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Nazia Hussain

Brexit: Elusive as Ever?



A Brexit agreement has finally materialised years after the secessionist vote, but there remains much unfinished business in this seemingly done deal. Photo taken by Habib Ayoade on Unsplash.

FEATURED COMMENTARY

Post-Brexit: Enter the Mini-Brexits?

By Frederick Kliem



With Brexit now official, the United Kingdom has accelerated efforts to bolster ties as a separate entity from the European Union, including via an application to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership. Photo of the CPTPP Head of Mission Roundtable taken by the official Number 10 Flickr account and tagged under a Creative Commons Licence.

Great Britain and the European Union finally agreed upon their Trade and Cooperation Agreement. It was a long, arduous process. Although Brexit comes at a high social and political price, eventually, moderate Brexiteers got much of what they were looking for. What about the future?

Commentary

HABEMUS PACTUM! The best news about the long elusive Brexit deal is that there finally is one. This alone is a big win for British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who needed a political triumph.

Although Brexit and the divorce agreement came at a high price, Brexiteers got most of what they wanted. It is surprising just how much Brussels was willing to accommodate British requests.

Costly Triumph: Now For 'Mini-Brexits'?

Brexiteers above all wanted to pull Britain out of the European Union single-market and customs union; unimpeded national control over immigration; and independence from EU legal jurisdiction, standards and regulations. They generally achieved all that.

A well documented and indeed obvious consequence of Brexit is reduced economic growth for Britons in 2021 outside the single-market. Yet, the UK-EU agreement provides for quota- and tariff-free market access, a relief for everyone bar the most hard-line Brexiteers.

The economic impact will be theoretically cushioned – perhaps eventually offset – by a restructuring of British trade with new, independent trade agreements, which Britain can independently negotiate. London has already concluded 63 free trade (FTA) agreements, commenced official FTA

negotiations with a further six countries, and are in ongoing talks with Australia, New Zealand and the United States.

Granted, many of those FTAs are equal or similar to the EU ones; but it was less the content of FTAs that mattered to Brexiteers than the sovereignty to negotiate or change them independently. The same applies to EU standards, which the UK no longer has to accommodate beyond the threshold already in place.

This certainly is a victory

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for Brexiteers, who de facto achieved what they had set out for. But Brexit came at a high price in form of a social levy, a demoralised society divided over Brexit, and now a British society perpetually stressed by a series of never-ending “mini-Brexits”.

These mini-Brexits include numerous matters that have been either shelved for now or insufficiently addressed. Both result in continuous public and political debates, legal challenges and re-negotiations, internally and with the EU, with the consequence that Brexit is not done and never will be – with all the societal tensions that come with it.

Mini-Brexit I: Devolution

The Northern Ireland (NI) question seems insoluble for now. Accordingly, the agreement’s compromise is unsatisfactory and ultimately unsustainable. In a necessary effort to avoid a hard border on the island of Ireland, NI will remain connected to the EU in manifold ways.

Economically, Brexit has de facto created a UK-internal “sea-border” with NI remaining within EU single-market and customs regulations, while the rest of the UK has left both.

Socially, the Republic of Ireland (RI) has declared it will provide grants to NI students to continue participating in the EU’s flagship student exchange programme Erasmus. Other UK students will, for now, not be able to benefit from this scheme anymore.

The relatively stable status quo ante on the island of Ireland has been unsettled by Brexit, now connecting NI to RI, via Brussels.

Likewise, the Scots – who overwhelmingly voted “remain” – go to the polls in 2021. Brexit will certainly be the main fault-line, and, while unlikely at this point, the spectre of Scottish independence will darken Britain’s political climate for years to come.

In combination, these double devolution issues severely complicate the “United” in the Kingdom.

Mini-Brexit II: Fishing

It is debatable whether there ever can be such a thing as a “sovereign coastal state”, but exclusive rights to British fisheries is what the industry expected from Brexit. The eventual compromise achieved only a marginally greater share for British fishers, who are outraged and – correctly – feel that they have been sacrificed for other national priorities.

Economically negligible as this is, fishing carries disproportionate political and emotional weight. A deeply disappointed industry will continuously lament the implementation of what they see as a sell-out Brexit.

Because regulations will be re-negotiated annually after 2026, fishing will remain a perpetual issue, ensuring that Brexit will partly be fought again annually and not be forgotten anytime soon.

Road Ahead: Not Done Yet

While Brexiteers can claim victory from their perspective, Brexit is not done, and never will be.

Two economies so deeply intertwined and geographically adjacent will perpetually struggle in arbitration courts over the true meaning of the Brexit agreement and the issues left unresolved. As far as the NI and fishing disputes are concerned, this perpetual struggle has been written into the agreement.

In this light, it is difficult to see how Britain can ever return to a status quo ante – a time before the nationalistic, inflammatory, sometimes racist and xenophobic but at all times immensely divisive Brexit campaign created a societal discord that will be difficult to heal.

What It Means for Asia

For Asia, Brexit offers opportunities. We can expect increasing British interest in trade agreements as well as security cooperation. Several EU agreements, including with Singapore, have been rolled over, while others have been newly concluded or are being negotiated.

A significant one is the UK-Japan agreement. Not only does it represent a notable trade success for London, Japan will also support potential UK attempts to join the CPTPP (Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans Pacific Partnership) – one of the world’s largest free trade areas, and to

which the EU is not a member.

Even if only to please the US, we can also expect an increased UK security presence in the Indo-Pacific. Next year, the new aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth, Britain’s largest-ever warship, is expected to kick-off what is supposed to become “Global Britain’s” increased Indo-Pacific focus.

In addition to bolstering Asian recognition of its middle power status, London may expect a favourable US reception of its security contributions, which the EU cannot match, and which may allow London to jump the trade negotiations queue with the US. Such are the windows of opportunity opened up incidentally by Brexit.

To some observers, Britain is returning to becoming the exceptional and ambitious island power; to others, this is naïve sovereignty nostalgia. Few things in politics are ever one-dimensional. Brexit was always a double-edged sword, never entirely good or bad. 2021’s divorce agreement cements this ambivalence. ■

Dr. Frederick Kliem is a Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Multilateralism Studies (CMS) at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.

COVID-19 and Great Power Competition

On 16 February 2021, as part of the RSIS Webinar Series on Post-Pandemic Multilateralism and Diplomacy, the Centre for Multilateralism Studies hosted a session titled “COVID-19 and Great Power Competition”. Panellists deliberated on the impact of COVID-19 on the already complex great power dynamics in the region — from the risks of antagonism to the opportunities for cooperation.

Dr Beverley Loke, Lecturer in International Relations at the University of Exeter, outlined the four logics of great power dynamics and regional hegemonic ordering in existing literature. She introduced a fifth logic of “coalitional and collaborative hegemonies in a complex hierarchy”, which was anchored in assertiveness, fluidity, and compartmentalisation. The fifth logic suggested that Wash-

ington and Beijing would not only form coalitional hegemonies but engage in a collaborative hegemony based on shared interests. Dr Loke highlighted key regional great power trends sharpened by COVID-19: (i) Intensified US-China strategic competition; (ii) Assertiveness-responsibility nexus in China’s foreign policy; and (iii) Diminished US regional standing.

Providing a Chinese perspective, Prof Gao Jian, Senior Researcher and Secretary-General at the Shanghai Academy of Global Governance and Area Studies, spoke of the philosophical questions arising out of the pandemic. He elaborated on the economic, multilateral and cultural fallout of COVID-19, noting the need for inclusive globalisation.

The webinar concluded with Prof Brad Glosserman’s assessment of the continuing US-China competition under the Biden administration. Prof Glosserman who is Deputy Director and Visiting Professor at the Center for Rule-making Strategies, Tama University, said Washington is going to be looking at a foreign and domestic policy that is more inwardly focused. The US will also go about building a national consensus for engaging the rest of the world with its soft and hard power capabilities. Balancing the need to look inward and the need to engage with allies and partners is going to create a new equilibrium. ■

Multilateralism and Trade in a Post-COVID World

On 23 February 2021, the Centre for Multilateralism Studies (CMS) hosted a panel webinar on the global pandemic’s effects on international economic cooperation. To kick off the session, Dr Alica Kizeková, Head of Asia Pacific Unit and Senior Researcher at the Czech Republic’s Institute of International Relations, elaborated on how ASEAN Centrality has emerged from the pandemic relatively unharmed, considering an initial lack of coordinated action between member states in the first few months of COVID-19’s emergence. Despite the successful deployment of several mechanisms to manage health security and economic recovery, there were areas where the reassessment of regional cooperation might be necessary. This included amending trade facilitation goals, such as reducing cargo inspection times at the border, which might not be well-suited to a post-pandemic age.

Ms Alyssa Leng, Research Associate at Australia’s Lowy Institute, spoke on the changing contours of geo-economic competition post-COVID-19. China’s speedier economic recovery could enable a faster catch up to the US in terms of GDP, placing it well ahead of regional economic competitors such as India. Given that long-term, large-scale projects are less tenable due to fiscal constraints, she noted that vaccines could become a more popular economic diplomacy tool compared to resuscitating stalled infrastructure projects along the Belt and Road Initiative. These changes notwithstanding, China will remain a central geo-economic player. She added that while antagonising Beijing could result in trade retaliation risks for countries economically vulnerable to China, such economic punishments are generally painful on a sectoral rather than aggregate level.

Rounding off the discussion was CMS’ Asst Prof Lee Su-Hyun, who discussed the possible factors affecting the future trajectory of regional trade. In particular, disrupted and reshuffled supply chains, the ongoing US-China trade war, switch to a Biden White House, and the signing of new regional and free trade agreements have been shaping existing trade networks. However, it is too early to tell whether these trends would result in strengthened regional trade that would reinforce or undermine economic multilateralism on a global scale. She concluded that the efforts to strengthen multilateralism and reduce economic vulnerabilities might be better served by diversifying trade linkages and by compensating economic globalisation’s losers to achieve further liberalisation. ■

COVID-19 and the Future of Diplomacy

As part of the RSIS webinar series on Post-Pandemic Multilateralism and Diplomacy, the Centre for Multilateralism Studies hosted an event on 2 March 2021 titled “COVID-19 and the Future of Diplomacy”. The webinar saw the panellists deliberate on the challenges brought about by diplomacy having gone virtual — such as public messaging where misinformation could mix with nationalist sentiments to create new pressures on countries.

Dr Kitti Prasirtsuk, Vice-Rector for International Affairs and Associate Professor of Political Science at Thailand’s Thammasat University, highlighted the spread of COVID-19 as an important juncture in global politics, with the crisis having allowed Asian countries to demonstrate their competence. He noted that there has been a tactical shift of power from the West to the East in recent years. However, this shift has been com-

plicated by factors such as anti-Asian sentiment in the West as an unfortunate fallout of COVID-19 as well as the increase in great power competition.

Ms Ariel Bogle, Analyst at the International Cyber Policy Centre, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, outlined how countries that are developing their own COVID-19 vaccines, such as China, India and Russia, are using Western social media platforms to amplify positive narratives about their own vaccines. However, vaccine diplomacy has also led to misinformation campaigns targeting certain vaccines or amplifying negative stories about rival vaccines without proper context. For instance, the Pfizer vaccine has often been targeted by Chinese and Russian state media in misinformation campaigns amplifying negative stories surrounding it. Sentiment analysis shows that such misinformation campaigns

do have the impact of raising negative sentiments and might undermine public trust in vaccines, Ms Bogle noted.

The webinar concluded with Dr Alfred Gerstl, Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellow at the Department of Asian Studies, Palacký University Olomouc, Czech Republic, noting that since the COVID-19 vaccine is a global public good with limited supply, multilateralism is the logical process to avoid competition and “vaccine nationalism”. Dr Gerstl emphasised that while COVID-19 is a global problem concerning international relations, global governance, social justice and political philosophy, the pandemic has now become mainly an example for geopolitical rivalry, with vaccines as the new soft power tool in an enlarged diplomatic toolbox, especially for China, Russia and India. ■

Pacific Regionalism at a Crossroads: How Did We Get Here and Where to Next?

On 18 March 2021, the Centre for Multilateralism Studies (CMS) organised a webinar on the dynamics of regionalism in the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). Dr Tess Newton Cain, Project Leader of Griffith Asia Institute’s Pacific Hub, discussed the longstanding tensions undergirding the decision by the PIF’s Micronesian members — Palau, Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati and Nauru — to announce their departure from the organisation. In their view, the PIF disproportionately favours members from the South Pacific and does not seem to bring tangible benefits to the Northern Pacific members, for instance, in the hosting of regional institutions and the reaping of associated benefits like jobs creation.

The severity of this most recent rift notwithstanding, Dr Cain not-

ed that Pacific regionalism was not all lost as not all the Micronesian five have officially begun their exit process. Quiet diplomacy has been afoot to find interlocutors and encourage negotiations as there is significant interest in retaining a 17-member-strong PIF. However, the inability to hold in-person meetings owing to COVID-19 has made negotiations doubly hard. Acknowledging that the pandemic has ushered in more inward-looking sentiments, she added that more could be done to strengthen regionalism among member states. For instance, more high-level points of contact between foreign ministries would be beneficial as junior government officials have little clout in spotlighting regional issues at the national level.

In response to questions raised by Assoc Prof Alan Chong, head

of CMS, Dr Cain elaborated on the interests of external powers in the PIF’s fate and their potential roles in resolving tensions. For the European Union, the PIF is an important partner in climate change diplomacy. Being well within the US orbit and not at risk of coming under Chinese influence, for Washington, the Micronesian states could in fact become an important base for its hard security strategy, a “Fortress Micronesia”. Nonetheless, their departure from PIF would leave the United States with fewer allies in PIF discussions. Although there is interest in seeing the PIF weather this crisis, Dr Cain felt that the other Pacific Islander countries are better positioned to initiate and lead talks; any external support should only be in the form of facilitating those diplomatic efforts. ■

Multilateral Matters: News Roundup

COVID-19 and ASEAN: Facilitating Trade in Perishable Goods

Fulcrum | 5 April 2021 | [Full Report](#)

very inside Google after it emerged that the hackers in question were working for a US ally.
[Full Report](#)

East Asia Forum | 17 March 2021 | [Full Report](#)

The Quad Gives a Boost to India's Vaccine Diplomacy

The Interpreter | 16 March 2021 |

Countering China's influence is one thing. But fostering regional cooperation plays to the strengths of the grouping.

[Full Report](#)

ASEAN's Declining Common Denominator

Bangkok Post | 5 March 2021 | [Full Report](#)

Beyond Cotton, Another Thread in Xinjiang Supply Chain Creates New Snag for Global Textile Firms

South China Morning Post | 28 March 2021 | [Full Report](#)

After COVID, Services Are Where the Trade Action Is

Wall Street Journal | 22 March 2021 | [Full Report](#)

Google's Top Security Teams Unilaterally Shut Down a Counterterrorism Operation

MIT Technology Review | 26 March 2021 |

The decision to block an "expert" level cyberattack has caused contro-

Decoupling Won't Kill a Green Future

Foreign Affairs | 19 March 2021 | [Full Report](#)

Domestic Divisions Leave Blanks in US Asia Policy

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

Rules-Based Order? Strengthening consensus on the rules and principles underpinning the international order

Joel Ng, Sarah Teo and Benjamin Ho | *Asia Link Insights* | 16 February 2021

Sino-Indian Frontier Dilemma: A Potential Stalemate

Nazia Hussain | *China-India Brief* | 11 February 2021

Multilateralism in 2021: Better Than 2020?

Joel Ng | *RSIS Commentaries* | 8 February 2021

Measures of Economic Vulnerability & Inter-dependency in the Global Economy

Jikon Lai and Amalina Anuar | *RSIS Working Papers* | 20 January 2021

Minilateralism for Multilateralism in the Post-COVID Age

Amalina Anuar and Nazia Hussain | *RSIS Policy Report* | 19 January 2021

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Jikon Lai | *The Diplomat* | 05 January 2021

Mobile phone users as pseudo-

brokers in clientelism: evidence from Africa

Han Il Chang and Su-Hyun Lee | *The Social Science Journal* | 2021

COVID-19 and International Cooperation: IR Paradigms at Odds

Rajesh Basrur and Frederick Kliem | *SN Social Sciences* | Vol. 1, Article 7 | 2021

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Multilateral Matters is the quarterly publication of the Centre for Multilateralism Studies (CMS), analysing the most recent developments regarding multilateralism by our team. It covers articles on relevant economic and political issues as well as programmes and latest publications from the research centre. The objective of the newsletter is to promote the research being done by our centre, raising awareness of the many events that we hold on a regular basis.

Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: + 65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg