent on active international engagement: 'A new Labour government will (…) restore Britain's pride and

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[168] Labour Party, "Britain will be better with the new labour" (manifesto, 1997).

[169] Conservative Party, "Our vision for Britain" (manifesto, 1997).

influence as a leading force for good in the world'.[170] It is precisely this linking of domestic modernisation and global leadership that would later become emblematic of Global Britain rhetoric.

Robin Cook's 1997 declaration of an 'ethical foreign policy' signalled an explicit attempt to differentiate Labour from the preceding Conservative government.[171] His four strategic aims – security, prosperity, environmental responsibility, and the promotion of peace and democracy – were underpinned by the claim that British foreign policy should reflect

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[170] Labour Party, "Britain will be better with the new labour"; The notion of being a leading force for good in the world was used by the Labour Party to address the country's loss of influence due to more than a decade of Conservative leadership. Additionally, the Conservative Party under Major employed the idea of being a global trading nation to describe British foreign policy worldwide. In the context of Brexit, Theresa May and Boris Johnson both invoked these concepts to manage the country's diminishing influence at this time, which arose from leaving the EU.

[171] Robin Cook was Foreign Secretary between 1997 and 2001, being then Leader of the House of Commons and Lord President of the Council until 2003. Between 2001 and 2004 was simultaneously president of the Party of European Socialists, the European social democratic and progressive political party. Cook developed an Ethical Foreign Policy that 'was driven not only by personal convictions and those of his party, but also in order to create a degree of political distance from the last Conservative party government' (Miskimmon 2004, 285–86).

shared values, not simply strategic interests.[172] Although often dismissed as rhetorical idealism, this vision embodied a conceptual shift: Britain's global role was no longer reducible to historical obligation or geopolitical necessity but was instead framed in terms of value-based agency. Cook's call to make Britain 'once again a force for good in the world' would later reappear in post-2016 foreign policy discourse, further illustrating the longevity of this ideational strand.[173]

Yet it was Blair's 1999 Chicago speech that most clearly articulated the logic underpinning New Labour's foreign policy activism.[174] In what he later described as the basis of a 'doctrine of international community', Blair outlined six conditions for military intervention, blending moral imperatives with pragmatic calculation. This speech was not merely an abstract statement of principle but a claim to reassert Britain's global relevance

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[172] The first goal was the security of nations, where he highlighted the enlargement of NATO to become a more robust alliance and reduce tensions between East and West. Secondly, Britain's prosperity is allied with its history as a trading nation and its network of overseas posts. Thirdly, it focuses on the quality of life through investing in an environmental agenda within international organisations. Lastly, 'to secure the respect of other nations for Britain's contribution to keeping the peace of the world and promoting democracy around the world'. Cook saw this last foreign policy goal as 'the promotion of our values and confidence in our identity', which was also in the UK national interest.; Robin Cook, "Robin Cook's speech on the government's ethical foreign policy" (speech, Indonesia, 1997).

[173] Robin Cook, "Robin Cook's speech on the government's ethical foreign policy".

[174] Tony Blair, "Doctrine of the International Community" (speech, Chicago, 1999); Blair's Chicago speech is considered to have marked the beginning of 'The Blair Legacy' through Liberal Interventionism (Honeyman 2017, 47). It is a frequent practice for PMs to communicate their views in public speeches. While the party manifestos translate the party ideas, the narratives present in the speeches directly represent the PM's beliefs. Statements in the Chicago speech referred primarily to the foreign policy priorities and strategies of Thatcher's government.

through value-driven leadership. Blair's foreign policy was shaped by a belief in the transformative potential of liberal values, but equally by a conviction that Britain's status depended on its willingness to act. As Honeyman (2017, 47) observes, the Prime Minister assumed an increasingly vital role in directing foreign policy, institutionalising a leader-driven mode of strategic communication that would resurface in the post-Brexit period.

The doctrine of liberal interventionism gave coherence to Britain's foreign policy throughout Blair's premiership, though the Iraq War later undermined its credibility. Despite Cook's earlier vision, the events of 2003 revealed the tensions between ethical aspiration and geopolitical alignment, particularly concerning the UK's strategic proximity to the United States.[175] Still, the overarching logic of engagement over isolation persisted, and Blair continued to insist on Britain's global responsibilities and potential. Blair's liberal interventionist foreign policy combined the UK's status as a global power with a reprobation of isolationism.

Miskimmon (2004, 282–84) identifies four core elements in Blair's approach: an integrated foreign policy architecture grounded in social democratic values, a willingness to intervene militarily, burden-sharing across the Atlantic alliance, and the pursuit of British national interests through multilateral institutions. Between 1997 and 2004, Labour pressed the idea of an integrated foreign policy. Still, the repercussion of such a policy was 'that a wide range of domestic and foreign policy instruments' could be 'mobilized to deal with the challenges facing the global community' (Miskimmon 2004, 285).

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[175] Honeyman (2017, 49) argues that 'clearly ethical dimensions and human rights were not the primary driving force of British foreign policy, even before the events of 9/11, and such a flimsy application of them suggests a lack of real commitment'.

Although Blair's liberal interventionism is not reducible to the Global Britain concept that emerged after 2016, it undoubtedly contributed to its discursive architecture. The rejection of isolationism, the emphasis on value-driven leadership, and the assertion of Britain's role as a bridge between Europe and the US are all motifs that would later be mobilised in service of a post-EU vision of British foreign policy. What is notable, however, is that under Blair, these motifs operated within a framework of multilateralism and European engagement – precisely the commitments that Brexit later undermined.

Blair's premiership also represents a new phase in the relationship between the UK and the EU, whilst contributing to enhancing the special relationship between the UK and the US. Daddow (2013, 211) argues that 'the government wanted to modernize Britain in part by upgrading the priority and weight the government accorded the EU with respect to the US and Commonwealth within its foreign policy thinking'. Yet, it is commonly accepted that Blair's government only 'managed to "normalize" British-EU relations at the elite level' (Daddow 2013, 211).

Blair described the UK's position in terms of foreign policy alliances with Europe and the US, stating that 'For the first time in the last three decades we have a government that is both pro-Europe and pro-American'.[176] Nevertheless, in the 1983 General Election, the Labour Party indicated its opposition to the UK's special relationship with the US and simultaneously to a more active engagement with Europe (Garnett, Mabon, and Smith 2018, 335). This thesis argues that the rhetoric demonstrates that the decision to join the EC led the UK to set aside the aim of pursuing a more intense relationship with the US.

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[176] Tony Blair, "Doctrine of the International Community".

As Blair puts it, the UK was 'finally done (…) with the false proposition that we must choose between two diverging paths – the Transatlantic relationship or Europe'.[177]

In an interview conducted for this thesis, Julian Jessop highlighted the enduring relevance of the transatlantic connection, observing that 'one of the great things we did was we were a bridge between the US and Europe', and noting that Brexit had diminished this strategic advantage.[178] However, as Wallace (2005) contends, the so-called special relationship has historically complicated Britain's European diplomacy. Not only has it diverted prime ministerial attention away from multilateral European politics, but it has also generated scepticism among EU partners, who have been reluctant to accept a model in which their access to Washington is mediated through London (Wallace 2005, 55).[179]

During an interview for this thesis, Alastair Campbell, Blair's former Director of Communications at Downing Street, emphasised that one of the government's key strategic priorities was to ensure that 'Britain is going to be a leading player in the

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[177] *Ibid*; As Daddow's (2013, 223) has described: 'Blair believed Britain could reassert its "Great" Britain status only by working patiently with Europe's leading partners, by engaging early with policy initiatives and shaping them to suit Britain's interests. His notion that Britain would act out a unique role as a "bridge" between Europe and the US was predicated on both ends of that bridge being carefully constructed so that British could exert real influence in both arenas".

[178] Julian Jessop, interviewed by Catarina M. Liberato, November 25,

[179] Blair decided to 'commit more fully to building the European military capabilities in crisis management within the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) framework' and 'attempted to balance his commitments' with both the EU and the US (Miskimmon 2004, 282). Nevertheless, it is argued that the intervention in Iraq (2003) 'has made clear that in military terms, the UK remains firmly wedded to the transatlantic relationship' (Miskimmon 2004, 282).

European Union.[180] Britain's role in Europe was an important part of what we were trying to do'.[181] At the same time, however, he noted that New Labour's messaging was equally focused on establishing economic credibility: 'we were trying to show business that we were serious about business and that we could be trusted on the economy'.[182] While Blair was rhetorically committed to breaking with Thatcher's legacy, Daddow (2013, 212) argues that his most significant departures from traditional British foreign policy were not made with Europe, but through the development of a humanitarian interventionist agenda.

One of Blair's early and most politically sensitive foreign policy decisions concerned whether the UK should join the Euro. Although Blair was broadly pro-European and inclined to support membership, he recognised the political risks involved. As Tombs (2022, 47) observes, Blair 'was in favour (or at least wished to appear so), but he knew that "giving up the pound" was unpopular, as [he] feared losing the referendum that pressure from Sir James Goldsmith's Referendum Party had induced him to promise'. The decision was ultimately deferred, in part due to Chancellor Gordon Brown's insistence on meeting a set of 'five economic tests' – criteria that were, in practice, unlikely to be fulfilled, thus allowing the issue to be abandoned indefinitely (Tombs 2022, 48).

Labour's 2001 General Election manifesto positioned the party in direct opposition to the Conservative view on Europe. The document stated: 'Unlike the Conservatives, we

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[180] Alastair Campbell, Brexit Witness Archive, UK in a Changing Europe (interview, March 5, 2021); Alastair Campbell occupied the role of Downing Street Press Secretary (1997-2000) and Prime Minister's Official Spokesperson, as well as Downing Street Director of Communications and Strategy (2000-2003).

[181] Campbell, Brexit Witness Archive.

[182] *Ibid.*

see Europe as an opportunity not a threat. Because we participate fully, we are able to work with our partners to shape an EU agenda that advances our national interests'.[183] This was framed as a choice 'between an inward-looking chauvinism that leads to isolation and a modern patriotism where the British national interest is pursued through international engagement'.[184] The manifesto reflected Labour's vision of global engagement through active participation in multilateral institutions, addressing pressing global issues such as climate change, poverty, and international development, while maintaining a strong defence posture through NATO and European reform.[185]

By 2005, Labour had renamed its foreign policy platform to 'international policy', marking a shift in both terminology and scope.[186] The 2005 manifesto presented a retrospective on the preceding eight years and a forward-looking vision for 2010. It criticised the previous Conservative government for leaving Britain 'isolated in Europe' and without 'any coherent vision of our place in the world', while framing Labour's legacy as one of international leadership and responsibility.[187] Labour pledged to continue shaping Europe, to lead in tackling global poverty, to advocate for progressive trade and environmental agreements, and to maintain a robust defence strategy within a multilateral context.

The dominant global policy challenge facing Blair's third term was globalisation. The 2005 manifesto explicitly tied global economic interdependence to the need for European reform: 'Globalisation means that events elsewhere have a direct impact at home. So, we

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[183] Labour Party, "Ambitions for Britain" (manifesto, 2001).

[184] Labour Party, "Ambitions for Britain".

[185] *Ibid.*

[186] Labour Party, "Britain forward not back" (manifesto, 2005).

[187] Labour Party, "Britain forward not back".

will pursue British interests by working with our allies to make the world a safer, fairer place. This means reforming Europe'.[188] In his paper for the Foreign Policy Centre, *A Global Alliance for Global Values*, Blair (2006) further outlined a normative agenda for global governance, invoking 'the age of interdependenc' and arguing for 'a foreign policy of engagement'. He wrote: 'Globalisation is a fact. But the values that govern it are a choice. And the great challenge today is to articulate a common global policy based on common global values' (Blair 2006, 7).

For Blair, a values-based approach – centred on liberty, democracy, tolerance, and justice – was essential for shaping the international order. The appropriate response, as he argued, was 'a strongly activist foreign policy' (Blair 2006, 8), a doctrine consistent with New Labour's broader commitment to international leadership. As Hall (2013, 240) notes, globalisation was not merely a contextual factor but a central pillar of New Labour's foreign policy outlook.

Blair's liberal internationalism thus reveals the paradox at the heart of Britain's post-imperial identity: a desire to project influence globally while remaining uncertain about its institutional and regional affiliations. In this respect, his foreign policy legacy is not merely of historical interest but represents a vital link in the ideational genealogy of Global Britain.

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[188] *Ibid.*

BROWN'S PRAGMATIC CONTINUITY AND GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

Following Tony Blair's assertive liberal interventionism, Gordon Brown's premiership (2007–2010) marked a shift in the tone and priorities of British foreign policy. Although continuity is evident in the broad commitment to global engagement, Brown did not inherit Blair's internationalist enthusiasm. Rather than articulating a new ideology of foreign policy, Brown's approach reflected a realistic emphasis on global governance, economic resilience, and institutional reform in the wake of the unfolding financial crisis.[189] This section contends that Brown's foreign policy was characterised by a decision-making pragmatism that sought to recalibrate Britain's international role without radically departing from the strategic foundations laid by New Labour.

Where Blair had to innovate and distinguish himself from the preceding Conservative legacy, Brown operated within an existing Labour framework, allowing for a more technocratic and less ideologically charged approach. As (Whitman 2010, 836) observes, Brown's tenure was concerned with 'the new challenges of global governance and global capitalism' rather than the value-laden language of ethical intervention. His objectives coalesced around three principal spheres: the global economy, security strategy, and democratic development. Yet, even as these concerns mirrored earlier themes from Blair's government, they lacked the discursive ambition of a comprehensive foreign policy doctrine.

Nonetheless, Brown's government made significant institutional advances, particularly with the publication of the UK's first National Security Strategy in March 2008 (Whitman

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[189] Before becoming leader of the Labour Party and Prime Minister, Gordon Brown was Chancellor of the Exchequer (1997-2007).

2010, 838).[190] This initiative marked a significant departure from ad hoc threat response, introducing a forward-looking and integrated framework for policy formulation. In terms of security and global leadership, Brown's emphasis was on resilience, multilateral cooperation, and pre-emptive analysis, rather than military assertiveness. These changes reflect a more structured and anticipatory mode of engagement, aligning with the increasing complexity of global interdependence.

In his handling of international diplomacy, Brown also prioritised economic coordination, most visibly during the London G20 summit in 2009. As Gannon (2015, 14-15) notes, this event highlighted Brown's ability to function as a transatlantic interlocutor, managing to bridge EU and US positions at a moment of acute financial instability. The summit further affirmed Britain's role as a facilitator in global economic governance – an ambition previously gestured towards under Blair but made concrete through Brown's leadership in the crisis.

On European policy, Brown followed Blair in treating the EU as a platform through which Britain could amplify its global ambitions. As Whitman (2010, 837) argues, the EU was not the central vehicle for foreign and security policy, but rather one instrument among several for asserting British influence. However, the gap between formal commitment and political rhetoric remained wide. Labour's position was often marked

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[190] The 2008 strategy (Cabinet Office, The National Security Strategy of the UK: Security in an Interdependent World, 2008, Cm. 7291) was followed by the 2010 National Security Strategy (NSS) (Cabinet Office, A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The National Security Strategy, 2010, Cm. 7953). In 2015, Cameron's government published the National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) (Cabinet Office, National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review, 2015, Cm. 9161) and May's government The National Security Capability Review (NSCR) of 2018.

by ambivalence – supportive of integration was strategically sound, yet cautious about appearing overly enthusiastic. As Caroline Flint reflected in interviews, the government was reluctant to appear 'in love with the European Union' and maintained critical distance when domestic sensitivities required it.[191]

This tension between pragmatic cooperation and political caution also affected the UK's engagement with EU institutions. Flint, reflecting on her time at the Foreign Office, described the European Parliament as 'increasingly out of touch with many people in our country', therefore alienated from British political discourse.[192] Her testimony highlights the growing disconnect between national politics and EU mechanisms – an issue exacerbated by the lack of continuity among EU leadership and the failure to establish sustained bilateral relationships. These conditions weakened the perceived legitimacy of the European project within UK domestic debates, spreading the seeds for subsequent contestation.

The broader international context – especially the eurozone crisis – further worsened these tensions. Thompson (2017, 439) argues that the financial crash politicised London's role as the eurozone's offshore financial hub, while concurrently deepening integration pressures within the EU and shifting the institutional balance towards Germany. These developments not only affected Britain's leverage in EU affairs but also contributed to

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[191] Caroline Flint, Brexit Witness Archive, UK in a Changing Europe (interview, January 29, 2021).

[192] Flint, Brexit Witness Archive.

rising internal party pressure within the Conservatives. The downstream effects of this economic disruption ultimately contributed to Cameron's decision to call a referendum.[193]

Brown's foreign policy legacy thus lies not in bold new ideational trajectories but in the consolidation of strategic pragmatism, institutional anticipation, and crisis diplomacy. His tenure embedded a cautious form of internationalism anchored in economic management and multilateralism, while also highlighting the limits of the UK's engagement with the EU. Importantly, these dynamics – particularly the unease with European institutional frameworks and the reaffirmation of transatlantic ties – would later be re-articulated in the post-2016 vision of Global Britain, albeit under a markedly different political climate.

FROM GLOBAL NETWORK TO NETWORKED WORLD

Labour's foreign policy between 1997 and 2010 exemplified a strategic culture defined by the balancing of Atlanticist and Europeanist orientations, a duality long embedded in Britain's international posture. As Miskimmon (2004, 288) suggests, this period reflects the broader 'context in which strategic culture is expressed within the UK', revealing a foreign policy grounded in institutional flexibility and normative ambiguity. Despite pro-European rhetoric and episodic alignment with EU priorities, the deeper structural logic remained fundamentally cautious. As Nugent and Phinnemore observe, by the end of the

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[193] The costs of the financial crisis on the UK's relationship with the EU were a challenge for the Cameron-Clegg coalition government and have been a variable in the equation of political instability within the Conservative Party, leading to Cameron's referendum announcement. As Thompson (2017, 446) mentions, 'In a number of ways, the 2008 financial crash and the euro-zone crisis put a time-bomb under the sustainability of Britain's membership of the EU'.

Blair-Brown years, the UK remained 'towards the Eurosceptic end of any Eurosceptic–federalist spectrum' (quoted in Daddow 2013, 211). Similarly, Daddow (2013, 224) argues that Blair's 'web of beliefs' positioned him ideationally closer to Thatcher and the Eurosceptic tradition than often acknowledged.

Beyond discourse, New Labour's legacy also includes a substantive institutional transformation of the FCO. The period saw a concerted effort to transform the FCO into a dynamic actor capable of navigating and shaping global governance structures. As Hall (2013, 229) notes, this reform entailed both a redefinition of the FCO's internal culture and its strategic function as an enabler rather than a direct executor of foreign policy aims. Central to this transformation was the concept of a "global network", through which Britain could extend its influence by 'facilitating the actions of others rather than delivering substantive goods itself' (I. Hall 2013, 240). The DFID, by contrast, took the lead in operationalising responses to global challenges, while the FCO concentrated on building the architecture of influence.

This thesis contends that the notion of a "global network" embedded in New Labour's institutional reforms anticipates key dimensions of the post-Brexit Global Britain agenda. In contrast, the two projects differ in their geopolitical framing, both centre on the UK's aspiration to act as a connector of international partnerships, particularly via bilateral trade agreements and ad-hoc multilateralism. The emphasis on responsiveness, leadership, and network building reemerges in the Conservative foreign policy discourse post-2010.

The following section turns to William Hague, whose tenure as Conservative leader marked a critical moment of ideological repositioning. It is argued that Hague's "networked world" vision represents not a rejection but a reconfiguration of New Labour's global outlook, offering an alternative paradigm rooted in traditional conservative principles but adapted to a rapidly evolving international environment. As

leader of the opposition during Blair's second and third terms, Hague advanced a global strategy that both responded to Labour's dominance and laid the foundation for Conservative foreign policy realignment in the coalition (2010-2015) and post-referendum years.

5.2. The Evolution of Conservative Internationalism

Following the overview of New Labour's foreign policy orientation, this section examines how Conservative thinking on Britain's global role evolved under the leadership of William Hague and David Cameron. It traces how both figures contributed to the ideological foundations that would later inform the post-Brexit Global Britain narrative.

From 1997 to 2001, Hague served as Leader of the Opposition and sought to reposition the Conservative Party after its electoral defeat.[194] His tenure marked the early stages of developing a more assertive foreign policy outlook that aimed to align traditional Conservative values, such as trade, defence, and national sovereignty, with a globalised 21st-century context. Despite three unsuccessful election campaigns (1997, 2001, and 2005), the party's foreign policy discourse matured significantly during this period. In 2005, David Cameron assumed party leadership and appointed Hague as Shadow Foreign Secretary – a post he would later hold in government following the formation of the coalition in 2010.

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[194] Hague was elected after the resignation of John Major right after the loss in the general election of May 1997. In 2001, Hague also lost the General Election to the Labour candidate Blair.

Hague's most notable contribution lay in reintroducing a distinctly global dimension to Britain's foreign policy identity. Drawing on the party's heritage – notably Thatcher and Major's characterisation of Britain as a global trading nation – Hague advocated a strategic repositioning that embraced globalisation while reaffirming sovereignty. This thesis contends that Hague's approach innovatively merged longstanding Conservative ideals with an outward-facing, globally embedded vision of Britain's role in international affairs.

In the 2001 Conservative Party manifesto, under the theme 'Knowing who we are: A world leader', Hague outlined five key foreign policy aims: creating a more flexible EU; preserving national sovereignty by opposing further transfers of power to Brussels; rejecting a European army outside NATO; promoting global free trade by 2020; and reasserting control over asylum policy.[195] These commitments signalled both continuity and adaptation – reaffirming Conservative scepticism towards European integration while articulating a proactive global strategy centred on diplomacy, trade, and multilateral cooperation.

Hague raises specific foreign policy issues. The first one is what he calls 'In Europe, not run by Europe'.[196] Hague believes it is possible to have a European network where Britain leads the debate. Of particular note is Hague's emphasis on Britain's capacity to 'take a lead in the world', a phrase that would become a recurring motif in Conservative discourse.[197] He positioned the UK as a nation that 'can be a force for good' – a formulation that anticipated later iterations of the Global Britain agenda.[198] This was to

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[195] Conservative Party, "Time for Common Sense" (manifesto, 2001).

[196] Conservative Party, "Time for Common Sense".

[197] *Ibid.*

[198] *Ibid.*

be achieved by mobilising diplomatic capabilities and leveraging Britain's historical assets, including its global networks and the Commonwealth. In proposing the creation of a Foreign, Commonwealth and Trade Office, Hague advanced an institutional innovation that explicitly linked diplomacy to trade, predicting the structure adopted post-Brexit.[199]

Although committed to EU membership at the time, Hague's vision offered a form of globalism that remained distinct from supranational political integration. His stance differed from that of the Global Britain think tank which, from its inception in 1997, championed a globalist yet Eurosceptic alternative.[200]

Between 1997 and 2001, Hague's position evolved from moderation to greater assertiveness, especially on Europe. While initially promoting an inclusive, modernising brand of conservatism, by 1999 he began consolidating support from the party's Eurosceptic base. Lynch and Garnett (2003, 251-252) identify a turning point in mid-1999 when Hague pivoted towards more direct appeals to Conservative core voters, particularly through his "Keep the Pound" campaign and the development of the "In Europe, not run by Europe" slogan.

Yet, Hague's Euroscepticism was never absolutist. His discourse presented an alternative to Labour's pro-Europeanism without advocating for withdrawal. Instead, his proposals represented a strategic recalibration of Britain's place in the international system, combining normative ambitions with a belief in British distinctiveness. Elements of his worldview – including the emphasis on trade, the global role of the diplomatic service,

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[199] *Ibid.*

[200] Introduced in chapter IV.

and Britain's status as a military power – would later re-emerge in the Global Britain concept post-referendum.

In 2005, David Cameron succeeded Hague as party leader and sought to modernise the Conservative platform under what he described as a "liberal conservative" approach.[201] His proposition of Liberal Conservatism aimed to modernise the party but was 'not an ideology as such' (Honeyman 2017, 51). Though often presented as a break with the past, Cameron's foreign policy vision was profoundly shaped by Hague's global orientation. In a 2006 speech, Cameron articulated five core foreign policy propositions: understanding new threats, reassessing the imposition of democracy, developing revised military strategies, promoting a "new multilateralism", and reaffirming Britain's moral authority on the global stage.[202]

Cameron's multilateralism involved enhancing cooperation with both international institutions and longstanding alliances. He maintained the traditional emphasis on the special relationship with the US, aligning with both Brown and Blair in viewing the transatlantic bond as a central pillar of British foreign policy (Honeyman 2017, 60).

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[201] Cameron considered himself a one-nation conservative, and his leadership represented a return to the post-war and pre-Thatcher periods (Bochel and Powell 2018, 1–2). In the post-World War II period, the one-nation Conservatism (or Toryism) emerged, characterised more towards the left. Nonetheless, since the 1980s, there has been a more severe 'application of conservative principles in a purer form' (Dorey 2014, 34), associated with a more Conservative right, or Thatcherism. Cameron's conservative ideology has been widely studied by the scholarship of British politics (McAnulla 2010; Beech 2011; Heppell 2013; Hayton and McEnhill 2015; Honeyman 2017; Bochel and Powell 2018; Hayton 2018; Vail 2021; Pritchett 2023).

[202] David Cameron, "Conservative party leader's speech on foreign policy and national security" (speech, September 11, 2006).

However, Cameron also stressed the need for Britain to act from a position of 'genuine moral authority' – an idea he associated with liberal values such as human rights, democracy, and international law.[203]

This moral internationalism became a symbol of Cameron's rhetoric, particularly in his emphasis on global responsibility and leadership. Like Hague, Cameron saw Britain as a country with a normative role to play beyond its borders. In 2015, the National Security Strategy under Cameron's government listed among its key aims the expansion of Britain's 'world-leading soft power' and 'global reach' through diplomatic, cultural, and developmental means – including institutions such as the BBC World Service and the British Council.[204]

While positioned as a reformist, Cameron's Liberal Conservatism reflected much of the continuity in post-Cold War British foreign policy. His government maintained a commitment to multilateral engagement, upheld the US-UK partnership, and promoted democracy. It also shared with New Labour an interest in shaping a global order responsive to liberal values.

Nonetheless, Cameron's outlook was also supported by Hague's earlier innovation. The promotion of soft power, trade diplomacy, and Britain's international standing created the link between his vision and the Global Britain strategy outlined following the Brexit referendum. As Hayton (2018, 234) argues, Cameron's modernisation project 'brought electoral success, but did not involve a fundamental reappraisal of the party's ideology'.

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[203] Cameron, "Conservative party leader's speech on foreign policy and national security".

[204] United Kingdom, "Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR)" (report, Cabinet Office, London, November, 2015).

Similarly, Beech (2011, 357) suggests that Cameron's Conservatives 'sought simultaneously to promote foreign policy continuity and change (…) by highlighting some traditional tenets of Conservative foreign policy ideas while espousing important elements of Liberal thought'.

As Pritchett (2023, 234) observes, Cameron, like Thatcher before him and May and Johnson after him, ultimately rejected a declinist outlook in favour of an internationalist narrative grounded in liberal-conservative principles. This narrative, developed incrementally across party leaderships, formed the ideological scaffolding upon which the post-Brexit Global Britain policy would be constructed.

Beech and Munce (2019, 120) argue that David Cameron and William Hague were central in shaping the contours of Liberal Conservatism as a foreign policy doctrine. Their vision combined a traditional realist emphasis on power, national interest and pragmatism – rooted in the post-war Conservative tradition – with a more idealist ambition to modernise the party's international outlook. As Beech and Munce (2019, 120) observe, Cameron and Hague followed 'the steps of post-war Conservative politicians whose focus was outlined purely as national interest pragmatism during the Cold War', while also seeking to project a vision of global change and liberal internationalism. Notably, they conclude that Cameron's foreign policy approach bore greater resemblance to the globalist outlook of Gordon Brown – and, to a degree, Tony Blair – than to the Atlanticist realpolitik associated with predecessors such as Edward Heath, Margaret Thatcher or John Major.

Although Cameron expressed a broadly pro-European stance, Hayton (2018, 231) contends that he 'conclusively failed to effectively manage the European question', a failure which precipitated the end of his premiership. Cameron's inability to navigate rising intra-party tensions on Europe – amplified by broader concerns over migration and

sovereignty – allowed anti-EU voices within the Conservative Party to consolidate influence (Hayton 2018, 231). These tensions culminated in his resignation, despite having secured a parliamentary majority in the 2015 general election.

The following section explores the period immediately preceding the Brexit referendum (2010–2016). It analyses how the rhetorical, ideological, and institutional conditions evolved across both formal and informal levels of elite discourse – conditions that made the 2016 referendum not only possible but politically inevitable. Drawing on government speeches, interviews from the *Brexit Witness Archive*, key policy reports from leading think tanks, and relevant academic literature, the section traces the strategic framing of European integration and national identity in this critical transitional moment.

5.3. The Path to the Referendum and the Prelude to Brexit

In 2010, David Cameron became Prime Minister, forming a coalition government with the Liberal Democrats under Nick Clegg. This marked the Conservative Party's return to power after thirteen years of Labour government. William Hague, a longstanding advocate of a globally oriented Britain, was appointed Foreign Secretary (2010–2014), followed by Philip Hammond (2014–2016), whose influence would become significant in the lead-up to Brexit.

Hague's global vision strongly shaped Cameron's foreign policy during this period. In 2012, Hague launched the Balance of Competences Review, aimed at assessing the impact

of EU membership on the UK.[205] He stated: 'I want to take stock of the impact of the EU on our country based on a detailed assessment of those things that derive from EU law that affect us in the UK'.[206] In doing so, Hague acknowledged the shifting dynamics of globalisation, emphasising that 'wealth and power' were fluctuating 'towards emerging economies'.[207] While recognising the benefits of globalisation, he argued that Europe needed urgent reform to remain 'competitive, generate growth and generate jobs'.[208] Hague's position reflected a belief in the value of collective European influence in addressing global challenges such as security and climate change.

The review reiterated the UK's desire to maintain a leadership role within the EU framework, stating:

We are committed to playing a leading role in the European Union in order to advance our national interest. (…) To continue to deliver prosperity and security for our citizens in the face of a shift of economic power to the emerging markets, the EU needs to be more outward-looking, more dynamic and more competitive on the global stage. We want an EU that is able to use its collective weight for our common interests, such as trade and security.[209]

These rhetorical foundations laid the groundwork for what would later become the Global Britain agenda. Hague's globalist approach, though framed within the EU context,

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[205] Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), Review of the Balance of Competences between the United Kingdom and the European Union, 2012, Cm. 8415.

[206] FCO, Review of the Balance of Competences.

[207] *Ibid.*

[208] *Ibid.*

[209] *Ibid.*

would be reinterpreted after the failure to reform the Union in line with British preferences. In this sense, the core of Global Britain predates Brexit and stems from the reconfiguration of an existing Conservative foreign policy narrative.

In January 2013, Cameron delivered the Bloomberg Speech – a pivotal moment in the modern European debate.[210] Acknowledging the risks involved, he declared it was 'time for the British people to have their say' to 'settle this European question in British politics'.[211] Cameron outlined his intention to renegotiate the terms of the UK's membership before holding an in/out referendum. He positioned continued membership within a reformed EU as the ideal outcome, but asserted that the public would have the final say:

And when we have negotiated that new settlement, we will give the British people a referendum with a very simple in or out choice. To stay in the EU on these new terms or come out altogether. It will be an in-out referendum. Legislation will be drafted before the next election. And if a Conservative Government is elected, we will introduce the enabling legislation immediately and pass it by the end of that year. And we will complete these negotiations and hold this referendum within the first half of the next parliament.[212]

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[210] David Cameron, "EU speech at Bloomberg" (speech, London, January 23, 2013).

[211] Cameron, "EU speech at Bloomberg".

[212] The political content of this quote was removed from the speech publicly available at the UK Government website: David Cameron. "EU speech at Bloomberg" (speech, London, January 23, 2013). This quote was therefore retrieved from the speech video recording: David Cameron. "Prime Minister David Cameron's EU Speech" (10 Downing Street YouTube speech, London, January 23, 2013).

This speech signalled a shift in the political elite's relationship with the EU and set the tone for subsequent political strategy. Although Cameron and Clegg shared a pro-European outlook, both acknowledged the need for significant reform (J. Smith 2016, 336). Cameron envisioned a new relationship centred on the Single Market and collective action in trade and foreign policy, while maintaining flexibility in matters of sovereignty.[213]

The domestic political climate, however, was undergoing rapid changes. The 2014 European Parliament elections saw the UKIP, led by Nigel Farage, win the largest share of the vote (Ford and Goodwin 2014, 277).[214] UKIP successfully recast its Euroscepticism within a broader populist and anti-establishment discourse, placing immigration at the centre of its campaign (Tournier-Sol 2021, 381). As Tournier-Sol (2021, 382) argues, the party's rise exploited the political vacuum created by the centrist repositioning of the major parties, allowing UKIP to rouse support on the right.

In this context, the Conservative Party leveraged the promise of an EU referendum as a strategic electoral tool in the 2015 general election. The tactic proved effective – Cameron secured a parliamentary majority and was able to form the first wholly Conservative government since 1997. In May 2015, Philip Hammond introduced the *European Union Referendum Bill*, with Cameron formally presenting it in June.[215]

Following the official announcement of the referendum, political mobilisation around the Leave campaign intensified. The Global Britain think tank, founded in 1997, became more

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[213] Cameron, "EU speech at Bloomberg".

[214] With over 4.3 million ballots and 26.6% of the national vote (Ford and Goodwin 2014, 277).

[215] In June 2015, Cameron presented the legislation to advance the referendum, and the *European Union Referendum Act 2015* received Royal Assent on 17 December 2015 after lengthy debate in both Houses of Parliament, formally enshrining the promise made in the *Bloomberg Speech* ((J. Smith 2016, 333–34).

active, focusing on business and financial constituencies such as the City of London. The organisation promoted a vision of the UK as 'an outward-facing, sovereign, democratic' nation and deliberately distanced itself from parliamentary politics:

When, in February 2013, the Prime Minister announced his policy of re-negotiating after the next election the terms of EU membership and putting the outcome to the British people in a referendum, it was decided to focus Global Britain's research and activities on two important non-parliamentary "constituencies": the City of London in particular and British business in general.[216]

Simultaneously, private initiatives and pressure groups began to organise. One prominent figure was Richard Tice, who would later lead the Reform UK party (formerly the Brexit Party).[217] Reflecting on his early involvement, Tice claimed:

In summer 2015 I became one of the first business figures to back Brexit, co-founding the high-profile campaign group Leave.EU (…). I left there in 2016 to found a new organisation, Leave Means Leave, backed by many Tory MPs and economists, entrepreneurs and other business figures. We share an optimism for Britain's bright prospects outside the EU and a wish to get on with Brexit and build a better, more global country for future generations.[218]

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[216] https://globalbritain.co.uk/history/

[217] The Brexit Party received a new branding in 2021, and it is presently called Reform UK since the Brexit process was considered concluded and there was no longer the need to advocate for this aim. Reform UK team have been contacted to arrange an interview with Richard Tice. No answer was received.

[218] "Eurosceptic – Richard Tice," Richard Tice, accessed April 6, 2023, https://richardtice.com/eurosceptic/.

Debates within Parliament also highlighted tensions around the government's neutrality in the process. In November 2015, Baroness Anelay of St Johns, then Minister of State at the Foreign Office, insisted that the government's role was informational rather than partisan: 'the most useful role for the Government is to give information about the nature of membership to aid understanding and inform the public. The designated lead campaigners will interpret this information and provide strong arguments – on both sides, no doubt'.[219]

At the same time, Cameron initiated the formal renegotiation of the UK's EU membership terms with the President of the European Council, Donald Tusk.[220] The following section will examine this renegotiation process and its reception within the British political elite, followed by an analysis of how the referendum campaign unfolded and shaped the final vote.

EU'S MEMBERSHIP RENEGOTIATION GAMBLE

By the time David Cameron returned to Downing Street in 2015, public dissatisfaction with the UK's relationship with the EU had become a prominent issue – both within the Conservative Party and across segments of the electorate. Many of these grievances were rooted in concerns about sovereignty, migration, and the UK's economic position relative to the Eurozone. In response, Cameron aimed to renegotiate the terms of EU membership to produce concessions on key areas – 'immigration, "ever closer union" and

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[219] 767, Parl. Deb. H.L. (2015-16), col. 472.

[220] Donald Tusk was the President of the European Council between December 2014 and November 2019.

economic guarantees as a non-Eurozone member' – in hopes of securing a Remain vote (Tombs 2022, 57).

The potential of a British exit (Brexit) had a noticeable impact on the negotiation process. As Kroll and Leuffen (2016) argue, the threat of a referendum exerted pressure on both the UK and its EU partners, making the 2015–2016 negotiations unusually tense. Though initial bilateral meetings had already begun following Cameron's 2013 *Bloomberg Speech*, the political urgency of the referendum promise, reaffirmed following the 2015 general election, placed Brexit 'high on the agenda' (Kroll and Leuffen 2016, 1).[221] Nonetheless, the process was marked by ambiguity and hesitation from the UK side. Despite repeated commitments to reform, British negotiators failed to submit a clear reform agenda for much of the period, indicating the underlying difficulty in articulating a coherent national position (Kroll and Leuffen 2016, 5).

Central figures in this renegotiation effort included Tom Scholar and Ivan Rogers. Rogers, serving as the UK's Permanent Representative to the EU, was widely regarded as instrumental.[222] As Simon McDonald remarked during the research interview, Rogers was 'the bloke in charge', leading a coordinated Whitehall team in Brussels that maintained a strong FCO component, despite his Treasury background.[223]

In February 2016, the government formally introduced the *European Union Referendum Act*, signalling the culmination of the renegotiation process and the official beginning of the

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[221] Cameron, "EU speech at Bloomberg".

[222] Ivan Rogers was the Principal Private Secretary of PM Tony Blair (2003-2006), Cameron's Adviser for Europe and Global Issues (2012-2013) and British Permanent Representative to the EU (2013-2007).

[223] Simon MacDonald, Brexit Witness Archive, UK in a Changing Europe (interview, March 26, 2021).

referendum campaign. However, the new agreement was met with scepticism both within Parliament and among the public. From the Labour benches, Caroline Flint criticised the outcome as wholly insufficient, stating in the interview: 'It wasn't enough to placate the Eurosceptic voices in his Party or outside. Added to which Labour was saying he'd failed'.[224]

Julie Smith (2016, 339) noted that Cameron's strategy relied heavily on his capacity to secure reform, assisted by Chancellor George Osborne. This contrasted with the 1975 renegotiation, when Prime Minister Harold Wilson had delegated a significant portion of the leadership to Foreign Secretary James Callaghan, who played a central and unifying role (J. Smith 2016, 339). Cameron's personalisation of the process, combined with the limited scope of concessions offered, contributed to a fragile political outcome. As Kroll and Leuffen (2016, 2, 7) observe, the promise of a referendum produced no substantial gains, and the Brexit threat was perceived as an implausible scenario.

Outside Parliament, Eurosceptic sentiment was increasingly shaped by populist narratives. As Flint recalled, Nigel Farage's rejection of the deal carried more weight with some voters than anything Labour might have said: 'Farage's opinion on the renegotiation agreement probably had more impact on some of those voters than anything I, or our party leader, could have said at that point'.[225]

The challenge was also internal. Within the Conservative Party, the group Conservatives for Britain – founded in the summer of 2015 with the backing of over 50 MPs – initially expressed support for Cameron's negotiations. Still, their faith in a satisfactory outcome

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[224] Flint, Brexit Witness Archive.

[225] Flint, Brexit Witness Archive.

was minimal. As Hayton (2018, 232) notes, the group's support was conditional, and 'they were unlikely to be satisfied by any deal the Prime Minister was likely to be able to secure'.

Theresa May, Home Secretary at the time, later characterised the negotiation period as a missed opportunity on the EU's part (T. May 2023, 59). She argued:

Their intransigence in negotiations with David Cameron and their unwillingness to give him more on the free movement of people meant that the revised relationship with the EU which he put to the British people in the referendum did not resolve voters' main concern about membership. This made losing the referendum more likely. (T. May 2023, 59)

In addition to dissatisfaction with the outcome, the broader political communication strategy was fragmented and inconsistent. As Denzil Davidson explained in interview, the government failed to articulate clearly the strategic rationale for holding the referendum.[226] He commented: 'there was a perfectly good framed question and answer, which was, "The Single Market is great for our economy, and being in the EU is fantastic for our power in the world, but none of us want to be in a European super-state." (…) But there was a lack of a strategic argument for some time'.[227]

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[226] Denzil Davidson, Brexit Witness Archive, UK in a Changing Europe (interview, September 14, 2020); Denzil Davidson was advisor to FS William Hague (2010-2014), advisor to FS Philip Hammond (2014), advisor to the UK's European Commissioner Jonathan Hill (2014-2016), and special advisor on Europe to the PM Theresa May (2016-2019).

[227] Davidson, Brexit Witness Archive.

According to Davidson, the absence of a straightforward narrative linking renegotiation to a positive case for EU membership left a vacuum in elite discourse.[228] This thesis contends that the idea of Global Britain emerged in part to fill that strategic gap, offering a discursive framework that could rationalise a post-Brexit future while reinforcing the UK's ambition to remain a global power.

Having analysed the 2015–2016 renegotiation and the limited impact of Cameron's efforts to reshape the UK's relationship with the EU, the following section turns to the informal campaigning networks and discursive agents that advanced the Leave campaign. These actors played a crucial role in integrating elements of the Global Britain narrative into the broader Brexit debate.

Making the Case for Leave: Referendum Lobbyists and the Informal Revival of Global Britain

In the years preceding the 2016 referendum, the idea of Global Britain was revived by informal actors within the British political elite – this time framed explicitly in the service of the Leave campaign. Unlike earlier periods, where state institutions dominated foreign policy discourse, the narrative was now shaped mainly by lobbyists, think tanks, and ideologically driven economists seeking to recast the UK's global role outside of the EU. Once again, foreign policy discourse intersected with economic and trade imperatives – variables central to the referendum debate.

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[228] *Ibid.*

As detailed earlier in this thesis, a content analysis was conducted to trace the emergence and evolution of the Global Britain idea across a range of materials produced during this period.[229] Research reports from key think tanks were purposively sampled, selected for their prestige, influence, and thematic focus on Brexit and foreign policy.

One of the earlier contributors to this informal lobbying effort was the Global Vision campaign group, founded in 2007 during the Lisbon Treaty negotiations. Based at 57 Tufton Street – the well-known address for a collection of Eurosceptic organisations – Global Vision advocated for 'a looser, more modern relationship with the EU in the rapidly changing world of the 21st century', favouring trade and cooperation while explicitly rejecting political and economic union.[230]

In their report *Britain in a Global World?*, Baimbridge, Burkitt and Whyman (2007) promoted the notion of 'an independent, global Britain', framing EU membership as an impediment to national autonomy.[231] Their argument rested on the premise that Britain could better pursue economic and political interests by reasserting its independence. The same authors had earlier claimed that the UK's exclusion from the eurozone would not curtail its global standing: 'It can embrace an essentially European identity or, if it decides

. . . . . .

[229] Chapter III – Tracing Global Britain.

[230] https://web.archive.org/web/20070722013923/http://global-vision.net/index.asp

[231] Authors base this report on an article they authored for The Political Quarterly journal in 2000 (Whyman, Burkitt, and Baimbridge 2000). In this article, they make the case for an economic policy outside EMU, proposing strategies for a Global Britain. The Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) was approved by the Maastricht Treaty (1993). It imposed an institutional framework restricting the flexibility to determine economic policy rather than providing greater autonomy for the nation-states (Whyman, Burkitt, and Baimbridge 2000, 1).

to opt out of the euro, it can pursue a global strategy.' (Whyman, Burkitt, and Baimbridge 2000, 459–60).

These authors also posited that European integration risked leading Britain into 'powerless isolation' (Whyman, Burkitt, and Baimbridge 2000, 460). At the same time, the UK's linguistic assets, investment portfolio, and historical trading networks (particularly with the Commonwealth and Pacific Rim) positioned it to thrive as a global economic actor (Whyman, Burkitt, and Baimbridge 2000, 460). They argued that Britain's strategic future lay in reinvigorating these connections – a clear precursor to what would later be described as the Indo-Pacific tilt under the Global Britain doctrine.

Between 2013 and the referendum campaign in 2016, relatively few reports were produced on the practicalities of Brexit or the UK's prospective foreign policy. However, those published by prominent free-market think tanks such as the Adam Smith Institute and the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) – primarily oriented to economic issues – were significant in shaping the Leave discourse.

Roland Smith, writing for the Adam Smith Institute, authored a trilogy of influential reports in early 2016. In *The Liberal Case for Leave* (March), R. Smith (2016c) advanced a vision of Brexit as 'a global, outward-looking and ambitiously positive one', contrasting it with what he labelled the inward-facing, protectionist mindset of both Remainers and the xenophobic right. His rhetoric framed Brexit as a choice between 'a demographically declining little Europe' and a liberal, expansive, and dynamic global orientation (R. Smith 2016c).

In a follow-up report (April), R. Smith (2016c) countered the narrative that Brexit would isolate the UK, asserting that sovereignty and global engagement were not mutually exclusive: 'Other countries around the world "obey all the rules of the club" (the global

one) yet they are not obliged to surrender their independent voice at the top table or neutralise their democracy to the same extent the UK has as an EU member.'.

R. Smith further proposed that Brexit would enable the UK to formalise its role in global governance as a fully sovereign actor: 'Britain would be looking to formalise and democratise the UK's global governance involvement, bringing the UK's full voice to it as an open, global trading nation' (R. Smith 2016b).

In a third report, *Evolution Not Revolution* (May), R. Smith (2016a) promoted the European Economic Area (EEA) as a transitional model for Brexit. He suggested that stepping into the EEA would allow the UK to reclaim sovereignty while preserving trade continuity – 'a smooth exit without having to deal with everything upfront' (R. Smith 2016a). His argument was reinforced by a belief in the UK's unexploited global potential and minimal influence within the EU framework: 'EEA countries are in a stronger position, while the UK's influence inside the EU has turned out to be very limited' (R. Smith 2016a).

Collectively, R. Smith's (2016b; 2016c; 2016a) trilogy articulated many of the foundational principles that would later shape the Global Britain discourse: liberal economic internationalism, a sovereign global presence, an English-speaking advantage, and a renewed commitment to trade with Commonwealth and Pacific partners.

These arguments were not limited to abstract theorising. Reports such as R. Smith's (2016b; 2016c; 2016a) were actively disseminated during the referendum campaign and functioned as key sources for Leave advocates. Bourne and Booth's (Booth and Bourne 2016) *Making the Pieces Fit*: *Reforming Britain's Relationship with the EU* report, produced for the IEA, similarly presented economic models for both Leave and Remain outcomes.

Ryan Bourne (2016b), one of the co-authors, further advanced the ideological case by invoking Friedrich Hayek's legacy:

With his belief in evolutionary change and his respect for the UK's common law traditions, and the technological possibilities of the emergence of genuine global trade and friendly cooperation, Hayek surely would have believed that Britain's mission in the EU was complete and that it was time to embrace a globalist agenda. (Bourne 2016)

Bourne (2016b) argued that Britain's interests could not be adequately pursued within the EU, nor could it reform the Union in a way that aligned with its global aspirations. Therefore, he advocated for a post-EU strategy centred on free trade and cooperative diplomacy – key strands of Global Britain*,* as later articulated by Theresa May and her successors.

It is crucial to note that these arguments – advanced by economists, think tanks, and campaigners – linked foreign policy and economic sovereignty in novel and resonant ways. The question of EU membership was no longer seen merely through the lens of institutional integration but reframed as a decisive choice about Britain's global orientation. In this discursive field, the Leave campaign dominated. The government's failure to provide a robust alternative narrative left a vacuum, which these lobbyists filled with compelling, forward-looking visions of a sovereign, outward-looking Britain.

CONCLUSION

The final decades of the twentieth century were characterised by a period of strategic ambiguity and political contestation concerning the UK's evolving relationship with the EU. While the fundamental aims and values underpinning the European project were broadly understood, the specific policies, mechanisms, and institutional arrangements to achieve them remained uncertain and, at times, controversial. As this thesis argues, divisions within and across the British political parties over "the European question" were not only expected but also intellectually productive, contributing to a broader and deeper public debate about the UK's national interests, its foreign policy trajectory, and its long-term role in global affairs. In line with **Proposition 1 (*Ideational Foundation*)**, these debates drew on – and, in some cases, reworked – long-standing narratives about Britain's identity and global role, many of which had been articulated in earlier post-imperial debates following decolonisation. In this way, contestation over Europe served as a catalyst for revisiting and refining enduring foreign policy ideas, embedding them more deeply in the political discourse that would later sustain Global Britain.

Against this backdrop, the emergence of the Eurosceptic movement was a defining development. Within this movement, the concept of Global Britain was crafted as a narrative of departure – a vision of the UK unshackled from the EU, seeking to enhance its influence and regain a renewed position in world affairs. In contrast, earlier formulations of Global Britain – as found in the speeches and strategies of figures such as Blair and Hague – were not oppositional to EU membership. Instead, the concept functioned as a means of sustaining British influence, managing perceived national decline, and projecting the UK's values and interests abroad. In terms of **Proposition 3 (*Strategic Reframing*)**, it operated as a narrative tool through which policymakers could

reconcile structural constraints with enduring ambitions, framing Britain's external engagement in ways that preserved a sense of agency and purpose in the international arena.

This chapter has demonstrated how the foreign policy vision of New Labour, particularly Blair's doctrine of Liberal Interventionism, laid the conceptual groundwork for subsequent Conservative reconfigurations, notably Cameron's Liberal Conservatism. In line with **Proposition (*Ideational Foundation*)**, these continuities reveal how core ideas – about Britain's international responsibilities, the legitimacy of intervention, and the pursuit of influence through multilateral engagement – persisted across partisan divides, even as their framing and strategic emphasis evolved. Theresa May, who served as Home Secretary under Cameron from 2010 to 2016, appears to have inherited many of these foreign policy commitments, which in turn shaped her approach to Brexit. The political environment of 2016 created an opening for May to position Global Britain as a central organising principle of the UK's post-Brexit foreign policy, a move this thesis identifies as the emergence of Liberal Globalism. This will be explored in the following chapter.

Several ideological strands that would later converge in the post-2016 articulation of Global Britain were visible as early as the late 1990s. For instance, the idea of the UK as a force for good in the world featured prominently in both Labour's 1997 manifesto and Robin Cook's ethical foreign policy speech. Similarly, William Hague's Conservatives in 2001 adopted the same formulation, asserting that Britain could be a force for good. The concept of Britain as a global trading nation with links worldwide also appeared in both Labour and Conservative party platforms in 1997, revealing a notable cross-party convergence.

Moreover, the discourse of rejection of isolationism – central to Blair's internationalist posture – anticipated later framings of a Britain stronger in the world, while Hague's

emphasis on Britain taking a lead in the world mirrored this logic. Labour's notion of a Global Network of bilateral and multilateral partnerships evolved into Hague's Networked World policy agenda, a significant contribution to the intellectual framework of the Global Britain narrative.

Cameron's 2006 foreign policy vision reaffirmed several of these commitments: Britain as a moral actor, its leadership in multilateral responses to global crises, and its enduring strategic partnership with the US. His rhetoric of maintaining a global outlook – as Honeyman (2017, 60) notes – aligns directly with May's later claims about avoiding isolation and securing a free trade agreement with the US. These continuities underline the thesis's claim that Global Britain is less a rupture and more an evolution of pre-existing elite discourse.

The economic dimension of the Global Britain idea was also shaped by key actors in the Eurosceptic ecosystem. The Global Vision group, alongside economists such as Whyman, Burkitt, and Baimbridge (2000; 2007) articulated an economic case for Brexit grounded in trade liberalisation, Commonwealth partnerships, and the UK's global assets – anticipating elements of Boris Johnson's trade strategy, including his emphasis on the Indo-Pacific tilt. In their writings, the aspiration for an independent, global Britain was explicitly opposed to EU membership, reinforcing the linkage between trade policy and sovereign foreign policy.

During this period, several of the seven analytical strands of the Global Britain narrative were (re)activated and adapted to the evolving political environment. Britain's role in the world was reinforced through cross-party commitments to global leadership, often framed through the identity and values strand, emphasising the UK as a moral actor and a "force for good". The globalism versus isolationism strand was sustained by rhetoric

rejecting withdrawal from international engagement, even among Eurosceptic voices. Strategic alliances, particularly with the US and Commonwealth partners, remained a recurring anchor for external engagement. The actorness through foreign policy instruments strand emerged in early emphasis on trade, diplomacy, and security as levers of influence. In contrast, the relations with Europe strand was contested, with Eurosceptic actors framing EU withdrawal as a pathway to economic sovereignty. Finally, elements of the declinist perspectives and the politics of status strand surfaced in efforts to manage perceptions of national decline through expanded trade and diplomatic networks. By the eve of the Brexit referendum, these reactivated strands provided the conceptual building blocks for the post-2016 articulation of Global Britain.

Taken together, these strands support this thesis's first guiding proposition (**P1**): that Global Britain predates the 2016 referendum and evolved across decades of political contestation, with cross-party ideological influence contributing to its eventual crystallisation. Chapter IV demonstrated the historical antecedents of the Global Britain discourse; Chapter V has shown how the concept was sustained in political debate, both formally and informally, and gradually became embedded in the vocabulary of British foreign policy.

As outlined at the outset of this chapter, the analysis sought to address a key blind spot in the existing literature: the period from 1997 to 2016 – particularly the years preceding Cameron's 2013 Bloomberg speech – remains markedly underexamined in accounts of Brexit and its foreign policy implications. By foregrounding this overlooked phase and systematically analysing think tank publications alongside party manifestos, speeches, and strategic documents, the chapter offers a more textured understanding of how Global Britain was incubated, rearticulated, and gradually embedded in the institutional architecture of UK foreign policy.

Building on this foundation, the next chapter examines the post-referendum formalisation of the concept. It explores how Theresa May's government mainstreamed Global Britain as a national strategy, how Labour contested or reframed it, and how trade became a primary tool of external projection. The analysis evaluates whether, in the wake of Brexit, Global Britain moved from rhetorical placeholder to strategic framework – shaping the UK's international posture and informing the foreign policy choices of a state in search of renewed purpose.

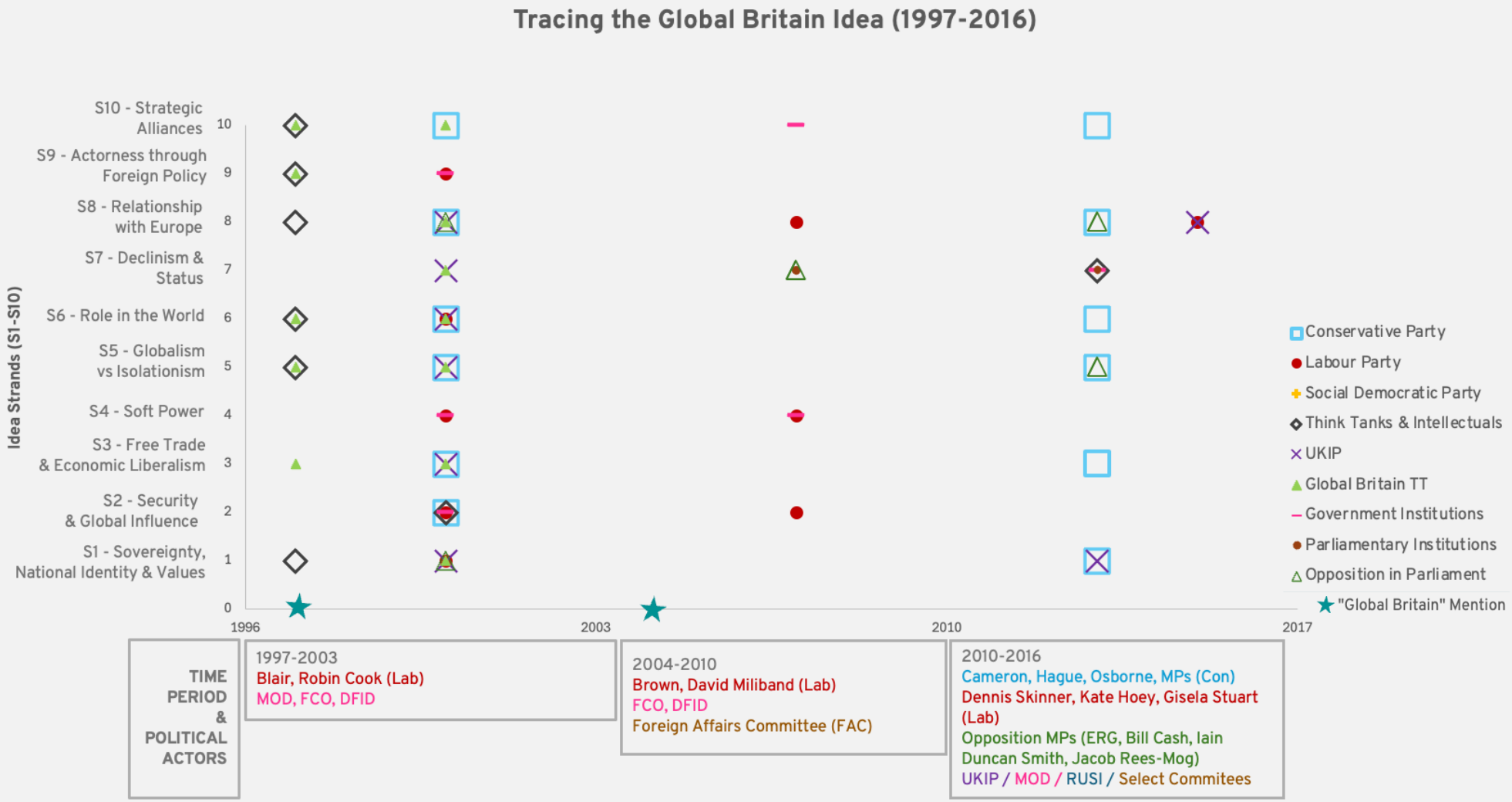


FIGURE 12 - IDEOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE GLOBAL BRITAIN NARRATIVE, 1997-2016.

A longitudinal chart of actors and ideational strands in British foreign policy discourse.

CHAPTER VI

MANAGING DECLINE AFTER BREXIT: GLOBAL BRITAIN MEANING, OPERATIONALISATION AND IMPLEMENTATION (2016-2023)

We are a protagonist – a global Britain running a truly global foreign policy.[232]

INTRODUCTION

The Brexit referendum symbolises a change in the UK's foreign policy orientation and represents complete freedom for a new strategy. The aftermath, culminating in the resignation of Prime Minister David Cameron, marked a critical juncture in British politics. Faced with a systemic political shock, the Conservative Party was compelled to devise a strategy to maintain power amidst profound uncertainty. The government had made no preparations for the possibility of a leave result. In this vacuum, the concept of Global Britain was introduced into the post-referendum communications strategy – initially as a rhetorical response to the crisis, and later as an attempted organising principle for the UK's future foreign policy orientation.

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[232] Boris Johnson, "Beyond Brexit: a Global Britain" (speech, London, December 2, 2016).

This chapter contends that Theresa May and Boris Johnson were the principal narrators of the Global Britain concept during the Brexit era.[233] While David Cameron was responsible for elevating Brexit to the centre of political discourse, May and Johnson sought to deploy Global Britain as a narrative vehicle for reasserting British purpose and influence amid acute political disruption. In doing so, they drew on existing ideational resources to stabilise their premierships and maintain the Conservative Party's electoral and parliamentary dominance. In line with **Proposition 2 (*Political Uptake*)** and **Proposition 3 (*Strategic Reframing*)**, these moves were reactive rather than anticipatory: Global Britain did not emerge from a coherent long-term strategy, but from the need to reframe the constraints of the Leave outcome into a story of opportunity and renewed global agency.

Although it would be overstated to suggest that May and Johnson innovated in ideational terms, they were successful in reframing long-standing foreign policy themes in a distinctively post-Brexit register. Their key achievement lay in introducing Global Britain into mainstream discourse as both a political slogan and an aspirational strategy. However, between 2016 and 2018, the failure to translate this narrative into a concrete policy framework drew sharp criticism from Parliament and contestation of this 'new empty idea' within elite policymaking circles. The Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC), under the chairmanship of Tom Tugendhat, formally requested a memorandum from the FCO to clarify the objectives, priorities, and proposed timeline for the Global Britain policy

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[233] This chapter in constituted by the conference paper Truly Global Britain: The vision for the United Kingdom during the Brexit process then developed into the journal article submitted for publication Truly Global Britain: The Construction of foreign policy after Brexit and the Vision for the UK's future role.

(Tugendhat 2018). This episode highlights the tensions between rhetorical deployment and policy implementation – a key theme explored in this chapter.

The Brexit referendum did not merely alter Britain's legal relationship with the EU; it also installed a foreign policy identity crisis. The government's unpreparedness for the leave outcome left the UK without a strategic plan for re-engagement with the world. Yet, the rhetoric of regaining parliamentary sovereignty was quickly exploited as an opportunity to assert national priorities allegedly constrained by EU membership. This conjuncture created a rare opportunity for redefining Britain's international role. Within this policy window, Global Britain emerged as the principal narrative offered by the political elite – mainly being advanced by May's Government – a discursive vehicle for projecting a future-facing, sovereign, and globally ambitious UK.

As demonstrated in earlier chapters, the conceptual genealogy of Global Britain predates Brexit. The first empirical chapter explored the post-war origins of the idea, identifying Arthur Bryant's rhetorical invocation and George Thomson's strategic engagement with the concept as foundational. Between the 1970s and 1997, Global Britain was intermittently advanced in formal political discourse by governments and opposition parties alike, while also circulating informally among think tanks and Eurosceptic actors.

The second empirical chapter examined the period from 1997 to 2016. Under New Labour, and during Conservative opposition, Global Britain evolved into a contested discursive ground. Two competing threads were identified: a formal narrative, developed by Blair and Hague, which positioned Global Britain as a strategy for sustaining influence and managing relative decline within the EU; and an informal narrative, propagated by the Eurosceptic movement, which framed Brexit as an opportunity for Britain to reclaim

global leadership beyond Europe. These competing narratives converged in the Brexit moment.

This chapter argues that Global Britain became a serious policy consideration only after the 2017 General Election. While May initially deployed the concept in an official speech in November 2016, it was not until 2017 that attempts were made to operationalise it as a strategic foreign policy framework. The objective of this chapter is to examine how Global Britain travelled across political discourses during the Brexit process – between 2016 and 2023 – and to assess the conditions under which it was mobilised.

Specifically, the chapter seeks to interrogate the nature and function of the Global Britain narrative: Is it merely a rhetorical expression or does it constitute a coherent policy? What is its purpose within political discourse? Which actors use the term, in which institutional settings, and to what ends? Does the narrative include or exclude relations with the EU in the Brexit context?[234]

Chapter I reviewed the academic literature on Global Britain, identifying three research groupings.[235] This chapter builds on the third one, which examines Brexit as a turning point in British foreign policy. Within this literature, four main analytical dimensions are recognised: (1) the historical antecedents of British strategy post-Brexit; (2) discourse analysis during the referendum and its aftermath; (3) policy proposals and scenario-

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[234] Alongside providing answers to these questions, which constitute the main contribution, this chapter represents a compilation of the presence of Global Britain in the UK official documents.

[235] Chapter I – British Foreign Policy and the Global Britain Discourse (page 32).

building; and (4) concrete policy implementations under Johnson's leadership, including the Global Britain Integrated Review (2021).[236]

Recent academic contributions have focused primarily on the discursive nature of Global Britain and its imperial undertones (Daddow 2019b; Turner 2019; Saunders 2020b). Saunders (2020b, 1140) argues that 'empire was excised from histories of Global Britain in a manner that minimises decolonisation', while Turner (2019, 727) characterises the concept as 'not just an idea or slogan, but a foreign policy narrative – specifically, a narrative of empire'. Others, such as Gifkins, Jarvis, and Ralph (2019, 1360), label Global Britain as 'the central pillar of the UK's post-Brexit foreign policy'.

Despite these insights, major gaps persist. While May's use of Global Britain has been documented, few studies interrogate the sources or intellectual architecture of the narrative. Existing research assumes its emergence post-referendum but fails to trace its antecedents or examine the institutional processes by which it became policy-relevant. This chapter seeks to bridge that gap by analysing how Global Britain was legitimised, recontextualised, and contested between 2016 and 2023.

In this period, Global Britain dominated the public political discourse. This chapter marks a new phase in the narrative's development, beginning with May's premiership and extending into Johnson's tenure. The analysis begins by mapping the term's usage across

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[236] Different disciplines, dimensions, and theoretical perspectives have studied Brexit. After the referendum, researchers focused on the impact of Brexit on foreign policy. Politicians and practitioners have been examining new challenges and building a vision of a prosperous future for the UK. The questions of isolation, global trade, great power, the Anglo-American alliance, the new European role, and the Commonwealth have received great attention.

institutional contexts – government documents, parliamentary records, party manifestos, and think tank publications. Methodological considerations are addressed in the first section, which introduces the distinctive data collection and analysis techniques employed in this chapter specifically.

Subsequent sections will trace the use of the term Global Britain in formal discourse from 2016–2022; examine the collaborative dynamics between Downing Street and Whitehall; analyse how the 2017 and 2019 General Elections shaped cross-party engagement with the narrative; investigate the influence of think tank discourse on the ideational construction of British foreign policy. By examining how the 'Global Britain' idea was disseminated among elite actors, institutions, and contexts, this chapter contributes to a broader understanding of post-Brexit identity construction and foreign policy reorientation.

6.1. Methodological Approach and Empirical Overview

This chapter, grounded in historical research design, investigates the political significance and discursive deployment of the concept of 'Global Britain' within the UK's political agenda. It delineates the contextual framework in which the term has emerged and evolved, identifying key periods, institutional actors, and documentary sources. The empirical analysis began with a focus on the two central entities shaping political discourse in the UK: the government and parliament. The core objective was to trace and quantify references to Global Britain across political communications.

Notably, no references to the concept were identified before the year 2000. Consequently, the data presented in **Figure 13** and the subsequent discussion pertain exclusively to the

period from 2000 to 2022. This aligns with the findings presented in the preceding empirical chapters, which suggest that the notion of Global Britain was already embedded within elite discourse before the Brexit referendum. The figure also clearly shows the rise in the number of Global Britain mentions after 2016.

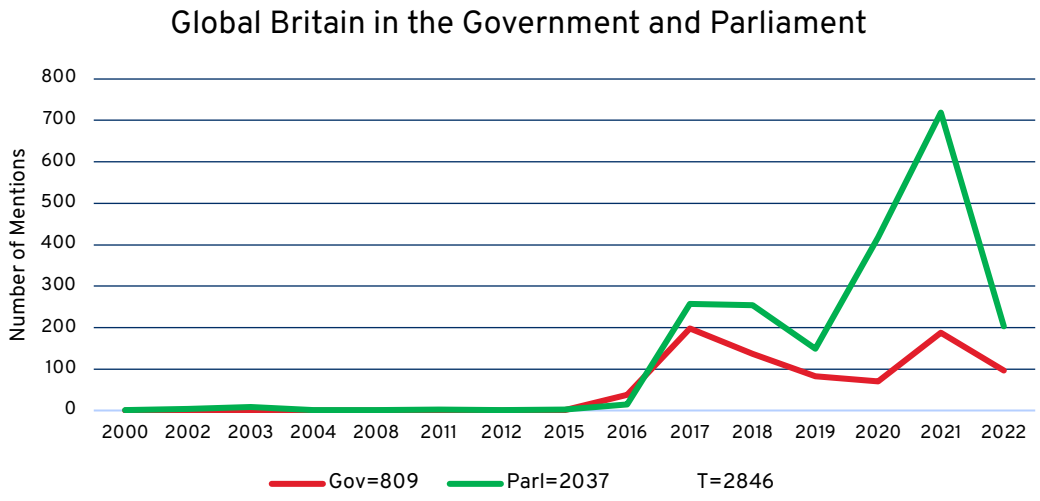


FIGURE 13 - COMPARISON OF GLOBAL BRITAIN MENTIONS, BETWEEN THE UK GOVERNMENT AND PARLIAMENT, 2000-2022 (N=2846).

During the pre-Brexit period (2000–July 2016), 22 references to Global Britain were identified in UK Parliament records. However, a qualitative examination reveals that many of these references relate to the *Global Britain* think tank (founded in 1997), rather than to the ideational or strategic concept later formalised in foreign policy narratives.

Thus, although the phrase was present, its strategic significance remained limited during this period.[237]

As shown in **Figure 14**, only one mention predates the referendum: a 2015 document – *Britain and Cambodia in the Asian Century*.[238] Though the term Global Britain does not appear, the narrative aligns with its emerging themes: support for a rules-based international system, free trade, and UK leadership in Asia-Pacific economic relations. This anticipates some core strands of Global Britain that have been identified.

In 2018, the Government created a curated document set titled 'Global Britain': delivering on our international ambition, consisting of 14 selected publications. Despite the larger number of available materials, the Government chose to highlight this specific collection. It includes speeches by Prime Ministers Theresa May and Boris Johnson, as well as Foreign Secretaries Johnson, Hunt, and Raab, bridging from November 2016 to February 2020. The selection raises questions about representativeness and narrative construction – why these texts, and what vision of Global Britain do they collectively promote?

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[237] In examining the UK Government's use of the term, the official website's search engine was employed. This yielded 809 references to Global Britain, as summarised in Figure 13. A limitation of this method is the reliance on topic-classified metadata, which may result in duplication (e.g. documents categorised under both Brexit and international affairs) or omission (e.g. relevant materials not explicitly tagged). Document types retrieved included speeches, news stories, authored articles, and official statements.

[238] British Embassy Phnom Penh, "Britain and Cambodia in the Asian Century" (world news story, Cambodia, November 17, 2015).

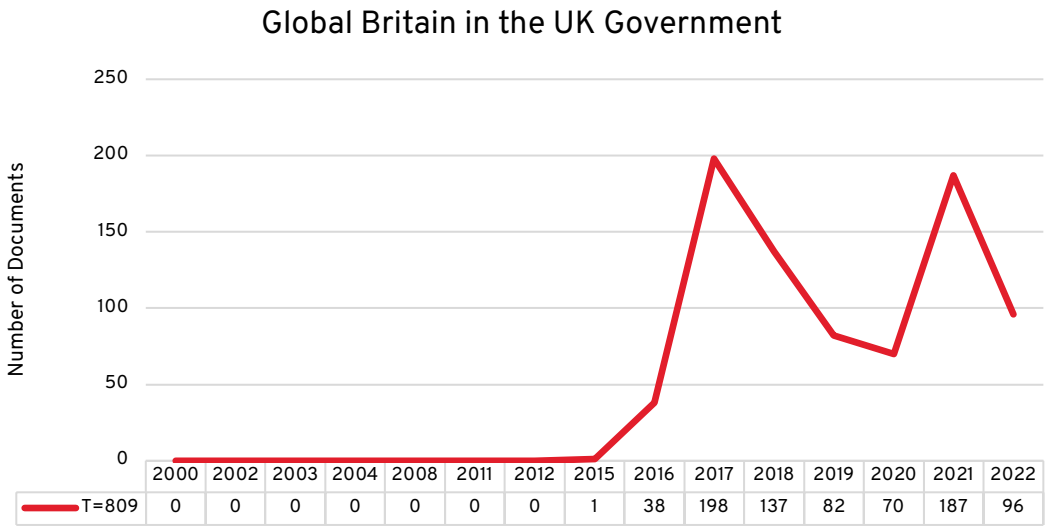


FIGURE 14 - GOVERNMENTAL MENTIONS OF GLOBAL BRITAIN, 2000-2012 (N=809).

Notably, the analysis of speeches delivered at Conservative Party annual conferences (2010–2015) found no direct reference to Global Britain in the public communications of May or Johnson during this period. As previously demonstrated, however, the ideological seeds of the concept were already present within Conservative discourse, even if they were formalised only after the Brexit referendum.

Hansard results **in Figure 15** confirm a greater volume of references to Global Britain in Parliament than in Government documents. Parliamentary mentions – comprising debates, statements, and ministerial contributions – more than double the Government's published materials. Before 2015, references were sparse but politically significant, often echoing the rhetoric of the Global Britain Eurosceptic think tank and its affiliated Lords and MPs.

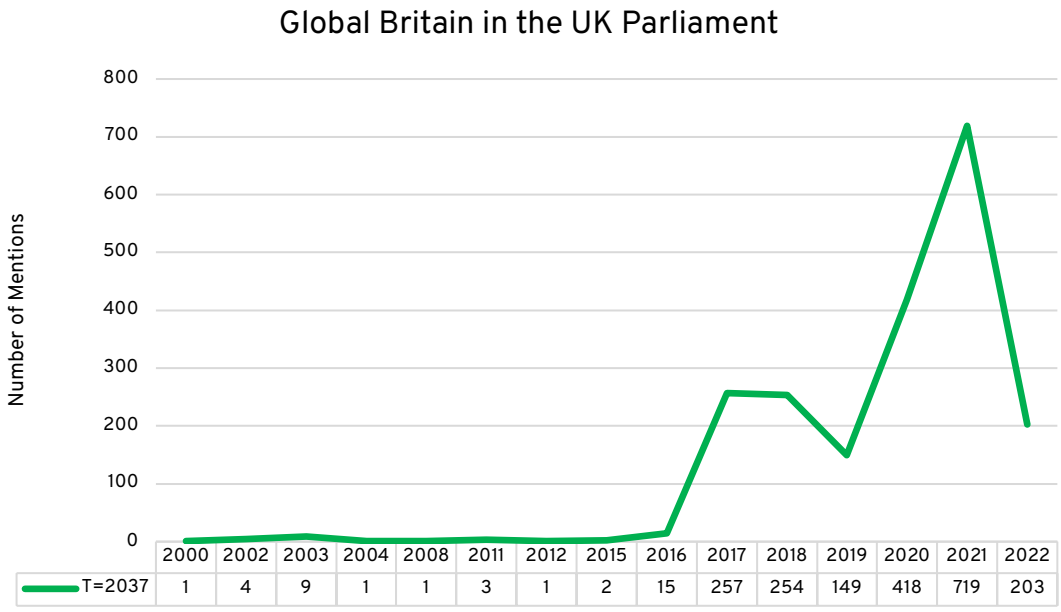


FIGURE 15 - PARLIAMENTARY MENTIONS OF GLOBAL BRITAIN, 2000–2022 (N=2037).

The data collection employed purposive sampling, focusing on key elite actors likely to influence foreign policy. The population included speeches, government documents, parliamentary debates, general election manifestos from the Conservative and Labour parties, and select publications from leading British think tanks. Selection bias was mitigated through triangulation – the process of cross-referencing data from Parliament,

Government, and informal sources – to construct a more comprehensive account of the ideational trajectory of Global Britain.[239]

This methodological approach represents a contribution to existing scholarship, which has typically privileged the Government's framing of Global Britain while neglecting alternative sources of elite discourse. By incorporating multiple perspectives, the chapter provides a more textured understanding of how the idea has circulated, gained traction, and evolved into a policy narrative.

The principal aim of this chapter is to interrogate the discursive life of Global Britain between 2016 and 2023. Emphasis is placed on the frequency, context, and purpose of its use by various political actors. Subsequent sections will apply a mixed-methods content analysis to these findings, examining how the narrative was operationalised in policy discourse and to what extent it reflects a coherent strategic doctrine.

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[239] The period between 2016-2022 is where most of the information on Global Britain is available and easily accessible. For this reason, there was a need to adapt the analysis method to a qualitative and quantitative content analysis to systematise the data. A mixed-methods content analysis was developed to provide valid inferences from 121 written texts. The content analysis method summarises the inferences from the documents to interpret and discover patterns and relationships within the findings (Krippendorff 2013b, 188). A non-probability purposive sampling was applied since there are a large population of texts in the time series of 2016 to 2022. This sample includes textual data belonging to different text types and is produced by several political actors. The texts were examined to unravel in which context they mentioned Global Britain, the political actor itself plus his role, and the meaning employed to the term. After observing these aspects, a thematic categorisation was conducted considering classification topics: Global Britain (idea), foreign policy, Brexit, EU, trade, economy, and culture. The recording unit in this analysis is the entire text. A codebook and a database system for the coding process were developed.

6.2. Institutionalisation Process: Discursive Consolidation and Strategic Operationalisation

Understanding the political actors involved and their respective roles is crucial for comprehending the evolution and significance of Global Britain. This section provides a longitudinal mapping across various political discourses. **Figure 16** illustrates the yearly volume of documents referencing Global Britain, revealing the changing dynamics in its discursive deployment. Between 2016 and 2019, the Government was the primary source of communication on the topic, whereas between 2019 and 2022, think tanks emerged as the most prolific producers. Nonetheless, a noticeable decline occurred in 2022. Parliamentary output, from both the House of Lords (HoL) and the House of Commons (HoC), closely mirrors the trajectory of think tanks, albeit with slightly less volume.

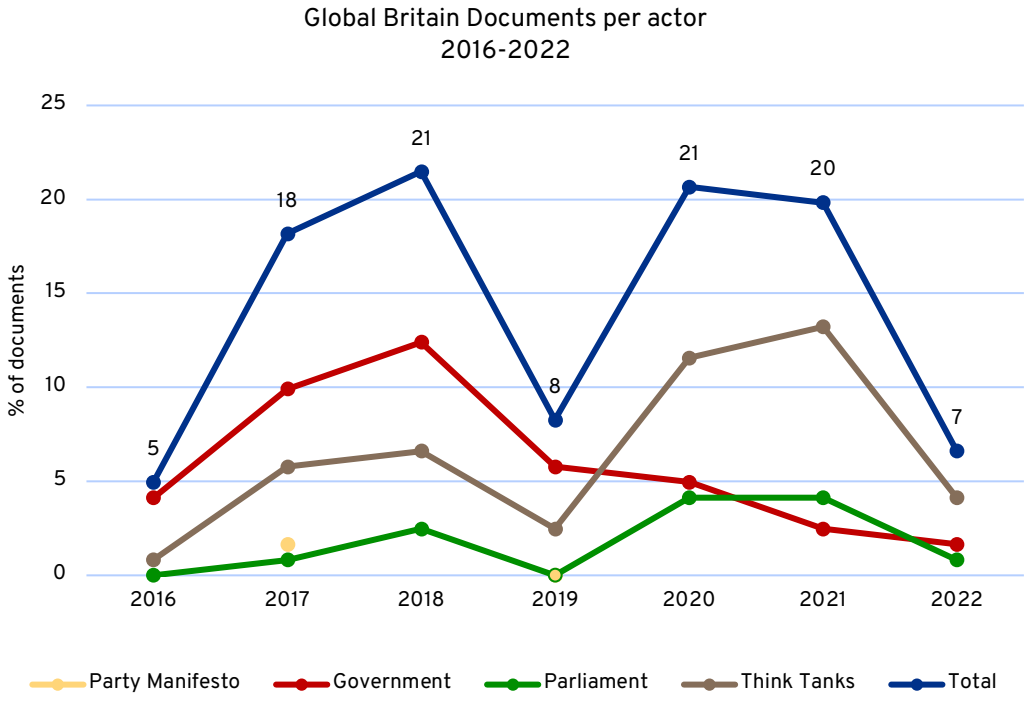


FIGURE 16 - FREQUENCY OF GLOBAL BRITAIN DOCUMENTS PRODUCED BY ALL THE POLITICAL ACTORS, PER YEAR, 2016-2022 (N=121).

Figure 16 shows a notable rise in references between 2016 and 2018, a dip in 2019, followed by a recovery from 2020 onwards. While this dip coincides with Boris Johnson's absence from frontline politics – from his resignation as Foreign Secretary in July 2018 to his return as Prime Minister in July 2019 – similar declines across other actors suggest that the 2019 General Election and related campaign activities may be a more compelling explanation for the downturn.

The 2017-2018 period marked a crucial stage in parliamentary debates. Members of Parliament increasingly invoked the concept of Global Britain, often critically, seeking clarity on its meaning and strategic implications. In December 2017, the Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC) launched a public inquiry into the term, calling on scholars, think tanks, and senior officials to provide evidence (Tugendhat 2018). This process not only prompted the FCO to articulate strategic priorities but also somewhat satisfied parliamentary demand, potentially explaining the brief subsequent decline in references.

Both the FCO (included under Government) and the FAC (under Parliament) produced a considerable proportion of dedicated documentation. HoC debates proved particularly valuable, offering detailed exchanges between ministers – especially Foreign Secretaries – and MPs, helping to illuminate diverging interpretations and expectations of the concept. The FAC, as a cross-party body, played a crucial role in shaping the parliamentary understanding of Global Britain as a foreign policy idea.

A closer look at think tank activity reveals that eleven institutions were responsible for the bulk of publications, with the Policy Exchange, British Foreign Policy Group, RUSI, and the Foreign Policy Centre collectively producing 81% of think tank reports on Global Britain (**Figure 17**).

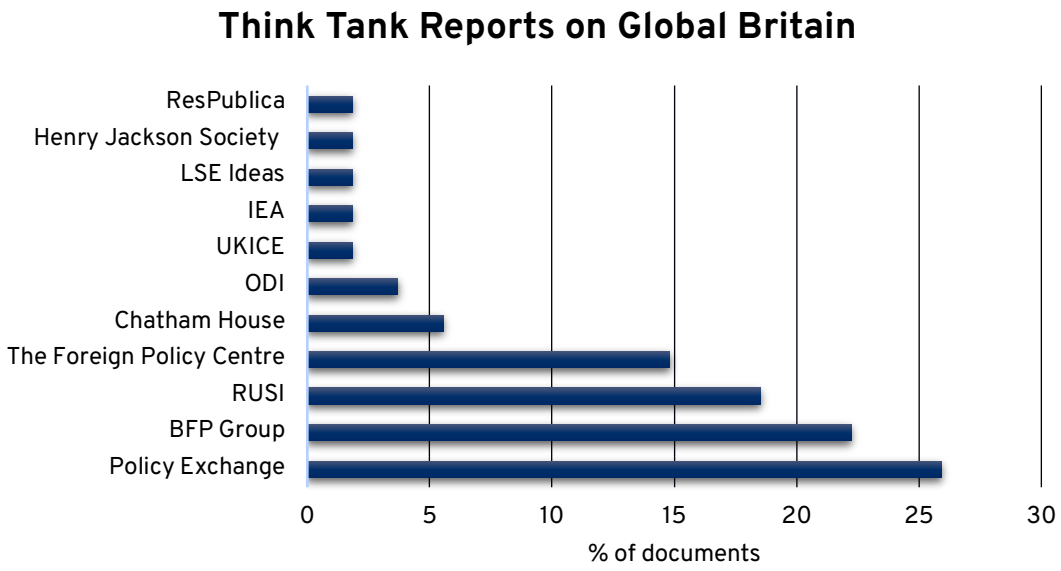


FIGURE 17 - FREQUENCY OF GLOBAL BRITAIN DOCUMENTS PRODUCED BY THINK TANKS, 2016-2022 (N=54).

The evolution of the idea over time supports a conceptual framework comprising six distinct phases, grouped into three broader stages: Ideational, Policy Building, and Policy Implementation (see **Table 3**). These phases reflect not only rhetorical shifts but also the transformation of Global Britain from a slogan into a strategic framework guiding UK foreign policy.

TABLE 3 – THE STAGES AND PHASES OF THE GLOBAL BRITAIN IDEA.

YEARS	STAGES		
	Ideational	Policy Building	Policy Implementation
1945 2016	**Phase 0** The origin of Global Britain idea and elite dissemination		
2016	**Phase 1** Introduction of the Global Britain idea (July 2016)		
2017	**Phase 2** Global Britain's Political Consolidation		
2018			
2019		**Phase 3** Strategy delineation process	
2020		**Phase 4** Operationalisation of the Global Britain idea with the Integrated Review (IR21) (December 2019 to March 2021)	
2021			**Phase 5** Implementation of the Global Britain idea (March 2021 to 2022 inclusive)
2022			
2023			**Phase 6** Evaluation of the implementation and strategy adjustment with the Integrated Review Refresh (IR23)

This periodisation was inductively derived from both the frequency and thematic content of documents across actors. **Figure 18** introduces a thematic classification of these documents, distinguishing between those that place Global Britain at the centre and those that integrate it into broader discussions of foreign policy, trade, or Brexit. For instance, Boris Johnson, when serving as Foreign Secretary, frequently framed Global Britain as the UK's post-Brexit strategy. Similarly, Theresa May presented Brexit as an opportunity for the UK to reassert its identity as a global trading nation.

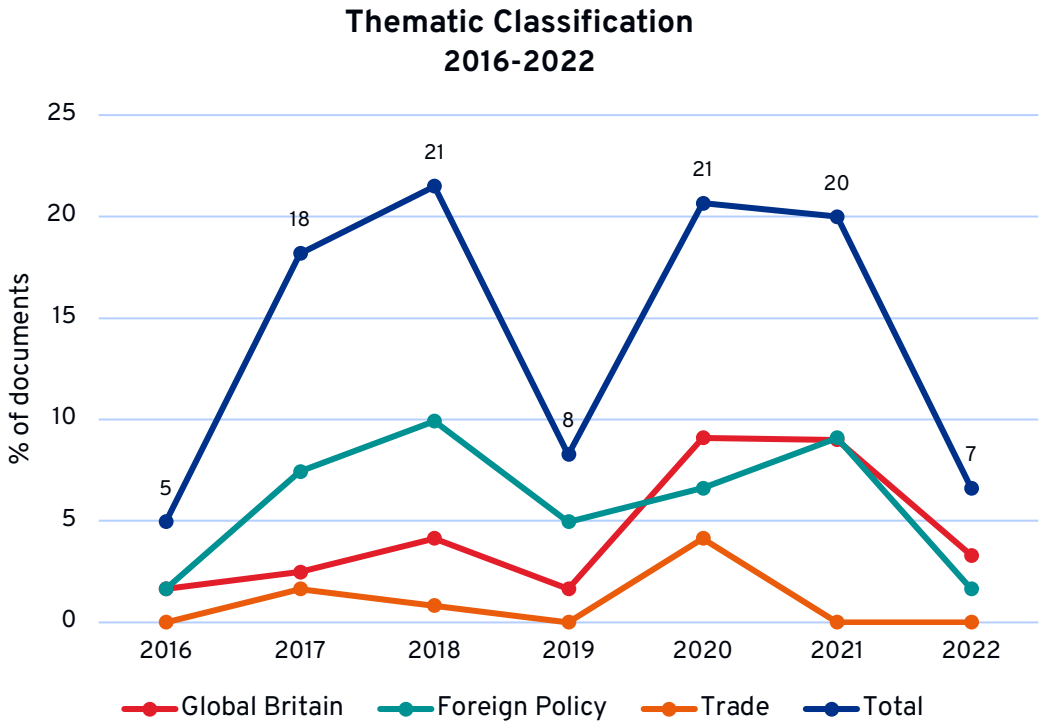


FIGURE 18 - GLOBAL BRITAIN DOCUMENTS THEMATIC CLASSIFICATION PRODUCED BY ALL THE POLITICAL ACTORS, PER YEAR, 2016-2022 (N=121).

The three main categories considered represent 78% of the total sample.

Figure 18 shows that 78% of all documents analysed fall into one of three categories: foreign policy, Global Britain (as the central theme), and trade. Observing these trends over time, one finds that foreign policy dominated until 2019. From 2020, references to trade increased significantly, and explicit engagement with Global Britain as a standalone

idea peaked. Overall, 41% of the documents examined centre on foreign policy themes, while 30% directly address the definition and significance of Global Britain (**Figure 19**). Brexit, trade, and economy-related content account for 7%, whereas only 3% explicitly address the UK–EU relationship. Cultural references, surprisingly, constitute 6%, higher than anticipated.

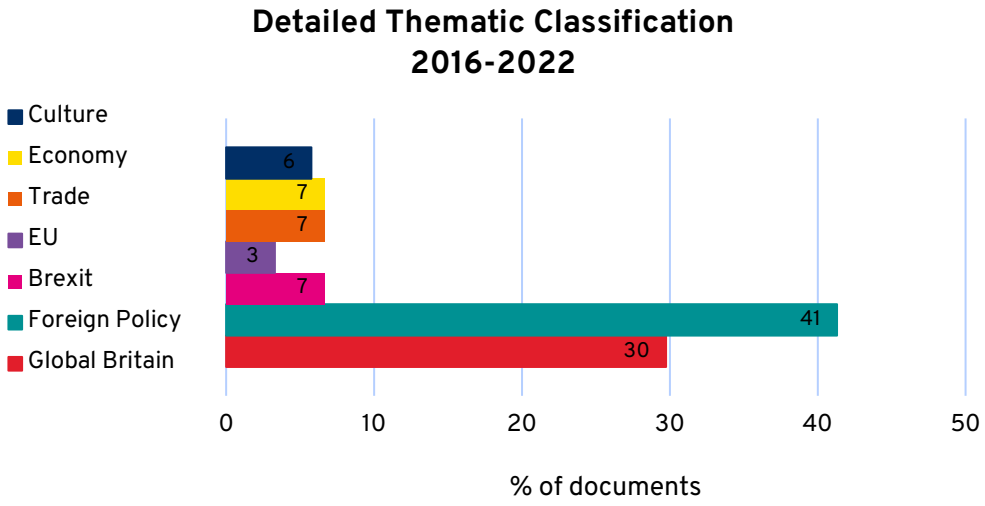


FIGURE 19 - GLOBAL BRITAIN DOCUMENTS THEMATIC CLASSIFICATION PRODUCED BY ALL THE POLITICAL ACTORS CONSIDERED, 2016-2022 (N=121).

A breakdown of government-specific documents (**Figure 20**) reveals a different focus: 30% concern foreign policy, 16% are directly about Global Britain, and 14% pertain to the economy. Only 10% centre on trade, despite trade being one of the first policy instruments mobilised in pursuit of the Global Britain agenda. EU-related content constitutes just 6% of government materials, and cultural themes also appear at 12%, showing a broader thematic scope than might be expected.

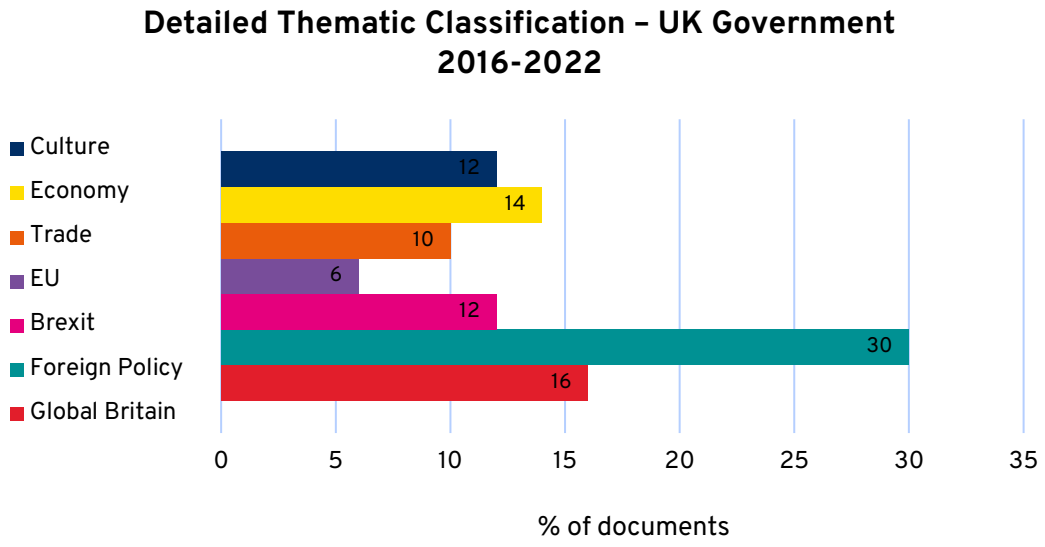


FIGURE 20 - GLOBAL BRITAIN DOCUMENTS THEMATIC CLASSIFICATION PRODUCED BY THE UK GOVERNMENT, 2016-2022 (N=50).

Theresa May, serving as Prime Minister (2016-2019), included references to Global Britain in key speeches between November 2016 and September 2018. Boris Johnson, her Foreign Secretary (2016-2018) and later Prime Minister (2019-2022), consistently used the phrase in public statements, particularly up to 2020. His alignment with the May government's conceptual framing suggests a degree of strategic continuity, at least in rhetorical terms. When comparing across actors, Government documents remain the most focused on foreign policy and Global Britain as strategic constructs. They also prioritise economic arguments more prominently than Parliament or think tanks. Brexit, while present, appears more as a contextual driver than a primary thematic category.

This section has demonstrated how Global Britain gradually transitioned from political rhetoric to a structured policy idea through a process of discursive consolidation and institutional uptake. From 2016 onwards, the phrase gained visibility in government documents, parliamentary debates, and think tank reports, each contributing in its way to shaping its meaning. Initially, the Government was the principal source of references, with Theresa May and Boris Johnson articulating the concept as part of a wider response

to the strategic vacuum left by Brexit. Over time, Parliament – particularly the Foreign Affairs Committee – played a critical role in probing and refining the narrative, while think tanks helped sustain the debate and add thematic depth.

The thematic trends explored in this section indicate a clear shift: initially, Global Britain was firmly embedded in the foreign policy discourse, but from 2020 onwards, trade and economic concerns gained greater prominence. This shift reflects both the changing priorities of political actors and the attempt to present Brexit not as a moment of rupture, but as a platform for renewed global ambition. Yet, the narrow focus on trade also hints at the limits of the narrative when faced with the challenges of implementation.

What emerges from the data is a complex picture. The idea was taken up and interpreted differently across institutions and over time, but its presence in the political discourse remained consistent for several years. Even as its centrality diminished after 2022, Global Britain had already left its mark – providing a strategic frame that helped the UK navigate an uncertain international landscape. The process outlined here supports one of the central arguments of this thesis: that ideas matter in foreign policy, not only because of what they convey, but also because of how they are repeated, adopted, and embedded into the institutional machinery of the state.

Building on these findings, the following section examines how the idea of Global Britain was introduced, framed, and initially operationalised through the strategic coordination between Downing Street and Whitehall, particularly under the leadership of Prime Ministers Theresa May and Boris Johnson.

6.3. Policy Architects: The alliance between Downing Street and Whitehall

This section examines how the idea of Global Britain was introduced, framed, and initially operationalised through the strategic coordination between Downing Street and Whitehall, particularly under the leadership of Prime Ministers Theresa May and Boris Johnson. The goal is to understand whether Global Britain functioned as a policy innovation or as a rhetorical device deployed to manage the political vacuum created by the Brexit referendum.

Theresa May was the first executive figure to introduce Global Britain as an organising concept in the aftermath of Brexit. Her early speeches framed the term as a response to globalisation and liberalism, emphasising the UK's global trading potential and commitment to international leadership.[240] May defines Global Britain as a way 'to thrive in a global economy' and as a response through global leadership.[241] This rhetorical move served a dual purpose: it distanced the UK from accusations of inward-looking nationalism and redefined Brexit not as withdrawal, but as strategic reorientation.

In her Lancaster House speech (January 2017), May explicitly articulated Global Britain as a vision of the UK as 'a truly global nation', integrating the language of economic openness with foreign policy projection.[242] Her twelve-point Brexit negotiation plan wove Global Britain into key priorities – most notably, trade liberalisation, immigration control,

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[240] Theresa May, "PM speech to the Lord Mayor's Banquet: 14 November 2016" (speech, London, November 14, 2016).

[241] May, "PM speech to the Lord Mayor's Banquet".

[242] Theresa May, "The Government's Negotiating Objectives for Exiting the EU" (speech, London, January 17, 2017).

and global scientific collaboration.[243] The concept functioned as a normative counterweight to the institutional disruption of EU withdrawal. Rather than narrating Brexit as a rupture, May's discourse framed it as a sovereign leap into broader global engagement.

While May's Global Britain narrative emphasised multilateralism and soft power, Boris Johnson adopted a more instrumentalist and performative interpretation. His December 2016 statement as Foreign Secretary redefined the term not as a strategic horizon but as a government 'programme', intended to communicate Britain's military, diplomatic, and commercial influence. Johnson refers to the concept of Global Britain as 'the need for us to commit ourselves to the peace and prosperity of the world', associating with foreign policy strategy, as he claims, 'we are a protagonist – a global Britain running a truly global foreign policy'.[244] He likened Brexit to a 'Bre-entry into the world', thus symbolically re-launching the UK as a global actor.[245]

This reframing was significant. Johnson transformed Global Britain from a foreign policy outlook into a communicative instrument of political reassurance, intended as much for

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[243] This speech is significant because it sets the national priorities and interests. Being perceived as assertive, the Government publishes the twelve points to be used when negotiating with the EU. These ambitions are (1) certainty; (2) control of our laws; (3) strengthening the Union; (4) maintaining the Common Travel Area with Ireland; (5) control of immigration; (6) rights for EU nationals in Britain, and British nationals in the EU; (7) protect workers' rights; (8) free trade with European markets; (9) new trade agreements with other countries; (10) the best place for science and innovation; (11) co-operation in the fight against crime and terrorism; (12) a smooth, orderly Brexit; Theresa May, "The Government's Negotiating Objectives for Exiting the EU" (speech, London, January 17, 2017).

[244] Boris Johnson, "Beyond Brexit: a Global Britain" (speech, London, December 2, 2016).

[245] Johnson, "Beyond Brexit: a Global Britain".

domestic audiences as for international partners. His emphasis on NATO contributions and defence spending revealed a pivot toward hard power, in contrast with May's invocation of soft power assets, such as business, culture, and science.

> Global Britain is a programme to help to explain to the world, but also to the people of this country, what I think they do not often suspect, which is the full range of Britain's military, cultural, commercial and diplomatic influence in the world. It is important to do that now, particularly as we make our Brexit—or Bre-entry into the world, as we should perhaps call it—to help people to understand that a more global Britain will be a more prosperous Britain.[246]

Johnson employs the concept of Global Britain to discuss the liberal and global future of the country following its exit from the EU, delving deeper into the economic opportunities that Brexit represents.[247]

While Boris Johnson, as Foreign Secretary, actively promoted Global Britain as a foreign policy slogan with outward-facing ambitions, Theresa May's framing of the concept was more expansive and embedded within a broader strategic vision for the UK. For May, Global Britain was not simply a tool of foreign policy; it was a national objective – a state to be attained. Her speeches reveal an attempt to position Global Britain as an organising principle for the UK's post-Brexit identity, one rooted in liberal economic values, institutional continuity, and soft power.

May presented the concept as a task that the UK must deliberately pursue. In her words, Global Britain was both a responsibility and an aspiration, framed by the belief that the UK's global position should be underpinned by its non-material influence. She emphasised the role of British business and economic leadership as central to the UK's

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[246] 621 Parl. Deb. H.C. (6th ser.) (2017) col. 847.

[247] Boris Johnson, "Uniting for a Great Brexit" (speech, London, February 14, 2018).

soft power credentials, stating that 'one of the biggest assets of a global Britain will be our soft power – and crucially that includes British business'.[248] Here, soft power was not merely cultural or diplomatic; it was tied to commerce, innovation, and the perceived global competitiveness of British enterprise.

This expansive understanding also extended to science and technology. May linked Global Britain to continued engagement with European partners on collaborative research, expressing a desire for the UK to remain among the most attractive global hubs for innovation.[249] Such references reflect an approach that did not see Brexit as a complete dissociation from Europe but rather as a reconfiguration of relationships – one in which Global Britain could emerge through enhanced soft power and scientific cooperation.

A key pillar in this vision was trade.[250] May consistently linked Global Britain to commercial diplomacy, particularly through the strengthening of traditional alliances. The US featured prominently in this vision, as she advocated for a 'renewed special relationship' and underscored her government's intention to negotiate a new bilateral trade agreement.[251] In doing so, she framed Brexit not as a retreat but as a gateway to greater global engagement. Her objective, as articulated, was for the 'new, global Britain

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[248] Theresa May, "PM Speech to the Lord Mayor's Banquet" (speech, London, November 13, 2017).

[249] Theresa May, "I want an exit that will work for all of us" (article, London, January 2017).

[250] Theresa May, "PM Speech on our Future Economic Partnership with the European Union" (speech, London, March 2, 2018).

[251] Theresa May, "Prime Minister's speech to the Republican Party conference 2017" (speech, USA, January 2017).

that emerges after Brexit [to be] even better equipped to take its place confidently in the world'.[252]

Despite rhetorical clarity from both May and Johnson, Global Britain lacked institutional traction during its early stages.[253] This led to increasing scrutiny from Parliament. In late 2017, the Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC), chaired by Tom Tugendhat, launched a formal inquiry into the meaning and practicalities of the Global Britain concept.[254] The inquiry highlighted a key tension: while political elites used Global Britain to signal

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[252] May, "Prime Minister's speech to the Republican Party conference 2017".

[253] For an individual approach of Global Britain being used by the members of May's Government, please consult the following speeches and news stories: Department for Exiting the European Union, "David Davis heads to Brussels tomorrow with a clear message: we are leaving the European Union" (news story, June 18, 2017); David Frost, (ADD); Department for Exiting the European Union, "Minister David Jones addressed freight and transport industry leaders" (news story, March 15, 2017); David Jones, "David Jones speech to the Freight Transport Association (FTA)" (speech, London, March 15, 2017); David Lidington, "Building a global Britain" (speech, London, April 2018); Liz Truss (ADD); Greg Hand, "Greg Hands speech to British Chamber of Commerce in Germany" (speech, Dusseldorf, February 2, 2017); John Glen, "Economic Secretary speech: FT Banking Summit" (speech, London, December 2018); Liam Fox, "Britain's Trading Future" (speech, London, February 2018) and "Global Britain: the future of international trade" (speech, London, April 2018); Michael Nevin, "Britain in the world and 'Brexit'" (speech, Malawi, August 2016).

[254] Tom Tugendhat, "Letter (Written Evidence) from Tom Tugendhat (Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee) to Boris Johnson (Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, FCO)" (London, Foreign Affairs Committee, 2018).

continuity and ambition in foreign affairs, there was no comprehensive policy framework to support the slogan.[255]

Johnson writes in response, 'Your request is so broad as to amount in effect to a substantive report on all aspects of British foreign policy and I cannot agree to the diversion of effort which responding to it would require'. He then proposes that Deborah Bronnert, FCO Director General Global Britain, could 'discuss the subject informally with the Committee, to help you scope the issues and assure me that FCO resources can be focused on addressing the Committee's main concern'.[256]

The FCO memorandum, while offering a broad definition – 'a determination to remain a successful global player' after EU withdrawal – acknowledged the lack of strategy and

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[255] The specific areas that the Committee was interested in included: 'How "Global Britain" differs from past UK foreign policy; What the main obstacles or challenges are to realising Global Britain; How UK foreign policy towards Europe, Asia and other regions will change under Global Britain?; Whether Global Britain seeks to increase or strengthen the "rules-based international order" and if so, how; Regional and thematic areas of focus; Prioritised objectives and attendant metrics, both across Government and within the FCO, including timescales and deadlines; Allocation of resources and responsibilities to deliver, both across Government and within the FCO; Mechanisms for coordinating activity across Departments, agencies, and posts; Lines of accountability, both across Government and within the FCO.'; Tom Tugendhat, "Letter (Written Evidence) from Tom Tugendhat (Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee) to Boris Johnson (Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, FCO)" (London, Foreign Affairs Committee, 2018).

[256] Boris Johnson, "Letter (Written Evidence) from Boris Johnson (Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, FCO) to Tom Tugendhat (Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee)" (London, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2018).

timelines.[257] The FCO presents a clear definition of the Global Britain idea, saying: 'The concept of Global Britain is shorthand for our determination to adjust to these changes [of leaving the EU], to continue to be a successful global foreign policy player, and to resist any sense that Britain will be less engaged in the world in the next few years'.[258] The consequences of Brexit are recognised as the loss of advantages due to EU membership. However, the FCO defends the vision that the country will gain competencies in foreign policy matters. The reformed 'international posture must reflect all these interests and all our policy ambitions'.[259]

Johnson's refusal to fully comply with the FAC's request, citing its scope as overly broad, further demonstrated that Global Britain was still undergoing conceptual consolidation and had not yet transitioned into an actionable strategy. Instead, the Government relied on informal briefings and selective documentation to maintain narrative coherence.

As leadership within the FCO changed, so did the emphasis on Global Britain. Jeremy Hunt, who succeeded Johnson as Foreign Secretary (2018–2019), largely avoided explicit use of the term, focusing instead on post-Brexit diplomatic realism.[260] Hunt's emphasis

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[257] Foreign and Commonwealth Office, "Memorandum from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office" (London, March 2018).

[258] Foreign and Commonwealth Office, "Memorandum from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office".

[259] *Ibid.*

[260] Jeremy Hunt, "An Invisible Chain" (speech, London, October 2018); Jeremy Hunt, "Foreign Secretary Hunt: Britain's role in a post-Brexit world" (speech, Singapore, January 2019); Jeremy Hunt, "Britain and Germany: an alliance of values" (speech, Berlin, February 2019); Jeremy Hunt, "Lord Mayor's Banquet 2019: Foreign Secretary's speech" (speech, London, May 2019).

on hard power and national renewal contrasted with May's soft power focus and suggested a recalibration of the narrative's utility.

Dominic Raab's tenure (2019–2021) reintroduced the phrase into foreign policy discourse, but with an altered tone. Raab's public articles proposed that Global Britain was 'more than Brexit or even free trade', aiming to present it as a moral compass for international engagement.[261] This rhetorical shift suggested an attempt to reclaim the narrative from its earlier, instrumentalist framing and re-anchor it in normative liberal internationalism.

Raab's intervention highlights a broader insight: Global Britain was a discursive tool whose definition fluctuated depending on the speaker, institutional setting, and political timing. While May initially introduced it as a strategic vision for a post-Brexit UK, successive actors adapted it to suit shifting priorities – defence, diplomacy, trade, or identity renewal – without uniting around a specific doctrine.[262]

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[261] Dominic Raab, "A truly global future awaits us after Brexit: article by Dominic Raab" (authored article, August 2019); Dominic Raab, "Global Britain is leading the world as a force for good: article by Dominic Raab" (authored article, September 2019).

[262] Raab resigned in September 2021, leaving the dossier to Liz Truss, who was responsible for the Department of International Trade (DIT) until then. Other political actors, such as ministers and Conservative Members of Parliament (MPs), were important in marketing the Global Britain idea during this period. We highlight the following: David Davis (DExEU), David Frost (Chief Negotiator for Exiting the EU), David Jones (DExEU), David Lidington (HoC), Liz Truss (The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice), Gavin Williamson (Secretary of State for Defence), Greg Hand (DIT), John Glen (Economic Secretary to the Treasury), Liam Fox (DIT), Michael Nevin (FCO), and finally Penny Mordaunt and Priti Patel (both as Secretary of State for International Development).

The Global Britain narrative, as presented between 2016 and 2019, emerged as a discursive attempt to contain the strategic vacuum left by Brexit. Through the alliance between Downing Street and Whitehall, particularly the FCO, the Government successfully introduced the term into elite discourse. However, the absence of an initial strategic framework led to contestation in Parliament and required institutional responses to articulate its practical meaning.

What emerges from this phase is that Global Britain was less a fully formed policy than a discursive placeholder – a flexible idea employed to reassure domestic and international audiences. At the same time, the state recalibrated its foreign policy identity. It reveals a broader pattern in UK foreign policy: a reliance on rhetorical innovation to mask strategic indeterminacy in times of systemic transformation.

Having examined how successive Conservative Prime Ministers – particularly Theresa May and Boris Johnson – attempted to embed Global Britain as both a strategic objective and a post-Brexit national identity, it is essential to consider how this narrative evolved across the broader political spectrum. The following section explores how the idea of Global Britain featured in the context of general elections, focusing primarily on the Labour Party's approach. This allows us to assess whether Global Britain remained a partisan project or became a shared framework across political lines, and to what extent Labour engaged with or challenged the concept in its foreign policy vision.

6.4. General Elections and Labour's Engagement with the Global Britain Narrative

Political manifestos are key artefacts in mapping how parties construct and communicate strategic ideas. They reflect not only policy priorities but also the ideational boundaries of mainstream political discourse. In the context of post-referendum Britain, both the Conservative and Labour parties adopted the Global Britain narrative in their 2017 General Election manifestos, signalling the term's discursive salience across party lines – even if not always sharing the same meaning or strategic function.

Labour's appropriation of the Global Britain term under Jeremy Corbyn marked a significant discursive shift. Rather than employing the concept as a slogan tied to trade expansion or great power revival, as in the Conservative articulation, Labour reframed Global Britain as a values-based foreign policy framework. Labour's 2017 manifesto proposed a vision of the UK's international role grounded in diplomacy, human rights, and multilateralism, calling for an end to 'aggressive unilateral interventions' and advocating a humanitarian response to global challenges such as the refugee crisis.[263] The manifesto stated: 'Unlike the Conservatives, Labour believes the values of peace, universal rights, and international law should guide Britain's foreign policy. Today, these values are being evaluated. As we leave the European Union, keeping Britain global is one of our country's most urgent tasks'.[264]

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[263] Labour Party, "For the many: not the few" (manifesto, 2017).

[264] Labour Party, "For the many: not the few".

This framing positions Global Britain not as an end-state or singular strategic doctrine, but as one possible expression of a broader post-Brexit internationalism, rooted in ethical responsibility rather than geopolitical ambition. While the term is adopted, it is hollowed of its Conservative meanings, signalling resistance to militarised or trade-centric interpretations.

In contrast, the Conservative Party's 2017 manifesto, *Forward, Together: Our Plan for a Stronger Britain and a Prosperous Future*, presented Global Britain as a central organising principle of post-Brexit foreign policy. The narrative was assertively framed as part of Britain's identity and global historical legacy: 'The United Kingdom is a global nation. Our history is a global history; our future must be global too. We believe Britain should play an active, leading role in the world'.[265]

A dedicated section on Global Britain provided a blueprint structured around eight core objectives: upholding British leadership in international institutions, building global partnerships and alliances, championing free trade, promoting British culture abroad, leading international development, reforming asylum policy, protecting the global environment, and combating modern slavery.[266] This list suggests a programmatic attempt to operationalise Global Britain beyond rhetoric, embedding it in the broader vision of global activism, market access, and regulatory sovereignty. Unlike Labour's usage, which was nested within an ethical foreign policy paradigm, the Conservative framing treated Global Britain as a strategic framework capable of replacing the EU's institutional scaffolding.

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[265] Conservative Party, "Forward, Together: Our Plan for a Stronger Britain and a Prosperous Future" (manifesto, 2017).

[266] Conservative Party, "Forward, Together: Our Plan for a Stronger Britain and a Prosperous Future".

The Conservatives won the June 2017 election with 42.4% of the vote, forming a minority government supported by the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). However, despite the rhetorical prominence of Global Britain in the campaign, it was mentioned only marginally in the immediate post-election period. For instance, then-Brexit Secretary David Davis merely invoked the phrase when stating the government's aim to secure a Brexit deal that would enable the UK to 'become a truly global Britain' – a perfunctory use that lacked strategic clarity.[267]

By contrast, the 2019 General Election marked a discursive turning point. Both the Conservative and Labour manifestos abandoned the explicit use of the term Global Britain. Labour introduced a section titled New Internationalism, signalling a departure from co-opted terminology and affirming a distinctive ideological orientation. Meanwhile, Johnson's Conservative platform focused almost exclusively on "Get Brexit Done" and the restoration of sovereign decision-making, with foreign policy framed under the broader slogan of "Strengthen Britain in the World".[268]

This discursive retreat can be interpreted in multiple ways. For Labour, it may reflect discomfort with adopting a phrase increasingly associated with Conservative post-Brexit ambitions. For the Conservatives, Global Britain may have been temporarily sidelined to concentrate political capital on the more immediate goal of resolving the Brexit impasse that had undermined May's leadership. Despite this, as shown in earlier sections, the term

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[267] Department for Exiting the European Union, "David Davis heads to Brussels tomorrow with a clear message: we are leaving the European Union" (news story, June 18, 2017).

[268] Labour Party, "For the many: not the few"; Conservative Party, "Forward, Together: Our Plan for a Stronger Britain and a Prosperous Future".

continued to animate official government discourse, particularly through the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Johnson's early premiership.

The inclusion of Global Britain in both parties' 2017 manifestos highlights the initial capacity of the term to function as a discursive bridge across ideological divides. However, the stark divergence in interpretation and intent – with Conservatives treating it as a strategy for national resurgence and Labour employing it as a vessel for ethical internationalism – reveals its adaptability and contestation.

By 2019, both parties had shifted away from explicit use of the term, suggesting that Global Britain may have reached its limits as a catch-all narrative in electoral politics. Yet its continued presence in government communications indicates that while it may have receded as a campaign slogan, it remained an active and contested organising principle in the policy domain.

In tracing the consolidation and operationalisation of Global Britain, it becomes evident that strategic ideas do not emerge in a vacuum. Beyond elected officials and formal institutions, a broader network of actors played a crucial role in shaping and legitimising the narrative. Among them, British think tanks emerged as particularly influential intermediaries, often serving as intellectual brokers between government priorities and public discourse. To fully understand the formation and endurance of Global Britain, it is therefore essential to examine the mechanisms of interaction between these policy institutions and the UK government.

6.5. Think Thanks Influencing the Government? Idea Diffusion and Policy Alignment

Understanding the mechanisms by which think tanks interact with government is central to tracing the diffusion and institutionalisation of political ideas in British foreign policy. In this context, Global Britain provides a compelling case study. Brexit created a rupture in the UK's strategic orientation, offering a window of opportunity for ideational entrepreneurs – including think tanks – to contest, legitimise, or operationalise visions of Britain's role in the world. This section analyses whether think tanks have functioned as agenda-setters proposing strategic ideas, or primarily as policy supporters operationalising government-defined narratives.

The frequency of documents produced by think tanks mirrors parliamentary discourse and aligns with government output between 2016 and 2022, as evidenced in **Figure 17**. However, publication chronology suggests that think tanks did not originate the Global Britain concept, but rather amplified, legitimised, and refined it once it entered the political discourse. This indicates a reactive alignment in early phases, followed by increasing assertiveness in shaping content, especially during the Policy Building Stage (2020–2021), as shown in **Table 3**, and aligned with the development of the Integrated Review (IR21).

During the Ideational Stage, several think tanks proactively developed dedicated programmes and strategic commissions centred around Global Britain. These included the Global Britain Programme at the Henry Jackson Society, led by James Rogers; the Global Britain Commission from Bradshaw Advisory; and Britain in the World, a Policy Exchange initiative launched even before the referendum (March 2016). The latter – under the direction of Michael Fallon and Lord Robertson – had the 'mission to revitalise

the British foreign policy debate in the UK, challenge the narrative of decline, encourage the creation of a new generation of foreign policy leaders, and to ask hard questions about Britain's place in the world, its hard and soft power assets, and future grand strategy' (Bew *et al.* 2018, 3).

A series of reports published in 2017 and 2018 articulated distinct visions of Global Britain across the ideological spectrum. For example, James Rogers (2017) of the Henry Jackson Society argued that Global Britain should evolve into a full-fledged grand strategy for national revival. He proposed that this narrative encapsulate both domestic cohesion and international engagement, supported by economic and military capabilities (Rogers 2017, 6). Similarly, Policy Exchange's *Global Britain, Global Challenges* report (Dupont 2017) advocated maintaining Britain's commitment to development aid and reducing trade barriers as means of securing global influence.

RUSI, in its analysis following the 2018 Munich Security Conference, highlighted the structural constraints facing a globally ambitious Britain, warning of limited resources in a post-Brexit environment (Chalmers 2018, 5). Complementing this, Thomson (2018, 14) demonstrated that both policy elites and the general public supported an outward-facing role for the UK – albeit with sharp divergences between Leave and Remain voters – signalling potential tensions between elite vision and public legitimacy.

Notably, think tanks also advanced Global Britain as an economic strategy. Reports by LSE IDEAS (Yueh 2017) and the Institute for Economic Affairs (Jessop 2018) linked the narrative to liberal trade policies and the restoration of the UK's position as a global trading hub. Jessop, for example, argued for prioritising early trade deals with Anglophone allies as a way of rehearsing the UK's negotiating capacity – directly feeding into the logic of 'Global Britain as a champion of free trade' (Jessop 2018).

Some think tanks explicitly challenged a narrowly security- or trade-based interpretation of Global Britain. ResPublica's (Blond, Noyes, and Sim 2017) emphasis on soft power and civil society autonomy provided an alternative vision where British global engagement was rooted in cultural diplomacy and institutional example. This call to move beyond the instrumentalisation of soft power framed Global Britain as a normative project rather than a geopolitical strategy. This plurality of perspectives reveals the ideational flexibility of Global Britain, enabling it to accommodate competing policy goals – from national security to development aid, liberal economics to soft power projection.

While there is a temporal correlation between think tank publications and government speeches or reviews, particularly in Phase 2 (2017–2018) and Phase 4 (2020–2021), causality is more difficult to establish. The bulk of think tank publications followed key political moments, such as the 2017 Conservative manifesto and the announcement of the *Integrated Review* (IR21). As such, the primary function of think tanks during the early phases appears to be ideational elaboration and normative justification of a government-framed narrative, rather than independent agenda-setting.

Nevertheless, the density of publications in 2020–2021 (representing 59% of think tank output) suggests an increasing capacity for policy-shaping during the operationalisation phase (see **Figure 16** and **Figure 17**). Notably, 24% of these focused directly on the meaning and strategic implications of Global Britain, indicating that think tanks were not merely echoing official documents but actively contributing to the narrative architecture and potential implementation pathways. However, this influence appears to wane after 2021. By 2022, think tank publications dropped to just 6%, all focused on traditional foreign policy, suggesting a narrowing of the discourse and possible conceptual exhaustion of the Global Britain narrative within policy circles.

British think tanks played a crucial supporting role in the institutionalisation of Global Britain as a post-Brexit strategic idea. Their function has been to provide intellectual scaffolding, policy recommendations, and legitimising narratives aligned with government priorities, particularly during the Policy Building stage. While not the originators of Global Britain, think tanks such as the Henry Jackson Society, Policy Exchange, RUSI, and ResPublica contributed meaningfully to its elaboration and dissemination across multiple policy domains.

Yet, the evidence does not support a strong top-down influence from think tanks on governmental policy direction. Instead, their impact lies in the diffusion and domestication of elite narratives. The relative decline in output post-IR21 underscores a shift in the function of think tanks – from ideational innovation to strategic reinforcement – within the broader ecosystem of British foreign policy.

6.6. Comparative Synthesis: Leadership Interpretations and Reframings of Global Britain

The analysis above demonstrates that while the Global Britain narrative exhibited a degree of continuity across Conservative leadership transitions, it was subject to notable reinterpretation in tone, emphasis, and policy framing under each Prime Minister. This section draws together the preceding evidence to compare how Theresa May, Boris Johnson, and, more recently, Rishi Sunak positioned and operationalised the concept, highlighting both ideological common ground and points of divergence.

Theresa May's version of Global Britain emerged as an organising vision in the immediate aftermath of the Brexit referendum. Her framing emphasised multilateral engagement,

liberal economic openness, and the UK's soft power assets – business, science, and culture – while signalling continuity in foreign policy traditions. May's speeches positioned Brexit as a platform for renewed global engagement rather than retrenchment, merging the narrative into trade diplomacy and alliances, especially with the United States, and presenting it as both a responsibility and aspiration for a "truly global nation."

Boris Johnson's interpretation was more performative, nationalist, and hard power-oriented. As Foreign Secretary and later Prime Minister, Johnson recast Global Britain from a broad strategic horizon into a communicative programme – "Bre-entry into the world" – designed to reassure domestic audiences and project confidence abroad. His emphasis on NATO, defence spending, and military capability contrasted with May's softer emphasis on values and partnerships. Johnson's framing was also more politically instrumental: a flexible slogan deployed to legitimise Brexit and consolidate political authority in moments of instability.

Sunak's approach, though less extensively branded under the Global Britain label, reflects a pragmatic recalibration of the narrative. The IR23 adjustments signal a shift towards economic diplomacy, targeted alliance-building, and stabilisation of the UK's strategic posture, while avoiding the overt symbolic flourish of his predecessors. Although the branding has faded, the underlying strands – sovereignty, trade identity, and strategic alliances – remain embedded in policy documents and institutional practices, indicating the concept's residual influence.

Across these leadership transitions, several continuities stand out: the presentation of the UK as a sovereign, globally engaged power; the coupling of foreign policy projection with economic objectives; and the use of Global Britain as a frame to reconcile Brexit with a renewed sense of international purpose. Yet, the differences in emphasis – May's soft

power multilateralism, Johnson's hard power assertiveness, and Sunak's discreet pragmatism – underscore the concept's flexibility. Rather than a fixed doctrine, Global Britain has operated as an adaptable ideational toolkit, enabling successive leaders to recalibrate Britain's international posture in response to shifting geopolitical conditions.

In comparative perspective, these findings affirm one of the core propositions of this thesis: that Global Britain's strategic utility lies less in its doctrinal precision and more in its capacity to offer a malleable narrative framework – one that can be reframed to meet the immediate political needs of the leadership while maintaining a semblance of strategic continuity. **Table 4** synthesises the narrative evolution of May, Johnson, and Sunak, highlighting differences and continuities in their strategic interpretation, thematic emphasis, and communicative style. By mapping each leader's framing against the thesis's propositions, it reveals how the same overarching concept was rearticulated to meet shifting political needs and international circumstances. May's tenure is characterised by a soft power–oriented, multilateral vision rooted in trade diplomacy and institutional continuity; Johnson's by a more performative, hard power–inflected approach combining strategic assertiveness with firm branding; and Sunak's by a pragmatic recalibration, marked by a muted narrative and selective engagement with the concept.

The comparison underscores the thesis claim that Global Britain is best understood as a flexible strategic narrative rather than a fixed doctrine. Its power has been less about prescribing a singular course than about organising meaning across changing constraints – being taken up (**P2**), reframed to fit leadership needs (**P3**), and embedded to varying degrees in policy and institutions (**P4**). The interview evidence is most probative when used to illuminate these turning points – moments of consolidation or contestation – rather than to corroborate texts. The next chapter leverages this comparative lens to evaluate concretisation and subsequent narrative attenuation.

TABLE 4 – COMPARATIVE FRAMING OF THE GLOBAL BRITAIN NARRATIVE UNDER SUCCESSIVE CONSERVATIVE PRIME MINISTERS (2016–2023).

Leader	Narrative Purpose	Dominant Strands	Policy Emphasis	Institutional Imprint	Guiding Propositions
Theresa May (2016-2019)	Reassurance; stabilise post-referendum uncertainty	1 Globalism vs Isolationism; 2 Role in the world; 5 Identity/Values; 6 Instruments (trade/soft power)	Multilateralism; Soft power; Commercial diplomacy; "global but not isolationist"	Early speech architecture; Selective Whitehall uptake; FAC scrutiny	P2 (Political Uptake) P3 (Strategic Reframing)
Boris Johnson (2019-2022)	Rebranding; assertive agency; "Bre-entry"	1 Globalism vs Isolationism; 2 Role in the world; 3 Status/Decline; 6 Instruments (trade/soft power); 7 Alliances	NATO & defence signalling; Trade assertiveness; IR21 strategy codification	IR21; Departmental strategies; Stronger routinisation	P2 (Political Uptake) P3 (Strategic Reframing) P4 (Post-Brexit Foreign Policy Transformation)
Rishi Sunak (2022-2023)	Pragmatic recalibration; economic security	2 Role in the world; 4 Relationship with Europe (practicality); 6 Instruments (trade/soft power); 7 Alliances	Economic statecraft; Targeted alliances; Risk management	IR23 refresh; Muted narrative, continued embedding	P3 (Strategic Reframing) P4 (Post-Brexit Foreign Policy Transformation)

CONCLUSION

This chapter has traced the evolution of the Global Britain narrative in the immediate aftermath of the Brexit referendum, charting six sequential phases in its trajectory: the initial articulation of the idea in 2016; its political consolidation during 2017–2018; the delineation of strategic contours between 2018–2019; operationalisation through the publication of the Integrated Review (IR21); subsequent implementation; and, most recently, evaluation and strategic adjustment in the Integrated Review Refresh (IR23). Taken together, these phases reveal Global Britain's progression from discursive innovation to strategic uptake and institutional embedding, reflecting the interplay of **Proposition 2 (*Political Uptake*)**, **Proposition 3 (*Strategic Reframing*)**, and **Proposition 4 (*Post-Brexit Foreign Policy Transformation*)**.

The year 2017 arguably marks the onset of Global Britain's political consolidation. This transition was shaped by a confluence of events, particularly the need for Theresa May and the Conservative Party to define the UK's post-Brexit foreign policy vision in the run-up to the General Election. This necessity is reflected not only in the Party's manifesto but also in the content and frequency of official government statements during this period. Boris Johnson's assertive interventions as Foreign Secretary further advanced the visibility and rhetorical coherence of the concept, even if substantive policy divergence remained.

By the end of 2018, Global Britain had progressed from an aspirational narrative to a more formally articulated strategic orientation. Parliamentary debates and select committee inquiries contributed to clarifying the concept's contours, albeit in a context of notable ministerial divergence. Johnson's resignation in mid-2018 underscored a fracture between his more ambitious global vision and May's more measured approach.

This divergence extended to their respective emphases: Johnson and his successors increasingly aligned Global Britain with frameworks of national renewal and geopolitical assertiveness, anchored in hard power, while May's conception privileged economic liberalism and soft power, including trade, diplomacy, and global institutional engagement.

The period between 2016 and 2018 was pivotal, marking a significant conceptual transition. It witnessed the transformation of a loosely defined political phrase into a framework capable of supporting a foreign policy strategy. The eventual operationalisation of Global Britain was embodied in IR21, published in March 2021 under Johnson's premiership. This policy document marked a decisive moment, elevating Global Britain beyond a political slogan into the realm of strategic direction. It was framed as a response to Britain's post-EU position in the world – one that sought not merely to avoid isolation but to reassert and even enhance its global role through economic, diplomatic, and military influence.

While the literature widely acknowledges May's role in mainstreaming Global Britain into the post-referendum discourse, this thesis contends that such a characterisation oversimplifies the origins of the idea. Rather than being solely a Brexit-induced innovation, Global Britain should be understood genealogically, with intellectual and strategic antecedents in earlier Conservative thinking about Britain's global role.

Although the empirical evidence indicates that Global Britain emerged as a Conservative project, this should be interpreted in terms of discursive ownership rather than ideological exclusivity. Its sustained invocation by successive Conservative Prime Ministers – May, Johnson, Truss, and Sunak – demonstrates the durability and political utility of the idea in navigating the foreign policy challenges posed by Brexit. However, it also raises

questions about whether the concept constitutes a coherent strategic doctrine or primarily serves as a performative instrument for expectation management.

Indeed, Global Britain has functioned simultaneously as an ideational framework, a discursive tool, and a policy placeholder. Domestically, it has allowed the Government to articulate a positive vision of post-Brexit national renewal. Internationally, it signals continued engagement and leadership ambitions in global affairs, distancing the UK from isolationist tendencies often associated with withdrawal from the EU.

Consequently, a genealogical reconstruction of Global Britain was essential to trace how the idea gained discursive traction within the British political elite. Chapters IV and V have mapped the historical and ideational frame of the concept, identifying the networks of actors and institutions through which it circulated well before its formal adoption in 2016. This long-range perspective complicates linear accounts of the term's origins. It underscores the extent to which Global Britain draws from, rather than departs from, longstanding debates about Britain's global role.

The post-referendum articulation of Global Britain did not introduce entirely new ideas; rather, it recombined long-standing foreign policy themes into a configuration tailored to the political demands of Brexit. Sovereignty and security were foregrounded, with NATO, the nuclear deterrent, and the Indo-Pacific tilt serving as markers of renewed strategic ambition. Economic liberalism and global market access were reframed as central tools of influence, while the familiar rejection of isolationism provided a rhetorical bridge between rupture and continuity. Britain's global role was recast in explicitly leadership-oriented terms, even as relations with Europe shifted from cooperative pragmatism to strategic distancing. By elevating non-European alliances – notably with the US, Commonwealth partners, and Indo-Pacific actors – the government presented Brexit as an opportunity to expand, rather than contract, Britain's international reach. This

recalibration adapted inherited narratives to new geopolitical circumstances, allowing the Global Britain project to project both change and continuity.

Having mapped the narrative consolidation and strategic mobilisation of the idea, this chapter has demonstrated how Global Britain evolved from a political slogan into a structured and resonant narrative, gaining momentum across governmental and para-governmental spheres. Yet discourse alone is insufficient to explain policy change. What remains is to examine the mechanisms through which this idea was rendered actionable – translated into institutional routines, strategic priorities, and formal doctrine. The next chapter turns to this phase of concretisation, analysing how Global Britain was embedded within the machinery of British foreign policy and what this reveal about the state's capacity to reconfigure its strategic orientation in periods of disjuncture.

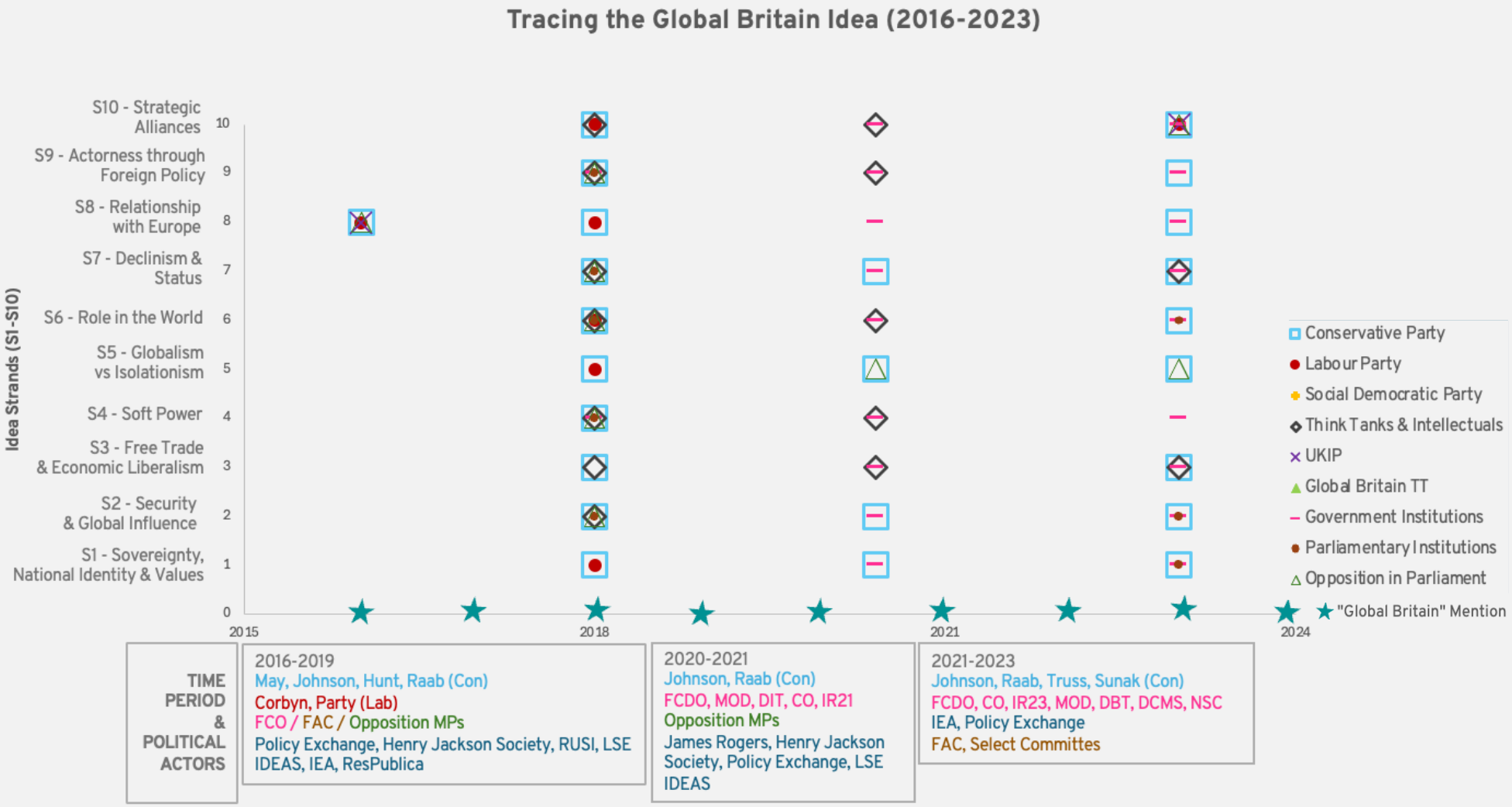


FIGURE 21 - IDEOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE GLOBAL BRITAIN NARRATIVE, 2016-2023.

A longitudinal chart of actors and ideational strands in British foreign policy discourse.

CHAPTER VII

THE CONCRETISATION OF GLOBAL BRITAIN

Political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind. (Orwell 1946)

INTRODUCTION

This chapter constitutes the fourth and final empirical chapter of the thesis. It is therefore appropriate to return explicitly to the central research question that has guided the inquiry: *How has the UK's foreign policy been influenced in the context of Brexit?* The overarching objective has been to trace, understand, and explain the decision-making dynamics underpinning British foreign policy following the 2016 referendum, with particular attention to the ideational, strategic, and institutional mechanisms identified in the analytical framework. In doing so, the chapter engages directly with **Proposition 2 (*Political Uptake*)**, **Proposition 3 (*Strategic Reframing*)**, and **Proposition 4 (*Post-Brexit Foreign Policy Transformation*)**, assessing how these dynamics shaped the adaptation and endurance of the Global Britain narrative in the years after the UK's withdrawal from the EU.

Through the literature review, Global Britain emerged as a pivotal concept introduced into the post-Brexit political vocabulary. Initially treated with some scepticism due to its vagueness and apparent rhetorical utility, it nevertheless proved to be more than a momentary slogan. After an exploratory empirical scrutiny to assess its salience within political discourse and government activity, the thesis proceeded to trace its origins and

trajectory using a genealogical approach. This method revealed deeper historical roots for the idea, extending back to post-war Britain.

Chapter IV established a historical framework for understanding contemporary debates on the UK's global role. Competing discourses – both formal (emanating from government and party leadership) and informal (led by Eurosceptic actors and policy entrepreneurs) – were mapped to show how various elite networks contested Britain's post-imperial international identity. These narratives gained momentum across different periods and coalesced into competing visions of British foreign policy.

Chapter V traced the maintenance and maturation of the Global Britain idea during the period 1997-2016. This phase was marked by ideological diversity, with successive governments advancing distinct foreign policy traditions: Blair's liberal interventionism, Hague's vision of Britain as a global actor, and Cameron's liberal conservatism. Despite their differences, these approaches shared common assumptions about Britain's place in the international order. Simultaneously, informal actors – particularly Eurosceptic groups – nurtured a parallel discourse of dissatisfaction with the EU, advocating an alternative vision for Britain's external relations.

Following the Brexit referendum, Theresa May's government formalised Global Britain as a core rhetorical response to the challenge of redefining the UK's foreign policy trajectory outside the EU. This concept was introduced by the Prime Minister and gradually integrated into the political discourse, raising essential questions regarding its usage, meaning, and political implications. The period between 2016 and 2022 is thus the focal point of both this chapter and the preceding one. Unlike Chapters IV and V, which were structured chronologically, Chapters VI and VII adopt a thematic approach while remaining anchored within the same post-referendum timeframe.

Chapter VI addressed the discursive consolidation of Global Britain, examining when, how, and by whom the concept was deployed. Through systematic content analysis of political speeches, party manifestos, parliamentary records, and think tank publications, the chapter identified key actors and phases in the life cycle of the concept, from ideational emergence to policy implementation. These phases were analytically divided into ideational, policy-building, and policy-implementation stages.

Yet, while the prior chapters succeeded in charting the emergence and use of the Global Britain idea, they leave several important questions unanswered, especially concerning how political ideas translate into foreign policy under conditions of systemic rupture. This chapter addresses that gap. Existing literature on Global Britain and Brexit has primarily focused on formal governmental narratives, often overlooking informal policy actors, particularly think tanks, and the mechanisms through which they shape or contest the foreign policy agenda.

Up until 2018, Global Britain faced sharp criticism within Parliament and in broader public discourse, frequently dismissed as an empty slogan. However, in 2021, Johnson's government sought to operationalise the concept through the publication of the Integrated Review (IR21). While this document offered strategic clarity, the processes through which Global Britain moved from abstract narrative to policy implementation require further scrutiny. Therefore, this chapter examines not only what happened but also how it happened: by tracing the actors, institutional processes, and ideational mechanisms at play.

The British foreign policy-making process has traditionally been studied as a relatively stable system, anchored in long-term strategic culture. Brexit, however, constituted a critical juncture, as the historical institutionalist literature would describe it. As such, this

chapter argues that post-Brexit foreign policy should not be understood as the product of routine procedures, but as part of an adjustment phase, marked by a high degree of contingency and institutional improvisation.

This discussion also contributes to the broader theoretical debate on the balance between change and continuity in foreign policy. While Brexit marks a departure from the UK's European integration trajectory, whether it produced a paradigmatic shift in foreign policy remains contested. The dominant narrative equated Global Britain with strategic innovation, but this thesis interrogates that assumption. It proposes that Brexit did not prompt a straightforward transformation. Still, rather than an adaptive recalibration of existing foreign policy traditions, a position encapsulated in guiding proposition 4 – Post-Brexit foreign policy in the UK significantly changed, not as a rupture, but through innovation within established strategic traditions.

Accordingly, this chapter seeks to map the delineation of the UK's foreign policy strategy in the post-referendum period. It addresses the following research questions: What are the main strands of Global Britain post-Brexit? What foreign policy guidelines emerged after the referendum? Which competing ideas were debated? Who led the strategic delineation process? How did decision-making unfold, and who championed Global Britain as a policy framework?

Following Goldstein and Keohane's (1993) framework of ideas in foreign policy, this chapter moves from ideational emergence to institutional embedding. Having already identified the idea; this analysis now traces its institutional consequences and causal mechanisms. Specifically, it investigates how Global Britain became entrenched in state institutions through the work of ideational entrepreneurs, policy architects, and institutional engineers.

Methodologically, this chapter draws on an original dataset comprising semi-structured elite interviews conducted between 2022 and 2024. These include interviews carried out by the author, as well as materials from the *Brexit Witness Archive* (UK in a Changing Europe project) and interviews featured in the BBC documentary *State of Chaos* by Laura Kuenssberg. These sources provide access to key political actors, enabling an in-depth exploration of behind-the-scenes decision-making.

The chapter is organised in three substantive stages. It begins by examining the operationalisation of Global Britain, tracing its ideational pathways and identifying the constituent strands that gave the concept coherence. It then turns to the process of concretisation, assessing how these strands were translated into policy practice through the post-Brexit foreign policy machinery, with particular attention to the institutional and political dynamics within Downing Street and Parliament. The final section analyses the fading and fragmentation of Global Britain, considering the factors – both domestic and international—that contributed to its loss of salience in the UK's foreign policy discourse.

7.1. Operationalisation of Global Britain

The thesis began by defining Global Britain based on its most representative usage in the post-Brexit context, serving as an initial conceptual anchor. However, as the research progressed – primarily through the genealogical tracing of the term – it became clear that Global Britain is not a novel invention but rather the product of a long-standing ideological lineage. Multiple elite political groups have mobilised and maintained variations of this narrative across time, shaping its contemporary expression in distinct ways.

The empirical chapters revealed multiple strands of Global Britain that evolved. With the idea's maturation, new and differentiated strands emerged, shaped by the varying degrees of Euroscepticism and ideological orientation of political actors. This led to the central guiding proposition of this chapter: post-referendum Global Britain, while rooted in historic traditions, constitutes a distinctive phase of foreign policy discourse that warrants analytical separation from its pre-referendum predecessor.

Before the referendum, the concept of Global Britain was more pluralistic and ideologically diverse. For some, it encompassed the belief that EU membership could coexist with a globally oriented British foreign policy; for others, the EU represented a structural constraint on national sovereignty and global ambition. In contrast, post-referendum Global Britain reconfigured those earlier debates into a more unified policy framework where disentanglement from the EU was central, not just institutionally but ideologically. It became a prescriptive vision for Britain's future as a sovereign global actor, free from the constraints of EU decision-making.

Crucially, while many of the strands constituting Global Britain are not new, their recombination in the post-referendum context produced a unique configuration. This distinction is fundamental. Post-referendum Global Britain is not merely a continuation but a selective adaptation – a reordering of traditional foreign policy ideas designed to respond to the political exigencies of Brexit.

Table 5 refines the concept of post-referendum Global Britain by delineating six core thematic strands that collectively shaped its meaning and policy direction. The first strand concerns the UK's orientation to EU membership. Brexit is understood not simply as a rupture, but as a deliberate catalyst for pursuing a more expansive and autonomous global strategy. The referendum outcome served to reframe the UK's international ambitions,

positioning departure from the EU as an opportunity to reassert sovereignty and redefine foreign policy priorities beyond the constraints of European integration.

The second strand captures a set of normative foreign policy values that underpinned the Global Britain agenda. These include an emphasis on moral authority, democracy promotion, and international responsibility. Through this lens, the UK sought to portray itself as a principled actor on the world stage – committed not only to its interests, but also to a broader ethical leadership role in global affairs.

A third theme relates to the UK's self-perception and projected position in the world. Central to this is the explicit rejection of isolationism, along with a determination to maintain global influence and assert international leadership. Global Britain, in this context, became a framework through which the UK could navigate perceptions of decline and project continued relevance and agency.

The fourth strand focuses on the UK's role within the international community. It affirms a commitment to multilateralism and global governance, encompassing active participation in international institutions and a desire to shape the rules-based order. This framing helped reassure allies that the UK's departure from the EU did not imply withdrawal from global responsibilities.

Fifth, Global Britain was closely tied to the prioritisation of national interests, most notably through trade liberalisation, economic growth, and security policy. The narrative positioned the UK as a dynamic, outward-looking trading nation, leveraging new bilateral agreements and economic partnerships as key tools of post-Brexit strategy.

Lastly, the sixth strand highlights a spectrum of wider roles envisioned for the UK. These include strengthened ties within the Commonwealth and Anglosphere, continued

leadership within NATO, and active engagement in prominent international organisations such as the G7 and the United Nations. This multifaceted positioning reinforced the idea that the UK could maintain a global presence independent of EU structures.

Collectively, these six strands demonstrate that Global Britain evolved into more than a rhetorical slogan; it represented an attempt to construct a comprehensive and coherent post-Brexit foreign policy identity. This typology provides a structured framework for analysing post-referendum foreign policy discourse and enables a comparative assessment of continuity and innovation.

To assess the degree of innovation embedded in this new phase, **Table 6** traces the presence of these six strands in earlier foreign policy traditions – specifically within the formal discourses of the Conservative and Labour parties, and the informal Eurosceptic movement. This tracing reveals a complex interplay of continuity and change.

At least sixteen policy strands in the post-referendum Global Britain framework can be classified as traditional. These elements – shared across both Conservative and Labour traditions – include a commitment to democracy, multilateralism, moral leadership, global trade, the Commonwealth, and a strategic Atlanticism through NATO and the special relationship with the US. These were enduring features of post-war British foreign policy, regardless of governing party.

For example, the ambition to maintain Britain's great power status and its influence in international affairs has been a recurrent goal since the Suez crisis. Both parties have historically endorsed global leadership in development, defence, and diplomacy, although the tone and mechanisms have varied. These continuities suggest that while the rhetorical frame of Global Britain may be novel, its ideological core is deeply embedded in the UK's long-standing international strategy.

TABLE 5 – SYSTEMATISATION OF THE KEY STRANDS OF POST-REFERENDUM GLOBAL BRITAIN.

GLOBAL BRITAIN KEY STRANDS & SUBCATEGORIES		
S4 Relations with Europe	1. EU membership	1.1 Solution for leaving the EU: pursuing foreign policy aims on a global scale instead of alignment with EU decisions
		1.2 UK's focus on Europe associated with isolationism
S5 Identity and Values	2. Foreign policy values	2.1 Influence as a leading force for good
		2.2 Actor of moral authority/moral purpose
		2.3 Outward-looking country
		2.4 Promoting Democracy and peace around the World
		2.5 Legitimate power with responsibilities in the world
S2 Britain's Role in the World	3. Position in the world	3.1 Managing hegemonic decline (military and economic power vs financial and commercial power)
		3.2 Reprobation of Isolationism
		3.3 Britain stronger in the world
		3.4 Britain taking a lead in the world
		3.5 Maintaining great power status
		3.6 Maintaining a significant role in the world
		3.7 Influence in the world
		3.8 Global outlook/strategy (UK's strategic position)
		3.9 Global power/global role
		3.10 Expand soft power and global reach
S1 Globalism vs Isolationism	4. Position within the international community	4.1 Global Network/Networked World/Britain's Network
		4.2 Leadership on global issues/global commitments
		4.3 Multilateralist approach
		4.4 Defence Global Role
		4.5 Leading international institutions
S3 Declinist Perspective and Politics of Status	5. National interests	5.1 Global trading nation with links around the world
		5.2 Free trade deals
		5.3 Growing the economy
		5.4 Pacific Rim/Indo-Pacific
		5.5 Security and defence interests/international security
S6 Actorness through Foreign Policy Instruments	6. Wider roles	6.1 Role within the Commonwealth
		6.2 Role within English-speaking countries
		6.3 Closer special relationship with the US
S7 Role of Strategic Alliances		6.4 Role within NATO
		6.5 Role within G7
		6.6 Role within the United Nations (Security Council)

Although Global Britain is typically framed as a Conservative project, several of its underlying assumptions – especially regarding Britain's rejection of isolationism and role as a global actor – were advanced in Labour foreign policy, particularly during the New Labour era. This suggests that while Global Britain is operationalised by Conservative governments, its ideological architecture draws from a broader British consensus on global engagement.

As expected, post-Brexit Global Britain draws significantly from the Conservative foreign policy tradition. These elements include the preference for bilateral trade agreements, belief in Britain's autonomous global role, scepticism towards European integration, and advocacy for soft power projection. However, the novelty of Global Britain lies not in these inherited elements but in their strategic recombination under the conditions created by Brexit.

Crucially, only two elements of Global Britain constitute genuine innovation. First, the notion that leaving the EU is a precondition for renewed global influence. Second, an explicit focus on global free trade deals as a foreign policy priority. Both ideas were absent from the foreign policy traditions of the mainstream parties, though they featured in the informal Eurosceptic discourse since the late 1990s. Their institutionalisation in government policy post-Brexit represents a formalisation of previously marginal narratives. Conversely, some historically significant ideas – such as the view that EU membership enhances British global influence – were abandoned entirely. This rejection marks a shift not just in tactics but in foundational assumptions about Britain's role in the world.

TABLE 6 – DISTRIBUTION OF PRE-REFERENDUM GLOBAL BRITAIN STRANDS ACROSS CONSERVATIVE, LABOUR AND EUROSCEPTIC NARRATIVES.

GLOBAL BRITAIN KEY STRANDS & SUBCATEGORIES			PRE-BREXIT REFERENDUM		
			Tories	Labour	Eurosceptics
S4 Relations with Europe	1. Linked with the EU membership	1.1 Solution for leaving the EU - Pursuing Global Britain as having greater influence and a stronger position in the world			x
		1.2 UK's focus on Europe associated with isolationism		x	x
S5 Identity and Values	2. Foreign policy values	2.1 Influence as a leading force for good	x	x	
		2.2 Actor of moral authority/moral purpose	x	x	
		2.3 Outward-looking country			
		2.4 Promoting Democracy and peace around the World	x	x	
		2.5 Legitimate power with responsibilities in the world	x		
S2 Britain's Role in the World	3. Position in the world	3.1 Managing hegemonic decline (military and economic power vs financial and commercial power)	x		
		3.2 Reprobation of Isolationism		x	
		3.3 Britain stronger in the world		x	
		3.4 Britain taking a lead in the world	x		
		3.5 Maintaining great power status	x	x	
		3.6 Maintaining a significant role in the world	x		
		3.7 Influence in the world	x	x	
		3.8 Global outlook/strategy (UK's strategic position)	x	x	x
		3.9 Global power/global role	x	x	
		3.10 Expand soft power and global reach	x		
S1 Globalism vs Isolationism	4. Position in the international community	4.1 Global Network/Networked World/Britain's Network	x	x	
		4.2 Leadership on global issues/global commitments	x	x	
		4.3 Multilateralist approach	x	x	
		4.4 Defence Global Role	x	x	
		4.5 Leading international institutions	x		
S3 Declinist Perspective and Politics of Status	5. National interests	5.1 Global trading nation with links around the world	x	x	
		5.2 Free trade deals			x
		5.3 Economic perspective	x		x
		5.4 Pacific Rim/Indo-Pacific	x	x	x
		5.5 Security and defence interests/international security	x	x	
S6 Actorness through Foreign Policy Instruments	6. Wider roles	6.1 Role within the Commonwealth	x	x	
		6.2 Role within English-speaking countries	x		
		6.3 Closer special relationship with the US	x	x	x
S7 Role of Strategic Alliances		6.4 NATO	x	x	
		6.5 G7	x		
		6.6 United Nations	x		

While Brexit was symbolically framed as a radical break – "a quiet revolution," in Theresa May's terms – the actual foreign policy trajectory exhibits strong continuities. Following the referendum, Global Britain repackaged its long-standing goals with renewed rhetorical urgency, rather than introducing a fundamentally new strategic doctrine. The divergence between discursive innovation and policy continuity reflects the political imperative to perform change without the institutional bandwidth to implement wholesale strategic transformation.

Moreover, time was a critical variable. The May government lacked the resources, political stability, and bureaucratic capacity to design a groundbreaking new foreign policy strategy. In this vacuum, the established Conservative tradition provided a low-risk foundation. Consequently, while the rhetoric of Global Britain projected boldness and rupture, the substance reflected adaptation within familiar paradigms.

This section has demonstrated that Global Britain is best understood as a hybrid construct: grounded in historical traditions, reframed through the lens of Brexit, and selectively innovated through Eurosceptic policy proposals. Its post-referendum configuration reorients existing narratives to meet the demands of a new geopolitical moment but stops short of redefining Britain's foreign policy identity in truly novel terms. In summary, Global Britain represents a discursive shift without doctrinal rupture. It performs the politics of innovation while enacting the practice of continuity – an approach typical of foreign policy in moments of systemic shock where institutional conservatism meets the political necessity of transformation.

IDEATIONAL PATHWAYS

The previous chapter traced the ideational trajectory and discursive consolidation of Global Britain, identifying seven chronological phases in its evolution: from origin and introduction to political consolidation, strategy delineation, operationalisation, implementation, and eventual policy evaluation. These stages were synthesised into a three-tier model – the ideational stage, the policy-building stage, and the policy implementation stage (see **Figure 5**). While Chapters IV through VI examined the earlier phases of emergence and consolidation, this chapter focuses on the later ones – from strategic reframing to operationalisation, institutional embedding, and evaluative reinterpretation.

Rather than treating these phases as causal steps in a linear sequence, the constructivist lens adopted here emphasises pathways through which meaning is produced, negotiated, and embedded. Building on Goldstein and Keohane's (1993a) typology of the ways ideas shape policy, these pathways are interpreted not as predictive mechanisms, but as heuristic tools for understanding how Global Britain was articulated, legitimised, and institutionalised.

Goldstein and Keohane (1993a, 3) identify three causal pathways of ideational influence, the process through which ideas can shape policy outcomes:

- ***Ideas as roadmaps*** — principled or causal beliefs can reduce uncertainty by offering actors clear goals and strategies.
- ***Ideas in tactical situations*** — in moments of strategic flux or low institutional stability, ideas can shape policy choices by framing alternatives.
- ***Institutional embeddedness*** — ideas influence policy when they become institutionalised in formal political structures and norms.

This chapter demonstrates that Global Britain has indeed functioned across all three pathways. The first pathway conceptualises ideas as roadmaps – providing clarity and orientation when actors face ambiguity. Global Britain functioned in precisely this manner during the uncertain post-referendum period. It offered a principled framework for reconceptualising the UK's global posture following EU withdrawal.

Read through a constructivist lens, these modes do not identify causes in the positivist sense but instead represent sites of meaning-making. The evidence presented here demonstrates that Global Britain operated across all three:

- In the immediate post-referendum uncertainty, it provided a symbolic and strategic orientation – an ideational "roadmap" for reimagining Britain's global posture.
- In the contingent and unsettled political climate after 2016, it acted as a framing device that pushed together sovereignty, leadership, moral purpose, and economic agility into a compelling and adaptable political story.
- Through its incorporation into official documents (e.g. the Integrated Review 2021), departmental strategies (e.g. DIT, FCO), parliamentary debates, and party manifestos, it became part of the institutional language of post-Brexit UK foreign policy.

A constructivist reading also foregrounds why this particular idea travelled so effectively: it resonated with pre-existing political identities, aligned with the strategic imperatives of those managing Brexit, and drew on a repertoire of historically rooted narratives about Britain's global role. Its eventual embedding in institutions was therefore as much about political utility and symbolic coherence as about its ideational content.

Goldstein and Keohane (1993a, 4-11) caution against over-ascribing causal power to ideas per se, arguing that policymakers often adopt ideas because they reflect pre-existing interests. In this case, Global Britain transitioned from elite discourse to formal policy

because it aligned with the political interests of those managing Brexit. It gave ideological coherence to the strategic necessity of foreign policy reorientation. Thus, Global Britain was instrumentalised not merely because it was ideationally robust, but because it offered a politically expedient narrative for managing Britain's post-EU identity.

Table 7 adapts Goldstein and Keohane's (1993a) typology to classify the subcategories of Global Britain identified earlier in the thesis, showing how they map onto different ideational registers – from causal beliefs about policy instruments to principled commitments and broader worldviews. This mapping serves not to assess the causal efficacy of ideas, but to interpret how distinct kinds of beliefs interact in the construction, adaptation, and legitimisation of Global Britain as a strategic narrative.

- ***Causal beliefs:*** Ideas about cause-and-effect relationships that guide practical action.
- ***Principled beliefs:*** Normative ideas about right and wrong, justice, and responsibility.
- ***Worldviews:*** Broader paradigmatic assumptions about how the world works.

In doing so, the analysis underscores the thesis's central claim: Global Britain is not reducible to a slogan or static doctrine. It is a dynamic political strategy, sustained by a blend of ideational continuity and adaptive reinterpretation, which has allowed it to navigate – and in turn shape – the evolving ground of post-Brexit British foreign policy.

TABLE 7 – CLASSIFICATION OF POST-REFERENDUM GLOBAL BRITAIN SUBCATEGORIES.

GLOBAL BRITAIN SUBCATEGORIES			CATEGORIES OF IDEAS
S4 Relations with Europe	1. Linked with the EU membership	1.1 Solution for leaving the EU - Pursuing Global Britain as having greater influence and a stronger position in the world	Causal Beliefs
		1.2 UK's focus on Europe associated with isolationism	
S5 Identity and Values	2. Foreign policy values	2.1 Influence as a leading force for good	Principled Beliefs
		2.2 Actor of moral authority/moral purpose	
		2.3 Outward-looking country	
		2.4 Promoting Democracy and peace around the World	
		2.5 Legitimate power with responsibilities in the world	
S2 Britain's Role in the World	3. Position in the world	3.1 Managing hegemonic decline (military and economic power vs financial and commercial power)	Causal Beliefs
		3.2 Reprobation of Isolationism	Principled Beliefs
		3.3 Britain stronger in the world	World Views
		3.4 Britain taking a lead in the world	
		3.5 Maintaining great power status	
		3.6 Maintaining a significant role in the world	
		3.7 Influence in the world	
		3.8 Global outlook/strategy (UK's strategic position)	
		3.9 Global power/global role	
		3.10 Expand soft power and global reach	Causal Beliefs
S1 Globalism vs Isolationism	4. Position in the international community	4.1 Global Network/Networked World/Britain's Network	Causal Beliefs
		4.2 Leadership on global issues/global commitments	Principled Beliefs
		4.3 Multilateralist approach	World Views
		4.4 Defence Global Role	Causal Beliefs
		4.5 Leading international institutions	
S3 Declinist Perspective and Politics of Status	5. National interests	5.1 Global trading nation with links around the world	Principled Beliefs
		5.2 Free trade deals	Causal Beliefs
		5.3 Economic perspective	
		5.4 Pacific Rim/Indo-Pacific	
		5.5 Security and defence interests/international security	
S6 Actorness through Foreign Policy Instruments	6. Wider roles	6.1 Role within the Commonwealth	
		6.2 Role within English-speaking countries	
		6.3 Closer special relationship with the US	
S7 Role of Strategic Alliances		6.4 NATO	
		6.5 G7	
		6.6 United Nations	

This section has shown that Global Britain operated through all three causal pathways theorised by Goldstein and Keohane (1993a): it provided strategic clarity in a moment of uncertainty (**P3: *Strategic Reframing***), framed decision-making in the volatile aftermath of the referendum (**P2: *Political Uptake***), and became embedded within the institutional machinery of British foreign policy (**P4: *Post-Brexit Foreign Policy Transformation***). Yet its traction was not solely the product of ideational resonance; it was also politically expedient, offering a unifying narrative that legitimised Brexit while preserving elements of strategic continuity. In this sense, Global Britain is best understood not as a static doctrine but as a flexible political strategy – rooted in longstanding traditions, adapted to the contingencies of the Brexit moment, and institutionalised through both discourse and policy practice. The following section turns to the concretisation of this strategy, examining how the narrative's abstract commitments were translated into specific policy domains, instruments, and institutional arrangements.

CONCRETISATION OF GLOBAL BRITAIN

Building directly on the causal pathways identified in the previous section, this part of the analysis examines the concretisation of Global Britain – the process by which the narrative moved from rhetorical claim to actionable policy. Here, the focus falls on three interlinked dynamics: its capacity to provide strategic clarity in a moment of uncertainty (**P3**), its role in shaping political and bureaucratic decision-making in the volatile post-referendum environment (**P2**), and its gradual embedding within the institutional machinery of British foreign policy (**P4**). By following these dynamics across the seven strands of the narrative, the section shows how Global Britain's meaning was adapted, negotiated, and operationalised within concrete policy arenas.

The publication of *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy* (IR21) in March 2021 marked a critical juncture in British foreign policy. Widely regarded as the most consequential strategic document of the 21st century in the UK context, the Integrated Review provided a comprehensive articulation of the Government's foreign policy priorities following Brexit. It constituted the first fully developed foreign policy framework produced since the 2016 referendum and thus represents a pivotal moment in the operationalisation of the Global Britain concept.

The five years between the referendum and the publication of the review were primarily dominated by the political and technical complexities of negotiating the UK's exit from the EU. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, it was only following Boris Johnson's accession to the premiership that a coherent attempt was made to consolidate a forward-looking foreign policy vision. The Integrated Review was the culmination of this effort, and it is clear that Global Britain served as its overarching guiding principle.

The review is structured around seven thematic components. It opens with the Prime Minister's strategic vision and an assessment of threats up to 2030. It proceeds to detail Britain's foreign policy objectives, reconfigure its defence and armed forces posture, recommit to international development, emphasise national resilience, and conclude with an outline of the institutional mechanisms through which these objectives will be delivered.

In his foreword, Prime Minister Johnson reaffirmed the centrality of Global Britain, projecting the UK as an active and values-driven actor within the international order. He envisioned a state positioned at the core of a global network of allies united by commitments to human rights and rules-based norms. In this vision, science and technology are not merely economic tools but strategic assets underpinning Britain's soft power and global influence. Moreover, the UK would continue to lead in conflict

resolution, diplomacy, development, and the response to transnational challenges such as poverty and climate change.

While trade played a central role in earlier iterations of Global Britain, particularly in the immediate aftermath of the referendum, the review afforded this theme a relatively diminished emphasis. Although Johnson reiterated Britain's maritime trading identity and commitment to championing free trade, the economic aspect of Global Britain was subtly displaced by a more values-based and security-oriented foreign policy vision. Importantly, climate change, the strength of the diplomatic and intelligence services, and the maintenance of military capabilities, including nuclear deterrence, were integrated into this broader vision.

The document also codified a set of normative commitments that align with Britain's historical globalist discourse. These include the promotion of universal human rights, the rule of law, freedom of speech, fairness, and equality. Framed within this moral and strategic architecture, the Government delineated four foreign policy priorities: (1) shaping the international order; (2) reinforcing strategic partnerships; (3) responding to the implications of China's rise; and (4) leveraging science and technology as instruments of national power and strategic advantage.

However, the resignation of Boris Johnson raised significant questions about the durability of the Global Britain agenda. Although the strategy was ostensibly designed to guide policy until 2030, its close association with Johnson and, to a lesser extent, Theresa May, prompted debate over its future under subsequent administrations.

In March 2023, the Sunak Government published the *Integrated Review Refresh* (IR23), citing the need to adapt to major geopolitical disruptions, most notably Russia's invasion of

Ukraine and China's increasingly assertive posture, including its stance on the Ukraine conflict. These developments prompted a recalibration of British foreign policy priorities while still operating within the framework of Global Britain.

A notable adjustment was the renewed emphasis on European security. Whereas IR21 had placed considerable weight on the Indo-Pacific tilt – emblematic of a post-Brexit shift away from Europe – the IR23 re-centred the Euro-Atlantic as a core theatre of strategic concern. This rebalancing was substantiated by a £5 billion, two-year increase in defence spending.

The refresh also articulated four revised strategic objectives: to shape the international environment in line with UK values and interests; to protect the UK and its allies from threats while managing escalation risks; to build resilience to mitigate domestic and international vulnerabilities; and to generate strategic advantage, particularly through innovation and systemic adaptability.

These adjustments do not signal the abandonment of Global Britain, but rather its strategic adaptation to a shifting global context. The concept thus continues to function as a flexible and enduring policy framework – anchored in Britain's historical foreign policy traditions (**P1:** ***Ideational Foundation***), but responsive to contemporary geopolitical developments (**P3** and **P4**).

7.2. Fading and Fragmentation of Global Britain

The publication of the Integrated Review Refresh (IR23) in March 2023 under Prime Minister Rishi Sunak marked a turning point in the rhetorical and strategic trajectory of Global Britain. While the review was formally built upon its predecessor (IR21), it significantly downplayed the use of the Global Britain label, signalling a deliberate distancing from the ideological frameworks associated with Theresa May and, more prominently, Boris Johnson. The discursive retreat from Global Britain suggests a broader repositioning in the UK's foreign policy narrative – one that is less oriented around post-Brexit ambition and more focused on pragmatic security and economic stability.

Rather than featuring prominently in the strategic language of government, the phrase Global Britain was relegated to the margins of political discourse, finding intermittent use only in economic contexts, primarily concerning global trade partnerships. The idea's migration from the formal foreign policy sphere into more informal and economic domains illustrates its diminishing institutional salience.

This rhetorical withdrawal coincided with the UK's attempt to stabilise its domestic political environment and reassert its international standing, particularly in European security. In the wake of Russia's full-scale illegal invasion of Ukraine, the UK emerged as a proactive European leader in defence, reaffirming its commitment to NATO and reinforcing its global military posture. Simultaneously, new trade deals were concluded with Commonwealth and Anglophone partners, and the Indo-Pacific region remained a strategic priority. Although the UK did not secure a long-anticipated free trade agreement with the US, it succeeded in consolidating the special relationship in multilateral settings, such as NATO and the UN Security Council, including coordinated responses to conflicts like the Israel–Palestine crisis.

Nonetheless, by 2023, the Global Britain narrative had receded primarily from the core of post-Brexit foreign policy. This gradual disappearance, overseen by the Sunak administration and successive Foreign Secretaries James Cleverly and David Cameron, occurred in the absence of an articulated replacement. This absence is revealing, and it reinforces the central theoretical proposition developed throughout this thesis – that ideas are particularly significant during moments of institutional rupture. In the disjunctive setting of Brexit, Global Britain provided both direction and legitimacy. Its withdrawal without an alternative narrative leaves a strategic vacuum in British foreign policy discourse.

The 2024 general election and the formation of a new Labour government under Prime Minister Keir Starmer presented a potential opportunity for narrative renewal. In his initial public statements and policy interviews, the new Foreign Secretary, David Lammy, articulated a foreign policy approach markedly distinct from the Johnson-era vision of Global Britain. Lammy's emphasis on "progressive realism" reflects an orientation toward pragmatic internationalism, grounded in multilateral institutions, regional partnerships (particularly with Europe), and a values-based approach to global engagement. He signalled an intent to repair relationships with European partners, strengthen Britain's role in NATO and the G7, and re-anchor the UK in frameworks that combine liberal-democratic values with a commitment to global security and economic justice. While Global Britain as a discursive frame may be absent from Labour's foreign policy vocabulary, several of its underlying strands – such as multilateral engagement, leadership on global challenges, and a strategic Indo-Pacific posture – are likely to persist under different rhetorical umbrellas. This illustrates both the flexibility and enduring influence of the ideational infrastructure developed post-2016.

This development raises two important interpretive questions. First, was Global Britain the product of an ideologically driven project, advanced by specific policy architects and institutional actors? If so, its erosion may be attributed to the departure of its primary sponsors from positions of political authority. The Sunak Government – despite being Conservative – has displayed little appetite for ideological grand strategy, favouring instead a technocratic and transactional approach to foreign affairs. In this sense, the waning of Global Britain may reflect a broader post-populist recalibration within the Conservative Party.

Second, and perhaps more significantly, how should the legacy of Global Britain be evaluated? On the surface, one might argue that its failure to survive successive leadership transitions or secure long-term institutional anchoring indicates its strategic failure. However, this thesis contends that such an assessment would overlook the substantive impact the idea has had. From its formal articulation in 2016 through to its institutionalisation in IR21, Global Britain functioned as both a discursive anchor and a strategic compass during a period of profound political uncertainty. It framed the UK's ambitions in a post-EU context, shaped public and parliamentary debate, and influenced key policy outcomes in foreign, defence, and trade domains.

Thus, even if by 2023 the idea had receded from the centre of British foreign policy, its influence cannot be dismissed. It endured across several governments, tough leadership changes, and contributed to a reconfiguration of Britain's global outlook. In this regard, Global Britain was a success, not necessarily in terms of longevity, but in terms of its role in guiding the UK's response to one of the most significant constitutional and geopolitical realignments in its modern history.

Finally, when placed within the analytical framework proposed by Goldstein and Keohane (1993a), the lifecycle of Global Britain offers an illustrative example of ideational influence on policy. As shown in **Table 6**, its strands span causal beliefs, principled beliefs, and worldviews – each activated under the exceptional conditions of political disjuncture. The case of Global Britain exemplifies how ideas, when aligned with elite interests and institutional opportunity structures, cannot only provide a short-term policy orientation but also shape the foreign policy architecture of a country navigating systemic transformation.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined the final stages in the life cycle of Global Britain, addressing the second and third components of the thesis's overarching question: how was the idea operationalised as foreign policy strategy, and what accounts for its eventual fading from political discourse? By structuring the analysis in two parts – the first focused on concretisation and institutional embedding, the second on narrative fragmentation and decline – the chapter has illuminated both the strategic function and the contingent fragility of the Global Britain narrative. In doing so, it engages directly with **Proposition 3 (*Strategic Reframing*)** and **Proposition 4 (*Post-Brexit Foreign Policy Transformation*)**, affirming the central argument of the thesis that ideas, even when momentary, can provide structure, coherence, and political utility in moments of rupture, while remaining vulnerable to shifting political incentives and changing geopolitical contexts.

In its initial post-referendum phase, Global Britain functioned as more than a slogan. It acted as an ideational placeholder capable of translating political disruption into strategic

direction. Through mechanisms of discursive uptake and institutionalisation, it became a loosely defined but operational framework for orienting Britain's foreign policy in the wake of EU withdrawal. Its prominence in the 2021 Integrated Review, its mobilisation across trade and security domains, and its uptake within multiple institutional and party-political contexts support **P2** and **P3**: that the idea was politically adopted and strategically reframed into policy doctrine.

Yet, the second half of the chapter showed that the very features that made Global Britain adaptable – ambiguity, cross-party appeal, and conceptual elasticity – also undermined its longevity. By 2023, the narrative had retreated mainly from formal discourse. No explicit successor was articulated, suggesting a deeper vacuum in strategic direction. This fading confirms **P4** and underscores a core insight of ideational theory: ideas matter not because they are permanent, but because they help actors navigate transitional moments. Once that function diminishes or becomes politically inconvenient, ideas may be displaced or quietly abandoned.

The chapter has also served as a bridge between the thesis's conceptual and empirical contributions. It applied the ideational mechanisms introduced in Chapter II – actor uptake, institutional resonance, and discursive coherence – to evaluate how Global Britain was translated into institutional behaviour. In doing so, it assessed the explanatory power of the theoretical framework. It demonstrated how the politics of narrative can shape foreign policy trajectories in the absence of material clarity or institutional consensus.

In sum, Global Britain was more than a rhetorical device, but less than a sustained strategic doctrine. It was a contingent and instrumental idea: effective in projecting a sense of purpose during political uncertainty, yet too conceptually fragmented to withstand

leadership change and shifting institutional priorities. Its rise and fall affirm the power of ideas in shaping policy, while also revealing the conditions under which they fade.

The empirical analysis concludes here. The overall thesis conclusion will now return to the research questions and guiding propositions, reflect on the implications of these findings, and offer a final assessment of what the Global Britain narrative reveals about the ideational foundations of foreign policy in moments of strategic disruption.

CONCLUSION

This thesis emerged from a recognition of the significant gap in understanding the foreign policy-making process in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum. Brexit was not merely a domestic political rupture – it was a profound foreign policy reorientation, challenging the UK's position within the international system. As the UK stepped away from one of its most central foreign policy frameworks – EU membership – it lacked a clearly articulated strategic vision for its future role in the world.

Foreign policy under EU membership involved shared sovereignty, especially in trade, regulatory, and legal domains. The campaign for "taking back control" was thus not only a call for domestic authority but a redefinition of foreign policy orientation. In this vacuum, the UK faced both internal turbulence – polarisation, institutional instability – and external uncertainty, including how to manage its international standing amid narratives of decline.

The May Government inherited this dilemma with no coherent post-referendum plan. Into this space entered the idea of Global Britain, initially rhetorical, but gradually formalised as a strategic concept intended to mitigate perceptions of decline, project optimism, and reassure both domestic and international audiences of the UK's continued global relevance.

The central research question thus became: What is the origin of Global Britain, and how has this idea shaped the UK's foreign policy in the context of Brexit? To answer this, the thesis adopted a historically grounded, theory-driven, and mixed-methods methodological approach, with key findings detailed across seven chapters.

This thesis demonstrates that Global Britain was not simply a reactive slogan born out of Brexit, but an evolving strategic idea rooted in Britain's post-war identity. It functioned as a narrative mechanism to legitimise change, stabilise political disruption, and guide foreign policy formation in a moment of strategic disjuncture. The idea's transformation – from rhetorical proposition to institutionalised policy and eventual marginalisation – confirms the power of ideas as contingent but instrumental drivers of foreign policy.

Chapter I reviewed the literature on British foreign policy and Brexit, identifying five key gaps: over-reliance on Cold War-era case studies, limited treatment of ideas in foreign policy, narrow partisan framing, a post-2016 focus that neglects pre-referendum dynamics, and inadequate use of primary sources. Chapter II introduced the theoretical framework grounded in Constructivism and Goldstein and Keohane's (1993) model of ideational influence. It presented ideas as causal, principled, or worldview-based beliefs that can shape policy through institutional embedding, elite consensus, or contextual resonance. Chapter III outlined the mixed-methods research design combining genealogical tracing, content analysis, and elite interviews, with ethical and methodological transparency to ensure internal and external validity.

Moving to the empirics, chapters IV and V genealogically traced the idea of Global Britain from its origin in Arthur Bryant's 1957 writings and George Thomson's formal articulation in 1968, through evolving cross-party Eurosceptic conceptualisations (1945-2016). The findings confirm that Global Britain existed long before Brexit and was maintained across both formal (governmental) and informal (think tank, backbench, media) discursive domains. Chapter VI identified six key phases in the life cycle of Global Britain from 2016 to 2023, demonstrating how the idea progressed from elite rhetoric to strategic vision and policy doctrine. This culminated in its operationalisation in the 2021 Integrated Review and its recalibration the 2023 Integrated Review Refresh. Chapter VII

analysed policy implementation and strategic adaptation, tracing the fading of Global Britain under Sunak and the absence of a replacement narrative. This supports the thesis that ideas are critical in moments of rupture, but their influence is contingent on alignment with institutional and elite interests.

Taken together, the findings presented above substantiate the overarching argument of this thesis: that Global Britain functioned both as a foreign policy narrative and an ideational device, responsive to moments of political rupture yet deeply rooted in Britain's historical international self-understandings. Each guiding proposition assessed offered a distinct analytical lens through which to evaluate the ideational, institutional, and strategic life of the Global Britain concept. What follows is a more integrated and critical assessment of the findings associated with each.

P1. IDEATIONAL FOUNDATION — confirmed that Global Britain is a cross-party discourse predating Brexit, embedded in the Eurosceptic tradition and contributing indirectly to the referendum's political climate.

> **FINDING 1:** The first assumption – that Global Britain is a Conservative Party discourse – is supported. As shown in Chapter VI, the term was formalised and institutionalised by the Conservative Government, particularly under Theresa May. Its repeated use in official speeches, parliamentary sessions, and foreign policy documents confirms its Conservative authorship in the post-referendum period.
>
> **FINDING 2:** The second assumption – that Global Britain existed before Brexit and evolved through the cross-party Eurosceptic debate – is also validated. chapters IV and V traced the discursive lineage of the idea back to the post-war period. Both Conservative and Labour actors, as well as informal political networks and think

tanks, engaged with conceptualisations of Britain's global role. These were often shaped by levels of Euroscepticism and diverging visions of Britain's international status.

FINDING 3: The third assumption – that Global Britain influenced the existence and outcome of the referendum – is only partially supported. While no direct causal link could be empirically established, Global Britain featured prominently in the Eurosceptic imaginary as a counterfactual vision of Britain's future outside the EU. This provided discursive legitimacy for Leave arguments, which promoted an alternative to EU integration based on sovereign global engagement.

The first guiding proposition is broadly confirmed. The first two findings show firm evidentiary grounding: Global Britain, while popularised by the Conservative government post-2016, clearly predates the referendum and draws on a deeper reservoir of Eurosceptic and exceptionalist thought. The evidence presented in Chapters IV and V substantiates a longer genealogy, evident in both party traditions and external networks. However, the third finding raises more complex questions about causality. While Global Britain contributed to the ideational atmosphere that enabled the referendum, there is no straightforward line of influence. Its role was more diffuse – shaping the boundaries of what was imaginable or desirable, rather than directly motivating Leave voters or campaign messaging. This reveals a limitation of ideational analysis more generally: influence is often indirect and cumulative. Still, this guiding proposition contributes to the thesis's central argument that ideas can help prefigure political moments of rupture by crystallising dissatisfactions and aspirations into discursive form.

P2. POLITICAL UPTAKE — verified that Theresa May's Government mainstreamed Global Britain, that Labour adopted it with alternative framing, and that it became a central narrative in foreign policy discourse across political and institutional domains.

FINDING 4: The first assumption is confirmed. Theresa May's government was the first to publicly and strategically deploy the Global Britain narrative, followed by other Conservative leaders and ministers. As demonstrated in chapter VI, the idea achieved formal recognition in official documents, manifestos, and debates, securing its place in the post-Brexit political lexicon.

FINDING 5: The second assumption is also validated. While initially a Conservative construct, Global Britain began to be referenced by Labour actors, notably in the 2017 General Election manifesto. Although Labour's framing of the concept diverged from that of the Conservatives – often emphasising multilateralism and international development – it nonetheless engaged with the same ideological terrain.

FINDING 6: The third assumption is strongly supported. Between 2016 and 2023, Global Britain became the dominant foreign policy frame in both formal political institutions and informal networks. Politicians, think tanks, the media, and academics used the concept as shorthand for the UK's post-Brexit strategic ambitions, illustrating its discursive and institutional prominence.

The second guiding proposition receives compelling support. Global Britain was not only mainstreamed by Theresa May's government but also entered the wider lexicon of British foreign policy. Its adoption by Labour and other institutional actors demonstrates how ideas travel and adapt across political divides. However, this very adaptability also underlines the conceptual instability of the term. While the findings confirm uptake, they also raise questions about the coherence of what was being adopted. That Labour used the term with a distinct framing – emphasising development and multilateralism – indicates that Global Britain functioned more as a discursive container than a unified

doctrine. The finding that it became the dominant frame between 2016 and 2023 is not in dispute; what is more analytically significant is how different actors invested it with competing meanings. This tension between discursive prominence and conceptual ambiguity reinforces one of the thesis's central claims: that narrative elasticity can enhance political utility but may ultimately undermine longevity.

P3. STRATEGIC REFRAMING — demonstrated that Global Britain was instrumental in legitimising Brexit, countering isolationism, and articulating a vision of renewed global status.

> **FINDING 7:** The first assumption is substantiated. Global Britain functioned as a strategic narrative designed to fill the vacuum created by the Brexit vote. As discussed in Chapters VI and VII, the concept served to communicate control, vision, and optimism, thereby mitigating domestic instability and projecting international confidence.
>
> **FINDING 8:** The second assumption is also confirmed. The idea was employed explicitly to counter claims that Brexit equated to international decline or isolation. Both May and Johnson utilised Global Britain to signal continued global engagement, particularly through trade deals, participation in multilateral institutions, and strategic partnerships beyond Europe. This narrative helped position the UK as outward-looking and globally ambitious, thus addressing concerns over status loss.

The third guiding proposition marks the point at which Global Britain is shown to exert its most visible policy function. The findings illustrate that the idea served as a stabilising narrative in the wake of Brexit – projecting control, optimism, and continuity at a moment of institutional disruption. Yet while the strategic function is well evidenced, its depth is

more difficult to determine. The findings confirm that the narrative responded to perceptions of isolationism and decline, but less clearly whether it reshaped strategic thinking in a sustained way. This is where the thesis contributes a more cautious perspective: rather than interpreting Global Britain as a fully-fledged strategy, the evidence supports its reading as a form of ideational scaffolding – instrumental in narrative and symbolic terms but often lacking in strategic specificity. This reframing role was politically proper, but also fragile. Once the urgency of post-Brexit legitimation faded, the narrative began to fragment – suggesting that its power lay more in rhetorical cohesion than in policy coherence.

P4. Post-Brexit Foreign Policy Transformation — showed that post-Brexit foreign policy was significantly transformed, marked by a reassertion of historical themes (e.g. Commonwealth ties, soft power) framed in innovative narratives and institutional commitments.

> **Finding 9:** The first assumption holds. As documented in chapters VI and VII, the foreign policy direction adopted after Brexit, framed through Global Britain, diverged from the EU-centric trajectory of previous decades. While rooted in historical traditions, the emphasis on bilateralism, Indo-Pacific engagement, and sovereignty-based partnerships marked a significant recalibration.

> **Finding 10:** The second assumption is partially validated. While Global Britain drew on long-standing traditions – such as the UK's maritime identity, Commonwealth ties, and global trade – it also reassembled these elements into new configurations. Two genuinely novel components were identified: the promotion of Global Britain as antithetical to EU membership and the aggressive pursuit of free trade agreements as a core foreign policy instrument. These innovations, however,

emerged from the informal Eurosceptic discourse rather than from the mainstream party traditions.

The fourth guiding proposition is partially confirmed. The evidence does show significant changes in foreign policy direction post-Brexit, including a turn to bilateralism, emphasis on sovereignty, and strategic re-engagement with the Commonwealth and Indo-Pacific. However, the extent to which these constitute transformation, rather than reconfiguration, is open to interpretation. The findings confirm that Global Britain helped reassemble older tropes into a new post-Brexit package – but two qualifications are essential. First, many of the novel components (e.g., antagonism to EU membership, centrality of trade policy) emerged not from institutional planning but from informal, ideologically-driven discourse. Second, the operationalisation of these elements often lagged behind the narrative itself. In short, the thesis supports the claim that Global Britain marked a significant shift in narrative and orientation. Still, its translation into long-term institutional practice was uneven and, by 2023, already subject to revision. This underscores the contingent nature of ideational influence: powerful at moments of rupture, but vulnerable to shifts in political leadership, institutional bandwidth, and external events.

How the Global Britain Idea Shaped UK Foreign Policy

This thesis set out to answer the core question: What is the origin of Global Britain, and how has the idea shaped the UK's foreign policy in the context of Brexit? This section provides a synthesised and analytical response to that question, demonstrating that Global Britain functioned not merely as a rhetorical tool but as a foreign policy framework deeply rooted in British political identity and status-seeking behaviour. The evolution of Global Britain exemplifies how political ideas can become powerful organising principles during moments of strategic uncertainty and institutional transition.

The first component of the research question – tracing the origins of Global Britain – was addressed through a historical and discursive exploration of political narratives. The study revealed that Global Britain did not originate spontaneously in 2016, as commonly assumed in the literature. Rather, it has a long-standing genealogy dating back to the post-war period, first articulated by Arthur Bryant in 1957 and later developed as a strategic notion by George Thomson in 1968. Over subsequent decades, the idea was alternately advanced, adapted, or sidelined by political elites, depending on context. From the 1970s to the 1990s, both Conservative and Labour governments used the concept to reconcile Britain's declining imperial stature with new forms of multilateral engagement, including EC membership. Throughout this period, informal actors – think tanks, Eurosceptic groups, and elements of the political elite – preserved the notion of a Britain with a global vocation, even when it remained peripheral to formal foreign policy.

The second part of the research question explored how this idea came to influence UK foreign policy in the specific context of Brexit. The evidence demonstrates that following the 2016 referendum, Global Britain transitioned from a underlying narrative to a central organising principle of foreign policy. Initially introduced into mainstream discourse by

Theresa May, the idea was taken up and more assertively articulated by Boris Johnson, first as Foreign Secretary and later as Prime Minister. This transition marked a critical ideational shift: Global Britain moved from being a contested vision within the broader Eurosceptic movement to becoming the formal strategy used by successive Conservative governments to legitimate the UK's withdrawal from the EU and to reframe its global position.

Crucially, the idea's influence went beyond discourse. It was institutionalised in the 2021 *Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy* (IR21), which defined Britain's strategic ambitions for the decade ahead. The review operationalised Global Britain across several domains – defence, development, diplomacy, and science and technology – underpinned by values such as international law, democracy, and global engagement. This represented not just a shift in policy, but a redefinition of national interest, shaped by ideational commitments to leadership, moral authority, and a rules-based international order. In line with the thesis's theoretical framework, this ideational framing aligns with a constructivist understanding of foreign policy, where interests and strategies are co-constituted with national identity and the pursuit of international status.

The implementation of Global Britain in the IR21 coincided with institutional and material recalibrations of Britain's global posture, including increased focus on the Indo-Pacific, new trade and defence partnerships beyond the EU, and a recommitment to NATO and the Commonwealth. However, the idea's influence began to wane under Rishi Sunak's government, as demonstrated by the 2023 *Integrated Review Refresh* (IR23), which de-emphasised the terminology of Global Britain. This marked a discursive and strategic reorientation away from the previous ideological framing, suggesting that Global Britain had served its purpose as a transitional narrative during a moment of post-referendum disjuncture. Notably, this shift occurred without the articulation of a replacement

narrative, revealing the centrality of Global Britain in structuring post-Brexit foreign policy in the absence of clear alternatives.

The thesis argues that while the narrative of Global Britain may have faded from formal discourse by 2023, its legacy persists. It functioned as an ideational framework that helped the UK reimagine its international role in the wake of EU withdrawal. Rather than measuring its success by longevity alone, one must assess its influence through the lens of ideational embeddedness, policy uptake, and institutional change. The idea provided coherence to an otherwise fragmented moment in British foreign policy and allowed political elites to manage both domestic uncertainty and international reputational risks. As such, Global Britain demonstrates the power of strategic narratives to shape foreign policy not only through explicit policy texts but also through the broader redefinition of national purpose.

In sum, the idea of Global Britain shaped UK foreign policy after Brexit by providing a flexible yet potent narrative architecture. It helped re-legitimise the UK's global ambitions, recalibrate its alliances, and respond to perceived status anxieties. While the future of the concept remains uncertain, the thesis concludes that Global Britain was more than a slogan; it was a meaningful attempt to reconceptualise Britain's role in the world through the interplay of identity, strategy, and political leadership.

The overarching aim of this thesis was to investigate the role of the Global Britain narrative in shaping the UK's foreign policy in the context of Brexit. In pursuing this, the research set out to achieve three interrelated objectives. First, the study aimed to examine how the Global Britain idea emerged and was operationalised into concrete policy, particularly in the immediate post-referendum context (**A1**). Second, the research sought to trace the genealogical development of the Global Britain narrative, mapping its

transformation from a rhetorical device to a strategic foreign policy concept (**A2**). This entailed locating its intellectual origins, tracing its evolution within the British political elite, and assessing how it became integrated into institutional policy-making. Third, the study aimed to understand the British foreign policy-making process during the extraordinary circumstances triggered by Brexit, thereby offering insight into the mechanisms through which strategic ideas are translated into actionable policies during periods of political and institutional disruption (**A3**).

In alignment with these aims, the thesis has successfully produced four key outcomes. Firstly, it identified and clarified the origin of the Global Britain narrative, locating its discursive foundations in both formal and informal political arenas dating back to the post-war period (**O1**). Secondly, the research demonstrated how this idea evolved and was reframed in response to shifting political conditions, culminating in its operationalisation during the Brexit process (**O2**). Thirdly, the thesis offered a nuanced conceptual understanding of Global Britain within the post-referendum context, highlighting the diverse interpretations of the idea across different political actors and time periods (**O3**). Finally, the study illuminated the foreign policy strategy delineation process in the aftermath of Brexit, showing how the British political elite used the Global Britain narrative to fill the policy vacuum left by EU withdrawal and reassert the UK's global role (**O4**). Taken together, these outcomes contribute to the scholarly understanding of how ideas influence foreign policy, particularly during moments of strategic disjuncture.

While the research has made a series of original contributions, it acknowledges its limitations initially. One primary limitation lies in the use of purposive sampling, particularly in relation to elite interviews. Due to limited access and the sensitive nature of the topic, the research may not fully capture the breadth of perspectives within the political elite, particularly among those unwilling to discuss internal decision-making

processes. Furthermore, the researcher's status as an international early career scholar may have constrained the depth and openness of some interviews, especially given the contentious nature of Brexit and issues of national sovereignty. A second limitation concerns the exclusive focus on the political elite; while this was a deliberate methodological decision to ensure depth of analysis, it precluded a broader exploration of media narratives and public opinion. Lastly, the research is theoretically limited in its generalisability. While the thesis has shed light on how ideas shaped UK foreign policy in a specific historical context, further comparative research is required to determine whether similar ideational dynamics operate in other polities or crises.

In light of these limitations, several avenues for future research emerge. A more extensive and inclusive elite interview series, sustained over time, would enable deeper access to political decision-makers and policy advisers, enhancing both data richness and accuracy. This could be complemented by longitudinal studies to trace how elite attitudes, and the salience of Global Britain may continue to evolve beyond 2023. Moreover, future studies could incorporate the role of public opinion and media framing, particularly in understanding how Global Britain was interpreted and internalised by the wider population. This would offer a more detailed view of how ideas circulate and gain traction across different societal levels. Comparative research across national contexts would also be valuable in testing whether the process observed in the UK – the ideational response to a systemic political rupture – is generalisable or context-specific. Finally, further theoretical work could explore how ideational and narrative frameworks intersect with institutional power structures to influence foreign policy behaviour in post-liberal or transitional democracies.

These findings also point to fruitful directions for further research. Future scholarship might investigate how Global Britain intersects with other enduring strategic narratives – such as the UK's self-conception as a bridge between Europe and the US, or its ambition to lead on climate and development agendas. Comparative studies could explore whether other states experiencing geopolitical or institutional shocks deploy similar narrative frameworks to manage uncertainty. Moreover, research could examine how competing domestic constituencies contest or reshape strategic ideas once they enter policy discourse. Finally, the role of media, public opinion, and civil society in sustaining or challenging elite-driven narratives such as Global Britain warrants deeper investigation, especially given the UK's evolving democratic and information environment.

This thesis offers several novel contributions to academic scholarship. It represents one of the first sustained attempts to genealogically trace the origins, evolution, and institutionalisation of the Global Britain narrative. By doing so, it makes an original contribution to the literature on British foreign policy, providing a comprehensive and historically grounded account of how an idea shaped policy during a period of profound political change. The thesis also advances the theoretical study of ideas in foreign policy by integrating constructivist IR theory with a mixed-methods design, thus demonstrating the causal mechanisms through which ideas influence policy outcomes. Furthermore, the research contributes to understanding the strategic use of narratives in legitimising policy change, particularly during periods of uncertainty and institutional rupture.

At a theoretical level, this study reaffirms the value of a constructivist lens for foreign policy analysis. By demonstrating how Global Britain functioned as both discourse and practice, the thesis shows how ideas not only reflect interests but actively constitute them. This supports the argument that foreign policy is not simply the outcome of material calculations or structural imperatives but is co-produced by narrative, identity, and elite

interpretation. The genealogical method employed here offers a model for scholars examining other contexts where the past is mobilised to legitimise present choices. In this sense, the thesis contributes to the growing literature that treats ideas and narratives as causal drivers of state behaviour, with explanatory power that complements – and at times challenges – materialist accounts.

Beyond academia, this study provides a valuable reference for policy practitioners, highlighting the importance of evidence-based strategic vision in foreign policy formulation and encouraging greater transparency and researcher engagement in institutional policy-making processes. It also contributes to the UN Sustainable Development Goals by addressing transparency (Goal 16), inclusive governance (Goal 5), and capacity-building for institutional effectiveness (Goal 17). This project has proven the importance of evidence-based policymaking and the need for constructive engagement between researchers and political actors.

These findings have important implications for the conduct and understanding of British foreign policy in the post-Brexit era. They suggest that, in moments of profound disjuncture, narrative framing can substitute for clear strategic direction – but only temporarily. The deployment of Global Britain illustrates how ideas can paper over structural gaps while new institutional arrangements are negotiated. Yet the eventual fading of the slogan also underscores the risks of relying too heavily on discursive strategies without sufficient policy depth. Policymakers should be mindful that while slogans can reassure and mobilise, they must be underpinned by credible resources, realistic objectives, and institutional capacity. The UK's search for its place in the world remains unfinished, and future foreign policy will likely continue to be shaped by

competing visions of Britain's identity and status – suggesting the need for clearer, more sustainable frameworks to avoid repeating cycles of improvisation.

In summary, this thesis revealed that the concept of Global Britain served as both a bridge and a buffer: a bridge between historical identity and contemporary strategy, and a buffer against the dislocation caused by Brexit. It rose as a vehicle of strategic reassurance, was embedded in policy structures, and faded when the political context evolved, leaving behind traces that still shape how Britain imagines its place in the world.

In tracing the journey of Global Britain, this thesis has shown that ideas, far from being abstract or peripheral, can serve as vital anchors in times of uncertainty, guiding political actors, shaping foreign policy, and offering narratives of purpose in moments of disjuncture. The case of post-Brexit foreign policy illustrates that strategic ideas, even if transient, can provide coherence, direction, and meaning amid institutional flux. Global Britain emerged not simply as a slogan, but as a strategic vision that helped make sense of a disorienting political moment. Although the idea may now be fading from formal discourse, its impact on the UK's post-Brexit foreign policy has been real and lasting.

This raises broader questions about the afterlives of strategic narratives: what remains once their rhetorical utility fades, and how such ideas continue to shape institutional logics and policy assumptions over time. These dynamics, while historically contingent, hold relevance beyond this particular case. The concluding reflections, therefore, turn to the possible implications and recommendations of these findings for future foreign policy visioning and institutional practice.

Policy Reflections & Recommendations

While this thesis is rooted in an interpretive analysis of foreign policy narratives, several implications follow from its findings for those involved in the strategic articulation of Britain's global role. The following reflections are not prescriptive in a narrow sense. Instead, they aim to foreground recommendations that may inform future policy visioning in contexts marked by institutional uncertainty and symbolic redefinition.

R1. Avoid Relying on Strategic Narratives as Substitutes for Strategy

The case of Global Britain demonstrates how narrative frameworks can momentarily stabilise political disjuncture yet often do so by obscuring rather than resolving strategic incoherence. Policymakers should remain attentive to the limits of ideational elasticity. Narrative coherence, while politically useful, cannot replace the substantive work of defining long-term objectives, aligning capabilities, and consolidating cross-governmental coordination.

R2. Ensure That Policy Narratives Are Matched by Institutional Depth

The operationalisation of Global Britain in the 2021 Integrated Review illustrates how quickly even high-level strategic visions can fade without durable institutional anchoring. Future attempts to project a national strategy should consider not only the rhetorical appeal of such narratives but also their capacity to endure across political cycles, administrative shifts, and changing global conditions. Without this, institutional memory fragments – and policy loses continuity.

R3. Build Cross-Party and Bureaucratic Consensus Around Strategic Visioning

That Global Britain was introduced, embedded, and then de-emphasised within the span of a few Conservative governments points to a deeper fragility in Britain's post-Brexit foreign policy architecture. While political leadership plays a vital role in shaping strategic identity, the longevity of foreign policy vision depends on securing broad-based legitimacy across partisan and bureaucratic lines. Policy frameworks forged in crisis may not survive its aftermath without such consensus.

R4. Acknowledge the Societal Circulation and Contestation of Elite Narratives

Although this thesis focused on elite production of foreign policy narratives, it found that ideas such as Global Britain are not confined to official discourse. They circulate, are rearticulated, and become contested in the public sphere. Future institutional strategies may need to account more directly for how foreign policy is interpreted beyond Westminster – particularly in an era of fragmented media, low trust in government, and heightened domestic contestation over Britain's role in the world.

R5. Remain Attentive to the Lingering Effects of Strategic Narratives

Even as the terminology of Global Britain receded under the Sunak government, the ideational logics it activated – from status-seeking to normative leadership – continue to shape the grammar of UK foreign policy. Policymakers would do well to trace how past narrative devices sediment into institutional cultures, strategic

reviews, and diplomatic practice. Ideas, once deployed, are rarely erased. They linger and constrain the horizon of future choices.

Each of these reflections emerges directly from the thesis's core arguments: that Global Britain functioned as an ideational framework in a moment of rupture; that it shaped foreign policy not just through formal documents, but through the reframing of identity and strategic purpose; and that its legacy persists even as its explicit invocation declines. These recommendations thus aim to foreground not just what happened, but what it suggests for the ongoing recalibration of Britain's global position. As this research demonstrates, the power of ideas lies not only in their ability to influence policy but also in their capacity to shape narratives and reimagine a country's role in the world. In times of disruption and an era of rapid global transformation, ideas can offer not just explanation, but direction. And in that, there is hope.

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APPENDIX

A. Interview Guide

Overarching Themes: British Foreign Policy; Brexit; Global Britain; Conservative Foreign Policy after Brexit; Influence

Pre-interview

A. Briefly explain the aim of the interview.
B. Briefly explain the interview and the main topics I will be interested in discussing.
C. Inform me that the interview will be recorded and that I will start recording.
D. Record the interview number, location, date, and time.

** Recording starts **

<u>General for all groups – Part A</u>

Introduction

A. Introduce the participant and ask for verbal consent for the interview.
B. Briefly describe the participants' current role.
C. Briefly describe past roles that might have importance (to confirm the information gathered)

BRITISH FOREIGN POLICY

1. How would you briefly describe British foreign policy? / How do you characterize the UK's foreign policy before the Brexit referendum?

2. Do you believe that the UK is a great power?

3. Can you mention the top 3 British national interests regarding foreign policy?

4. What were, in your opinion, the foreign policy priorities for the country after the referendum?

4.1. Do you think that these priorities changed with the 2019 election of Boris Johnson as PM?

5. Do you think that Boris Johnson managed to 'Get Brexit Done'?

BREXIT

6. When was the first time you heard about Brexit?

GLOBAL BRITAIN

7. When did you first hear about the expression "Global Britain"?

8. What is the meaning of Global Britain?

9. Whom do you believe that it was the author of the Global Britain idea?

10. Do you believe that Global Britain is exclusively a Conservative party policy?

INFLUENCE

11. Do you believe your ideas, and your work, have the power to influence British foreign policy?

11.1. If yes, can you give me an example of a specific situation and how that process happened?

Specific for Groups 2, 3 and 4: Civil Service, Think Tanks, Research Teams, Intellectuals, and Policy Advisers

a) Do you usually disseminate your work to other civil servants, policy advisers, parliament or No10?

b) Have you been involved in the drafting of the Integrated Review?

b.1) Could you mention the names of those involved?

Specific for Group 2 – Civil Service Speechwriters

a) Where do you usually gain inspiration to write speeches?

b) While you were working at No10, did you have any guidance on the communication strategy, direction to take, or narrative to follow?

Specific for Group 3 – Think Tanks

a) In the event of Brexit, was the think tank associated with a specific campaign or political movement?

Specific for Group 3 – Global Britain Think Tank

a) Can you tell me about the foundation of Global Britain think tank?

a.1) When did your connection start?

b) What has been the mission of the think tank in the past 25 years?

c) Can you please name some examples of policy influence?

d) Which methods have the think tank been using to disseminate ideas?

e) Is the think tank linked to any political party?

e.1) If yes – which?

e.2) If yes – since the foundation?

e.3) What is the connection with UKIP?

f) Is the think tank linked to the parliament activity?

g) In the event of Brexit, was the think tank associated with a specific campaign or political movement?

g.1) What is the connection with the 'leave' campaign?

<u>General for all groups – Part B</u>

POLITICAL VIEWS

12. Would you be comfortable sharing which side – 'leave' or 'remain' – you supported in the Brexit referendum?

13. Is there anyone that you think can contribute to my research and that I should interview?

13.1. Would you be able to give the name and contact?

End of interview

D. Is there anything else that you would like to mention or ask about the project?

E. Would you like to be contacted and receive updates on the research?

B. Interview Participant Information Sheet

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PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

The journey of Global Britain: Ideas and Foreign Policy change in the Brexit context.
September 2022 – July 2023

As a participant in 'The journey of Global Britain: Ideas and Foreign Policy change in the Brexit context.', you are invited to share your experiences as an important actor in the British political environment. Your participation is voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw at any point. The information sheet below intends to answer any questions you might have about the project. Thank you for reading this information, and if there is anything you want to ask, please get in touch with the researcher at **cmll3@kent.ac.uk**.

THE RESEARCHER

Catarina M. Liberato
PhD Candidate
School of Politics and International Relations
University of Kent (Canterbury, UK)

University of Kent Profile
Personal Website
LinkedIn
Twitter

Catarina is a 3rd year PhD Candidate under the supervision of Professor Richard G. Whitman, Dr Miriam Sorace and Dr Philip Cunliffe and has funding from the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT), a Portuguese government agency. Catarina's research focuses on British foreign policy changes and ideas in the Brexit context.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

What is the purpose of the research?

The main aim of this project is to focus on British foreign policy strategy delineation in the Brexit context. I am trying to explain how political actors decide on which foreign policy to follow. Who decides on what and where the policy ideas are coming from? The sample of this research project will be composed of 50 individuals in total from different groups within the political elite: politicians (Government, House of Lords, House of Commons, Conservative Party, Labour Party), policy advisers, civil servants, parliamentary and think tanks' researchers, and other intellectuals. This research will synthesise the analysed data and feature specific and high-quality case studies that can demonstrate the value of individuals in shaping the British foreign policy strategy.

What happens if you choose to take part?

Interviews are the key elements of the project. If you choose to participate in the research, you will be asked to commit to an in-person or online interview, which should take between 30 and 60 minutes. The interview will be recorded so it can be transcribed. Questions will be formulated before the interview and are intended to unveil how the British

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foreign policy strategy after Brexit was drafted, how ideas are shaping policy, and specifically, the routes of the idea of Global Britain.

What are the benefits of participation?

The benefits for you, in general, might include:

1. Recognising and reflecting on your own influence in shaping British foreign policy in the Brexit context.
2. To contribute to the future understanding of how British foreign policy strategy formulation happens in the British political environment.
3. To bring transparency to researchers and civil society in the policy-making process.
4. To help generate evidence that can inform UK decision-making actors about the British foreign policy delineation strategy.

Can I be identified from the research?

Filling out the consent form provided, you will be asked if you would like your responses to be anonymised. This means that you can choose whether you would like your name to be identified in the research. Any information collected will be anonymised if you decide to participate anonymously, and the security-stored data will be stored with a participant identification number.

What will happen with the data?

The researcher will use the data collected during the interviews to develop the PhD project at the University of Kent, and the data might also be used in scientific publications. As well as oral presentations at international academic conferences. The key outputs of this project include a PhD thesis, scientific articles, and PowerPoint presentations with the main findings. As the primary audience is composed of academic researchers, the study will include a solid chapter on the methodology and ethics. As the secondary audience is composed of policy and decision-makers in the UK, the study will include systematised elements and possible recommendations to the political elite.

Data Management Plan

The data collected will be stored securely at the University of Kent OneDrive system, as well as in the personal laptop of the researcher and an external hard drive. Participants may require the elimination of the data at any moment by sending an email to the researcher, Catarina M. Liberato, at **cmll3@kent.ac.uk**.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical safeguards will be put in place to ensure the best research practices are always followed in this project. Important ethical considerations during this research process also include the limits of interpretation, the modalities of reporting and dissemination of information and findings, and the data management and storage plan to protect personal and sensitive information. The project has been given ethical approval by the School of Research Ethics and Governance (REAG) of the University of Kent. To ensure the best research practice is always respected, the research team will constantly contact the supervisory team.

What if I have any queries or complaints?

If you have any queries about the project or your participation, please contact the researcher, Catarina M. Liberato, at **cmll3@kent.ac.uk** or Professor Richard G. Whitman at **r.whitman@kent.ac.uk**

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C. Interview Consent Form

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CONSENT FORM

Title of project: The journey of Global Britain: Ideas and Foreign Policy change in the Brexit context

Researcher: Catarina M. Liberato (PhD Candidate) **Participant Identification Number:** __

1. I confirm I have read and understood the information sheet provided for this study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily. ☐
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. ☐
3. I would like my responses to (*please choose one*):
   - be anonymised before analysis. ☐
   - not be anonymised before analysis. ☐
4. I agree to take part in this research project. ☐
5. I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials related to this project to Catarina M. Liberato and the University of Kent. ☐
6. I agree to a 30-60-minute interview. ☐
7. I agree to have my interview recorded. ☐
8. I am interested in being contacted about this study's findings. ☐

Name of Participant: _____

Date: _____

Signature:

Researcher: Catarina M. Liberato

Date: _____

Signature:

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D. Analytical Process for Qualitative Content Analysis

To ensure transparency and strengthen the credibility of the findings, this thesis includes a detailed account of the analytical process for the qualitative content analysis in Appendix D. While qualitative, interpretive research does not aim for replication in the positivist sense, outlining the analytical process step-by-step enhances reproducibility in the sense of allowing other researchers to follow and understand the methodological pathway taken. This contributes to the validity of the research by making explicit the interpretive decisions, coding procedures, and analytical moves that underpin the study's conclusions. The structure of the process draws on the principles outlined by Halperin and Heath (2020, 377–379), adapted to fit the constructivist and genealogical approach of this study.

The appendix also includes an illustrative codebook based on the pilot study covering the 2017 and 2018 material, which represents only a small subset of the broader sample analysed in the thesis. Providing such detail aligns with best practices of research transparency in qualitative political science, ensuring that the analytical process is open to scrutiny, that claims can be traced back to the evidence, and that other scholars can adapt or build upon the approach in future studies.

STEP ONE | Select the material to be analysed

Population of texts:

- UK government: speeches, reports, and other documents on 'Global Britain'.
- UK parliament (House of Commons): debates.
- Conservative and Unionist Party: general election manifesto.
- Labour Party: general election manifesto.

- Think Tanks: published reports and articles from the main think tanks in the UK.

Sampling:

- Non-probability sampling – Purposive Sampling – Time Series: 2017 and 2018
    - Purposive Sampling: "selection method where the study's purpose and the researcher's knowledge of the population guide the process (…) pre-defined set of actors, the researcher may be in a position to identify the particular respondents of interest and sample those deemed most appropriate." (Tansey 2007, 770);
    - Advantages: "inclusion of important political actors"; Disadvantages: "limited scope for selection bias" and "limited potential to generalize from the sample to the wider population" (Tansey 2007, 769).
- Textual data that belongs to different text types: party manifestos, reports, written statements, etc.;
- Textual data produced by different types of authors and political actors, mainly May and Johnson.

Documents	2017	2018
General Election	1	0
Conservative Party Manifesto	1	-
Labour Party Manifesto	1	-
Government	12	16
Parliament	260	263
Debate	1	3
Think Tanks	5	4
Total = 43	20	23

STEP TWO | Define categories or topics of interest

What will you examine these texts for?

- 'Global Britain' reference.
- Political actor and his position.
- Meaning given to the term.
- Related topic (e.g.: trade, economy, foreign policy, diplomatic service, etc.).

STEP THREE | Choose the recording unit (unit of content)

What segments of the text will contain what you are searching for?

- The entire text/document.
- Recording unit: 'Global Britain', global nation, global trade; theme.

FIELD NAME/NUMBER	FIELD DESCRIPTION
DOCID	**document identification**
	[code of the document]
PRD	**producer**
1	government
2	parliament
3	conservative party
4	labour party
5	think tank
PA	**political actor**
1	may
2	johnson
3	FCO/FCDO
4	CO
5	DIT
6	DExEU
7	conservative party
8	labour party
9	think tank
10	house of commons
YR	**year**
1	2017
2	2018
MT	**month**
1	january
2	february
3	march
4	april
5	may
6	june
7	july
8	august
9	september
10	october
11	november
12	december

FIELD NAME/NUMBER	FIELD DESCRIPTION
CATG	**categorie**
1	global britain
2	foreign policy
3	brexit
4	european union
5	trade
6	economy/business
7	other
TOP	**topics**
	[open]
GBM	**global britain meaning**
	[open]
DOCT	**document type**
1	speech
2	authored article
3	memorandum
4	corporate report
5	news story
6	press release
7	written evidence
8	debate
9	report/briefing paper
10	manifesto

Coding example:

DOCID	PRD	PA	YR	MT	TITLE	CATG	TOP	GBM	DOCT	NOTES	LINK	SEARCH
31BGB	1	3	2	2	How UK foreign policy responds to an ever more challenging global environment: February 2018 memorandum for the International Relations Committee	2	The presence and influence overseas, particularly the UK-US relations, Europe, Russia, Indo-Pacific, Africa, UK-Middle East and North Africa dynamics, UK-Americas.	"The concept of "Global Britain" is shorthand for our determination to adjust to these changes [of leaving the EU], to continue to be a successful global foreign policy player, and to resist any sense that Britain will be less engaged in the world in the next few years."	7	Written Evidence Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FPW0027)	http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/international-relations-committee/foreign-policy-in-changed-world-conditions/written/79900.html	Global Britain Collection > Evidence in response to parliamentary enquiries
42BGB	1	2	2	3	Foreign Secretary announces 250 new diplomatic roles and ten new sovereign missions overseas	2	new diplomatic roles; government budget for Global Britain	"the Government's Global Britain vision, this expansion of the UK's global presence"	6	Boris Johnson announces at least 250 new diplomatic roles will be created overseas and 10 new sovereign missions opened over the next 2 years.	https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-announces-250-new-diplomatic-roles-and-ten-new-sovereign-missions-overseas	Global Britain Collection > Previous Foreign Secretarys' announcements

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