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The Anglosphere and 'Anglo-scepticism' in the post-Brexit UK-Australia relationship

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ABSTRACT

The UK-Australia relationship was invested with renewed importance after Brexit, particularly amongst conservatives in both countries. Ideas about cultural and strategic commonality amongst Anglophone countries were an important element of the elite project underpinning Brexit. A comparative analysis of this Anglosphere perspective is important as it shapes the worldviews of political and policy elites in both countries, thus underpinning recent developments such as AUKUS and the UK-Australia FTA. Drawing on extensive interview data, this article contends that although seldom referred to explicitly, the Anglosphere idea continues to frame understandings of the relationship between Australia and the UK amongst conservative elites in both countries. However, the Anglosphere idea is contested, and our comparison also identifies a persistent strand of what we call 'Anglo-scepticism'. This Anglo-scepticism is premised on a critical appraisal of the relevance of the Anglosphere idea as a useful perspective through which to understand the UK-Australia relationship.

KEYWORDS

Anglosphere; Global Britain; AUKUS; Indo-Pacific Tilt; UK-Australia free trade agreement

Introduction

The Anglosphere idea emerged as an alternative world-ordering idea on the right of politics in English-speaking democracies during the first decades of the twenty-first century. With important historical lineages to Winston Churchill's concept of the 'English-speaking Peoples' and earlier nineteenth-century ideas of 'Anglo-Saxonism', the Anglosphere is a contested idea whose advocates seek to combine liberal internationalism with domestic social conservatism whilst explaining the historical-political development of the idea of liberty. Although the Anglosphere is used to refer to this history and the supposed values of the English-speaking liberal democracies—the USA, the UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand—the term has particular resonance in UK-Australia relations as it is often used by advocates to locate bi-lateral relations within wider values-based claims pertaining to common history and identity. This article argues that the Anglosphere

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perspective has played an important part in shaping the worldviews of political and policy elites in both countries, thus underpinning recent developments such as AUKUS and the UK-Australia FTA. However, this research also illuminates a substantial strain of what we call 'Anglo-scepticism', in response to claims of commonality and strategic alignment from Anglosphere advocates in both countries.

The article proceeds as follows. Firstly, stressing the importance of the constitutive ideas and imaginaries that inform foreign policymaking and interpretations of national interests, we examine what we call the Anglosphere tradition in UK-Australia bi-lateral relations, in particular during a period of overlap between conservative governments in London and Canberra from 2013 to 2022. Secondly, noting that Australia became a particular focus of post-Brexit UK foreign policy, we analyse elite perceptions of the ideas, institutions, and policies that 'filled in' the policy space that the UK's withdrawal from the EU opened. Thirdly, based on our interview data, we interrogate the attitudes towards the Anglosphere idea in the UK and Australia and how it is contested as a meaningful or helpful way to understand both countries' place in the Indo-Pacific region and the world order more generally in the 2020s.

The article is based on 27 semi-structured interviews with policy elites chosen to reflect opinions on the left and right of politics in the UK and Australia conducted between October 2022 and May 2023 (Appendix 1). We focus on the idea of Global Britain, the UK-Australia free trade agreement (FTA) and AUKUS, as particular policy expressions substantiating the broader Anglosphere idea that reshaped geospatial imaginaries amongst conservatives in English-speaking countries during the 2010s. The interviewees were selected from three cohorts: former diplomats and politicians; political advisors, civil servants, and think tank analysts; and senior academics who contribute to foreign policy discussions in the public realm. This rich and original dataset provides a unique window into elite perceptions of the UK-Australia relationship in the post-Brexit period, thus adding to our understanding of the Anglosphere imaginary in international relations.

Dilemmas in UK-Australia relations and the Anglosphere tradition

Just prior to, and especially after, the UK's vote to leave the European Union in 2016, the Anglosphere idea became part of a revived geopolitical imaginary within the UK's Conservative Party and its supportive media outlets (Black 2019; Peters 2021). Forming an important part of the Eurosceptic right's vision of a post-EU UK (Kenny and Pearce 2019), from late 2016 the Anglosphere idea was shaped into policy through the related idea of 'Global Britain' (Kenny and Pearce 2018). In projecting an image of the UK as an international actor freed from the constraints seemingly imposed by its membership of the EU, the Anglosphere idea invited other states into new, or often *renewed*, relationships with the aims of post-Brexit British foreign policy (Browning 2019), building on existing forms of defence and security cooperation, notably the 'Five Eyes' treaty-based intelligence sharing network. This was particularly the case regarding the UK-Australia relationship which became a focus of early post-Brexit UK foreign policy. Importantly, this relationship was one in which two members of the same party family were in dialogue with each other during the 2013–2022 period when the centre-right Coalition government's period in office in Australia overlapped with that of the Conservatives in the

UK from 2010. Thus, in two countries with administrations sympathetic to the Anglosphere idea that was circulating in the ideational milieu of the right, the seemingly empty policy of 'Global Britain' eventually took form as certain agreements and pacts, not least among them the UK-Australia FTA and AUKUS.

The emergence of the Anglosphere idea at the margins of right-wing politics across English-speaking democracies at the outset of the twenty-first century was dependent on two geopolitical events in particular: the US-UK-Australian invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the 'poly-crisis' of the EU from 2009. Interventions by James Bennett (2004), Robert Conquest (2005), and Daniel Hannan (2013) promoted the Anglosphere idea as an improvement on the post-Cold War liberal international order, promoting a techno-utopian future in which the English language was the lingua franca of the internet. Although far from uncontested in terms of its view of the past (Clayton and Newman 2023; Malik 2021), or contemporary relevance (Ferguson 2021) the Anglosphere idea built upon a narrative of liberty developed and enshrined in the political institutions and common law of English-speaking countries.

The power of the Anglosphere idea rests not on its intellectual coherence, but instead on its apparent longevity combined with narratives of its triumph against totalitarianism in the twentieth century. As Jack Holland argues, the Anglosphere 'is a security community bound by a shared identity forged through racialized conflicts and their subsequent retelling in national mythology' (Holland 2020, 60). Eliding the imperial roles of English-speaking powers, this narrative creates an identity for English-speaking peoples in which they are on the side of the good in the broad sweep of history, bestowing liberty across the world. It is this positive identity narrative that makes the Anglosphere idea attractive to those uncomfortable with a view of the past in which English-speaking peoples were oppressors (Vucetic 2012, 108). This identity-narrative helped shape British and Australian bi-lateral relations from 2010 because Anglosphere advocates could draw on foreign policy orientations that predated UK membership of the EEC and addressed some of the emerging foreign policy dilemmas of the 2010s. Rather than being a novel departure in British politics, the Anglosphere is, as Michael Kenny and Nick Pearce have demonstrated, a new name for persistent policy orientations on the right of British politics. As they observed, while the idea of the Anglosphere was not a prominent element in the pro-Leave campaigns, it did offer 'a horizon of possibility and affective ideological content for many Brexiteers' (Kenny and Pearce 2018, 157), and a way of articulating Britain's place in the world that looked beyond Europe, drawing upon a set of cultural, economic, and political links which have deep historical and imperial roots (Vucetic 2021; 2023). In this sense, the popularity of the Anglosphere idea on the right of British politics was intimately linked to the opportunities and tensions around Brexit, but at the same time it was not a complete departure from political tradition (Wellings 2019, 168), although this played out as a sharp contestation within the Conservative party (Hayton 2018, 157). In Australia it was driven by the response to a complex regional order in relation to China, always with the US as the fulcrum of Australian strategy, but also simply opportunism and ideological affinity with the Brexiteers' worldview on the part of the Coalition governments in Canberra (Balls 2022). In this instance, strategy followed identity rather than the other way around (Vucetic 2011, 138).

Research on historical and contemporary elite policy networks across English-speaking states show how international and domestic orders were and are entwined and

collective identities substantiated (Legrand 2021; Parmar 2019). Such entanglements helped shape geospatial imaginaries on the right of politics across the English-speaking world by creating historical and institutional traditions that actors can draw upon when facing policy dilemmas (Bevir et al. 2013), not least the UK's withdrawal from the EU and other states' responses to Brexit and its foreign policy consequences. Thus, the Anglosphere idea became a new articulation of much older traditions in British and Australian foreign policies.

Since Brexit, the UK-Australia relationship has been the focus of more attention from both the Australian and UK governments than at any time since the UK's accession to the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973 (Allison-Reumann *et al.* 2018, 388–390). A dominant narrative of this bi-lateral relationship runs that the UK's accession to the EEC was the final parting of a strategic relationship that had begun to diverge with the fall of Singapore in 1942 and Australia's turn to the US for its security, and later the emergence of Asian markets—initially Japan, but subsequently China—for its primary economic relationships. But there is also truth in the idea that, even during the height of Empire, trade between the UK and the Dominions over-promised and under-delivered. Even allowing for the broader scope of their definition of the Anglosphere John Ravenhill and Jefferson Heubner (2019, 99) have shown that intra-Anglosphere trade declined markedly from 1913 to 2018. What emerged in its place was a series of regional trading blocs that took advantage of shorter supply lines than those posed by the globally dispersed English-speaking countries. Although UK foreign direct investment (FDI) into Australia remained substantial and second only to the USA (Australian Government, Treasury 2016), by the time the Conservative government gained power in 2010—in a coalition with the Liberal Democrats—Australia represented just under one percent of the UK's total trade in goods, with 51 percent going to the EU (ONS 2023).

Given these trade and economic frameworks, the political investment in Australia by Eurosceptics and Brexiteers in the UK was a notable departure from the taken-for-granted nature of the relationship that had embedded itself since the 1970s, close cooperation during the War on Terror notwithstanding. This taken-for-granted aspect existed because whilst there was a lot of goodwill between governments of both sides of politics in London and Canberra, there wasn't always a sense that there was much common ground at the strategic or trade levels anymore. One former senior advisor to Australian Labor Party (ALP) governments recalled a ministerial visit to London in the late 1980s:

> … Maggie invited Hawke to bring a significant proportion of his Cabinet to London simultaneously and we all traipsed to London … The fascinating thing was, we all rabbled around, said "Christ what are we going to talk about?" […] Ministers, of course, always like to go to the UK, there might be cricket on and all that sort of thing. I mean literally, they just like being in London. The task of trying to put together a decent agenda for a meeting between Australian and British defence ministers was really hard because all they could say was, isn't it wonderful how well we get on. (AU05)

This sense of friendliness but lack of strategic congruence continued throughout the 1990s as the UK deepened its integration into the EU, and Australia sought and developed markets and security *in* Asia, rather than *from* Asia (Gyngell 2021, 195–198). There had been some movement on the bi-lateral relationship in the 2000s with the

establishment of annual AUKMIN meetings of foreign and defence ministers (Hall 2023, 34–42). Then, from 2010, Australia began to play a part in attempts by senior Conservative politicians in the UK to re-imagine Britain's global role, although at this time still within the EU. Important in this regard was Foreign Secretary William Hague's policy reorientation from 2010 to 2014 (Hague 2014). Speaking in Sydney in January 2013 Hague said that 'allies don't come with broader shoulders, bigger hearts or greater courage and resourcefulness than Australia', and that 'our ties are stronger and more relevant than ever' (Hague 2013). Hague's 2013 visit was the first to Australia by a UK foreign secretary in twenty years and was an attempt to end the benign neglect that he and Prime Minister David Cameron felt had characterised the relationship when the Conservatives took office. Addressing the Australian Parliament in 2014, Cameron claimed that

> Ours is an alliance that has been forged in adversity and tested over time. Rugged. Resilient. Reliable. Adjectives that sum up this great nation and its people. There is no more dependable ally when the chips are down. Now, if our alliance was built on history alone, it would be inspiring, but static; a sepia-tinged scrapbook of sentimentality. And if it was just built on trade and commerce alone, it would be rich, but lifeless. But it is far, far more than that. (Cameron 2014)

This energy in the relationship—built in this instance on cooperation in the face of the threat from the Islamic State/Daesh—was in part because the warmth was reciprocated from the new Coalition government in Canberra, led in 2013–2015 by the Anglosphere enthusiast, Tony Abbott (Abbott 2009, 159). As part of a particularly ideologically informed foreign policy (McDonald 2015, 651), there was a notable rhetorical shift from the Abbott government on UK-EU relations away from the more measured language of the previous Australian Labor Party (ALP) government (2007–2013), which felt that the existing relationship between the UK and the EU was entirely satisfactory from an Australian perspective (UK Government 2013). Whilst it was difficult politically to speak openly about the Anglosphere idea in parliamentary forums, Abbott and his mentor, former Prime Minister John Howard, embraced the idea (Wellings and Ghazarian 2024) when others shied away from it (Bishop 2016).

Unofficially, other senior Conservatives were courting Australia—and in some cases New Zealand—as potential beneficiaries of any significant reorientation by the UK away from the EU. Daniel Hannan was particularly active in advancing the idea of Australia and New Zealand (Centre for Independent Studies 2014), countries he referred to as the UK's 'true friends', as alternative trading and diplomatic partners if the UK were to leave the EU (Hannan 2015). Following a speaking engagement in Melbourne in 2013 when Mayor of London, Boris Johnson suggested a zone of free movement of labour between the UK and Australia (Johnson 2013). Building on the especially close political rather than strategic ties between the two countries and their sister-parties in government, bi-lateral cooperation deepened during the Brexit years.

A small but important instance of such collaboration was the training given by Australian trade negotiators to British counterparts as the UK sought to negotiate its way out of the EU. One senior UK trade official recalled that 'given that the UK was leaving the EU they [the Australians] were very keen to engage with us and they gave us some support', attributing this willingness to assist to a belief that 'the UK would be a force

for open trading and generally a liberal trade policy which was broadly what they favoured as well' (UK02). More significant for trade relations between Australia and the UK was the signing and ratification of an Australia-United Kingdom Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in 2021–2023. Announced ahead of King Charles III's coronation in May 2023, along with an FTA with New Zealand, the FTA was hailed by the Australian British Chamber of Commerce (ABCC) as offering 'exciting new opportunities for Australian business looking to grow into one of our most important international markets' (ABCC 2023). The deal was similarly welcomed by Australian Prime Minister Albanese for offering 'significant benefits to Australian exporters, consumers, workers and our economy more broadly' (cited in ABCC 2023). UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak commented that he was 'delighted our first built from scratch trade deals' were with some of 'our closest allies and greatest friends'—namely Australia and New Zealand (Gov.uk 2023).

The deepening relationship was not concerned with trade alone. In 2021, Australia broke an existing contract with France to build conventionally powered submarines for Australia, and instead entered into an agreement with the US and UK to acquire and eventually build nuclear-powered submarines as part of the AUKUS pact (Barnes and Makinda 2022). In announcing the pathway to Australia's nuclear-powered submarine fleet, the joint leaders' statement framed the decision in terms of history, values and a vision of the international order:

> For more than a century, our three nations have stood shoulder to shoulder, along with other allies and partners, to help sustain peace, stability, and prosperity around the world, including in the Indo-Pacific. We believe in a world that protects freedom and respects human rights, the rule of law, the independence of sovereign states, and the rules-based international order. The steps we are announcing today will help us to advance these mutually beneficial objectives in the decades to come. (Prime Minister of Australia 2023)

From the UK perspective, AUKUS became an important plank in the so-called 'Indo-Pacific Tilt' that was announced in the Integrated Review (IR) of 2021 and the so-called 'Refresh' of 2023 of the UK's defence and foreign policy orientations (UK Government 2021; UK Government 2023). Although the Refresh re-emphasised the primacy of the Euro-Atlantic theatre in light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Australia was also drawn into material support of Ukrainian forces (Gov.UK 2024; UK13). In this way, the Anglosphere, AUKUS and the UK-Australia FTA helped 'fill in' some of the foreign and security policy space that Brexit had opened. However, this was far from uncontested in Australia despite the claims of commonality inherent in the Anglosphere idea which will be analysed below.

'Global Britain' and the Anglosphere in UK-Australia relations

The Anglosphere idea began to take shape as 'Global Britain' in the immediate aftermath of the 2016 referendum. First articulated under Theresa May in 2016, brandished enthusiastically by Boris Johnson and Liz Truss, the term 'Global Britain' was quietly dropped by the Sunak government. Yet although the rhetoric of Global Britain has now been abandoned, what had been 'a slogan in search of substance' (UK12) has increasingly been filled in with some more identifiably substantial content. The UK-Australia relationship has been at the heart of this process of 'filling in', notably in relation to trade and security via the UK-Australia free trade agreement and AUKUS. These

initiatives, along with the idea of Global Britain itself, should not be seen as distinct from the Anglosphere idea, but constitutive of it, and another means by which the Anglosphere idea matters as a frame for viewing the UK's and Australia's place in the world and relationship to each other.

The term 'Global Britain' was deployed by Theresa May in her speech to the Conservative Party conference in October 2016, and became an official moniker for post-Brexit foreign policy in 2017. Yet as one academic observer noted: 'As to the concept itself, I think under May it's widely regarded as being essentially just a slogan … It was added to government documents, but nobody could really figure out what it meant that the UK wasn't doing anyway' (UK09). To the extent that Global Britain did contain definable substance, it was in the area of trade. Upon forming her government in July 2016, May took the decision to create a Department for International Trade, appointing Brexiteer Liam Fox as Secretary of State. One advisor recalled that: 'This was seen as elementary stuff right from the start because of course leaving the European Union meant leaving the Customs Union and of course that meant having your own trade agreements' (UK01). This was reinforced by May's Lancaster House speech in January 2017, in which she argued that: 'A Global Britain must be free to strike trade agreements with countries from outside the European Union too' (May 2017).

Following the vote to leave the EU, relations with Australia acquired a renewed, and possibly outsized, importance in British politics. For the Coalition governments in power in Canberra between 2013 and 2022, Brexit was, if not always desirable to all government members, an outcome that could be accommodated and turned to Australia's advantage. Yet some in the Coalition government saw it in much more positive terms. Dan Tehan, the Australian Trade Minister 2020–2022, announced that the free trade agreement with the UK would right a 'historic wrong' caused when Britain joined the EEC in 1973 and abandoned Australia's farmers (cited in Tillett 2021). From an Australian perspective Brexit changed the usual power dynamic between the two countries in Australia's favour (AU11). One former Australian diplomat put it that:

> Australia has always been the one that wants more from the relationship, wants more connectivity … . But it's suddenly changed, I think because post-Brexit obviously Britain has been trying to find a place and a purpose in the world … I think what we've really noticed is the UK is a much more enthusiastic partner for Australia since Brexit. Probably more enthusiastic than we are. (AU04)

There were reasons for this shift in the power dynamics of the bi-lateral relationship. A senior trade official in the UK government recalled that:

> Ministers wanted to show that we were doing something different rather than just doing what we were doing in the EU. So, Australia and New Zealand were definitely prime candidates for early engagement … because they were members of CPTPP [the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership], and because the government also decided relatively early on that the UK should apply for membership of that group, it was important for us that we had an agreement with Australia and New Zealand before we were trying to finalise membership of CPTPP. (UK02)

Nevertheless, other observers also pointed towards a trend of more collaborative working between the two countries that predated the referendum and that would have continued even if the UK had remained in the EU. Brexit, one policy expert argued, served to

quicken this but did not initiate it (UK12). As one UK Labour advisor observed, there was an ideological dimension to this:

> I think whether Brexit happened or not, there was already that inclination amongst certain Conservative Party members, to press for greater political ties with the Anglosphere. I don't think Brexit has affected that inclination as such … [but] it does offer an opportunity for some forms of economic cooperation which weren't open previously. (UK14)

Similarly, for one academic observer, 'Brexit has had a significant impact, but in terms of, I suppose, just ratcheting the relationship up, not actually changing some of the fundamentals underneath' (UK03).

The relative speed with which FTAs were negotiated between the UK and Australia and New Zealand stood in stark contrast to the much slower pace—and in Australia's case ultimate failure—of FTAs with the EU. This gave credence to the idea that each of these Anglophone countries just understood each other in a way that was different—and easier—than with the Europeans. Yet, whilst the UK government announced the FTAs with Australia and New Zealand as 'ground-breaking' (Gov.uk 2023), most interviewees were underwhelmed with the UK-Australia FTA, seeing it less as an expression of commonality and more as a political necessity for the UK government, largely operating in Australia's favour. The political need for a trade deal was widely acknowledged, and with it the implication that the UK was in the weaker negotiating position, leading to an unusually easy 'win' for Australia, particularly on agricultural issues. One Australian analyst described these terms as having been 'secured charging uphill without ammunition' (Grozoubinski 2021). Most Australian respondents felt that Brexit had diminished the UK's global influence and that when it came to the subsequent negotiations for a free trade agreement, the UK had a greater political need for the FTA than Australia, leading to the latter getting the best out of the deal. One Australian head of a foreign policy think-tank noted that the FTA:

> … came in exceptionally quickly, which may make you wonder about the quality of it as a deal, but, in terms of a political document, something to be able to say, look, we are building trade links with other parts of the world that are not the EU, I think it must have been seen as very valuable. (AU07)

This perspective was confirmed by UK interviewees. One government advisor said that the trade deals were 'a political imperative not least because of the composition of the cabinet' and the need to demonstrate the 'upside' of leaving the EU (UK01). Another figure with knowledge of the negotiations claimed that Ministers were told that: 'this is not actually a deal that's in Britain's interests immediately, that Australia wins. And the message was clear from the top, that's irrelevant, we want a deal' (UK03). A parliamentary opponent of the government recalled that: 'the problem was, quite simply, [Liz Truss's] first priority was the photo opportunity. Her second priority was getting a deal at any price. The third, and very far distant, was what the deal contained' (UK07). This criticism was echoed by a former cabinet colleague of Truss, George Eustice, who told fellow MPs that:

> The first step is to recognise that the Australia trade deal is not actually a very good deal for the UK … the truth of the matter is that the UK gave away far too much for far too little in return. (cited in BBC News 2022)

In short, the prospect of being able to strike independent trade deals was one of the few concrete manifestations of post-Brexit Global Britain that ministers could point towards. Australia and New Zealand were prioritised in this respect as they were seen as 'natural' allies that the UK could look to do business with, and also as a route to a smoother accession to the CPTPP which was identified as an alternative set of trading arrangements for the UK to pursue post-Brexit, and as logical component of the 'Indo-Pacific tilt'. Advocates of the Anglosphere aspired to secure a wider set of free trade agreements, with the prize being a deal with the United States, but as the prospects of that faded securing the Australian deal became all the more important (UK02).

While the idea of Global Britain did not elicit much enthusiasm from Australian respondents, there was some support for it from trade-related quarters. The rapid negotiation of the FTA and the UK's intention to join the CPTPP were seen by some as an opportunity for Australian companies. For one expert, the UK was returning 'to being the sort of mercantile trading nation of their traditional view of themselves' (AU08). Another Australian compared the negotiations favourably with those with the EU, again making a link to common values and modes of practice: 'it certainly feels like a much more pragmatic, practical working relationship, which I consider to be indicative of the Anglosphere style of getting things done' (AU06).

There was more to a shared enthusiasm for trade underpinning the relationship, however. The UK-Australia FTA included provisions for labour mobility at a time when both countries were experiencing labour shortages. This was particularly noticeable in the UK after it left the EU, but was also true for Australia although for different, pandemic-related reasons. One Australian interviewee pointed out how sourcing labour from the UK would be easy due to people-to-people links, underpinning the idea of natural commonalities between the two countries. The interviewee pointed out that in Australia 'we're desperate for workers across everything' and, reflecting old ideas about Australia as 'the working man's paradise', that labour from the UK was an answer to this problem: 'It's just so easy now to literally go to the UK and run a recruitment drive because they'll feel almost at home – but sunnier and nicer' (AU06).

In contrast to the FTA, the AUKUS pact was seen as benefiting the UK more than Australia by locking Australia's security into UK capabilities in a manner not seen since the atomic testing of the 1950s. AUKUS was also seen as a hard power expression of the Anglosphere, whose (liberal democratic) values were referenced as a reason for why closer cooperation between such powers made sense (Johnson 2021), even if Japan and South Korea might have been better strategic choices for the US in seeking to contain China (Lyon 2023). The announcement of the AUKUS security pact in September 2021 caught the world, and especially France, by surprise (Holland and Stanton 2024, 712). For Australia, this marked a significant strategic development that came at substantial diplomatic cost. This was because it entailed reneging on the A$90 billion submarine contract signed with France in 2016 in favour of a new agreement to acquire nuclear powered submarines in collaboration with the UK and the USA for an estimated A$386 billion. As one former ALP leader noted, 'AUKUS was announced by Australia in a shambolic way that did serious damage to the relationship with France' (AU01). Another noted that 'the active deception of France … to do it in the way we did, it was just disgraceful' (AU02). The deal provoked growing domestic discontent, primarily on the left of the ALP, but also from former Prime Ministers Kevin Rudd (Labor

right) and Malcolm Turnbull (Liberal) who questioned the wisdom of the decision (Rudd 2022; Turnbull 2022).

Negative reactions to AUKUS and the Anglopshere will be explored below. For now, it is sufficient to note that AUKUS created disquiet rather than vigorous debate in Australian politics. However, it stirred no such controversy in the UK. Indeed, as one UK interviewee observed, in the aftermath of the Brexit negotiations there was 'a lot of emotional joy about sticking one to the French and coming up with an agreement that completely shuts them out' (UK06). From a UK perspective, the interviewees concurred that the UK was not the prime initiator of the AUKUS pact, which was driven by a changing Australian defence posture in response to concerns over growing Chinese military power, especially in the South China Sea and the south-west Pacific (Abbondanza 2022; Taylor 2020). Given this alignment of Australian and American security concerns in the Indo-Pacific, and the UK's position as a close ally of both, UK analysts suggested that it was unsurprising that the UK government was very happy to help facilitate the signing of the pact (UK08; UK11).

The theme of British opportunism was reflected in opinion in Australia, but in a way that questioned the strategic considerations underpinning AUKUS and the UK's 'Indo-Pacific Tilt'. For one Australian foreign policy advisor, the British embrace of AUKUS was 'purely opportunistic' (AU13). An Australian think tank CEO thought it may have been a distraction from the failure in Afghanistan that had been so visible the month before the announcement (AU11), and hence driven in part by domestic political agendas in Australia. One UK academic observer noted:

> I think there was a certain amount of fortuitousness on the part of the UK, that Australian thinking had changed in terms of what they were wanting to do on submarines … But in reality, a lot of the security defence policy relationships stuff was already in hand, partly because of things like Five Eyes, but also Five Powers and so on. And so, it was a crystallisation of thinking about what concretely the UK could do without having to commit resources, security and defence policy resources they didn't have today. (UK11)

The shifting geopolitical context, particularly in relation to China, was also cited by the majority of interviewees as a factor pushing the UK and Australia closer together (UK12). As one former UK government advisor recalled,

> I think external factors like the rise of China have obviously forced more collaboration between the English-speaking peoples in various parts of the world who are dealing with those challenges and that was a subject of lots of the discussions that I was part of. (UK10)

The AUKUS pact itself, in the words of one Australian former senior politician, was driven by 'Australian anxiety over China' (AU02), or as another former UK diplomat now based in Australia pithily put it: 'China is the reason' (AU12). For another, former UK government advisor, AUKUS is 'very significant' and represents a 'decisive step' in the reorientation of the UK's position on China (UK01).

Another UK-based security expert concurred that AUKUS will have substantial long-term implications for all the parties involved, arguing that

> it's a very deep agreement and probably it will end up being as important to the UK, Australia, and the US as NATO is. They're different types of agreement but nonetheless this draws the UK into the Indo-Pacific and connects Australia, the US, and Britain to one another's security for the next 40 or 50 or even 60 years. (UK08)

The same interviewee underscored the implicit trust that underpins the pact and its genesis as a response to what was perceived as a common systemic threat: 'you have this really deep degree of trust between the three countries which both allowed them to kind of concoct the AUKUS agreement but also to operationalize it' (UK08). In the words of one former government advisor, this sense of 'common values' and the presence of 'well embedded and critically important institutions like the Five Eyes arrangements' (UK10) were a vital precursor to AUKUS, and were pointed to by multiple interviewees. Another academic observer also suggested that identity and values were an important motivator for the UK in helping forge the AUKUS pact:

> I guess it seems to me that if it was really all about 'containing China', there are other partners that you'd involve in doing this. And so that suggests to me that there is some kind of identity and signalling component to the – doing it through AUKUS instead of actually bothering to establish ways of coordinating with European partners. (UK09)

Other interviewees noted the longstanding mutual trust in terms of cooperation on security questions as the basis of AUKUS. For one Australian interviewee, 'the global reach of Australia, the US and the UK across the time zones and across the geographies of the world makes us natural partners' (AU08). For this interviewee, the AUKUS agreement was again linked to values as well as strategy. He stated that AUKUS 'reaffirms and recommits both our countries to working closer together … but particularly underlines and underscores that sense of common values' (AU08).

For UK interviewees, AUKUS served to give credence to the UK's claim to have 'tilted' to the Indo-Pacific as per its two policy documents of the era, the Integrated Review (2021) and the Integrated Review Refresh (2023). It reflected the reality that 'initiatives, investments, and presence under the broader Indo-Pacific tilt homed in on the Anglosphere' (Haugevik and Svendsen 2023, 2400). This view was met with some scepticism in Australia (AU12). For one Australian foreign policy advisor:

> Johnson was looking for any opportunity to be able to say to the British people: hey, we still matter, we're still in it! They sent *HMS Elizabeth* down to have a look around in the South China Sea; really, I mean, they couldn't even operate the ship properly, they couldn't fly anything off it. When it was transiting through the South China Sea, their systems weren't working. It was gesture politics at the most pathetic kind, really. It's adolescent and juvenile. (AU13)

Yet ultimately, AUKUS reinforced the Anglosphere orientation of Australia's security outlook, or at least this was how it was perceived by important neighbours in ASEAN and in New Zealand, both of which are committed to nuclear free regions. As the former New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark put it: 'Now there appears to be an orchestrated campaign [in Wellington] on joining the so-called "Pillar 2" of #AUKUS, which is a new defence grouping in the Anglosphere with hard power based on nuclear weapons' (cited in Daly 2023).

'Anglo-scepticism' in the post-Brexit UK-Australia relationship

Although seldom referred to explicitly as a guiding principle for foreign policy formation, all interviewees noted a set of abiding assumptions underpinning the Anglosphere idea that continue to frame understandings of the relationship between Australia and the UK

amongst policy elites in both countries. However, these suppositions regarding values and commonality are ideologically contested, to the extent that a persistent strand of what we might call 'Anglo-scepticism' exists on the left of Australian politics. Nonetheless, this scepticism towards a return to an 'East of Suez' UK foreign policy was itself premised on a critical appraisal of the endurance of the Anglosphere as a perspective through which Australia's place in the world can be, and still is, understood on the right of Australian politics. Thus, whilst claims about commonality were overstated by proponents of the Anglosphere idea and the UK government alike, the Anglosphere nevertheless retained an unstated presence in the imaginaries in both countries.

For many interviewees in the UK the Anglosphere idea was clearly present in their understanding of UK-Australia relations, even if it was in some cases not explicitly termed as such. As one former UK government advisor noted: 'I think the concept of the Anglosphere is real but it's cultural and linguistic. It's family ties, sporting ties, those kinds of things. Quite a lot of travel and migration between bits of the Anglosphere really influences things' (UK01). People-to-people relations were cited as an important source of enduring connection between the two countries by multiple interviewees, both at an elite level—for example interchange of political personnel such as government officials, think-tankers, media commentators and so on—as well as at the popular level, where familial links were repeatedly pointed to. One academic observer argued that demographic ties give a relevance to the Anglosphere that means it 'isn't harking back, it's still a living link'—a consequence of which is that 'freedom of movement to Australia or North America matters probably more to Brits than it does to people elsewhere in Europe' (UK03).

Another former UK government advisor noted that:

> … the honest answer is no one would ever write down in the Foreign Office, "we should do this with them because it's part of the Anglosphere". But it's not irrelevant, and the fact of shared histories is not irrelevant … it reveals something about a common identity and a trust, and a sort of fraternity if you like which in written or unwritten ways definitely impacts who we see as our friends in the world and who we want to work with on things. (UK10)

On similar lines, another UK official noted the Anglosphere concept 'feels like a convenient typology to describe that set of countries that we would probably look to cooperate with in a crisis situation' (UK04). A senior foreign policy expert with close connections to the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and Ministry of Defence (MoD) argued that while the Anglosphere

> is not structured in the way that the EU is or NATO is, that's indicative of the trust that binds it together – it doesn't need to be codified because the five countries already see the world in a very similar light, and they know they are going to have a very similar response to different strategic or economic issues. (UK08)

A former Liberal politician in Australia had a similar view of Anglosphere:

> I see it as a shorthand for describing – it's not quite the English-speaking world but the dominant English-speaking countries, what the French would call "the Anglo-Saxons", [and] what we all have in common as countries is there's a high degree of overlap between our interests, objectives, values, systems of government, and of course our culture too. (AU04)

The more positive appraisals of the Anglosphere were to be found on the right of Australian public life, where Brexit helped stimulate 'the best relationship period for the Australian-UK relationship in many years' (AU08). There was, however, a contrary view. Julie Bishop, Australian foreign minister from 2013 to 2018 described the Anglosphere as a 'fantasy' just ahead of the Brexit referendum (Bishop 2016). The notion of Global Britain has been interpreted as infusing post-Brexit UK foreign policy with a 'narrative of Empire' (Turner 2019) reportedly mocked by sceptical Whitehall officials as 'Empire 2.0' (Kenny and Pearce 2018, 161). For one UK official, the Anglosphere 'feels like quite a British-centric view' that is 'harking back to a bygone era' (UK04). None of this would be welcomed in Australia where ambivalent attitudes towards Britain and the Empire could be found in the centre and left of politics. Other interviewees didn't doubt the energy in the relationship or the historical ties, but these led to scepticism towards the value of too close or un-reflexive alignment with the power that failed to provide security for Australia in 1942 and abandoned the Commonwealth for Europe in 1973. One former politician and ambassador recalled that: 'I think there was a real sense of abandonment when Britain first went into the European Union … the geographic reality was that we couldn't depend on the United Kingdom' (AU01).

While all the Australian interviewees had heard of the Anglosphere idea, all but the most pro-UK were dismissive of it as the basis for sound foreign policy. One former ambassador and senior figure in the ALP argued that 'the Anglosphere is very much a creature of history rather than contemporary geopolitical, geostrategic, geographical realities' (AU02). As one former foreign policy advisor put it, 'the Anglosphere is a very narrow concept. It means English-speaking white men … It's an outmoded concept though, in that Australian society is changing as we speak … and ultimately one, I think, that doesn't help Australia at all' (AU13). Another Australian interviewee described the Anglosphere as 'a deeply and quite deliberately racist concept' (AU09). Nor was it seen as making sound strategic sense. The perception that Australia 'was being captured by the notion of the Anglosphere reborn … did contribute significantly to some of the negative regional reactions' to AUKUS in the Indo-Pacific (AU02).

Nevertheless, the Anglosphere idea itself was universally understood to have some relationship to common culture (however defined) and shared history, with some less-defined notions relating to language, worldviews, and ways of doing things, which echoed some of the UK responses. One Australian politician and former businessperson described the Anglosphere as 'a group of like-thinking people' (AU06). Another former Member of the Australian Parliament noted: 'the similarity of our systems of government and our political temperament, which means ideas can be quite readily translated across those boundaries or policies can, in a way that would be different with France, or India, or Germany' (AU04).

These varying perspectives on the Anglosphere also reflect ideological divisions. Australian Anglo-scepticism is articulated particularly from the Labor left. British enthusiasm for the Anglosphere is rooted in the dominance of a Conservative worldview of UK foreign policy since 2010 and particularly the need to adapt to Brexit, which was fundamentally a project of the Conservative right. The Anglosphere tradition of the Conservative right was most diametrically opposed to the Anglo-scepticism of the Labor left. Consequently, views amongst opinion-formers and policymakers in Australia about the wisdom of Brexit and the desirability of the UK's new geostrategic re-orientations

were divergent, reflecting party traditions with those on the right of politics more favourably disposed to the UK, and those on the left more likely to be sceptical.

From the left, the pro-Brexit viewpoint was derided by a former foreign minister as being confined to the 'Tony Abbott Anglosphere heroes' (AU02). This interviewee went on: 'I think there's a pretty profound sense of disappointment among most serious Australian policymakers, Australian thinkers, that Britain has abandoned all that [EU membership] for reasons that didn't have much to do with rationality' (AU02). Another senior foreign and security policy advisor to Labor governments concurred:

> I'm one of those who think that Brexit is an unmitigated mistake. I don't think there's any upsides to it and I think the story of how the British allowed this to happen to themselves is itself one of the most interesting political questions I think I've ever encountered. (AU05)

Even the entire Australia-UK relationship itself was seen by one former federal Labor cabinet member as 'sentimental rather than substantive' (AU02). The most stinging criticism of AUKUS came from the former ALP Prime Minister Paul Keating. Keating described AUKUS as an expression of the 'faded and jaded Anglosphere' (cited in Snow 2021) that was a strategic disaster for Australia.

Anglo-scepticism was not confined to the Australian left. It also found critics in the centre of the Liberal Party, not least from Malcom Turnbull, as noted above. Turnbull was Prime Minister from 2015 to 2018 and had been the chair of the Australian Republican Movement in the 1990s. He was critical of the value of AUKUS and the part that the UK might play in the Indo-Pacific, arguing that 'AUKUS as an agreement, absent the submarines, is not of great strategic significance. The engagement of "global Britain" in the Pacific, whatever that means, may well not survive the prime ministership of Boris Johnson' (Turnbull 2022, 76).

Others in the UK were similarly sceptical of the lasting value of 'Global Britain'. It was in the words of one British parliamentarian: 'a vanity project … it was typical Boris Johnson – vacuous, unresearched, ill-informed, not thought through' (UK07). Or as another foreign policy expert commented,

> it was very much seen as a bombastic, almost arrogant self-identification on the part of the UK and maybe pointed towards an outsized role of the UK in the international arena … and it is associated a lot with Boris Johnson. (UK05)

Amongst the Australian interviewees, assessments of the reorientation implied in the Global Britain idea were not very positive, providing evidence of Anglo-scepticism. As one former foreign policy advisor noted, 'Global Britain is part nostalgia and part aspiration … I see this as being essentially superficial politics on the part of the British government. I don't see it as being substantial because it's not sustainable' (AU13). UK interviewees concurred that it was a desire to signal distance from the Johnson-Truss approach to international relations that motivated the demise of the Global Britain discourse. As Richard Whitman noted in late-2023, there was a deliberate switch under Sunak from 'expansive rhetoric towards a new government narrative with a stress on serious-minded action alongside delivery of improved diplomatic relationships with neighbours' (Whitman 2023). Nonetheless, both AUKUS and the UK-Australia FTA

are now part of the UK-Australia bilateral relationship that was significantly refashioned as the UK left the EU.

Conclusion

In the UK the Anglosphere idea has in recent years enjoyed a moment in the sun, as a particular confluence of events, most importantly Brexit, served to facilitate its revival. The bi-lateral relationship with Australia has been the bastion of this comeback, as the latter's sympathetic leadership and strategic reorientation brought the interests and identities of both countries into closer alignment than at any time since 1973. In search of ontological security, the Anglosphere offered a return 'home' for the post-EU UK in which Australia was a familiar and comforting partner. As our interview data has shown, the Anglosphere idea offered a framework based on historical ties, shared values, and mutual interests that underpins the bilateral relationship and offers ballast in an increasingly turbulent geopolitical era. The advance that the Anglosphere idea made in the UK in the debate about, and aftermath of, the vote to leave the EU consequently had a spillover effect on the right of Australian politics, where ideological fellow travellers were receptive to it.

This article finds that although a shared set of abiding assumptions that constitute the Anglosphere idea continue to frame understandings of the relationship between Australia and the UK amongst elites in both countries, the 'Anglo-scepticism' of the Australian left complicates any simple notion of a commonality of interest in the post-Brexit UK-Australia relationship. This finding is significant because it challenges simplistic assumptions about the ease with which the Anglosphere can adopt the posture of a unified geopolitical actor, at a time of strategic uncertainty in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. It also raises doubts as to the extent to which the ideologically infused Anglosphere perspective will continue to play an important role in defining UK-Australia relations, even with a Labour government in office in the UK after July 2024.

Yet some tangible outcomes of this period of closer cooperation, most notably AUKUS, are likely to endure for decades to come. For Australia, AUKUS reinforced a return to a former security posture by locking the country deeper into a defence relationship with the UK and the USA over the manufacture of nuclear-powered submarines, and other aspects of fifth-generation warfare. This, along with the less important UK-Australia FTA is the main legacy of Anglopshere enthusiasm in UK-Australian relations in the post-Brexit period.

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Appendix 1: interviewees

AU01 former high commissioner and ambassador, 2 November 2022
AU02 former foreign minister, 30 November 2022
AU03 former ambassador and party leader, 16 May 2023
AU04 former ambassador and parliamentarian, 5 May 2023
AU05 former senior foreign and security policy advisor, 23 January 2023
AU06 parliamentarian and former businessperson, 25 May 2023
AU07 CEO of an international policy think tank, 25 October 2022
AU08 CEO of a chamber of commerce, 17 November 2022
AU09 academic and media commentator, 14 November 2022
AU10 academic and media commentator, 29 November 2022
AU11 CEO of an international policy think tank, 28 October 2022
AU12 former diplomat, 30 November 2022
AU13 former senior foreign policy advisor, 17 November 2022
UK01 former senior government advisor, 29 March 2023
UK02 former senior trade official, 30 March 2023
UK03 academic and media commentator, 27 February 2023
UK04 government official, 28 March 2023
UK05 senior foreign policy think tank researcher, 23 May 2023
UK06 academic and media commentator, 27 March 2023
UK07 Member of Parliament, 20 January 2023.
UK08 think tank director, 4 July 2023.
UK09 academic and media commentator, 6 March 2023
UK10 former special advisor, 31 March 2023
UK11 senior academic / think tank researcher, 9 March 2023
UK12 think tank director, 3 April 2023.
UK13 academic and media commentator, 12 October 2022
UK14 political adviser, 13 February 2023.