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British environmental foreign policy identity post-Brexit: environment and climate policy

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Abstract

Since the 2016 referendum on leaving the European Union (EU), the United Kingdom (UK) government has been keen to persuade commentators and stakeholders that Brexit will not be bad for the UK's environment. Rather in line with the role of Britain as a great power, the government has suggested that when it comes to the environment the UK can be a global superpower, leading other nations in its pursuit of ambitious environmental policy goals. This new environmental foreign policy role orientation has been articulated through the concept of 'Green Brexit' and showcased via the chairing of a major Climate Change Conference (the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, Conference of the Parties (COP) 26) in Glasgow in 2021. However, whilst there was a flurry of policy activity around COP26, overall 'Green Brexit', has yet to be underpinned by coherent and credible domestic policy commitments necessary for effective international environmental leadership.

Keywords Brexit · Environment · Foreign policy identity · Green Brexit

Introduction

Brexit has disrupted assumptions about the United Kingdom's (UK) foreign policy identity (Oppermann, et al. 2020) and its positioning on the environment (Burns et al. 2019). The Government has sought to affirm its dominant role orientation as a global power and has articulated a post-Brexit foreign policy identity through the concept of 'Global Britain' (Her Majesty's Government (HMG), 2021a). In parallel, it has discursively constructed 'Green Brexit' as a way for the UK to lead the world in developing ambitious environmental and climate policies (Gove 2017). This repositioning of foreign policy has been subject to critical evaluation as analysts seek to make sense of what 'Global Britain' means to the UK and, crucially, to its partners

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(Daddow 2019; Gifkins, et al. 2019; Niblett 2021; Oliver 2016). Environmental policy became a central component of the framing of the UK's international diplomacy in the immediate period following the Referendum. However, there has been little scrutiny of what Brexit means for the UK's attempts to position itself as an internationally leading environmental actor. This article seeks to address that gap by synthesising insights from the literatures on role adaptation (Gaskarth 2014; Oppermann, et al. 2020) and international environmental leadership (Wurzel, et al. 2019) in order to review the UK's environmental foreign policy role orientation, conception and performance (see Webber 2022; Gaskarth 2014). The article identifies the characteristics environmental leaders might be expected to exhibit. It assesses the significance of Brexit by reviewing the UK's environmental foreign policy identity pre-Brexit and the claims made by policy elites about the implications of Brexit, before presenting a short case study of the UK's performance at COP26, the first major test of claims concerning a 'Green Brexit'.

The analysis suggests that whilst the UK's role as an environmental leader has been discursively emphasised through the construction of Global Britain and 'Green Brexit', this discursive construction has not yet been matched by coherent and credible domestic policy commitments. Moreover, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the energy price spike and associated cost-of-living crisis suggest that there may be less emphasis upon the UK's environmental foreign policy leadership in the coming months and years.

conceptualising environmental foreign policy identity

Gaskarth (2014) suggests that one way to analyse British foreign policy identity is to reflect critically upon the roles that Britain seeks to play in the world, while recognising that these roles are shaped by domestic self-identities and political pressures, and by the expectations of other states and international actors (see also Adler-Nissen et al. 2017). This approach provides a dynamic understanding of identity and roles as it is possible to consider a basket of role conceptions from which a state selects. These choices may change depending upon domestic and external conditions. Brexit raises some fundamental questions about the UK's foreign policy role, its self-perception and how it is regarded by others. Interestingly in the post-Brexit period the UK has chosen the role of environmental leader as part of its wider foreign policy identity, revisiting a position held in the mid to late 2000s, which had lapsed in the intervening years of austerity. The literature on roles distinguishes between orientation (how a state presents and or perceives itself) and role performance – the basket of behaviours a state is expected to perform to fit its orientation. Analysing the UK's environmental foreign policy identity requires a consideration of the choice *and* performance of role orientation.

To analyse the performative element of the UK's environmental foreign policy identity as an environmental leader, I turn to the environmental leadership literature that is typically used to analyse the behaviour of states in the international arena. Like the work on roles, this body of work emphasises the relationship between internal and external factors that condition and shape the types and

styles of leadership exercised by states (see Liefferink and Wurzel 2017; Torney 2019; Wurzel, et al. 2019). Key measures of credibility regarding claims of international leadership are domestic policy ambition and implementation. Consequently, assessing the UK's claims to environmental leadership requires consideration of internal and external ambition and intent. Table 1 classifies state leadership into four broad categories: laggards (entailing low internal and external environmental ambitions); pioneers (high internal but low external ambition); symbolic (high external ambition but no matching internal ambition); and pushers (high external and internal ambition) (Liefferink and Wurzel 2017: 954). These environmental leadership positions change over time and are shaped by economic performance or by ideological shifts occasioned by a change of government.

There are clear synergies between the role identity and environmental leadership literatures. Both recognise the importance of internal politics in shaping external role identity and the centrality of the behaviour of other actors in shaping the nature of the role that a state can occupy. Crucially the leadership literature provides an analytical toolbox, which can be used to assess a state's performance in the role of global environmental leader. Consequently I draw upon both literatures to evaluate UK environmental foreign policy identity in order to address two research questions:

I) What kind of environmental leader has the UK sought to be since the 2016 referendum?
II) To what extent has the UK's role orientation matched its role performance?

To address these questions, I proceed in the following section to summarise briefly the UK's role conception in the pre-Brexit era. I conduct a systematic review of the UK's role conception as an 'environmental leader' by reviewing parliamentary debates, and key policy documents to identify how the government articulated its Green Brexit environmental role orientation. I then take as a case study the hosting of COP26, which represented the first major opportunity for the UK to showcase its environmental foreign policy and diplomatic credentials since leaving the EU, to evaluate the extent to which the UK's discursive construction of itself as an 'environmental superpower' (role orientation) was matched by credible policy commitments (role performance) (see Gaskarth 2014; Oppermann et al. 2020).

Table 1 Types of environmental leadership

External face	Internal face	
	Low Ambition	High Ambition
Low Ambition	Laggard	Pioneer
High Ambition	Symbolic	Pusher

Liefferink and Wurzel (2017, p. 954)

the evolution of the uk from 'awkward' dirty man of Europe to climate pioneer

The UK enjoyed an unenviable environmental foreign policy reputation in the 1980s, due to an unwillingness to accommodate EU environmental policies and the unfortunate environmental consequences of domestic policies upon neighbouring states in the form of acid rain and pollution of the North and Irish seas (Rose, 1989; Lowe and Ward 1998). There was a clear view within the Department of Environment (DoE) (now the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs [DEFRA]) that the UK had nothing to learn from its European neighbours (Lowe and Ward 1998). However, following a relatively painful period of readjustment there was a realisation amongst policy elites in the 1990s that rather than constantly battling against EU rules that did not easily fit within the UK's policy paradigm it would be better to try to shape the rules adopted at EU level (Jordan 2002). The UK thus started to engage more positively at EU levels while still pushing its own preferences for deregulation and market-based instruments.

Crucially in the mid-2000s as environmental issues gained political traction and increased policy salience, they became a component of UK international diplomatic efforts. For example, the UK government made climate change and development aid key foci at the 2005 Gleneagles G8 summit. Prime Minister Tony Blair, a convert to the climate issue, was central to this initiative. At the meeting, he committed the UK to working with partners internationally to secure a successor agreement to the Kyoto Protocol limiting global greenhouse gas emissions. Blair recognised that emerging economies would be critical to any future agreement and invited the so-called + 5 group—China, India, Brazil, South Africa, and Mexico—to the Gleneagles Summit (Blair 2011, p.554). The UK government committed 0.7% Gross National Income (GNI) to overseas development assistance (ODA) in the spending review of 2004, further enhancing the UK's credibility with international partners in the Global South. In parallel, then Chancellor Gordon Brown commissioned economist Nicholas Stern to write a report on the economics of climate change (Khatri 2007) in order to persuade the business community of the merits of taking action to address the issue.

The Gleneagles summit saw the UK using its convening power to build partnerships and to court potential followers in an effort to shape a post-Kyoto climate agenda. In this spirit, the Stern Review, published in 2006, provided intellectual leadership by articulating the economic and business case for action on climate change (Rayner and Jordan 2017). Blair worked with his chief scientific advisor, David King, to bring the scientific community on board (Khatri 2007). He also sought to build a pro-climate action alliance in Europe in line with his strategy of using the EU as a site for the pursuit of UK preferences and as a soft-power multiplier. However, there was a disjunction between Blair's international leadership on the issue and the limited ambition of domestic UK climate policy at the time, which led to predictions that the UK would miss its 2010 emission reduction and 2020 renewable energy targets (Carter 2008, 2014; Rayner and

Jordan 2017). The gap between international rhetoric and domestic performance had the potential to undermine the UK's performance in the role of international environmental leader as at this stage the UK was acting as a symbolic or cost-free environmental leader (Rayner and Jordan 2017, see Table 1).

The adoption of the Climate Change Act in 2008 addressed this misalignment and reaffirmed the UK as an international leader on climate change, so shifting it towards the status of a 'pusher' (see Table 1), and enhancing the credibility of the leader role orientation. The Act introduced ambitious statutory emission reduction targets, carbon budgets, and a Climate Change Committee (CCC), all of which allowed Parliament to hold future governments to account in their fulfilment of the CCA's goals (Carter 2014). UK civil servants were increasingly recognised as international experts on climate change. This domestic policy activity was accompanied by proactive international engagement. Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett sought successfully to have climate change debated as a security threat by the UN Security Council (Sindico 2007; Warner and Boas 2019), and Prime Minister, Gordon Brown expended considerable personal political capital in trying to secure an agreement (albeit unsuccessfully) at the Copenhagen COP15 in 2009 (Seldon and Lodge 2010). The seriousness of the UK position was also reflected in the 2008 UK national security strategy, which included several references to the risk of climate change (Warner and Boas 2019). This period saw a clear and coherent strategy that linked domestic and international policy ambitions on climate change. Consequently, the UK matched its role orientation (environmental leader) with effective role performance – by using a range of soft power levers, convening power and intellectual credibility, along with acting as a first mover to align international positioning with domestic policy commitments.

However, after the Blair/Brown period, the Conservative-Liberal coalition government struggled to commit to progressive environmental and climate policies as it pursued austerity policies in the wake of the global financial and economic crisis. A mismatch thus reappeared between the image of the UK as a climate leader and its more modest domestic ambitions (Rayner and Jordan 2017). Prime Minister David Cameron was famously quoted as saying the UK needed to get rid of all the 'green crap' over concerns at rising energy prices. His time in office witnessed an increasing scepticism of EU environmental regulations (Carter and Clements 2015), which were perceived as constraining the UK government's ability to roll back domestic environmental policy (Lockwood 2021). In the run up to the Brexit referendum government ministers increasingly viewed the EU as imposing unwarranted environmental regulatory burdens upon the UK. Given this domestic context British international environmental policy initiatives were thin on the ground. The UK during the Cameron period could generously be characterised as a pioneer, or less sympathetically as a country edging toward laggard status. For whilst the UK had adopted ambitious policies and sought to shape ambition elsewhere in the 2007–2009 period, between 2010 and 2016 it was no longer pursuing proactive strategies either domestically or internationally.

Brexit and UK environmental foreign policy identity

The environment struggled to gain policy traction during the Brexit referendum campaign. Apart from one speech, Prime Minister Cameron did not engage with the subject. The key issues of the Brexit debates were, rather, immigration and the economy (Clarke, et al. 2017). Following the referendum, however, environmental non-governmental organisations (ENGOs) mobilised to form Greener UK, a coalition of interest groups, which sought to prevent a withdrawal from, or weakening of, EU environmental protections (Abbot and Lee 2021). The discussions about the environmental implications of Brexit generally focused upon what Brexit meant for UK policy with limited consideration given to what it might mean for the EU (Oliver 2016) or for the UK's wider environmental foreign policy identity. One notable exception was a House of Commons (HC) enquiry that flagged the soft power and strategic advantages offered by EU membership for the UK and the EU (HC, Foreign Affairs Committee, 2016).

The claim that the UK could secure a 'Green Brexit' emerged after the June 2017 general election following Michael Gove's appointment as Secretary of State for the Environment by Prime Minister Theresa May (Abbot and Lee 2021). Gove moved quickly to suggest that Brexit did not mean that UK environmental protections would be weakened (Gove 2017). Freed from the constraints of EU membership, he suggested, the UK would be able to innovate and pursue more ambitious policies than when a member state. He went so far as to suggest that post-Brexit the UK would become an 'environmental superpower' (Hansard HC, 2019). In his victory speech following the 2019 election, Boris Johnson similarly committed the UK to becoming the 'cleanest, greenest [country] on earth with the most far-reaching environmental programme' (Johnson 2019).

The 'Green Brexit' role orientation was an interesting choice by the May and Johnson administrations. One alternative (proposed in 2018 by the then Chancellor Philip Hammond and Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt among others) was the so-called 'Singapore-upon-Thames' model, involving a hard Brexit, low taxes and the deregulation of environmental and labour standards in pursuit of international economic competitiveness. In this context, the claims of a 'Green Brexit' were, in effect, a means by which to assuage the concerns of domestic environmental, agricultural and fisheries lobbies about the potential impact of EU withdrawal upon future standards and trade (Abbot and Lee 2021). The 2018 to 2019 period also saw the salience of environmental issues rapidly increase in Europe and the UK, driven by Greta Thunberg's school strikes campaign, Extinction Rebellion protests and stark scientific warnings about the impacts of climate change (Carter and Pearson 2020; Pearson and Rüdig 2020). The UK's prospective hosting of COP26 in November 2020 (subsequently moved to 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic) also helped drive up issue salience. In short, there was more to be gained politically by embracing a rhetoric of environmental leadership than in pursuing a riskier Singapore-on-Thames regulatory race-to-the-bottom.

A legislative programme was developed that centred on the Environment, Agriculture and Fisheries Acts. These pieces of legislation were largely domestic

in application and sought to ensure in the short term that no legal gaps emerged as a consequence of Brexit, although it is worth noting that much of their detail applied to England only, as the policy areas covered are devolved to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Environment Act (2021), which established post-Brexit targets and environmental governance structures, stipulated that the 25 year environment plan (25YEP) published in January 2018 (HMG, 2018) would be England's first post-Brexit Environmental Improvement Plan. It is in this document that the international dimensions of 'Green Brexit' were initially articulated.

The 25YEP set a series of ambitions and targets, although few were genuinely long term. The plan gave an indication of the UK's post-Brexit environmental role conception, but also of its limits. The notion of leadership articulated involved leading by example by setting and meeting goals and pushing for greater ambition at the global level. The main areas mentioned in the international chapter were climate change, poaching and trade in endangered species, biodiversity and marine protection. There is an explicit commitment to use ODA and climate finance to enable countries in the Global South to build resilience. An international conference on the trade in illegal wildlife was scheduled to be held in October 2018 and preparations were already being laid for a joint UK-Italian bid (subsequently launched in June 2019) to take up the presidency of COP26. There was also a commitment in the 25YEP to the dissemination of the natural capital approach to environmental policy which seeks to put an economic price upon nature and the environmental services it provides, such as carbon uptake from trees. This commitment was followed up by the Treasury in 2019 with the commissioning of the Dasgupta Review on the Economics of Biodiversity (Dasgupta 2021), the aim of which was to shape the debates on nature protection in the same way that the Stern Review shaped climate discourse and ambition.

These initiatives anticipated some of the content of the Johnson government's key statement of foreign policy priorities in *The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy* (HMG, 2021a). Given that the *Integrated Review* was published shortly ahead of international COPs on climate change and biodiversity, it unsurprisingly focussed on these environmental issues. Like the 25YEP, it emphasised the UK's position as a first mover on climate policy and its 2050 net zero target. On biodiversity, the *Review* committed the UK to protect 30% of its own land and sea by 2030 to 'support the recovery of nature'. There was detailed discussion of UK commitments ahead of COP26, but the biodiversity commitments were less specific: the report talks rather vaguely of the UK 'driving support' for new targets at the planned 2021 UN Biodiversity Conference (CBD COP15) (subsequently rescheduled to 2022).

Taken together, the 25YEP and the *Integrated Review* give an indication of the UK's ambitions and its claims to leadership. The rhetoric of 'Green Brexit' and the linking of external performance as a 'superpower' with domestic policy ambition suggests that rhetorically at least for the May and Johnson governments Green Brexit would rest upon ambitious external and internal environmental policies, putting the government in the 'pusher' quadrant of Table 1. However, the key policy documents failed to articulate a clear and coherent concept of what environmental

global leadership means and how it might be operationalised domestically and internationally over the long term. Instead, immediate policy priorities linked to upcoming international events took centre stage. Climate change received the most thorough treatment. This emphasis is understandable as COP26 was the first major test following the UK's formal exit from the EU in January 2020, of government claims to environmental leadership. Summitry provides an opportunity for political leaders to shape agendas at both the international and domestic levels thereby enhancing their global credibility. COP26 consequently provided a diplomatic window of opportunity for the UK government to deliver on the claims of environmental leadership that were so central to the discursive construction of Green Brexit and a perfect opportunity for analysts to evaluate the credibility of such claims. The following section reviews the UK's chairing of COP26 with a particular view to identifying the links between domestic and international ambition.

First test for 'Green Brexit': COP26

COP26 was important for several reasons. It was the first formal review of the nationally determined contributions states had committed to in Paris in 2015, to reduce global emissions and so limit increases in global temperatures. It was also the first major climate conference following the departure from the White House of climate-sceptic Donald Trump. Upon his inauguration in January 2021 Joe Biden had moved swiftly to establish a more ambitious suite of US climate policies and to reverse Trump's decision to take the US out of the Paris Agreement (Morton 2021). Further, COP26 had been postponed due to COVID-19 and came after extensive pandemic-related lockdowns and a global economic downturn. This raised doubts about how ambitious the outcomes of the conference were likely to be, but that it was taking place at all was seen as a feat of planning and logistics. Crucially for the Johnson government it was a major international platform that could be used to demonstrate the success of Brexit and to burnish the Government's environmental credentials.

Given the wider context, the UK, as Chair of COP26, set relatively modest ambitions in an exercise of expectation management. Hence, rather than pushing for the more ambitious targets and action that the science suggested were necessary, the Conference was limited to trying 'to keep 1.5 alive',—maintaining, in other words, the goal set out in the 2015 Paris Agreement of limiting the global average increase in temperature, through cuts in greenhouse gas emissions and the achievement of global net zero emissions by 2050. COP26 also signalled a shift of emphasis in climate action. Previously, international efforts had been geared to mitigation (cutting emissions) rather than adaptation (investing in measures to minimise the negative impacts of climate change such as flood defences). COP26, significantly, emphasised the need for greater funding and support for adaptation. Emphasis was also placed on reaching the long-standing (and yet to be achieved) climate finance pledge to raise $100 billion per year in climate finance for poorer countries in the Global South to facilitate adaptation and mitigation. Finally, there was a focus upon pinning down the rules to make the Paris agreement from 2015 operable. A consistent thread

linking the various approaches was the perceived need to mobilise private finance and business support to deliver climate goals, an approach that chimed well with the UK government's own preferences.

The run-up to the COP was far from ideal for the government. Cuts to the UK's ODA budget led to widespread condemnation from development experts and leading politicians, who questioned the UK's ability to persuade other countries to make financial commitments in the face of its own cuts, (Farand 2020; Colenbrander and Miller 2021; McKeon 2021), especially since former Prime Minister May had sought to align ODA commitments with climate delivery (HMG, 2019). The defining images of the opening days of the COP26 were inauspicious, characterised in a very British way by poor weather leading to train cancellations and long queues to enter the conference venue (Harvey et al. 2021), and compounded by issues around access and inclusion for disabled delegates and civil society actors (Davis 2021). Indeed, the opening chaos led the Climate Action Network (CAN) to make the UK the 'fossil of the day', an ignominious title bestowed on countries or actors "doing the most to achieve the least" progress on climate change (CAN, 2021). This was the first of three such awards for the UK during the conference, putting it in second place after Australia on the fossil leaderboard for the whole COP. Boris Johnson also found himself mired in domestic sleaze allegations, leading him to have to defend the UK at a COP26 press conference and assert that the UK was 'not a corrupt country' (Walker 2021).

Despite these setbacks, some progress was made. India, which had resisted bringing forward net zero plans, submitted a plan for net zero—albeit for 2070 rather than 2050—and committed to reducing carbon emissions by one billion tonnes by 2030 (BBC 2021). China and the US issued a joint declaration on *Enhancing Climate Action in the 2020s* (Volcovici, et al. 2021). Alok Sharma, the UK's COP President, was viewed by many as having performed well, engaging in a whirlwind range of diplomatic meetings ahead of the conference. He also won over delegates by weeping and apologising at the end of the conference when agreement on phasing out coal was weakened at the last minute (Spencer and Burgess 2021). Whilst organisation on the ground left something to be desired, the UK's diplomatic machinery was generally judged to have been effective.

However, credibility on the international climate stage is linked to domestic policy. Here the UK picture was mixed. The UK called upon other countries to phase out coal and boasted about the UK's own plans to do so. But the government gave ambiguous signals on a new deep coal mine in Cumbria (Greene 2021). It also seemed to be considering giving permission for a new oil field off the coast of Scotland (Wright 2021) and announced in the October 2021 budget statement a cut to duty on short haul passenger flights, a move seemingly at odds with the government's emission reduction ambitions (Shankleman 2021). Yet it was also clear that the prospect of the COP, along with the increased salience of environmental and climate policy, had ratcheted up domestic UK policy ambition. The UK made much of being the first 'major' economy to commit to net zero by 2050 (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2019). It also committed to an ambitious interim target of cutting emissions by 68% by 2030 and 78% by 2035. Yet, as the UK Climate Change Committee pointed out, the commitment to net zero needed

to be matched by concrete policy plans (Climate Change Committee 2021). This appeared to come in the ten-point green industrial plan unveiled in November 2020 (HMG, 2020) and the net zero strategy published in October 2021 (HMG, 2021b).

The former claimed that it would create 250,000 new jobs, largely through investment in offshore wind capacity, low carbon hydrogen and nuclear power. The plan also committed the government to an early phase out of petrol, diesel and hybrid vehicles (by 2030 and 2035) and investment in carbon capture and storage, greener transport, green homes and nature recovery plans. The net zero strategy laid out the UK's decarbonisation pathway to net zero by 2050, with policies and proposals to reduce emissions for each sector and a suite of cross-cutting actions, including transitioning to electric vehicles and investing in new low carbon forms of energy.

Green Brexit—role performance?

COP26 reinforced the UK's discursive commitment to the role orientation of global environmental leader. However, its performance—the extent to which commitments were credible and coherent—left something to be desired. For example, the net zero strategy received a mixed reaction. The broad ambition was welcomed, as were specific initiatives on green energy, building standards and moves toward electronic vehicles. However, critical voices suggested that the strategy included insufficient public investment and was overly reliant on private sector solutions and investment (Harvey and Elgot 2021). The UK Climate Change Committee pointed to some omissions (such as agricultural emissions) and noted the need to change public behaviour, for example, on diets and travel, and argued that plans for investment in domestic heat pumps and energy efficiency were vague and unambitious (Climate Change Committee 2021). It also became clear that there were reservations in government over the cost implications of the net zero strategy. The Treasury issued a net zero review (HMG, 2021c), which pointed to future shortfalls in revenue linked to the move away from fossil fuels. However, there were no plans to address that gap through changes in the tax system (Climate Change Committee 2021). More damningly, the High Court found that the government's net zero act was unlawful in failing to provide sufficiently detailed plans to meet its aims as required under the Climate Change Act (de Kauwe and Rundle 2022). The government was required to bring forward more detailed plans by the end of March 2023.

During this period there was a range of domestic and party-political constraints facing the government. For example, a core of climate-sceptic MPs on the conservative back benches mobilised to form a net zero scrutiny group, which was accused of seeking to stoke a new culture war on the issue of climate change (Taylor and Horton 2022; Carter and Pearson 2022). Broader public acceptance of net zero policies (Beaver 2021) looked set to waver as global energy prices soared during 2021–2022 (caused first by rising demand as the global economy emerged from pandemic restrictions and latterly by shortfalls of Russian supplies owing to the war in Ukraine). Resulting inflationary pressures, especially on low-income households seem likely to sap popular enthusiasm for climate change priorities, which surveys suggest is fragile and sensitive to perceived costs (Ipsos 2022).

The Government published an Energy Security Strategy in April 2022 (HMG, 2022) in direct response to concerns about energy prices. However, the strategy was widely criticised by experts as a missed opportunity to align energy security with net zero ambitions, not least due to its suggestion that new sources of oil and gas (including through fracking) would be needed to address the energy-supply crisis (Le Page 2022). Criticism was also levelled at the strategy's failure to include energy efficiency measures and its focus upon costly and long-term solutions such as nuclear power, rather than onshore renewables (Climate Change Committee 2022; Carter and Pearson 2022).

Looking beyond climate to wider environmental policy, there has, as yet been no overall statement of UK environmental foreign policy underpinned by coherent long-term strategic ambitions. Rather there has been a patchwork of different policy documents, the vast majority of which have been domestic in inspiration and orientation. The 25 YEP cobbled together a somewhat random mix of aspirations and short-term targets. The *Integrated Review*, meanwhile, seemed driven in its environmental concerns by the imminence of COP26. It contained no clear statement of what Global Britain means for the environment or how the UK might mobilise its claims to leadership around the environment as part of a broader foreign policy strategy. The Dasgupta Review struggled to generate the same level of buy-in and impact from political, economic and international actors as the Stern Review. The Biodiversity COP15 held in 2022 saw the UK government again come under fire for failing to provide domestic ambitions to match its international commitments. Campaigners noted that whilst the UK supported the 30 by 30 targets (that 30% of land and sea be protected by 2030) only 3% of land in the UK could be deemed to be protected (Greenfield and Weston 2022).

Conclusion

Brexit opened a window of opportunity for UK foreign policy identity and environmental policy ambition. The government moved to assuage wider concerns about environmental policy post-Brexit by claiming to pursue a 'Green Brexit' and aspiring to be a global environmental leader. However, this role orientation required an alignment between domestic and international policy commitments. This article has reviewed the credibility of the international role identity selected by the government by synthesising the literatures on role orientation and environmental leadership to analyse key policy documents and the UK's performance at the first major international environmental conference post-Brexit, COP26, in order to address the following questions:

I) What kind of environmental leader has the UK sought to be since the 2016 referendum?
II) To what extent has the UK's role orientation matched its role performance?

On the first question, I have argued that the UK has discursively emphasised its role as an international environmental leader as part of its attempt to deliver a Green Brexit. The role orientation built upon pre-existing attempts to develop an internationally ambitious environmental policy under the Blair and Brown governments, where international policy ambition was matched by domestic policy developments (on climate at least) and the UK could be classed as a pusher in the leadership typology (see Table 1). On the question of whether the UK's role orientation matched its performance my analysis suggests that the 'Green Brexit' policy orientation has not been wholly coherent, but rather has been a rhetorical device to bring together various policy initiatives that were needed as a consequence of Brexit and to assuage the concerns of affected groups. It has yet to be translated into a coherent and clear environmental strategy and consequently the global environmental leader orientation has not yet been fully performed. The leadership typology suggests that the UK is at best exercising the role of symbolic leader, where it is making external claims of ambition but failing to deliver the domestic policies that would make such claims credible.

Consequently, there is as yet no long-term environmental foreign policy identity linked to 'Green Brexit'. Rather there have been some short-term policy endeavours, most notably to deliver COP26 and thereby to polish post-Brexit UK's (somewhat tarnished) reputation as a climate leader. There was a recognition that to be credible the UK had to deliver domestically but the suite of policies brought forward by the Johnson administration, whilst ambitious, had notable gaps and a number of domestic policies actively undermined the climate agenda. The policy gaps become more obvious in a context of rising energy prices and increasingly vocal opposition from the Conservative backbenchers to the pursuit of net zero.

In many respects the UK's environmental foreign policy positioning post-Brexit is consistent with longstanding practice whereby engagement has varied in line with domestic policy priorities. It is also worth noting that in this, the UK is not alone. Scholarship on environmental leadership is replete with studies of states that were once, but can no longer claim to be, environmental leaders, or where leadership is patchy across different environmental policy areas (e.g. see Börzel 2003; Wurzel et al. 2018; Wurzel et al. 2019). For example, Germany has struggled to reconcile its status as a leading car manufacturer, with its reputation as an environmental leader. Moreover, Germany, along with other EU states, is now facing some challenging trade-offs over its energy mix as Russia threatens to cut off gas supplies.

Evidence from previous economic downturns also suggests that the cost-of-living and burgeoning economic crises are likely to dampen public and political enthusiasm for environmental policies in the near future (Burns and Tobin 2016; Kenny 2022). Given this unpropitious context it seems unlikely, at least in the short to medium term, that we will see the rhetorical commitment to 'Green Brexit' and environmental leadership translated into an ambitious and holistic environmental foreign policy strategy that can tackle the most pressing environmental challenges.

Declarations

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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