



The UN after Brexit

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The Hague University of Applied Sciences

How does the looming exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union affect the work of the United Nations? In the week of the United General Assembly in New York, on Tuesday 24 September, the research groups of United Nations Studies and Changing Role of Europe jointly organised a panel discussion on the UN after Brexit, in the Speakers Corner of The Hague University of Applied Sciences. The audience during this lively event were some 90 public officials from embassies and ministries, university lecturers and researchers, and students from various backgrounds.

Present on the panel were two distinguished guests: UK Ambassador to the Netherlands, The Hon. Peter Wilson and EU Director at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mrs. Lise Gregoire-van Haaren. The main questions addressed during their respective introductions were how Brexit would affect the UK's position at the UN, with particular reference to the 'Global Britain' outlook; the impact Brexit might have on the UK's relations with, and ability to interact with, its EU neighbours at the UN; and the implications of Brexit on UK-Dutch relations.



Both guests stressed their personal past and current experiences with the UN. They both extolled the benefits of multilateralism, and the importance of the UN as a platform for the former. The presence and interaction of diplomats at the UN affords them with a global perspective to take home. UNGA provides the opportunity for the type of 'open-door' diplomacy that traditional bilateral relations has often prevented. It was noted how multilateralism fosters cooperative rather than competitive interactions. In addition to aiding communication, the value of the UN forum as a 'thermometer' for applying normative pressure on leaders was acknowledged.

A salient aspect of the debate between the panellists and the audience addressed both the normative and practical justifications for the representation of regional groupings at the UN. Specifically for this discussion, this referred to whether, and how, Brexit would affect the UK's position in this regard. There was considerable debate over this question; on the one hand, states should act individually at the UN, thus there is an argument to be made that Brexit should not affect the UK's actions at the UN. On the other hand, regional and cross-regional alliances have been shown to be crucial, given the pressure often placed upon states by votes. Despite what was pointed out as a UK pivot away from European and toward Commonwealth neighbours, it was assured that the UK would continue to seek allies in EU neighbours.

The debate also provided interesting and new insights for many into Dutch diplomacy at the UN. Mrs. Gregoire-van Haaren outlined how the Dutch approach to their term on the SC was one of continuity; the priority was to enforce what had already been agreed. They applied this to a normative agenda, focusing on conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and accountability. This approach led to success and is exemplary of the potential role to be played by small states in their non-permanent terms on the SC. It is possible to have an impact as long as you act proactively and hold the pen. Along with the seven other EU members of the SC, they would hold joint press take-outs outside the building after each meeting, thus presenting a strengthened EU element of the SC. Mr Wilson stressed that the legitimacy of the UN and EU remains with national parliaments of sovereign member states. There will be change but also continuity in the UK's outlook upon multilateralism. This may lead to a novel playing field with opportunities for new alliances in which France – as the EU-27's only remaining permanent SC member – has a pivotal role. In the words of one speaker: 'we will all have to test our comfort zones.'

Overall, the panel provided an open and enlightening discussion. It shed light on the importance of solid personal relations between individual diplomats who have histories of working together through more turbulent times.

