

Foreign Policy as Compensation: Why Brexit Became a Foreign and Security Policy Issue

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Exogenous reform demands can put leaders in a tight spot where change runs up against structural impediments. Yet, where asymmetries in reform costs occur across domains, leaders can seek to re-frame the impetus of change from one domain to another. Such compensatory behavior is commonplace but is not adequately captured by existing research on linkage politics, forum shopping, or diversionary conflict. This article develops the concept of compensatory foreign policy, whereby leaders use foreign policy change to compensate for unviable economic reforms when they have greater capacity and choice in the former domain. Empirically, we use elite interviews to reconstruct the politics of security policy in the post-Brexit United Kingdom, showing how party leaders focused on foreign policy change when beneficial economic arrangements were precluded. Our argument contributes to recent research on linkage politics by demonstrating the conditions under which leaders seek foreign policy reforms to compensate for economic weakness.

Las exigencias en materia de reformas exógenas pueden poner a los líderes en una situación difícil en la que el cambio se encuentra con impedimentos estructurales. Sin embargo, cuando se producen asimetrías en los costes de las reformas en todos los ámbitos, los líderes pueden tratar de desplazar la fuerza de este cambio de un ámbito a otro. Este comportamiento compensatorio es frecuente, pero no se refleja de manera adecuada en las investigaciones existentes sobre la política de vinculación, la búsqueda del foro más favorable o el conflicto de distracción. Este artículo desarrolla el concepto de política exterior compensatoria, mediante el cual los líderes utilizan las cuestiones de política exterior, cuando tienen mayor capacidad y elección en el ámbito exterior, con el fin de compensar las reformas económicas inviables. De manera empírica, utilizamos entrevistas de élite con el fin de reconstruir la política de seguridad en el Reino Unido post-Brexit, y demostramos cómo los líderes de los partidos se centraron en el cambio de política exterior cuando se frustraron los acuerdos económicos beneficiosos. Nuestro argumento contribuye a la investigación reciente acerca la política de vinculación ya que demuestra las condiciones bajo las cuales los líderes buscan reformas de política exterior para poder compensar la debilidad económica.

Les demandes de réformes exogènes peuvent placer les dirigeants dans une position difficile, le changement se retrouvant confronté à des obstacles structurels. Pourtant, quand des asymétries de coûts de réforme interviennent dans différents domaines, les dirigeants peuvent chercher à recadrer l'élan de changement d'un domaine à l'autre. On observe souvent ce genre de comportement compensatoire, mais il n'est pas représenté à sa juste valeur dans les recherches existantes sur la politique de « linkage », l'élection de juridiction et les conflits de diversion. Cet article développe le concept de politique étrangère compensatoire, dans laquelle les dirigeants utilisent les problématiques de politique étrangère pour compenser les réformes économiques non viables, quand ils jouissent d'une capacité et d'un choix supérieurs dans le second domaine. Sur le plan empirique, nous employons les entretiens avec des élites pour reconstruire la politique sécuritaire du Royaume-Uni post-Brexit. Nous montrons ainsi que les chefs de partis se sont concentrés sur l'évolution de la politique étrangère quand il était impossible d'obtenir des arrangements économiques avantageux. Notre propos contribue à la recherche récente sur la politique de linkage en démontrant les conditions dans lesquelles les dirigeants poursuivent des réformes de politique étrangère pour compenser une faiblesse économique.

Introduction

When the United Kingdom (UK) electorate voted 51.9% to leave the European Union (EU) in the June 2016 referendum, foreign and security policy had scarcely featured in the campaign. It was acknowledged that Brexit would have implications for the UK's international relationships, including with the EU, but the debate itself focused more on ques-

tions of sovereignty, immigration, and contributions to the EU budget (Menon and Salter 2016, 1309). Yet by the start of talks on the future relationship in February 2020, as the Johnson government trumpeted its decision not to negotiate a security agreement with the EU, one could be forgiven for thinking the referendum had largely been about foreign policy. Johnson's premiership had begun with the promise of a deal that would allow the UK to 'have its cake and eat it' by negotiating frictionless trade with the EU. But what the government offered was a far less beneficial trade agreement tied to the concept of a 'Global Britain' and the abrogation of EU ties in other domains. In the course of just a few short years, then, foreign policy had shifted from a domain largely untouched by Brexit to a key means through which

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leaders sought to establish their Brexit credentials. While all aspects of European policy can be considered ‘external affairs’ in a general sense, the shift from the economic to the foreign policy aspects of European integration is significant, not least since these domains are governed by distinct logics.

Brexit is far from the only example of foreign policy being used to compensate for difficult or non-existent reforms in other domains. French President Charles de Gaulle’s efforts to break the Anglo-American ‘duopoly’ on power promised radical restrictions on American investment in the country but later became associated more with symbolic disengagement from elements of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (Chryssogelos and Martill 2021, 7–9). In 1960s Canada, ‘prairie populist’ Prime Minister John G. Diefenbaker picked (and lost) a public spat with President Kennedy over Canada’s contribution to North American nuclear defense after unsuccessful efforts to reorient the Canadian economy (Nash 1990). Revolutionary Iran has frequently resorted to state-sponsored martyrdom in its security strategy to legitimize its domestic policies and ‘nourish’ the state’s Islamist credentials (Booyesen 2021, 2479). In the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte has framed overtures to China as part and parcel of his domestic revitalization of politics (Song and Velasco 2022, 4). And the EU has channeled demands for a restructuring of the economic bases of integration into a broader reform agenda under the aegis of EU ‘strategic autonomy’ (Bérard-Sudreau and Pannier 2021, 297).

Why, and under what conditions, do leaders seek to shift reform demands into the field of foreign and security policy? The question is an important one, yet existing research does not capture adequately these dynamics. Research on domestic/international linkages has highlighted various ways in which domestic priorities impinge on foreign policy, including through increased politicization of foreign policy (Destradi et al. 2022, 476; Friedrichs and Tama 2022, 776), the domestication of international issues (Bickerton et al. 2015; Zürn 2019; Chryssogelos 2020, 985), the use of foreign policy to divert attention from domestic issues (Smith 1996, 134), the role leaders play in linking together different issue areas (Haas 1980), and domestic and international bargaining ‘games’ (Putnam 1988). However, these frameworks expect either distraction or linkage, rather than substitution and compensatory dynamics. Moreover, it is often assumed that foreign and security policy is ring-fenced from political contestation to a greater degree than other areas, given the difficulty of articulating clear political preferences in this area (Gowa 1998), the limited access to information citizens have on foreign affairs, the de-politicizing dynamics of securitizing external threats (Buzan et al. 1998), and the prevalence of behind-the-scenes political bargains (Rathbun 2011). Yet the Brexit example shows that foreign policy can often be an outlet for politics in other domains.

To account for the extent to which Brexit became a foreign and security policy issue, this article articulates a theory of foreign policy as *compensation*, drawing on conceptual and theoretical research in International Relations (IR), European Studies and Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA). It argues that leaders facing exogenous reform demands can take advantage of asymmetries in reform costs by substituting change in one domain for unrealized reforms in another. Opportunities for compensatory foreign policy-making depend on both the nature of reform demands and the extent of asymmetry in reform costs. Compensatory foreign policy is most likely to occur where reform mandates are exogenous, vague and thinly institutionalized and when reform costs in the foreign policy domain are correspondingly

lower than those in the economic domain. This, in turn, depends on (1) the capabilities the state can deploy, (2) the availability of alternatives, (3) the autonomy of the state from interest groups, (4) the balance of relative versus absolute gains, and (5) the thickness of the institutional environment.

Empirically, the article examines the changing politics of security in the UK following the Brexit referendum, focusing on three specific instances of compensatory foreign policy: (1) Theresa May’s effort to negotiate a security partnership with the EU; (2) Boris Johnson’s decision to forego a security agreement; and (3) the Labour Party’s announcement that it would seek a negotiated security agreement if elected. Post-Brexit Britain offers a ‘most likely’ case of compensatory foreign policy, given the vague mandate for reform accompanying the Brexit vote and the high degree of asymmetry in reform costs between the economic and strategic domains. Our evidence comes from elite interviews conducted in London and Brussels, supplemented by government documents, speeches, referendum campaign materials, and media reports. Our findings are in line with the expectations of the compensatory approach: The May government came increasingly to focus on foreign policy as the idea of bespoke economic arrangements was ruled out by the EU. The Johnson government capitalized on support for ‘no deal’ but, facing clear economic ruin under this scenario, made a show of removing the security agreement from its negotiated deal. Labour, finally, chose to capitalize on growing discontent with Brexit by proposing a security agreement rather than re-open the discussion of economic arrangements already precluded by the EU.

Our argument identifies and articulates a distinct form of linkage politics that differs from existing concepts of politicization, issue-linkage and diversionary foreign policy in significant ways, not least by showing how change in one domain can *substitute* for the absence of change in another. It also contributes to contemporary debates on the domestication and externalization of foreign policy by showing the conditions under which leaders are more likely to shift reform demands into alternative issue areas. Our findings show that far from being less amenable to domestic politics than other domains, foreign and security policy can—depending on the balance of reform costs—become a venue for contentious political dynamics from other domains to play out. Empirically, the argument helps explain several puzzling aspects of the Brexit vote, including the increasing salience of foreign policy relative to the stakes involved and early expectations, the oscillation between different leaders in an area where structural logic might be expected to predominate, and the invariance between proposals in the economic domain versus the security domain. Our argument also has policy implications, cautioning citizens to be aware of elite efforts to divert their concerns into less salient issue areas, and highlighting to policymakers the difficulty of ring-fencing cooperation even in areas not usually subject to high levels of domestic contestation.

Brexit and the Foreign and Security Policy Puzzle

On January 24, 2023, the opposition Labour Party announced it would negotiate a new ‘security pact’ with the EU should it win the next general election (BBC News 2023). The timing of Labour’s announcement made sense, coming less than a year after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine had thrown the European security landscape into turmoil, and coinciding with increasing evidence of the damaging effects of Johnson’s ‘hard’ Brexit on the British economy

(Hix et al. 2023, 186). Yet it was notable that security was the sole area Labour chose in which to set out their Brexit stall, even as the party had consistently advocated for softer designs on Brexit during the negotiations (Pogruud and Maguire 2020), and continued to oppose Johnson's agreement without proffering specific designs on any replacement. At a moment ripe for capitalizing on opposition to Johnson's Brexit deal, the opposition's decision to pitch a security and defense agreement seems puzzling.

Labour's decision to focus on security and defense mirrors a decision made by Johnson three years prior, at the beginning of the negotiations on the future relationship in February 2020, when the Prime Minister informed the EU that Britain had decided to forego a security agreement with the Union. This deviated from the position of his own government, which had indicated in the revised Political Declaration that it wished to negotiate a security agreement, and represented one of the least contentious issues at stake and one where the UK held a relative advantage as a major regional security provider. Johnson's decision upset the EU and paved the way for the situation in January 2021 when the UK's relationship with EU foreign and security policy ended, denying officials on both sides useful contacts.

Johnson's decision was a sign of how things had changed over the course of the negotiations. When Theresa May had taken over from David Cameron in 2016—pledging to deliver Brexit 'come what may'—security and defense had received little attention. As part of her broader strategy of maintaining as much continuity in the UK–EU relationship compatible with the end of 'free movement' and the jurisdiction of the European court, the May government hoped to negotiate a security agreement that took into account the UK's strategic heft. As the negotiations proceeded, security issues climbed up the agenda, not least because it was seen as an area where the UK could demonstrate its commitment to European partners. By mid-2018, the UK's security and defense relationship had become a headline component of the UK's Brexit strategy, such that it informed major speeches and provoked concerted opposition from hardcore Brexit supporters.

The prominence that security and defense issues received, both as something for the UK to explicitly abrogate and for Labour to emphasize post-facto, is puzzling. First, it is surprising that successive governments emphasized the strategic dimensions of Brexit more than other areas at crucial moments in the process. Given the background presence of NATO, the strategic weight of the UK, and the broadly intergovernmental nature of European security collaboration (Maurer and Wright 2021a, 386), most observers in 2016–17 had concluded this would be one of the least contentious areas of the talks (Turpin 2019). Second, it is puzzling that we should see such oscillation over time both between individual leaders—but also across their respective tenures—on questions of security and defense, especially given that European security collaboration is often held to be a response to powerful structural drivers, including American disengagement (Wivel 2008, 293) and bureaucratic interests (Bickerton 2011; Svendsen and Adler-Nissen 2019; Maurer and Wright 2021b). Third, it is surprising that the contents of the various foreign and security proposals have been invariant to what governments have either pursued or obtained in the trade and economic domain, since this would suggest it is not simply the case that the former area has been politicized along with the latter domain, but rather that dynamics other than politicisation are at play.

A Compensatory Theory of Foreign and Security Policy

The remainder of this article addresses these puzzles by articulating a compensatory theory of foreign and security policy. Drawing on insights from IR theory, European Studies and FPA, we illustrate the background conditions responsible for incentivizing compensatory foreign policy, focusing on the nature of the mandate and the balance of reform costs across domains. Our aim is to set out the theoretical basis for understanding the dynamics observed in relation to Brexit, rather than to map out comprehensively every aspect of each dimension involved.

The first task is to account for where reform demands come from, and why leaders might be either unable—or reticent—to fully deliver on them. Policy demands are seldom dictated by the priorities of individual governments alone but depend also on popular and external demands for reform. Citizens can exert pressure on their political leaders to undertake costly reforms (e.g., Kaufmann and Pape 1999) while external actors—states and international organizations—can similarly issue pressure for reform (e.g., Blankenship 2021; Becker et al. 2023). These demands often present governments with difficult choices, balancing the political necessity of delivering reforms against the high costs of implementation. This, in turn, incentivizes political elites to find ways of signaling the efficacy of reforms without fully realizing them, thereby accruing the political benefits of pledging reform without encountering the costs. While partial implementation and discursive framing strategies have been used by leaders to do just this, a further—and often more efficacious—way leaders can square the circle is by shifting the impetus of change into a policy area where reform is easier to bring about. Such compensatory actions can provide an alternative where pressure for change is such that doing nothing is simply not an option.

Compensatory dynamics are most likely to emerge where demands are exogenous and undesired from the government's point of view. Vague and heterogeneous reform demands are more amenable to compensatory dynamics since it is more difficult for political actors to convincingly transpose precise demands into alternative policy areas. Demands that are weakly institutionalized in the policy process—that is, are subject neither to the oversight of formal bodies nor binding on the government—also afford governments more discretion to shape the resulting mandate and shift the onus of reform across policy domains. Beyond these background conditions, much depends also on the role of leaders themselves, who must engage in a protracted effort to frame reform demands as foreign policy issues and the ensuing reforms as satisfying the mandate for change (Hofmann and Martill 2021, 316; Jenne 2021, 325). This requires that they have sufficient political capital to reinterpret the reform mandate and also that the audience is sufficiently receptive to their re-framing to regard changes as successfully delivering on their demands (e.g., Wehner and Thies 2021, 333).

Conditions for leaders to engage in compensatory policy-making emerge out of asymmetries in reform costs—that is, the divergence between policy domains in how difficult disrupting the status quo and instituting a new regime would be. Such reform costs can depend upon (1) the relative power and capabilities of the state in question—whether conceived of in terms of military, economic, or institutional power (Elman 1995, 172); (2) the number and viability of alternative options to the status quo (Dür 2008, 652; Morse and Keohane 2014; McKibben 2020); (3) the autonomy of the state from domestic interests and the number and ar-

rangement of domestic veto players (Moravcsik 1993, 482; Tsebelis 2002); (4) the logic of interaction and the balance of relative versus absolute gains at stake (Powell 1991; Snidal 1991); and (5) the institutional environment within which reform takes place, including the thickness of relevant regimes and the extent of interdependence (Janusch 2018; Koremenos et al. 2001). *Ceteris paribus*, reform will be less costly where the state in question is more powerful, has multiple viable alternatives to the status quo, is autonomous from domestic veto players, where the issues involved are positive-sum rather than zero-sum, and where levels of interdependence and institutionalization are lower.

While compensatory foreign policy can present itself in multiple distinct domains—security, trade, migration, energy, etc.—the most prevalent examples (including those mentioned above) seek substitution between the economic and security domains. The calculation of reform costs across both domains is a roughly comparable exercise, albeit with distinct metrics. Within the domain of foreign and security policy, any calculation of reform costs will involve an assessment of the country's geopolitical weight relative to its neighbors, the number of potential partners and alliance formats, the autonomy of the executive from bureaucratic, societal and sectoral interests, the nature of the strategic issues at stake, and the strength of existing institutional and organizational rules and practices. Within the economic domain, reform costs are a function of the state's relative 'market power' (Damro 2012, 690), the availability of alternative policies, regimes or trading partners, the strength of sectoral lobbies and interest groups, whether issues are cooperative or zero-sum, and the extent of institutionalization and interdependence.

The relationship *between* these domains is the crucial factor in establishing conditions for compensatory foreign policy, which is advantageous to governments only under conditions of asymmetry. To some extent, the attributes of different domains are fungible and can be transposed into others. For example, economic power translates into influence in both the economic and geopolitical domains, while the institutional dynamics of political systems can channel all policy decisions in the same direction. Yet there are good reasons to expect variance between reform costs in different domains. Countries develop and deploy distinct constellations of power resources, such that some are considered military powerhouses in spite of their weak economies (e.g., Russia) while others are economically powerful but militarily weak (e.g., Germany and Japan) (Maull 1990; Paterson 2011). Moreover, distinct regime constellations emerge in different fields, resulting in distinct organizational frameworks across domains, even within the same region—as with the long-standing division of labor between the 'civilian' EU and 'military' NATO in Europe (Hofmann, 2011, 2013, 2019). It is also common for decision rules to differ between foreign and security policy and other issue areas (Raunio and Wagner 2017, 3) and for patterns of interest representation to vary across these domains (e.g., Klüver and Zeidler 2019).

This does not mean that reform costs are always lower in one domain than the other. It remains helpful, conceptually, to treat reform costs as a variable, since the demand for costly strategic change may in principle be compensated for by economic reform. The renegotiation of NAFTA as part of the Trump administration's 'America-first' foreign policy is one such example. However, there are several reasons why reform can often be achieved more easily in foreign and security policy. First, interests are often less concentrated in this domain, with close firm–state relations mini-

mizing differentiation between state and sub-state interests (Calcara 2017, 535). Second, many actions in the foreign policy domain are performative and symbolic, making them cheaper for governments to initiate, while the delivery of external reforms often hinges on the actions of others, offering governments more wiggle room when signaling success (Chryssogelos and Martill 2021, 5). Third, governments often have more leeway in formulating foreign and security policy given the limited roles legislatures often possess in this domain (Raunio and Wagner 2017, 3–4), lower levels of open partisan contestation (e.g., Gowa 1998; Rathbun 2011), and the relatively low level of information possessed by citizens and legislators on foreign policy issues (Kaarbo and Kenealy 2016, 31).

What does this framework add to our existing knowledge of domestic/international interactions? It is already well known that leaders engage in *linkage* strategies that seek to benefit from asymmetries across policy domains. Linking different issues can allow leaders to build coalitions with domestic partners and can contribute toward 'log-rolling' strategies (Oktay 2018, 105). Leaders can also gain bargaining leverage by citing constraints in the domestic and international 'games' within the other domain (da Conceição-Heldt 2013; Putnam 1988). And they can initiate highly salient policies externally—including war—as a distraction from domestic scandals and economic underperformance (Smith 1996, 134) or to induce 'rally round the flag' effects (Baum 2002, 264; Mueller 1970). Leaders can also use the nebulous nature of foreign policy commitments to appeal to broader constituencies of opinion (Meibauer 2021, 17) and avoid harming entrenched domestic interests (Chryssogelos and Martill 2021). Finally, external issues can be subject to increasing politicization as political actors seek to open up another front on their domestic agenda and invoke the presence of external 'enemies' to aid domestic mobilization (Lacatus and Meibauer 2022, 442; Wojczewski 2020, 6).

However, existing concepts do not get to the core of the compensatory dynamics articulated here. Issue-linkage (e.g., Haas 1980) overlaps with some aspects of compensatory foreign policy in its broadest sense, but does not capture the particular emphasis on purported substitutability at the heart of compensation. Where security policies are adopted in lieu of economic ones, it is not so much to link issues as to *replace* them. Two-level game metaphors capture broadly the context within which compensatory dynamics take place, but fail to capture processes aimed at domestic audiences that do not link together the international and domestic games for bargaining advantage (rather, compensatory dynamics *occlude* bargaining disadvantages). Diversionary foreign policy (e.g., Smith 1996, 134) captures similar dynamics in terms of elite interests, and the element of subterfuge and misdirection involved in compensatory foreign policy. However, the core assumption of compensation is that it maintains or increases the salience of the existing issue, whereas diversionary policies aim to reduce the visibility of difficult problems. Politicization may be considered a pre-requisite of compensatory foreign policy but predicts *correspondence* across politicized domains, rather than the *divergence* implied by compensatory behavior.

Methodology

Empirically we examine the impact of the June 2016 Brexit referendum on British foreign and security policy. Explaining post-Brexit dynamics in the UK's foreign relations is important for its own sake, given the UK's size as a strategic actor, its position within major international forums, and its

Table 1. Asymmetric reform costs in the Brexit case.

	<i>Economic/trade policy</i>	<i>Foreign/security policy</i>
Relative power	UK market power far lower than combined EU27	UK one of two major security actors in Europe
Alternatives to an agreement	No viable alternatives to Single Market access	Alternative NATO, G7 and bilateral formats
Interest representation	Business highly exposed to Brexit (but politically weak)	Bureaucratic support for close EU relationship
Logic of interaction	Zero-sum dynamics dominate	Positive-sum dynamics (security is 'indivisible')
Institutional environment	Asymmetric interdependence and high costs of exit	Intergovernmental cooperation with low sovereignty cost

central role in the European security order (Adler-Nissen et al. 2017, 574; Maurer et al. 2023, 234). Brexit also provides a 'most likely' case for compensatory foreign policy dynamics because of the nature of the Brexit mandate and the high levels of asymmetry in reform costs between the economic and the foreign and security policy domains. Demand for Brexit was exogenously derived (and opposed by the Cameron government) with Brexit demands manifest in the vague exhortation to 'take back control', and the referendum carrying no formal constitutional weight, creating ideal conditions for actors to re-interpret and frame the resulting mandate. Reform costs were rendered exorbitantly high in the economic domain by a combination of Britain's relative economic weakness, the absence of alternatives to trade with the EU, the strong preference of business for maintaining economic ties, the zero-sum nature of UK deviation from EU rules, and the high costs of exit from the Single Market. Meanwhile, in the domain of foreign and security policy, reform costs were mitigated by the UK's status as a major defense actor, the presence of alternative formats, the absence of entrenched sub-state interests, and the intergovernmental nature of European security cooperation (see Table 1).

We focus on three moments in the post-referendum chronology: (1) Theresa May's attempt to negotiate a security agreement with the EU; (2) Boris Johnson's decision to seek a more distant relationship in foreign and security policy; and (3) the Labour Party's 2023 decision to seek a security agreement if elected. This amounts to 'two and a half' within-case examples—since the Labour Party remains in opposition at the time of writing—which together help demonstrate the relevance of compensatory foreign policy for understanding the dynamics of Brexit. This is for three reasons: First, setting out more 'cases' of compensatory foreign policy can help increase our confidence in the efficacy of the theory. Second, by establishing variation in *kind*—with variation in individual leader, political party, and hard/soft designs on Brexit—we are able to not only control for potentially confounding variables but also highlight the different ways compensatory dynamics play out. Third, by looking at consecutive cases, we are able to chart the Brexit process over time and show the significant role that compensatory dynamics have played throughout the entire process while accounting for how earlier changes came to influence later ones.

Theoretically, we expect the combination of an exogenous and vague mandate for reform and high levels of asymmetry in reform costs would lead governments to shift the emphasis of post-Brexit reform into the foreign and security policy domain, and the findings across the three cases back this up. We show that in spite of the marginality of foreign policy issues to both the Leave campaign and the Brexit process, successive party leaders came to focus increasingly

on foreign policy issues as their economic proposals floundered. The May government was rebuffed in its efforts to secure a bespoke Brexit agreement and focused instead on articulating an ill-defined 'Global Britain' narrative and seeking a comprehensive security partnership. The Johnson government opted for a 'no deal' in security and defense to showcase the UK's autonomy when a more distant economic relationship would prove too costly. And the Labour Party, wary of re-opening the debate on models already rejected by the EU, focused its major policy speech on the need to 'take back control' through a new security agreement.

Our evidence comes from elite interviews conducted in London and Brussels—as well as online—from late 2017 to 2023. In total, we spoke with over sixty individuals involved in the Brexit negotiations, including negotiators, officials, ambassadors, politicians, interest group representatives, and think-tank experts. Our interview data are supplemented with government documents, speeches, think-tank reports, media articles and the 'Brexit Witness Archive' of the *UK in a Changing Europe* programme. We adopt a process tracing approach that aims at reconstructing the dynamics surrounding post-Brexit foreign and security policy, using the data to examine in detail the scope conditions and mechanisms postulated in the theoretical discussion (Beach and Pedersen 2019). Since Brexit is ineluctably complex, such a 'structured' and 'focused' comparison serves to highlight the core dynamics of interest, while cutting out the 'noise' one might find in more comprehensive, historical accounts (George and Bennett 2005, 85; King et al. 1994, 45).

Drawing on the interview data, we assess in the empirical sections the reform costs in both the economic and foreign policy domains as they applied to the May and Johnson governments and the opposition Labour Party. We combine this with an assessment of the stated rationales in the data for the respective security policies, which serves to identify the principal mechanisms linking asymmetry in reform costs to foreign policy outcomes. Thus, our data afford us access to both direct and indirect evidence for compensation by identifying the presence of specific background conditions and their role in motivating policy change. Alternative explanations based on structural and partisan factors—identified in the discussion above—are accounted for through the within-case analysis insofar as these motivations are not present in the data. Moreover, alternatives can be assessed through the configuration of the cases themselves, since the observed variation in security policy does not correspond with major changes in either external structural factors or which party is in government.

The May Government's Security Partnership

The decision to leave the EU was difficult to interpret as a vote for foreign policy renewal. Discussion of foreign, secu-

riety and defense policy issues, and the value or otherwise of the UK's link to the EU's foreign and security policies, were limited to a few select mentions (e.g., [Bruges Group 2016](#)) and far from representative of broader conversations ([Hadfield 2018](#), 175; [Hill 2023](#)). This does not mean foreign policy issues were not intimately connected with the idea of Brexit. Accession debates in the 1960s and 1970s had focused both on the UK's economic malaise and its post-Suez decline in international status ([Saunders 2019](#), 45) and the Leave and Remain campaigns captured divergent views of Britain's role in the world in 2016 ([Rogstad and Martill 2022](#), 213–16). But foreign policy did not have the salience that immigration and sovereignty had, and did not constitute the core of the Brexit mandate, at least as interpreted by political leaders at the time. While Brexit would mean, at least in principle, the loss of the UK's access to EU foreign and security policy institutions, observers predicted considerable continuity in this area, owing to the lack of political salience and the intergovernmental nature of EU foreign policy cooperation ([Turpin 2019](#), 13).

Initial statements on what Brexit would look like emphasized the importance of returning sovereignty to the UK. May saw her government's primary task as delivering Brexit 'come what may' and ensuring that this was done in a manner consistent with the mandate from the electorate, which she interpreted as a vote to return control to the British people and end the freedom of movement ([Shipman 2018](#), 100). This interpretation informed May's 'red lines' which precluded continued free movement, significant budgetary contributions, and the jurisdiction of the Court of Justice of the EU. Beyond this May sought to ensure as much continuity in the economic relationship as possible, with the UK maintaining access to the single market in areas where Britain did not seek to diverge from EU rules ([Shipman 2018](#), 5). This (re-)interpretation of the referendum vote by political elites was facilitated by the Leave campaign's nebulous 'take back control' message and the open nature of the referendum question itself. It was also enabled by the lack of a clear basis for where responsibility lay for delivering Brexit, the absence of any process for discerning citizens' preferences beyond the initial vote ([Russell 2021](#), 447), and the Cameron government's deliberate refusal to plan for a Leave victory ([Shipman 2018](#), 6). For May, this was a blessing and a curse, since it allowed for strategic (re)framing of what Brexit meant, but also afforded May's critics on the right the same ability.

Anticipating the difficulties of delivering Brexit, in her major speeches May sought to articulate a new slogan for Britain's post-Brexit journey—'Global Britain'—which was used as the backdrop for the Lancaster House speech in which May set out her Brexit agenda (HM [Government 2017a](#)). Global Britain re-cast the goals of Brexit in the imprecise terms afforded by metaphors of international alignment, aiming to appeal to those nostalgic for a time in which Britain's geopolitical relevance was not in doubt ([Melhuish 2023](#); [Turner 2019](#), 727) and who saw Brexit as an opportunity to engage more with external partners outside the uncompetitive EU ([Melhuish 2022](#), 1769). Intended also as a way of convincing Remain supporters and external audiences that Britain would not shirk on its obligations, it provided "compensatory promises of authority and prestige" to domestic audiences, acting as a partial antidote to the expected economic suffering Britain's withdrawal from the EU looked set to bring about ([Turner 2019](#), 729). Interestingly, the Global Britain rhetoric did not accompany any concrete proposals for the UK's foreign policy relationship with the EU, focusing instead on the government's vision for the

post-Brexit UK. Thus, while the concept was largely empty policy-wise, it allowed the government to articulate significant post-Brexit changes by rhetorically signaling a new alignment and by identifying developments the UK could have undertaken as an EU member as being constituent parts of the delivery of Brexit.

May's aim for a bespoke agreement ran up against the desire of the EU27 to safeguard the integrity of the single market and forestall contagion among the remaining member states ([Figueira and Martill 2021](#), 1872–3; [Laffan 2019](#), 14, 2023, 628). While on cooperation issues—like foreign policy and research funding—both sides would gain from continued engagement post-Brexit, zero-sum issues dominated in the domain of the single market, where concessions for the UK would result in competitive advantages to the detriment of the EU ([Jurado et al. 2022](#), 276) and where EU citizens were 'benchmarking' Brexit outcomes relative to the status quo ([De Vries 2017](#), 39; [Walter 2021](#), 2385). Moreover, as the stronger party in the negotiations, the EU's vision for Brexit mattered more than Britain's. The UK was more dependent on access to the EU market than the other way around, with UK businesses and citizens highly exposed to the imposition of economic barriers ([Schimmelfennig 2018](#), 1155). Britain had few alternatives to an agreement, given the extent of its trade with the EU and its geographical contiguity with the Union, in spite of Brexiteer claims the UK inhabited a 'post-geography' trading world ([Siles-Brügge 2019](#), 431). Businesses were highly exposed to any diminution in the economic relationship and lobbied against harder designs on Brexit, especially a 'no deal' scenario ([Seldon 2019](#), 497). Though politically constrained in the febrile post-referendum political environment ([James and Quaglia 2019](#), 259), the government remained keen not to spook business, with ministers responsive to their concerns ([Shipman 2018](#), 93, 496) and to their structural power ([Kalaitzake 2021](#)).

As the negotiations got underway it became increasingly apparent that British designs on a bespoke Brexit were a non-starter. While the first phase dealt with issues of withdrawal, not the future relationship, the EU repeatedly restated its opposition to UK proposals that would involve 'cherry picking' market access in different areas or disrupting the existing balance of rights and obligations ([Laffan and Telle 2023](#), 20). The failure of the UK strategy coincided with a renewed emphasis on an agreement in security and defense. Unlike the economic aspects of Brexit, this was perceived to be one area where the UK could obtain an agreement that could afford continuity amidst the political benefits of withdrawal. This was down to a combination of factors: Strategic interests being positive-sum, no side would benefit from any decrease in the security of the other, giving the EU and UK incentives to continue cooperating in this area. EU foreign and security policy institutions are intergovernmental and as such would not incur a significant sovereignty cost for the UK, nor would UK engagement undermine the EU's institutions from within ([Martill and Sus 2022](#), 409–10). Moreover, there was much that the UK—as one of the major foreign and security policy actors in Europe ([Hofmann and Mérand 2020](#), 163; [Whitman 2016](#), 254)—could add to EU foreign policy (Interview B04). The UK also had a choice of formats, and could simply opt to fall back on NATO or bilateral cooperation should it not obtain a suitable agreement with the EU ([Whitman 2016](#), 260).

Thus, while foreign and security policy cooperation was not a significant component of the Brexit mandate, it became seen as an important area where the UK could maintain continuity post-Brexit. And, as the negotiations faltered

in other respects, it became increasingly prominent. In her Florence Speech in September 2017, the Prime Minister sought a “new era of cooperation” and proposed parallel economic and security agreements with the EU to ensure continuity post-Brexit (HM Government 2017b). The aim of the speech was to inject a more conciliatory tone into the Brexit talks and emphasise the value of foreign and security policy cooperation (Interview C1). On 17 February 2018, May delivered another major Brexit speech at the Munich Security Forum in which she proposed a “deep and special partnership between the UK and the EU, to retain the co-operation that we have built and go further in meeting the evolving threats we face together” (HM Government 2018a). In May 2018, the government set out a proposed framework for a ‘comprehensive’ security and defense partnership (HM Government 2018b), which would be incorporated into the Political Declaration appended to the Withdrawal Agreement and negotiated in the future relationship phase. The proposals envisioned structured cooperation across the foreign, security and defense policy domains, with a focus on both ‘internal’ and ‘external’ security issues, with regular meetings across all levels, participation in select operations of the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and in projects under the aegis of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), and UK engagement in decision-making where British contributions were made (HM Government 2018b).

The intention was not to create significant new rules-based institutional structures, but rather to facilitate continued intergovernmental cooperation (Interview B18). What the government was seeking was an institutionalized set of arrangements, based around regularized meetings, in order to prevent the emergence of a security gap (Interview C15). According to one UK government insider, the government was also “determin[ed] not to allow difficulties in the negotiations on the economic side to be able to spill over into negotiations in terms of essentially maintaining our security cooperation” (Interview B18). As the official put it: “We felt that this was an area where the UK potential was bringing quite a lot of assets to the table and showing that we were willing to continue to provide that security contribution to the collective security of the continent” (Interview B18). Politically, security and defense policy was one area where the relationship could be kept close and cordial, and thus be considered a positive consequence of the Brexit vote (Interview C19). There were other considerations, too, in the background, including a perceived desire on behalf of many EU member states to keep the UK tied into the evolving EU security architecture (Interview B18). May also had a personal interest in the security domain—as a former Home Secretary—(Interview C10) and was keenly aware of the deteriorating security situation in Europe following acts of Russian aggression on UK soil (e.g., the Salisbury poisonings) alongside concerns among NATO allies about the US commitment to the Atlantic alliance under President Donald Trump (Martill 2023).

The proposal for a security partnership was redolent of May’s broader approach to Brexit, in which London sought to leverage UK influence to keep pre-existing ties as intact as possible. But there was also a compensatory aspect to May’s foreign policy proposals, with an agreement in this area viewed as one way Britain could make up for the ties lost in other areas. In this, the May government was at once correct and incorrect. While the EU recognized the potential contribution the UK could make, it also saw in May’s proposals further evidence of UK cherry-picking (Svendsen 2022), and in any case lacked a clear institutional basis for

significant third-country participation in EU foreign policy (Wessel 2019, 431). Domestically, opinion on Brexit among Conservatives had been hardening, with increasing opposition to any deal that would keep the UK more aligned with EU policy areas (Kettell and Kerr 2020, 593). Security and defense issues became subsumed within these broader political struggles (Interview C01), with May’s proposed security agreement attacked by representatives of the pro-Brexit faction on the basis it would see the UK unnecessarily tied into EU structures after withdrawal (Martill 2023). Having encountered the difficulties of maintaining the underlying economic relationship with the EU while also realizing its ‘red lines’, the government moved its focus to foreign and security policy, only to find the domestic political ground had shifted in the intervening months, such that a bespoke agreement in this area was no longer seen as a win for many Conservatives.

Johnson and the Trade and Cooperation Agreement

The failure of May’s agreement in the UK Parliament—thrice defeated between January and March 2019—coupled with the failure of efforts to obtain concessions from the EU, unify the Conservatives, and reach out to the opposition Labour Party, spelled the end of May’s tenure as Prime Minister. Johnson had, by this point, firmly established himself as the leader of the pro-Brexit faction of the Conservatives, and secured an easy victory in the leadership election, which was dominated by the question of each candidate’s willingness to undertake a ‘no deal’ Brexit. The re-framing of Brexit, such that continuity was no longer seen as beneficial but rather as incomplete withdrawal, was facilitated by the imprecise referendum mandate. Having joined the chorus of those labelling May’s agreement ‘Brexit In Name Only’ (BRINO), and taken up the mantle of the hard Brexit supporters, Johnson set his sights on a more autonomous relationship, opting for a less ambitious Canada-style FTA (Interview C07). This was a much more distant landing point than May’s Chequers Proposal, yet it did not escape the overall difficulties of negotiating with the EU, nor the trade-offs between autonomy and market access. With Britain dependent on access to the single market, the EU still called the shots, and insisted upon the UK committing to a level playing field as a condition for a trade agreement (Usherwood 2021, 119; Wille and Martill 2023). While Johnson’s deal sought greater autonomy, it could never be the full autonomy desired by Brexiteers, since this would be too damaging to the UK economy.

One way the government responded to this dilemma was to seek other areas where a more autonomous relationship could be negotiated. As an opener to the negotiations on the future relationship, beginning in February 2020, the Johnson government decided to take the security and defense proposals off the table (Interview C05). The Political Declaration included a section on security cooperation, which had been agreed under May and not excised by Johnson in his revised agreement. Yet the Johnson government communicated to the EU that a formal relationship was not necessary and that it was not interested in negotiating in this area (Interview C12). The decision was received with frustration in Brussels, not least by Barnier, who had assumed that the UK would consider itself bound by the terms of the Political Declaration and who had been keen to reach an agreement on security as part of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) under negotiation (Barnier 2021, 316). Within the Commission more broadly, the decision not to negotiate on security and defense was seen as a major loss,

given this was one area in particular where there was much the UK could have added (Interviews B04, B08, and B12). The decision also surprised observers in the UK, who had regarded security and defense as a low-hanging fruit and one area where continuity post-Brexit could be maintained relatively easily (Interview C02 and C10).

An important motivation was that security and defense cooperation was one area in which UK autonomy vis-à-vis the EU could be achieved at relatively little cost, given the extent of extra-EU options available (Interview C08 and C12). As an interviewee from the UK government side put it, the reason “was partly because they had decided on a hard Brexit on the trade and economic side and...they felt [security] was an area that they could demonstrate the regaining of full sovereignty” (Interview B18). One observer noted that: “It was simply that the UK didn’t want...to legitimize any security and defense partnership whatsoever” noting that the decision was “mostly ideology” (Interview C08). Another interviewee claimed the decision was part of “reassert[ing] a very strong Brexit”, describing EU security cooperation as “window dressing that you can easily remove” in order to appease the European Research Group, an informal Conservative Party policy grouping hostile to security cooperation (Interview C10). By removing the security commitment, the Johnson government could remove one of the ties through which the Conservative right believed Britain had been ‘shackled’ to the EU (Interview C12). Autonomy was easier to achieve in this area because “the EU in foreign and security policy is weak enough that this is a policy area where the UK could afford to just go through the member states rather than have a structured relationship with the EU” (Interview C05). Even if bilateral ties were regarded as less efficacious than an EU-wide agreement, the UK could still afford to withstand ‘no deal’ in this area (Interview B08).

The circumstances of Johnson’s decision to focus on foreign and security policy differ from those of his predecessor, as do the substantive policy implications—yet the logic is remarkably similar in shifting the onus of reform into a domain where it can be more easily realized. While May sought in her proposed security agreement to obtain continuity unavailable in the economic domain, Johnson saw in foreign and security policy an opportunity for autonomy of a level that could not be achieved in the parallel economic relationship. Both moves were facilitated by the same background conditions in foreign and security policy, where the UK’s strength and the availability of alternative formats allowed it both the freedom to diverge as well as a good chance of negotiating continued engagement with the EU should it wish (Whitman 2016). Despite, therefore, the May government have spelled out the broad contours of what a comprehensive agreement in security and defense might look like, the TCA negotiated by Johnson makes no reference to security and defense collaboration (Usherwood 2021, 118). Thus, when the agreement came into force provisionally in January 2021, the UK reverted to a highly distant relationship, with no formal connections between the UK and the EU in these areas. This had the effect of significantly downgrading the UK–EU security relationship, removing UK officials from regular meetings and resulting in a distinct loss of previously intimate connectivity (Interviews C05 and C14).

The TCA itself, agreed on 24 December 2020, was regarded by many observers as a flawed document, excluding as it did financial services and a host of other areas, and failing to provide for the ‘frictionless trade’ Johnson claimed it would deliver (The Independent 2020). With the dubious benefits of the TCA making for a difficult sell, the Johnson government’s concerted efforts in the aftermath of

the agreement to signal the benefits of Brexit were focused on foreign affairs. Johnson maintained the Global Britain language of his predecessor, which was used to brand major changes in the UK’s strategic orientation—such as the *Integrated Review of Security and Defence* (HM Government 2021)—alongside several external agreements. New trade deals were trumpeted as big wins for Global Britain, even though the majority were either roll-over deals from EU agreements or simply mirrored what the EU was itself negotiating, while the much-promised FTA with the US never materialized (Heron and Siles-Brügge 2021, 732). The AUKUS (Australia-UK-US) agreement with the US and Australia in 2021 was framed as a Global Britain success and helped cement ties with Commonwealth and transatlantic partners seen as natural alternatives to Britain’s European partners (Interview C19). The agreement precipitated a serious rift with France, which lost out when Australia abrogated existing defence-industrial arrangements with Paris (Interview C03). The UK also went to great effort to eschew engagement with Brussels on foreign policy issues, signing a host of bilateral agreements with member states (Interviews C11 and C12) and avoiding mention of ongoing areas of cooperation, including sanctions (Interview C17B). Even after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, EU officials complained that the UK was downplaying the Union’s role in European security so as to buttress the Global Britain narrative (Interviews C02, C14, and C17A).

The Labour Party’s Security Announcement

The Labour Party—in opposition since 2010—has struggled in many ways to adapt to Brexit. The calling of the referendum coincided with the party’s selection of the left-wing and former Eurosceptic Jeremy Corbyn as party leader, contributing to protracted infighting within the party over the messaging of the ‘Labour In’ campaign. When the Leave vote was announced, observers pointed to the ostensibly lukewarm support Corbyn had given the EU in his messaging, while his defenders pointed out the difficulty of selling the status quo in order to support the incumbent Conservative government. In the aftermath of the referendum, the Labour Party committed to respecting the Leave result, meaning both the government and official opposition parties were officially ‘pro-Brexit’. Labour’s difficulty articulating a clear line on Brexit was confounded by the mandate given to the Leave side which made it difficult to establish any legitimate anti-Brexit space. Moreover, while the party’s MPs were overwhelmingly pro-remain, many of the party’s voters—especially in the de-industrialized north of England—had supported Leave in the referendum.

Labour’s response to these challenges was one of ‘strategic ambiguity’. By criticizing the government’s delivery of Brexit, and highlighting its failure to deliver for ordinary people, the party benefited during the 2017 general election from the belief among Remainers that it was an anti-Brexit party, and among Leave supporters that it was pro-Brexit (Cutts et al. 2020, 11; Hobolt 2018, 47). It was, according to the Shadow Chancellor, a fine line to walk to continually “look for forms of words that hold the whole place together as best you can” (McDonnell 2021). In relation to the talks themselves, Labor emphasized the need to negotiate a Brexit that supported workers’ rights, and the party’s position was close to the May government’s line in everything except its proposal to maintain a customs’ union with the EU. In this, the Labour position ran up against precisely the same constraints as May had, namely that efforts to negotiate bespoke arrangements were deemed ‘cherry picking’ and

rejected out-of-hand by the EU (Barnier 2021, 67). Thus, while the party nurtured the image that a Labour government would negotiate a more beneficial deal with Brussels, from the EU's perspective its position was simply another request for special treatment (Interviews A03 and D01).

During the course of the negotiations, as Brexit became re-politicized by the failure of May's deal, support grew within the party for a commitment to a 'second referendum', with Keir Starmer, the Shadow Brexit Secretary, one of those pushing for such a commitment (Campbell 2021; Pogrund and Maguire 2020). The party's commitment to another vote, adopted prior to the 2019 general election, broke with their previously advantageous policy of ambiguity, contributing to their defeat at the hands of Johnson's Conservative Party, which succeeded in swinging numerous 'red wall' seats in the Labor heartlands through its 'Get Brexit Done' message (Cutts et al. 2020, 7). Having been burned by the second referendum commitment, Starmer—who succeeded Corbyn as party leader in the aftermath of the election—re-established the party's commitment to Brexit along similar lines to the Conservatives, precluding membership of the Single Market and Customs Union, despite Brexit remaining "the most gigantic elephant in the tiniest room there has ever been" (Campbell 2021).

Successive gaffes by Johnson, notably the so-called 'Partygate' scandal which led to his resignation, contributed to an upsurge in support for the Labour Party from late 2022 onward. While the available data suggest growing support among citizens more broadly for a softer UK–EU relationship (Hix et al. 2023, 186), the party has avoided significant statements on Brexit or the EU. Indeed, it is difficult for Labour to capitalize on this outside the security domain, both because of its association with the 'second referendum' campaign and also the now-proven unviability of 'cherry picking' access to the Single Market (Interview D01). The risks involved in attempting to reappraise the economic relationship were driven home following rumors that Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's Conservative government was considering 'Swiss-style' proposals for the UK–EU relationship (The Times 2022). While occurring at a time ripe—politically—for mending ties with Europe, European observers pointed out this model of the association had already been rejected during the negotiations, while the Conservative right began mobilizing immediately to defend Brexit from the ostensible threat of Johnson's agreement being rolled-back (BBC News 2022). Thus, the Conservatives' own experience with a mooted change to the economic status quo demonstrated just how unattainable—and politically contentious—the search for a more integrated economic agreement would be.

Against this backdrop, the Shadow Foreign Secretary, David Lammy, announced on January 24, 2023 that, if elected, Labor would seek to negotiate a security pact with the EU (BBC News 2023). Noting that Labour would seek to 'take back control' through foreign policy, Lammy argued in his speech that the Conservatives were "fundamentally wrong to think it means going it alone", calling on Britain to act as "a leader in Europe once again...a reliable partner, a dependable ally and a good neighbour" (Labour Party 2023). Under the tagline 'Britain Reconnected', the shadow Foreign Secretary proposed a new UK–EU security pact that would "institutionalise new cooperation across foreign policy through regular EU/UK summits and structured dialogue, both at the political and official level" (Labour Party 2023). On the face of it, the emphasis on security and defense is surprising, since this is an area where much can be achieved under the radar, with most observers predict-

ing an improvement in the behind-the-scenes relationship should Labour be elected (Interviews C14 and C15). And, while the stakes are high following the invasion of Ukraine, the 'no deal' in security and defense is far less damaging owing to the background presence of NATO (Interview C18). Reflecting the relative lack of concern about the need for a formal security relationship, one interviewee noted that a future Labor government "would say yes to pretty much anything [on security] that was proposed" but that they were "not sure there would be an enormous amount of value in them" (Interview C19). Another suggested that a Labour government would likely be "better behaved", but was not sure "whether the UK's interests will be profoundly different being where they are now" (Interview C04).

Yet a focus on security is politically valuable, even if the greatest gains at stake for the UK are in revising the economic relationship. A formal security agreement would not re-open contentious debates surrounding the UK's 'red lines' nor Britain's relationship to the regulatory and institutional framework of the Single Market, issues on which Labour fare little better than their Conservative opponents. Moreover, the terms of a security agreement—which is outwardly desired by the EU—would be comparatively simple to negotiate and would take place from a position of relative strength. Because Johnson's TCA contained no security agreement, there is much in the way of low-hanging fruit to be gained through even minimal forms of cooperation. And with the Ukraine War raging in the background, outward criticism of UK–EU security cooperation is likely to be more muted than it would otherwise be. As noted by one interviewee: "One of the first things [Labour] will do is to move forward in this direction, because of [the] mutual interest and it's easy to do...I don't think Starmer will try to reverse Brexit, but he will definitely try to come to more sort of cooperative relationship" (Interview C12). As with the policies of successive Conservative governments, Labour's announcement suggests that the best way of dealing with demands for reforming Britain's relationship with the EU lies in transposing them into one domain—foreign and security policy—where the UK has real leverage and comparatively little at stake.

Conclusion

In spite of the status of EU security and defense cooperation as a technical and relatively specialized area of intergovernmental cooperation, the position of party leaders on the value of a security deal has varied considerably in the years since the Brexit vote. From seeking a close security partnership in mid-2018 under the May government, February 2020 saw the Johnson government default to a 'no deal' outcome in this area, while in January 2023 the Labour Party committed to a security agreement should it win the next election. Why such variation in such a short space of time? And why did these security agreements not mirror the underlying economic relationship sought by these leaders, often going further in the proposed direction than more significant arrangements in the trading relationship? In this article, we argued that EU security policy is valuable for leaders because of its ability to compensate for unavailable economic arrangements. Given the economic costs of Brexit and the asymmetry in power, neither bespoke arrangements nor 'no deal' were ever plausible outcomes. Yet Britain could expect to obtain special treatment or survive 'no deal' in the foreign and security policy domain, where the UK had greater leverage and a non-EU fallback in NATO. Thus, foreign policy rapidly became an area in which leaders could signal to

constituencies they were delivering on their specific Brexit promises.

Theoretically, our argument articulates a new and distinct form of internal–external linkage politics that differs in crucial respects from existing categories of politicization, diversionary war and issue linkage. It also contributes to research on domestication and externalization by identifying the conditions under which leaders can instrumentally seek to reframe domestic priorities as international ones. By showing that foreign policy—under certain conditions—can become a venue for political struggles emanating from other issue areas, our argument helps counter long-held assumptions about the specificity of the foreign policy domain and the extent to which it is insulated from domestic concerns. Empirically, our interpretation sheds light on the gradual politicization of foreign and security issues in the aftermath of the Brexit vote and the divergence between early expectations of an easy agreement and the current ‘no deal’ status quo. It also promises to help us understand historical cases in a new light (e.g., Gaullism) and to help identify contemporary instances of compensatory foreign policy. Finally, our argument comes with lessons for policymakers, who need to be aware of the conditions under which contagion of policy shifts into different domains is more or less likely, and for citizens, who should be informed about the possibilities of misdirection by governments struggling to deliver on their promises.

Interviews

- A03 Former Conservative MEP, 18/7/2017.
- B04 Official, European Commission, 1/7/2021.
- B08 Senior Official, European Commission, 6/7/2021.
- B12 Senior Official, European Commission, 16/7/2021.
- B18 Former Cabinet Office Official, 23/5/2022.
- C01 Academic expert, EU external relations, 3/10/2022.
- C02 Senior Official, EEAS 7/10/2022.
- C03 Senior Fellow, think tank, 7/10/2022.
- C04 Academic expert, EU external relations, 7/10/2022.
- C05 Senior Fellow, think tank, 10/10/2022.
- C06 Academic expert, EU external relations, 10/10/2022.
- C07 Academic expert, EU external relations, 10/10/2022.
- C08 Official, German Foreign Ministry, 14/10/2022.
- C10 Academic expert, EU external relations, 14/10/2022.
- C11 Senior Commission Official, 18/10/2022.
- C12 Senior Fellow, think tank, 19/10/2022.
- C13 Official, German Foreign Ministry, 19/10/2022.
- C14 Senior Fellow, think tank, 20/10/2022.
- C15 Senior Fellow, think tank, 21/10/2022.
- C17A Senior Official, EEAS, 26/10/2022.
- C17B Senior Official, EEAS, 26/10/2022.
- C18 Academic expert, EU external relations, 28/10/2022.
- C19 Former EU defense official, 2/11/2022.
- D01 European diplomat in London, 3/8/2023.

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