In August 2013, the UK briefly flirted with joining the US in launching punitive airstrikes against the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad. It demurred, in the end, after Members of Parliament (MPs) vetoed to use of force. Nearly five years later, however, in April 2018, the UK did participate in a nearly identical operation to that proposed in 2013. Alongside the US and France, UK forces struck three Syrian military facilities allegedly involved in the production and storage of mustard gas. Why the change?

Prime Minister David Cameron faced international embarrassment and domestic ridicule after defeat in 2013. The Financial Times (2013) observed of the lost parliamentary vote that ‘if Britain’s allies scorn this as an abdication, they are right’. The Sun, the UK’s best-selling newspaper, carried a front-page story announcing the death of the ‘special relationship’ (Newton Dunn 2013). In the end, the UK’s international standing survived, not least because the US chose not to proceed without its most frequent ally. But the UK’s decision, in a June 2016 referendum, to leave the European Union reignited questions about its reliability as an international partner, both to Europe and to the US (Oliver and Williams 2016, 556, Whitman 2016b, 260). It also triggered a period of uncertainty and anxiety among the UK’s foreign policy elite, most of whom considered EU membership a vital component of the country’s great power role (Chatham House 2015).
This paper explores whether this status anxiety explains the UK’s greater willingness to use force in Syria in 2018 compared to 2013. Part one explains how, in theory, a shift of the magnitude of Brexit might disrupt the two-level game underpinning the UK’s strategic posture. Part two looks at the procedural and contextual differences between the two votes, noting the change in Prime Minister from Cameron to Theresa May, the way Brexit functioned as a backdrop in 2018, May’s decision to deny MPs an opportunity to veto her proposals, and the way memories of 2013 – as well as the ongoing battle against Da’esh – influenced the debate in 2018. Part three compares how Cameron and May explained their respective policies, noting considerable continuity but also important differences between them. Part four compares how MPs more generally approached the question on the two occasions. A short conclusion draws out what appear to be the key reasons for the UK’s apparent change of heart, noting that – whatever impact it might otherwise have on the context for and conduct of UK diplomacy, Brexit did not appear a significant factor in April 2018.

How might Brexit disrupt the UK’s strategic posture?

A state’s strategic posture reflects the ‘two-level game’ its leaders constantly play. At the international level they work to signal credibility to allies and enemies alike. At the domestic level they must secure their own continuation in office, and ratification for major international commitments. The two levels influence each other; domestic divisions undermine international credibility, and international pressures ‘reverberate’ domestically (Putnam 1988, 434). In theory, the international level drives decisions while the domestic level disrupts them (Waltz 1979, 65, Zakaria 1992, 197, Lobell, Ripsman and Taliaferro 2009, 25-26, Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell 2016, 3). In practice, the domestic level’s capacity to disrupt is often so great that it overwhelms the international.
In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the UK enjoyed a preeminent position in international politics. Its material strength deterred challengers, while its moderation (at least in dealing with possible rivals) made the emergence of a balancing coalition against it less likely (Morgenthau 1967, 28). The end of Empire complicated the picture. Not only was the post-imperial UK a much smaller and weaker successor to its globe-spanning predecessor, it lacked a clear model for how to use what power it retained. As former US Secretary of State Dean Acheson (1962) famously put it, the UK had ‘lost an empire, but not yet found a role’.

Academic observers broadly agree that the UK has managed to retain, at least to some degree, the status of great power into the twenty-first century. Morris (2011), for example, argues that the UK still seeks (and other states still accept it holds) the rights and responsibilities associated with great power. Edmunds (2010), Broad and Daddow (2010), Daddow and Schnapper (2013), Gaskarth (2014) and McCourt (2014) all raise questions, however, about how sustainable this position can possibly be against a backdrop of declining material capabilities.

For much of the post-imperial period, the UK tried to compensate for this by emphasising its reliability as a partner, specifically as a military ally of the US and political ally of the EU (Coker 1986, 139, Hill 2019, 22, 147). Neither relationship proceeded entirely smoothly, and at times the two clashed (Marsh and Baylis 2006, Hood 2008, Sperling 2010). In general, however, the UK felt strong normative and practical pressures to make its position work, and successive generations of decision-makers did just that, even going so far as to make a virtue of the UK’s status as a transatlantic “bridge” (Sanders and Houghton 2017). On the surface, therefore, we have grounds for asking whether Brexit has changed the UK’s attitude toward its security
partnership with the United States. The European and transatlantic strands of its post-imperial strategic stance are intertwined. Dramatic change in one should affect the other somehow.

Leaving the EU raises serious questions about how reliable the UK actually is. There are at least three reasons for this. First, the decision to leave (and its messy, uncertain implementation) has shredded the UK’s reputation for consistency and competence in foreign affairs. Other states quite reasonably ask whether a state unwilling to co-operate with its nearest neighbours deserves a privileged seat on the UN Security Council (Whitman 2016a, 523). Thomson et al (2017), for example, found that ‘Remain’ voters were more multilateral and ‘Leave’ voters more unilateral relative to each other. Thomson (2018) followed this up by showing that ‘Remain’ voters believed much more strongly that Britain should play an active role in international politics than did ‘Leave’ voters. As the referendum laid bare, ‘Leavers’ are in the majority.

Second, the leave vote has disrupted the UK’s domestic politics, raising lasting questions about whether it can credibly commit to anything. Divided states struggle to respond coherently to international-level pressures (Prins and Sprecher 1999, 271, Schweller 2004, 161). Both the referendum campaign and its aftermath have left the country deeply divided over how it should act toward the wider world (Hobolt 2016, Flinders 2017, Ford and Goodwin 2017). They also triggered domestic political realignments, with new factions emerging both within and between parliamentary parties, and the 2017 general election delivering a hung parliament seemingly unable to agree on how Brexit should play out. As Gilpin (1981, 13) observed, ‘shifts in domestic coalitions may necessitate redefinition of the ‘national interest’'. That seems doubly true for shifts driven by disagreements over what the national interest is. It should also be true for shifts influenced, at least in part, by international political pressures. These can, in
some circumstances, alter domestic power balances and, in turn, alter policymaker calculations about what constitutes an appropriate international strategy (Putnam 1988, 454-456, Christensen 1996, 3-4, Auerswald 1999, 470).

Third, leaving the EU is likely to further undermine the UK’s strategic capabilities. Even if the economic impact of withdrawing from the world’s largest free trade area proves smaller than most economists predict, it seems unlikely to be positive (Oliver and Williams 2016, 557). The US already had questions about the UK’s ability to fulfil its security obligations even before the Brexit vote. MPs warned, for example, that the UK risked being seen as a ‘free-rider’ should it fail to contribute adequately to the fight against Da’esh (Foreign Affairs Committee 2016, 9). Not for nothing did President Obama (2016), noting that ‘part of being friends is being honest’, warn that Brexit Britain would be at the ‘back of the queue’ as far as the US was concerned. Its aftermath makes those questions all the more pertinent (Rees 2017, 565). The UK will, furthermore, lose influence over EU security policy when it departs, leaving it unable to represent US wishes and raising the risk that EU states will work together to bypass NATO (Whitman 2016b, 260, Oliver 2016, 698). France and Germany announced renewed efforts to create a single EU military command – a proposal long vetoed by the UK – even while the Brexit process went on.

Yet the Brexit decision might not have much of an impact on the UK’s broader strategic stance. There are, again, three reasons why this might be the case. The first reason is that the Trump administration regards multilateral cooperation with suspicion, and instinctively approves of efforts to disrupt supranational organisations (Adler-Nissen, Galpin and Rosamond 2017, 580). Then-candidate Trump (2016) welcomed the Brexit vote, promising to ‘strengthen our ties with a free and independent Britain, deepening our bonds in commerce,
culture and mutual defence’. Amidst parliamentary chaos in the UK during March 2019, Trump (2019) continued to promise that ‘the potential is unlimited’ for a strong transatlantic relationship after Brexit. Yet Trump’s support should not, on its own, satisfy sensible UK decision-makers that their position with regard to the US will be safe after Brexit. Trump is an unusual US president. Obama’s scepticism better reflected concerns among US elites about the impact of Brexit on the UK’s value as an ally (Oliver and Williams 2016, 556, Whitman 2016b, 260, Rees 2017, 568). Trump is also well-known for his own unpredictability and unreliability, factors which combine with his oft-expressed unilateralism to raise questions about how much weight the UK could possibly place on his expressions of support (Gamble 2018, 1229, Hill 2019, 22).

Secondly, Brexit might not change the UK’s material capabilities by that much. As we have seen, these were already much-diminished and somewhat in doubt even before the Brexit vote. The UK is not proposing to withdraw from NATO or give up its UN seat. Nor does it propose to reduce its material capabilities further. Indeed, it is likely to continue to play a useful role as part of the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing community (Heisbourg 2016, 14). It is retaining its nuclear deterrent and will soon have two large aircraft carriers at sea and a new naval base in the Persian Gulf.

Finally, whatever Brexit might do to the UK’s international position, any pressure to adopt a more pro-active security stance might not yet have filtered through to decision-makers. Both domestic and individual-level factors disrupt the direct relationship between systemic forces and policy outcomes (Schweller 2006, 5).
Comparing 2013 and 2018

Brexit takes place at a time when the balance of power between the UK’s domestic branches of government has shifted. Historically, the executive possessed considerable autonomy in matters of foreign policy (Bono 2005, 206). Since 2003, however, the House of Commons has sought and gained a degree of influence over military deployment decisions (Strong 2018a, 28). While the extent of MPs’ power remains contested, that it exists to some degree does not. This is significant because most studies of how domestic politics affect inter-state bargaining assume the legislature enjoys considerable influence over the executive (Schweller 1992, 240), an assumption that did not work well for the UK before 2003, but has arguably become more valid.

This shift has raised questions about how far UK governments will anticipate the legislature’s reactions before proposing military action, as the White House apparently does (Auerswald and Cowhey 1997, 506), and whether the cross-cutting nature of foreign policy issues relative to domestic political considerations will disrupt the traditional balance of power between and within parliamentary parties, making it look more like the US (Diermeir and Feddersen 1998, 611). Given that a government must, by definition, enjoy the support of a majority of MPs, intra-party rather than inter-party relations have generally mattered more to policymakers (King 1976, Russell and Cowley 2018). Challenges to executive leadership generally emerge from within governing parties, and result primarily from ideological disagreements (Benedetto and Hix 2007, 757), public pressure (Kesgin and Kaarbo 2010, 20), changes in institutional practices (Mello 2012, 420) or external shocks (Peters and Wagner 2014, 310). Parliament’s growing influence over military action chimes with the Leave campaign’s stated goal for Brexit, of ‘taking back control’ (Chalmers 2017, 663).
Generally speaking, the more power domestic actors have over the executive’s ability to make foreign policy decisions, the harder the executive will find it to act as it sees fit. Scholars have traditionally expressed concern that parliamentary involvement in strategic questions can produce more impulsive, less ‘rational’ outcomes (Morgenthau 1967, 7, Levy 1988, 659). Those states whose legislatures exert significant influence over foreign policy matters are often considered less able to make credible international-level commitments (Cowhey 1993, 300, Reiter and Tillman 2002, 816, Auerswald 2004, 641). More recent work has, however, cast a degree of doubt over this sceptical framing (Gaubatz 1996, 110). States with more democratic decision-making processes arguably can, under the right circumstances, make more credible commitments than less democratic counterparts (Fearon 1994, 577, Partell and Palmer 1999, 389). Where parliamentary elites value a particular international-level commitment, their involvement in decision-making can make it more rather than less sticky (Leeds, Mattes and Vogel 2009, 461, Tago 2009, 220, Kreps 2010, 191).

On balance, the House of Commons’ involvement in military deployment decisions seems to have undermined the UK’s position as a reliable ally (Strong 2015, 1125, Strong 2018a, 29). MPs’ decision, in 2013, to veto military action in Syria underlined this point (Gaskarth 2016b, Strong 2018b, 5). With Brexit arguably undermining the UK’s position further, it makes sense to ask whether the apparent shift in policy between 2013 and 2018 reflects a deepening status anxiety among UK elites.

The 2013 veto and the 2018 strikes took place five years apart, separated by two general elections. The personnel involved had changed. Of the 557 MPs who voted on Syria in 2013, 303 took part in the votes that followed the 2018 action. The UK had a new Prime Minister, whose more authoritarian approach to leadership made her less likely to want to share power
with parliament than her predecessor. Individual-level differences like this can and do shape decision-making processes (Foyle 1997, Kaarbo 2018), though they are not necessarily determinate (Gaskarth 2016a, 718). In this case, the key difference between 2013 and 2018 was that in 2013 Prime Minister Cameron allowed MPs to vote on the government’s strategy for responding to the Assad regime’s alleged use of chemical weapons before ordering the use of force, whereas in 2018 Prime Minister May gave the order first, then reported her actions to parliament after the fact. In addition to questioning May thoroughly on her position, MPs forced two emergency debates – on the substance of the government’s decision, and on the question of whether they had been adequately consulted – but they did not get the chance to prevent the operation happening as they had in 2013.

The government had lost its majority and gained an opposition leader extremely unlikely to support the use of force. Memories of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which played a big role in the 2013 debate (Oliver 2015, 115, Kaarbo and Kenealy 2016, 2017), had faded by 2018 thanks to the intervening rise of Da’esh. Even before handing over power (in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum) to Theresa May, Cameron’s own framing of the Syria situation had shifted (Strong 2018b, 17). The debates in 2018 also took place with the benefit of hindsight. MPs knew that the 2013 veto caused ‘diplomatic embarrassment’ for the UK (Foreign Affairs Committee 2015, 10), even though President Obama apparently independently decided not to strike without the UK (Goldberg 2016). Despite assurances from various US officials, UK decision-makers could see quite clearly how the White House pivoted towards France after 2013 (Strong 2015, 1130-1131). It was, perhaps, unsurprising that the May government bypassed MPs by ordering military action then seeking their views afterwards, while the Cameron government allowed them a prior vote, and agreed not to proceed when they voted no.
The following sections attempt to understand the differences between 2013 and 2018 by comparing how, first, Prime Ministers Cameron and May described their policies and, second, how MPs responded to them in debate. They present an interpretive discourse analysis aimed at identifying all of the key themes referenced by each speaker and, in the case of MPs, quantifying the relative frequency with which each frame appeared in debate. The section looking at MPs also discusses the relationship between a speaker referencing a particular theme, and whether they ultimately voted for or against the government’s policy.

Comparing Cameron and May

Despite significant differences in terms of the domestic and international circumstances they faced, and in particular the fact that Cameron spoke in anticipation of military action while May spoke in its aftermath, there were at least five key similarities between how the two Prime Ministers explained their approach.

First, both leaders described their main objective as the deterrence of chemical weapons attacks against civilians. Both argued that the UK could and should launch a limited set of strikes on Syrian military targets aimed at reducing the regime’s ability to deploy chemical weapons, and at making clear it could not do so without retribution. Cameron warned that ‘a regime that has used chemical weapons…will conclude, if nothing is done, that it can use these weapons again and again on a larger scale and with impunity’ (Hansard 2013, c1433). May echoed this warning, arguing that the UK’s actions ‘send a clear message to anyone who believes they can use chemical weapons with impunity’ (Hansard 2018a, c43). Both also linked the goal of deterring future strikes with that of degrading the regime’s capacity to act. Cameron in particular argued that this was the only goal of his proposed policy, ‘full stop, end
of story’ (Hansard 2013, c1434). Both, finally, argued that enforcing norms against the use of chemical weapons was not just a matter of humanitarian responsibility, but was in the UK national interest.

Second, both leaders outlined the humanitarian case for intervention in Syria. Their positions were essentially identical. Both claimed the UK had an imperative to respond to what Cameron called a ‘war crime’ (Hansard 2013, c1426) and to prioritise, in May’s words, ‘the alleviation of humanitarian suffering’ (Hansard 2018a, c46). Both also sought to place the limited use of force in the broader context of the UK’s effort to respond directly to the humanitarian crisis occasioned by the Syrian war. Cameron pointed out that the UK was ‘one of the largest donors’ to aid agencies working in the region, and promised ‘we will go on making that investment because we are saving lives and helping people every day’ (Hansard 2013, c1439). May reiterated this point, noting that ‘the UK, having given almost £2.5 billion, is now the second biggest bilateral donor for Syrian refugees in the region’ (Hansard 2018a, c46). The one minor difference between Cameron’s position and May’s reflected the deepening of the humanitarian crisis in the intervening years, and its spread to European shores during the summer of 2015. May faced more sustained and pointed criticism of the government’s failure to admit significant numbers of refugees to the UK.

Third, both Cameron and May talked about the need to avoid mission creep, and in particular to avoid the limited use of force broadening into full-scale participation in the Syrian Civil War; a major concern of back-benchers in 2013 in particular. Both explicitly stated that their policy was ‘not about regime change’. Nor was it about ‘taking sides’ (in Cameron’s words) or ‘intervening in a civil war’ (May’s) (Hansard 2013, c1426, Hansard 2018a, c40).
Fourth, both Cameron and May made essentially the same point about the role of the United Nations in questions of humanitarian intervention. Both would prefer only to act with UN approval, and both would proceed without it where necessary. Cameron argued that, for all its value as a mark of international legitimacy, ‘it cannot be the case that that [Security Council approval] is the only way to have a legal basis for action’ (Hansard 2013, c1429). May agreed, insisting that the UK ‘must not allow’ a situation in which ‘we are prepared to act only when we have the support of the United Nations’, suggesting that would mean ‘any tyrant could determine that they can act and use these weapons with impunity’ (Hansard 2018a, c53).

Finally, both Cameron and May took steps to assert their independence from the United States. This is interesting, given the intervening change in administration, and the far greater popularity President Obama enjoyed in the UK relative to President Trump. Cameron insisted that ‘our actions will not be determined by my good friend and ally the American President; they will be decided by this Government and votes in this House of Commons’ (Hansard 2013, c1433). May echoed these sentiments, maintaining ‘neither I nor this Government take instructions from any President or any other national Government. When we act, we act in what we believe to be the national interest—that is our only concern’ (Hansard 2018b, c203).

The differences between how Cameron described his policy in 2013, and how May described hers in 2018, were greater in number but smaller in significance than the similarities.

First, May had to spend time justifying her refusal to seek prior parliamentary approval, something she did in part by referring to ‘lessons learned’ from Cameron’s experience in 2013 (Hansard 2018a, c148). Her argument involved both challenging the existence of the newly-developed convention that MPs should exert ex ante veto powers over military deployments,
and seeking to extend the range of executive discretion allowed within it. At times, she gave a traditional Westminster Model account of parliament’s role in foreign policy matters, arguing ‘it is Parliament’s responsibility to hold me to account for such decisions, and Parliament will do so. But it is my responsibility as Prime Minster to make these decisions—and I will make them’ (Hansard 2018a, c42). At others, she claimed to be upholding the convention, while expanding the Cameron government’s position on when the government could legitimately act first and ask approval later. Cameron’s Cabinet Manual ‘acknowledged that a convention had developed in Parliament that before troops were committed the House of Commons should have an opportunity to debate the matter…except when there was an emergency’ (Cabinet Office 2011, 44). Cameron himself told MPs that in the face of an urgent threat ‘you could act immediately and explain to the House of Commons afterwards’ (Hansard 2015, c26). May took things a step further, echoing an earlier statement by then-Defence Secretary Michael Fallon (2016, c10WS) by insisting that ‘in observing the convention, we must ensure that the ability of our armed forces to act quickly and decisively, and to maintain the security of their operations, is not compromised’ (Hansard 2018b, c200). In May’s view, the government could legitimately bypass MPs in non-emergency situations for what essentially boiled down to reasons of operational convenience. Indeed, she went on to argue that the convention applied primarily to ‘major deployments like the Iraq war when the scale of the military build-up requires the movement of military assets over weeks’ (Hansard 2018b, c203). Clearly this was not Cameron’s view, as he permitted a vote on Syria in 2013. May was able, finally, to claim she had the support of the House for her policy. While exact figures are difficult to determine in the absence of a decisive vote, a sufficient number of speakers in the debates on 16 and 17 April 2018 supported the government’s position for it to have won. Cameron did not have that luxury.
Second, May adopted a more Western-centric and more aggressive stance on the question of deterrence. Cameron was more multilateral, referring to Europe, NATO and the Arab League as well as Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. His goal was to emphasize the legitimacy of the operation (Hansard 2013, c1427). May, by contrast, focused narrowly on the US and France, and emphasised the effectiveness rather than the legitimacy of the operation (Hansard 2018b, c207). In explaining why deterring the use of chemical weapons was in the UK’s national interest, May was able to refer to the Russian government’s use of Novichok in an unsuccessful attempt to assassinate a former spy in Salisbury (Hansard 2018a, c43), an incident yet to occur when Cameron spoke. This argument played two distinct roles. First, it emphasised the point that chemical weapons were a threat to the UK mainland, echoing a broader trend toward a focus on UK national security visible in debates in Syria after 2013 (Strong 2018b). Second, it played into broader questions about the risk of mission creep and the role of the UN. One advantage May had in 2018 was that, with the action already having taken place, she could credibly argue that the risk of a direct confrontation with Russia had been minimised. That risk was arguably far smaller in 2013, since Russia had not at that time deployed significant ground forces to Syria, but it is in general easier to argue that your policy will not result in mission creep after the fact than it is in the abstract. Russia had spent the five years since 2013 failing to fulfil its promise to oversee the dismantling of the Assad regime’s chemical weapons capabilities, and vetoing every motion related to Syria brought to the Security Council. May was able to justify not waiting for Security Council approval by referring to the intransigence of a state that had not only demonstrated its willingness to tolerate the widespread use of chemical weapons on civilians, but also to use such weapons against the UK (Hansard 2018a, c149).
Third, May expressed more certainty than Cameron. Cameron said ‘I am not standing here and saying that there is some piece or pieces of intelligence that I have seen, or the JIC has seen, that the world will not see, that convince me that I am right and anyone who disagrees with me is wrong’ (Hansard 2013, c1432). May, by contrast, based her case for action on the government’s ‘rigorous assessment of the available open-source material and intelligence’ and argued that while the ‘Government have access to all that information…Parliament does not and cannot’ (Hansard 2018b, cc206-207). May benefited in particular from the way memories of Iraq played a less important role in 2018 than they did in 2013. Cameron felt compelled to insist that ‘we must not let the spectre of previous mistakes paralyse our ability to stand up for what is right’ while also conceding that ‘we must recognise the scepticism and concerns that many people in the country will have after Iraq’ (Hansard 2013, c1440). May similarly acknowledged that ‘in the post-Iraq era, it is natural for people to ask questions about the evidence base for our military actions’, but then went on to insist ‘we have an obligation to protect the safety and security of our sources’ (Hansard 2018b, c206).

Finally, May argued more forcefully against the suggestion that she was simply doing the bidding of the United States. Whereas Cameron benefited from President Obama’s relative popularity in the UK, May had to deal with widespread opposition to President Trump. Cameron talked about his conversations with Obama, and about their shared views (Hansard 2013, c1428). May was less equivocal. ‘Let me be absolutely clear’, she said. ‘We have not done this because President Trump asked us to’ (Hansard 2018a, c42).

What is especially interesting about these comparisons, in light of the rational set out at the start of this paper, is how little difference Brexit appeared to make to the UK government’s policy toward Syria. Clearly the May government, driven in part by the Prime Minister’s more
authoritarian instincts, and in part by its knowledge of Cameron’s defeat, adopted a different approach to consulting parliament. Clearly, too, it made a difference that five more years of war had elapsed with no sign of resolution in Syria. But May never referred to, nor even acknowledged, the idea that Brexit might have created pressure to demonstrate greater reliability to the US. It seemed not to have formed part of her calculus at all.

Comparing the broader parliamentary debates

Comparing the 2013 and 2018 debates is complicated by the absence of directly analogous parliamentary occasions. In 2013 the government presented a substantive motion asking MPs to endorse its proposed approach. A full day of deliberations followed, concluding in a vote which the government lost by 285 to 272. In 2018 the Prime Minister made a statement, during which she took over one hundred and forty interventions from MPs, in a session that lasted over three hours. The Speaker then allowed an emergency three-hour debate on a motion stating that the House had considered the government’s approach that was moved by the Labour back-bench MP Alison McGovern and which concluded in a vote forced by the SNP in which Labour decline to take part, leading to a large government victory. A second three-hour emergency debate followed the following day, on a motion moved by Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, on a motion noting that the House had considered parliament’s role in military deployment decisions. Again, the result was a government victory in the unusual and somewhat absurd context of Corbyn urging his MPs to reject a motion he proposed, while the government supported it.

Despite these differences, it proved possible to identify similar themes arising across the two debates. Echoing Cameron and May, MPs referred to the UK’s broader international alliances,
the importance of deterring the use of chemical weapons, the humanitarian case for action, the legacy of Iraq, the risk of mission creep, the role of the UN, the degree of uncertainty surrounding the government’s case and the US-UK relationship. Those speaking in 2018, furthermore, also commented on the role of parliament in military deployment decisions, and on the rights and wrongs of the government’s decision to act without prior consultation.

The first two columns of Table 1 set out the proportion of speeches made in 2013 and 2018 which mentioned each theme, adjusted to exclude those themes that only arose in 2018, such as the role of parliament. This allows us to track the relative prominence of different concerns in the two debates. The subsequent columns identify what proportion of those who mentioned each theme went on to vote in favour of or against the government’s policy – though thanks to Labour’s abstention on the first vote in 2018, the figures for that debate are drawn from the vote on 17 April on Jeremy Corbyn’s motion, making them an imperfect proxy for endorsement or rejection of the government’s position.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>% speeches 2013</th>
<th>% speeches 2018</th>
<th>Pro 2013</th>
<th>Pro 2018</th>
<th>Anti 2013</th>
<th>Anti 2018</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Allies</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>0.37</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deterrence</td>
<td>17.7%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanitarian</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
<td>25.6%</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>1.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mission creep</td>
<td>20.4%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>1.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>14.6%</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>1.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertainty</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>1.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US Relations</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>1.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: breakdown of MPs’ speeches, by theme, 2013 vs 2018.

Table 1 shows how MPs paid markedly more attention to the UK’s relationships with its allies (including the US) and, in particular, to humanitarian questions in 2018 relative to 2013, and less attention to mission creep and Iraq. That reflected a number of changed circumstances,
including the election of President Trump, the formation of (and the UK’s participation in) the coalition against Da’esh, and the increasing visibility in the UK of the humanitarian disaster in Syria after the migration crisis of 2015. Most significantly, the fact MPs paid less attention to Iraq in 2018 versus 2013 reflected the issue’s reduced salience in the mind of the average speaker, while the fact they spent less time discussing mission creep reflected the fact that, in 2018, they spoke over two years after the UK began military operations in Syria targeting Da’esh, and after the specific operation had concluded without, apparently, dragging the UK further into the conflict.

Table 1 goes on to depict changes in how MPs who mentioned each theme in debate subsequently voted. The figures reported show the relative probability that an MP who mentioned a particular theme voted either for or against the government on each occasion. A figure of 1.0 implies that an MP who mentioned that theme was no more or less likely than an MP who did not mention that them to vote in the manner indicated. Figures below 1.0 imply that an MP who mentioned that theme was less likely to vote in the manner indicated than an MP who did not, while figures above 1.0 indicate the opposite. Using this measure allows us to compare the relationship between mentioning a specific theme and voting behaviour across the two debates while controlling for the fact that a higher proportion of MPs voted against the government in 2013 than in 2018.

In general, MPs who spoke in one of the two debates were more likely to vote against the government than those who did not speak. This observation reflects two basic facts of life in the House of Commons. First, any government can rely on a sizeable ‘payroll vote’ comprised of MPs appointed to ministerial positions or other government jobs (Cowley and Stuart 2012). These individuals almost always vote with the government (they are expected to resign
otherwise) but, with the exception of the ministers who open and close a government debate, generally do not speak in relevant debates. There is thus a natural tendency for opponents of the government to be over-represented in debates. Second, while it is true that back-bench government MPs do use debates to support the government in the hope of boosting its case (and possibly their own prospects of joining the payroll), the majority of those who speak in a debate are likely to do so in order to criticize the government. There is simply more reason for someone to speak in order to disagree with what the government is doing than there is for them to speak to agree with it.

Things get more interesting when we look at shifts between 2013 and 2018. The 4.9% of speakers who referred to the UK’s allies in 2013, and the 17.7% who referred to the principle of deterrence, were less likely to vote with the government than the average MP. Those who referred to the same themes in 2018 were much more likely to vote with the government than the average MP. This suggests a shift in the way these topics were debated, with the majority of MPs opposing Prime Minister Cameron’s claims about the need for the UK to support its allies and deter the future use of chemical weapons in 2013 and a majority supporting Prime Minister May’s claims on the same subjects in 2018. Those MPs who referred to uncertainty in 2013 were more likely than the average to vote with the government; by 2018 those who referred to uncertainty were less likely to support the government. Several of those who mentioned this theme in 2013 did so to query whether the Assad regime was truly responsible for the use of chemical weapons. Conservative MP Richard Shepherd, for example, encouraged his colleagues to ask ‘cui bono?’ before himself voting against the government (Hansard 2013, c1530). That shift likely mirrored differences between how the two Prime Ministers presented their case; as we have seen, Cameron admitted his case for action was not clear-cut. May did not. It also reflected the absence of significant government
rebellion in 2018. Although opposition MPs such as Labour’s David Drew warned that ‘intelligence is not sacrosanct’ (Hansard 2018b, c230), no government back-bencher referred negatively to uncertainty in the Prime Minister May’s position.

Those who mentioned Iraq were still less likely to support the government in 2018 than the average MP, but they were more likely to do so than those who mentioned Iraq in 2013. That likely reflects the greater share of MPs in 2018 who warned of the dangers of treating Iraq as a reason never to use force, compared to those who argued Iraq was indeed a reason for scepticism, who were more prominent in 2013. Examples of the former included Labour’s Alison McGovern, who abstained on both votes in 2018 after arguing ‘we cannot drive looking only in the rear-view mirror’ (Hansard 2018a, c106). Examples of the latter included the Conservative David Davis, who warned during the 2013 debate, with reference to Iraq, that ‘our intelligence as it stands might just be wrong’ (Hansard 2013, c1470).

While MPs who mentioned the US were generally much less likely to support the government on both occasions than those who did not, that was especially true for the 10% of MPs who did so in 2018. They were only slightly more than half as likely as the average MP to vote with the Prime Minister. In contrast to the debate on intervention against Da’esh in 2015, for example, MPs who talked about the US in 2013 and 2018 generally did so to criticise the Prime Minister for apparently taking orders from Washington. No-one spent much time on either of these occasions worrying about the UK’s responsibilities as an ally, a topic that did play a role in 2015 (Strong 2018b). Jeremy Corbyn, for example, accused Prime Minister May of acting in 2018 on ‘the whims of the US president’ (Hansard 2018a, c44). Several opposition MPs attacked President Trump personally, including Labour’s Hilary Benn, who confessed that ‘the temperament of the current occupant of the White House…made me worry last week’,
the Liberal Democrat Jo Swinson, who called Trump ‘erratic and unpredictable’, and the SNP’s Ian Blackford, who described him as ‘reckless and foolish’ (Hansard 2018a, cc116, 126, 144).

One issue that notably gained very little attention from MPs was Brexit. Just one MP – the SNP’s Martin Docherty-Hughes – linked the government’s decision to intervene in Syria to the UK’s pending departure from the EU, and he did so to criticize the Prime Minister for bypassing the UN, rather than to praise her for seeking to compensate for the UK’s loss of standing (Hansard 2018a, c132). Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and back-bencher Alex Norris both quoted the Leave campaign slogan ‘take back control’ in complaining about the government’s failure to consult MPs before ordering action, but neither talked more broadly about Brexit (Hansard 2018b, cc197, 238). And that was it.

Conclusions

This paper considered whether the UK’s decision to leave the EU in June 2016 explains its greater willingness to join the US and France in military action in Syria in 2018 compared to 2013. It seemed a reasonable question to ask. Brexit threatens to undermine the UK’s international standing, weakening it in material and political terms while bringing its reputation for reliability into question. It has created significant divisions among political elites while revealing deep dissatisfaction in elites among the general public. Given what we know about the relationship between domestic and international politics in general, and the way the UK in particular has historically conducted itself, there were good grounds for suspecting that Brexit might explain the difference between 2013 and 2018, at least in part.
It appears, at least as far as the House of Commons was concerned, however, that this simply was not the case. Prime Minister Theresa May made no reference to the UK’s changed international circumstances in explaining her reasons for using force in Syria. Nor, with the exception of one critic from the SNP, did any other contributor to the series of debates that followed her decision. It simply did not feature as an issue. MPs complained about President Trump, reflected on the legacy of Iraq, regretted (at least in some cases) voting against action in 2013, and supported the idea that the UK should help deter the use of chemical weapons. They did not, at least not publicly, regard the strikes as an opportunity to restore the UK’s standing in the Brexit context.

Three possible explanations for this arise. First, it is possible that Brexit does not in fact imply a significant shift in the UK’s strategic posture. The assumption set out in this paper – that leaving the EU weakens the UK and makes it look less reliable – could simply be wrong. Alternatively, that particular assumption could be right, but the corresponding assumption – that the prospect of military action in Syria represented a good opportunity for the UK to reassert itself – could be wrong.

Second, it is possible that Brexit does imply a significant shift in the UK’s strategic posture, but that decision-makers had not realised as much by April 2018. That could be because the UK had not actually left the EU at that point. It could also reflect excessive optimism among Leave-voting parliamentarians or supporters of the government’s approach to Brexit, who together comprised a majority of MPs (at the time). We know the transmission belt linking international-level pressures to domestic-level decision-makers is imperfect and indirect. We could yet see a future UK government engaging in similar military actions for precisely the reasons hypothesised in this paper.
Finally, it is possible that both the May government and many MPs privately recognized that the UK had fresh incentives to demonstrate its utility to the US in the aftermath of Brexit, but that they refrained from saying as much publicly. May already faced criticism for allegedly following President Trump’s directions. There seemed little support in parliament for the idea that the UK should prove itself a reliable ally in general, let alone that it should do so with respect to a particularly unpopular president. In the absence of private government papers, it is impossible to say for sure. But the possibility remains that the government acted in Syria to shore up the UK’s reputation in Washington, while deciding not to make the case for its stance publicly. A precedent for such an approach exists in the Blair government’s strategy during the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, so it is at least plausible.

If we accept, however, that Brexit does not explain the UK’s greater willingness to strike Syria in 2018, the question still remains of what does explain it. A number of points stand out.

First, the fact the May government bypassed MPs allowed it to escape the risk of a parliamentary veto. Prime Minister Cameron would have ordered the use of force in 2013 were he not blocked from doing so by the House of Commons.

Second, May’s decision to act first and consult MPs after the fact meant she escaped the hypothetical objections that dogged Cameron. Cameron struggled to assure MPs that the UK would avoid mission creep and civilian casualties. May already had avoided those things before standing up to speak.

Third, some of the arguments made against intervention in 2013 clearly no longer worked in 2018. As May herself repeatedly pointed out, the intervening five years proved conclusively
that Russia would block any attempt to co-ordinate a response to the use of chemical weapons through the UN, while failing to fulfil its promises to oversee a disarmament process itself. In addition, Russia carried out a chemical attack on UK soil during the period. While some MPs — including Jeremy Corbyn — argued that the UK should ‘not throw the baby out with the bathwater’ by giving up on the UN because of Russian intransigence, most seemed to accept in 2018 what they did not in 2013 — that there was no reasonable prospect of a UN-led solution.

Fourth, President Trump’s more direct, less deliberative approach to foreign policy meant he was always unlikely to follow President Obama by deciding not to intervene in Syria. He had in fact already done so, without UK help, in 2017.

Finally, the combined effect of the 2015 migration crisis and the rise of Da’esh had made clear the UK could not avoid involvement in the Syrian conflict. It is harder to warn of mission creep when the mission is creeping towards you.

So Brexit probably doesn’t explain why the UK intervened in Syria in 2018 but not in 2013. Instead, the best explanation lies in more immediate, contingent factors. That does not mean Brexit will not change the UK's strategic posture in future. But it hadn’t done so by April 2018.
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