Still Awkward After Brexit? Re-thinking Britain’s Role in Europe with the Help of Comparative Regional Integration

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KEY WORDS
Brexit, European integration, awkward states, comparative regional integration, comparative regionalism.

1: INTRODUCTION - BREXIT AND AWKWARD STATES IN REGIONAL INTEGRATION

The UK is due to leave the European Union (EU; the Union) on 29 March 2019. At the time of writing, the details of this departure remain to be decided, and important questions such as the nature of the UK’s subsequent trading – and other - relationships with its erstwhile partners remain unclear. There are myriad other matters to be settled before the future UK-EU relationship can safely be understood, but even once completed those negotiations will not fully resolve the matter of the UK’s role in regional integration.

This is because European integration and the EU are not the same thing, even if popular discussion usually elides them. Just as in other parts of the globe, the regional integration of Europe is best understood as a matrix of institutions, norms, and processes, with overlapping memberships and functions: the EU is simply the most encompassing and supranational of such bodies. When it comes to other bodies or structures in Europe, the UK will continue to be a member, *inter alia*, of the Council of Europe and NATO. Further, it has been noted that ‘non-membership should not be confused with non-integration and non-cooperation with the EU’, as Norway and other states are in the European Economic Area despite not being member states of the EU (Sitter and Sverdrup, 2017, 1). Indeed, as a result of Brexit, the UK will problematise the status quo for Europe’s pan-continental structures,
since it will, at the very least, require them to rethink their previous relationships with
London and to engage with a state that may not share overlapping membership of the EU
with some of their members. Thus, while the exact ways in which the UK will continue to be
an awkward partner (George 1998) in European integration are difficult to predict, the fact of
its ongoing awkwardness is not in question.

In this article, we draw on the growing work on awkward states within comparative
regional integration/regionalism studies (Murray, Warleigh-Lack and He 2014; Stegmann
McCallion and Brianson 2017), as well as comparative regionalism studies more broadly.
Our intention is not to deny the particularities of the UK context and Brexit, such as its
implications for Scotland and the Northern Irish peace process. Rather, we seek to examine
the post-Brexit context, in which the UK’s current approach, as an EU member state, to
manage its awkwardness by relying heavily upon opt-outs and participation in complex EU
diplomatic processes (Adler-Nissen 2014), will no longer be available. This is a context in
which Brexit will have changed the way in which the UK is seen by third countries in ways
that are often likely to be critical (Adler-Nissen, Galpin, and Rosamond 2017). Our argument
is that, although the UK is quite capable in principle of managing its ongoing regional
awkwardness, to do this successfully, it will need to reimagine itself as a middle power in a
way that corresponds to whichever variant of regional integration it secures from among the
range of possibilities we present.

We fully accept that behaving awkwardly in regional integration can serve states’
objectives, particularly if they are, in geopolitical terms, ‘small’ and otherwise struggling to
secure their interests in multilateral settings (see Wivel, 2017). In this article, however, we
view awkwardness as an essentially negative phenomenon, that is, as one which brings non-
trivial costs, both material and otherwise, to the state in question that would not otherwise
arise and which require management or off-setting. This follows from the definition of
awkwardness that we employ (see below), which speaks to issues of ontology as well as, and
perhaps more than, context- or issue-specific decisions. Thus, the ‘great English tradition that
is sceptical, egalitarian, independent-minded and gloriously awkward’ (O’Toole, 2017), a
description of a cultural rather than a political phenomenon, and territorially limited to one
part of the UK, does not feature in our definition.

Existing work sets out a helpful understanding of ‘awkwardness’ in regional
integration, as well as the independent variables to guide comparative study of the
phenomenon. This article invokes this work for the purposes of clarity and precision while avoiding the reinvention of the wheel. Murray, Warleigh-Lack and He (2014: 280) hold that awkwardness denotes ‘an uncomfortable state of affairs in which a state strives to participate in a region but lacks full belonging in and commitment to the goals of the latter.’ Importantly, awkwardness encompasses both obstructiveness and maladroitness, and hence both deliberate and inadvertent problem-generation, but it is not primarily an objective phenomenon. It is ultimately a social condition, the function of the perceptions and judgement of state actors (leaders and officials) and their regional partners, produced by the interaction of various factors that themselves stem from both material and ideational origins. By ‘material factors’ we again follow Murray, Warleigh-Lack and He to include power relations, institutional and policy preferences, economic objectives, policy achievements, security concerns and domestic politics; by ‘ideational factors’ we similarly adopt their suggestion to include identity (whether or not a state considers itself, and is considered by others to be, fully part of its region) and vision, that is, how awkward states would like their respective regions to develop, and the role they would like to play in that process (Murray, Warleigh-Lack and He 2014: 283).

The rest of the article is structured as follows. In section 2, we apply the most germane independent variables set out in existing work on awkwardness to the UK case, to show how British awkwardness in European integration can helpfully be understood from the perspective we advocate. In section 3, we introduce a model for thinking about Britain’s post-Brexit role in European integration that draws on comparative regionalism literature, and in section 4 we show how and from where Brexit offers opportunities to draw on the experiences of other awkward states. Section 5 concludes the article.

2: BREXIT AND BEYOND: THE UK AS AN AWKWARD PARTNER
The literature on the UK’s relations with the EU, and role in European integration more generally, is vast and incapable of full review in this article for reasons of space (see inter alia Bache and Jordan 2006, Gamble 2003, George 1998, Smith 2017, Wall 2008). In this section of the article, we therefore focus on the ways this literature highlights and explains the UK’s
awkwardness in its regional context, paying particular attention to the issues that will
continue to be salient after Brexit.¹

Atlanticism has been at the heart of UK strategy towards European integration in general
and the EU in particular (Gamble 2003). Facing the end of Empire, London sought to join
what became the EU in order to please Washington, and to avoid falling behind a potential
US-USSR-EEC triumvirate that would divide the world’s interests and politics between
themselves (George 1998; Young 1999). The need to preserve that transatlantic relationship
at almost any cost for the purposes of prestige – and a sense of British distinctiveness - meant
that even when it had the ability and will to lead in EU politics, the UK’s Atlanticist
preferences effectively limited the possible success of such efforts (James and Opperman
2009). After Brexit, this preference could generate ongoing awkwardness in the UK-EU
relationship, because the UK’s security dependence upon the US will continue to jar with its
economic dependence upon the EU, if the UK remains part of the single market and customs
union, or with the problems caused to the British economy if it leaves them. Moreover, as a
member of NATO, the UK will continue to have a role in deciding important elements of EU
external policy, since the EU Treaties currently make EU use of military personnel and
resources dependent upon NATO agreement. The potential for disruption here is clear.

Although Brexit will take the UK out of the EU, it remains to be seen whether this
withdrawal will change the dominant narrative about the UK’s role in European integration.
This discourse is primarily one of costs, both economically in terms of contributions to the
EU budget, and less materially in terms of loss of autonomy. In principle, secession from the
EU should change this narrative, and even constitute a moment at which a replacement story
of costs and benefits could be generated, because the UK will either cease paying into the EU
budget once it leaves the Union or pay less into it, in direct exchange for participation in the
single market and particular flanking policies, depending upon the eventual Brexit agreement.
However, it is wise to recall that narratives about Brexit are constructed and disseminated in
the context of political struggles (Adler-Nissen, Galpin, and Rosamond 2017), and it is
plausible that the issue of costs could continue to dominate UK thinking about European
integration, particularly if the Brexit negotiations are portrayed domestically in the same
zero-sum and confrontational way as has prevailed so far in the UK’s public debates about

¹ Thus, for instance, the UK’s recent record as a frequent ‘uploader’ of environment policy in the EU (Jordan
2006) is not directly pertinent as the UK is leaving the EU, although it could have indirect pertinence if it helps
the remaining EU states see Britain as a state that can bring constructive, useful solutions to regional
problems.
the EU (Wall 2008; Oliver 2016). The Brexit negotiations with the EU to date illustrate an ongoing problem of awkwardness as demonstrated by a lack of a deep or comprehensive understanding of the EU, and a continued perception of costs being imposed on the UK due to its exit. The narrative that has been apparent regarding what is being dubbed the divorce bill is that of being saddled with an invoice for that ‘divorce’ (European Commission, 2017).

Identity is a key issue in the evolving UK relationship with European integration. ‘Europe’ remains for many UK politicians somehow elsewhere, rather than a continent of which UK political actors have felt truly part; as one senior EU politician put it, UK politicians almost always portray and think of themselves as ‘negotiating with Brussels, rather than in Brussels’, a small preposition denoting a wealth of implications (de Vries, cited in Pappamikail Brown 1998: 220). Most Britons have not considered themselves European (Smith 2017). Moreover, popular Euroscepticism in the UK is by no means recent, and even at its peak in 1997, the levels of pro-Europeanism reported by UK citizens in Eurobaromenter data, if we take as a proxy those citizens who say they think their country’s EU membership is on the whole a good thing, was a full thirty per cent below the EU average (Goodwin and Milazzo 2015).

After Brexit, this popular lack of identification with European integration could become less salient, if UK involvement in its region is equipped with a more supportive narrative, as per the discussion above. However, it could also serve as fertile soil in which further UK awkwardness could germinate, since either elite absence from regular meetings with EU peers or a lack of regular elite socialisation may increase the sense of distance and ignorance that has in the past facilitated Euroscepticism (Wall 2008). At the popular level, it could easily prove the case that Euroscepticism increases, generating thereby a constraint on government action: UK citizens have tended to view even the EU as an irksome meddler of secondary importance, for which it was illogical to make significant concessions (Geddes 2002), and this may imply even less appetite for any such perceived sacrifice to or for less powerful regional institutions. The perception of the EU as a ‘meddler’ has certainly persisted in both some Eurosceptic media reporting, and successive government pronouncements, including comments by Theresa May regarding EU interference in the June 2017 general election. Nor has the EU’s peace narrative proven to be persuasive to many UK politicians. As Daddow (2017) comments, ‘Conservative leaders since Heath have never fully bought into the EU’s self-identity as a regional peace-bringer’.
Unlike member states that sought to bring about a form of transnational Europeanisation of norms, such as Poland under Donald Tusk (Klatt, 2012), the UK sought neither to internalise EU norms nor to diffuse its own across the member states or at the EU level (George 1998; Smith 2017). There is equally an enduring inability to comprehend the EU’s governance mechanisms on the part of UK political elites, even if UK officials have often been more adroit (Wall 2008).\(^2\) These failings are likely to generate significant awkwardness for and of the UK after Brexit, even though it will no longer be part of the Union as such - particularly if the attention paid to understanding EU politics and processes after secession reduces further from its present, rather low, levels. The UK has always been better at stating what it does \textit{not} want from European integration than what it does (Armstrong and Bulmer 2003). London-Brussels normative dissonance could easily increase after Brexit, since not only will the UK have finally rejected the core EU value of ‘ever closer union’, but it will also have created distractions and problems for its erstwhile partners that they will at the very least consider unwelcome, even if Brexit also serves discursively to strengthen EU-27 unity (Adler-Nissen, Galpin and Rosamond 2017). We note here recent proposals for a Defence Union indicate a commitment to enact plans that were not previously feasible due to UK opposition. Recent opinion polls across Europe also indicating a rise in support for the EU suggest that Brexit may serve as a cautionary tale in other member states.

3: THE UK AND EUROPE AFTER BREXIT: TWO POSSIBLE SCENARIOS

We now turn to a typology of the varying kinds of region that exist today, in order to discuss the prospects for the UK in European integration after Brexit. We assume for present purposes that the EU itself remains in its current form, and exclude three points on the regionalisation spectrum developed by Warleigh-Lack (2006) because they are not relevant here.\(^3\) Brexit is by definition taking the UK out of an instance of structured regionalisation (the EU), and dominance regionalisation requires a tightly bound membership organisation under the leadership of a hegemon, which again is not pertinent to our discussion because the UK will be leaving the EU and seeking to create a relationship with it in a new capacity as a

\(^2\) Both the present authors have professional experience in EU politics and policy-making, and can attest to this problem’s longevity. Craig Oliver’s (2016) memoir is an unwitting testament to its continuing existence, and officials from both the EU institutions and the EU-27 frequently raise this as an impediment in the Brexit negotiations that have taken place at the time of writing (Carswell 2017).

\(^3\) Warleigh-Lack uses the term ‘regionalisation’ to express the fact that regions are often dynamic processes, and to transcend the division in the literature between proponents of ‘regional integration’ and ‘regionalism’ as understandings of the phenomenon to be studied.
non-member state. Network regionalisation is driven fundamentally by a sense of shared identity which, as we have discussed, is effectively absent in the case of the UK and its European regional engagement. This leaves security regionalisation and conjoined regionalisation as germane points on Warleigh-Lack’s spectrum. In Table 2 we envisage a maximalist and minimalist version of both, to incorporate ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ forms of Brexit respectively.

**TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE**

In security regionalisation, the key question is whether and how the UK is able to reach comprehensive agreements with the EU-27 regarding ongoing cooperation in both economic and hard security terms. In principle, the maximalist version of this relationship would have little substantive change from the present arrangements, with the exception of a reduced contribution from London to the EU budget, non-participation in measures such as the Common Agricultural and Fisheries Policies, and new sectoral limits being placed on the jurisdiction in the UK of the EU Court of Justice (CJEU). British awkwardness here would centre on divergence of threat perception or worldview, reluctance to commit resources (including personnel), and failure to admit the implications of mutual dependence with European partners for national policy-making or strategic choices.

In the minimalist version of this scenario, the UK would have a bespoke, cross-sectoral trade relationship between London and Brussels that nonetheless falls short of the EEA in scope. Awkwardness from the UK here would centre on the wish to pursue independent, or divergent, policies in other sectors of the economy which undermine the integrity of the trade agreement it had reached. Britain would have security relationships with its erstwhile partners mainly via NATO, albeit with possible *ad hoc* participation in EU security measures undertaken by mutual agreement. One option here would be to cooperate with the EU-27 on civilian crisis management, similar to those agreements signed by the EU with the US, Chile, and Australia as well as other states. Unless special arrangements are negotiated between the UK and the EU as part of its exit, the UK could thus negotiate a Framework Partnership Agreement on Crisis Management with the EU to enable it to participate in the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy (CFSP) military and civilian crisis management missions (Murray, Allison-Reumann and Matera, 2017).

Conjoined regionalisation, on the other hand, would see the UK focus on the economic aspects of a future relationship with the EU, leaving the hard security aspect of the
relationship undeveloped other than via bilateral links identical to those it has with other NATO states, and possibly place additional emphasis on alliances with partner states such as those in the Five Eyes intelligence alliance with Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States. The maximalist form of this conjoined economic regional relationship would comprise a limited number of sectoral economic deals with the EU-27, perhaps including regarding the role of the City. London itself would be awkward in this context by isolating key aspects of the British economy from the agreement, preferring to pursue divergent policies in the hope of competitive advantage. The minimalist version of this scenario would see the UK falling back on WTO rules to trade with the EU-27 entirely as a third country. In this situation, British awkwardness would be primarily in the form of a Brexit negotiation failure, and subsequent privileging of deeper trade relationships and agreements with states outside the EU and EEA. The costs of non-membership of the EU would thus be starkly revealed.

4: COPING WITH AWKWARDNESS – BRITANNIA IN THE COMPARATIVE REGIONALISM LABORATORY

What does the comparative regionalism literature indicate about how to manage awkwardness in such instances? In this section of the article, we put forward deductions from the literature that appear generally applicable to awkward states in regional integration, tailoring them to the particular context of the post-Brexit UK, before presenting brief case studies to illustrate how three other awkward states have sought to manage the condition. It bears emphasising here that underlying each version of the scenarios sketched in Section 3 above is an unequal and asymmetrical future partnership between the UK and the EU, in which the UK has far more to gain from an ongoing mutually-beneficial arrangement than the EU. An exit is far more than a collection of opt-outs from a regional body while retaining membership of that body. It constitutes a change to the status of the UK within its own region, to its representation as an active member of a regional body in international forums, and to its ability to identify with its neighbours as partners in policy-making. It is no longer a constituent part of the most important regional club of Europe, if not the world. The UK will, after March 2019, find itself interacting with the EU as a third country rather than a full member whose population size and diplomatic capacities effectively gave it a larger say in EU policy-making than had many of its partners, although in the maximalist version of the
security regionalisation scenario there may be some fuzzy boundaries here around participation in Europol, especially on counter-terrorism cooperation, or EU security missions. The fact remains that the UK will no longer be a peer or EU partner in EU decision-making, but a demandeur. Its former partners will now be in a position to assess any requests it may wish to make from their position within the EU club and not with a club member. This analogy suggests that non-membership entails costs (of exclusion) and not necessarily benefits of regional belonging in Europe. Such costs are both material (and financially costly too) and ideational. Although the UK was always reluctant to act as a primus inter pares within the EU as it forsook opportunities for leadership (apart from Margaret Thatcher on the Single Market) it nevertheless had the capacity to do so, and this capacity is no longer relevant.

Moreover, Brexit problematises relations between the UK and the EEA states; again, in the maximalist version of the security regionalisation model, these relations can be managed, but of course the UK’s staying within the EEA (and at the same time outside of the EU) requires the assent of not only the EU but of all of the EEA states too. The UK’s future successful management of its awkwardness will thus require an obvious but essential first step: it will have to wish to do so, and be prepared to make compromises and concessions for this purpose. This step is in fact more difficult than it appears, because it requires the abandonment of one near-constant in the UK’s relationship with the EU in particular and European integration in general, namely its domestic framing of relevant narratives as centred on costs, difficulties, and battles, rather than more realistic narratives that also feature the benefits and gains of engagement with European integration. This would represent a shift in elite thinking that could potentially alter popular opinion too. This article suggests it could be predicated on a constructive vision for the continent’s future and the role the UK would seek to play in that future. We suggest that a British government would then be in a position where the Brexit deal is presented as an historic turning point that ushers in a new relationship that is better suited to the UK’s interests or needs (than past membership of the EU) while seeking at the same time to contribute to meeting the needs of the region itself. It would see the UK embracing a form of regional belonging that is broader yet positive for national interests – economic and security interests in particular. This constructive approach is a paradoxical feature of successful awkward states in asymmetric power relations with their regions (see below). At the time of writing, signals from some parts of the UK policy elite are becoming more hopeful in this regard, with for instance the publication of the UK’s
position paper of 23 August 2017 on the future jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice, which appears to resile from its previous implacable antipathy to the Court.⁴

A second factor of general applicability to awkward states in regional integration is their liminality, which can be geographical, cultural, or strategic – or indeed any combination of the three. In the UK case, this refers to the sense that Europe is ‘elsewhere’, and that the state itself is fully part of no single region. It is consistent with the Atlanticism we discussed in Section 2 of the article. Again, the key to successful management of this ambiguity is overt acknowledgement of the difficulties it can create, while seeking to minimise their impact and/or offset them by enlisting its more positive aspects in the service of the European region (and not simply the EU) rather than just the state in question. In the UK’s case, Brexit appears to put an end to London’s role as Washington’s friend in Brussels, at least in EU Brussels, but an alternative could be constructed if close enough relations with the EU-27, as well as the US under its 45th President, are maintained by the UK even while EU defence and security integration deepens and while many EU states and the EU remain in NATO. The UK could potentially remain the US’s friend in NATO Brussels, for example.

A third general factor of pertinence here is the need for awkward states to keep close diplomatic ties with their regional neighbours, and remain up-to-date with the workings and agendas of regional bodies in which they do not take part. In the UK case, this would mean maintaining excellent relations not only with key member states of the EU, but also with the EU institutions themselves, since there is often a knowledge gap between what national government departments do, and what current thinking in the relevant policy areas is in Brussels. In other words, Brexit requires, in all likelihood, turning the current Permanent Representation of the UK to the EU – in effect, the British embassy to the Union - into an even more important entity, unless the outcome of Brexit negotiations is in keeping with the minimalist conjoined regionalisation scenario. This is not very different from how many third countries monitor events and outcomes in the EU, and their relevance to these countries. Building alliances in Brussels will be required of the UK just as it is for other third states.

Norway is a case study for the maximalist security regionalisation option, in view of its EEA membership and relations with Nordic states that approximate those of the UK with

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Ireland. They have tailored their relationship with the EU in a manner that suits their own awkwardness and identity. Like the UK, Norway has twice voted on EU membership, although Norway opted not to join at all. Gänzle and Henökl (2017) note that Norway has had a close link with the EU since 1994, actively participating in a large number of EU policies and programs and effectively forging a close partnership that has in itself become increasingly “awkward.” The Norwegian option includes membership of the Single Market with its four freedoms, which was itself a major achievement of the UK as a key driver and which was subsequently considered particularly problematic for the UK after the Brexit referendum. Given the results of the UK June election in 2017, this could be considered as an option. Although Norway does not have to pay EU tariffs for access to the Single Market, or deal with EU quotas, it is obliged to pay the Union for this privilege. It is obliged to deal with EU as unit, relating to customs and legal requirements. It complies with many EU policies (although not the Common Agricultural Policy or fisheries policy). However it does not frame the regulations that it must adhere to. It does not actively participate in EU law-making and has no vote – or veto - in EU institutions. It is worth recalling that:

An important difference between EU membership and EEA membership is that a country with full membership of the EU has access to all the EU bodies. Participation by the EEA countries is primarily restricted, however, to preparatory and implementation committees connected with the Commission (Lægreid, Steinthorsson, Thorhallsson 2004, 354).

Although Norway contributes to the EU budget there are substantial benefits that at present render this option a potentially attractive one for the UK. These include cooperation in ‘research and development, education, social policy, the environment, consumer protection, tourism and culture, collectively known as “flanking and horizontal” policies. Furthermore, the EEA guarantees equal rights and obligations within the internal market for citizens and economic operators’ (Gänzle and Henökl 2017). A Norwegian option would mean that the UK would not need to rescind all EU-derived legislation since 1973, as much of it would remain intact in either a Single Market or an enhanced arrangement such as that which pertains in Norway at present. The Norwegian approach of ‘pragmatic participation’, which is framed as ‘pragmatic cooperation in low politics, not the high politics of

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5 We do not include a case study suggestion for the minimalist conjoined regionalism context since this is predicated on the UK-EU relationship effectively ending. In addition, space limitations constrain the depth of the case studies that we can undertake here.
sovereignty’ which nevertheless are ‘often not about maximising one’s own interests, but rather… about finding solutions that are acceptable’ (Sitter and Sverdrup 2017) may well provide a useful template for the UK.

Japan is a case study for the minimalist security regionalisation option in terms of its relations with ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian States) states; its participation in the ASEAN Plus initiatives such as ASEAN Plus Three (with China and South Korea); the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit (EAS) and its membership of APEC, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum. Like the UK, it considers the US as a major ally. For Japan, like South Korea, the US has long been a security guarantor in the Asia Pacific. Like the case of the UK, some partners in the Asia Pacific have not regarded Japan as belonging in the region, due to the role it played in World War II, and particularly in Korea and China. Significant tensions remain and often are heightened in these relations.

Japan has sought to confront its liminality through postwar reparation payments and generous development assistance to the region, and also support for Asian states in the aftermath of the Asian Financial Crisis. It was an active proponent of the Chiang Mai initiative on currency swaps and of the ASEAN Plus Three process. It has also proposed initiatives for a regional body (minus the US) such as that advanced by then Prime Minister Hatoyama whereby Japan is ‘to become a “bridge” for the world, between the Orient and the Occident’ (Hatoyama 2009). He spoke of ‘an East Asian community taking shape as an extension of the accumulated cooperation built up step by step among partners who have the capacity to work together, starting with fields in which we can cooperate—Free Trade Agreements, finance, currency, energy, environment, disaster relief and more’ (Hatoyama, 2009). Despite a perception of awkwardness in the region, and a difficulty with embracing ‘the apparent advantages of regionalization’, Japan and Australia were ‘the prime movers behind the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum’ (Beeson and Hidetaka 2007, 230; 228). Japan is plagued by its difficult history and contested Asian identity. The UK has a less contested history yet its relationship with its EU partners remains influenced by its distinctive experience of war, its perception of regional differentness, and its alignment with the US.

Australia is a case study for the maximalist conjoined regionalisation option in terms of its relations with ASEAN states and regional bodies such as the ARF and EAS and its support for ASEAN regionalism. It seeks to be actively involved in all regional bodies of the
Asia Pacific and was a leader of the APEC initiative. Yet it too struggles to be recognised as a leader or partner in the region due its close relationship since the end of World War II with the US. Its ties with the UK also remain remarkably close, giving it two significant extra-regional partners in a way which does not always help its aspirations towards regional belonging.

There are considerable ideational and material differences of Australia and its region (Murray, Warleigh-Lack and He, 2014) yet its participation in APEC, ASEAN Dialogues, the East Asia Summit and other bodies point to a clear commitment to engage in both security and economic regional bodies. It has also signed major free trade agreements with China, Japan, South Korea, the US, and ASEAN.

Although an awkward partner in the region, it seeks nevertheless to play a role as a middle power – a role that the UK may wish to consider. Beeson (2011, 567) comments that ‘middle powers such as Australia can do little to influence the larger geopolitical structures … but they can make material and ideational choices that have a powerful impact on their own welfare and help to legitimate the extant international order’. On the other hand, Patience (2014, 455) argues that ‘Australia’s middle power imagining is, in part, a product of deep nostalgia for the golden age of Empire — for what was perceived as far away Britain’s cultural superiority and civilizing destiny in a world becoming bewilderingly cosmopolitan and fearfully foreign’. It has been proposed that, as a middle power, ‘Australia’s policy settings need to be robust and adaptable to a range of possible futures’ in its own region (Wood, 2016, 139). States such as Canada, South Korea and Japan are also regarded as middle powers.

Patience (2017) and other scholars identify three kinds of middle powers: dependent middle powers; regional middle powers; and middle powers as global citizens (such as Scandinavian states). Of particular interest here are dependent middle powers, ‘states that are treated warily by partners and contenders alike because of their alliances with great powers’. The example of Australia and its relationship with the US comes to mind – where dependent middle powers will generally be expected to align their policies with their great power ally’s foreign, international trade, and security policies (Patience 2017). A regional middle power, on the other hand, holds power by virtue of being a member of that region, for instance *qua* member state of the EU.
These observations are worthy of consideration in the comparative regionalism laboratory that the UK may step into over the next few years. At the same time Australia and the UK are seeking closer relations in the context of Brexit, with references to both the Commonwealth and the Anglosphere. There is talk of the UK and Australia actively forging a ‘network of nations’ of the Commonwealth, and of Britain working with ‘like-minded partners’ such as Australia (Matera, Allison-Reumann and Murray, 2017). There are already established strong security and defence ties between the two nations. Yet the UK may wish to reflect on the fact that Australia seeks a multifaceted approach to its international role and linkages, based on FTAs and multilateral fora as well as regional bodies. Unlike the UK, Australia joins regional bodies, such as the East Asia Summit, with enthusiasm. The UK may observe that Australia seeks active engagement or leadership in APEC and the G20, for example. It remains an awkward partner while effectively being an avid joiner of, and participant in, organised bodies and institutions.

5. CONCLUSION: AWKWARD MEANS AWKWARD?

This article has sought to show the value of engaging with the comparative regionalism literature to understand how the UK can manage its role in European integration after Brexit. The UK choice of exit from the EU after the June 2016 referendum has not been emulated by other states in the Union. However, there are states that have left their respective regional bodies for a number of reasons; some of them have found their way back again, such as Morocco’s re-joining of the African Union in 2017. It may be that whatever relationship is negotiated between London and Brussels during and after the Brexit talks is temporary, and not just because there may well be agreement on a transitional deal, but because over time the UK changes its mind and reaches a different future understanding of and accord with the Union. It may even be that Britain re-joins the EU; certainly, senior EU figures have suggested this is possible, and others have expressed a hope along these lines, viz. Danuta Huebner (2017):

It’s never too late to understand what you are going to lose. I hope it will be a learning process, which of course might make some people rethink the whole thing.

Moreover, British awkwardness can in principle be mitigated by following similar strategies to those identified in Section 4. Taken together with an appreciation of the new
power dynamics of the post-Brexit context and a sincere, if partial, invocation of the relevant
shared norms, the UK is quite capable of minimising the negative consequences of Brexit for
its regional engagement beyond the unavoidable disruption of the Brexit process and
negotiations. There may be some cause for optimism here in that formal exit from the EU
finally puts to bed the sense that British grandeur and autonomy was lost in 1973 – that it
encountered in the EU continental intransigence and a plethora of costs. Has that wound
finally been cauterised, making London in future a much more content European player,
albeit a more marginal one? Because it will remain a European player – in NATO and in the
Council of Europe and even perhaps in EFTA and the EEA.

The UK could choose to play a role in Europe as a pragmatic participant, like
Norway, or as a dependent middle power, as Australia has been characterised. If a dependent
middle power, its links with the US cannot be assumed in an era of a Trump presidency and
apparent great power rivalry. If the UK wishes to be a regional middle power, in a broad EEA
configuration, it would need to deal with the consequences of its past low levels of elite
socialisation within the EU and to develop a new socialisation strategy based on pragmatic
coalition-building or alliance-formation along policy lines, for example in the EEA and with
at least some selected allies (perhaps Nordic ones) within the EU as part of that EEA. The
legacy – or even burden – of memory remains a feature of the UK’s position and positioning
in Europe – and that includes memory of its own international past and the memories of its
interlocutors over more than four decades of EU membership and more recent recollections
of difficult Brexit negotiations.

Our sense is that too much optimism is unlikely to be proven correct in the short or medium
terms, unless the Brexit negotiations themselves take a far less combative tone, because they
presently signal no, or very limited, recalibration of norms and identity on the part of UK
elites. Without such a shift, and as Theresa May might put it, awkwardness in the case of the
UK’s regional role will really mean ‘bloody difficult.’

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House of Representatives, Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, Trade Sub-Committee, 27 March


Young, H (1999): This Blessed Plot: Britain and Europe From Churchill to Blair London: Macmillan.
Table 1: UK Awkwardness after Brexit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element of Awkwardness</th>
<th>Material or Ideational?</th>
<th>Post-Brexit Relevance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Atlanticism</td>
<td>Material and ideational</td>
<td>NATO membership could be used to frustrate EU action; ‘special relationship’ as source of prestige</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU membership narrative of costs</td>
<td>Primarily ideational</td>
<td>Need to develop narrative of ‘(costs and) benefits’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity (both elite and popular levels)</td>
<td>Ideational (Euroscepticism)</td>
<td>Sense of superiority or difference less salient?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low internalisation of regional norms</td>
<td>Ideational</td>
<td>Poor elite understanding of Brexit’s diplomatic impact</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: UK Awkwardness after Brexit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Region</th>
<th>Maximalist version</th>
<th>Minimalist version</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Security regionalisation</td>
<td>UK collaborates in EU policing, defence and security policies as well as NATO; UK accedes to EFTA and the EEA,</td>
<td>UK participates only in NATO; no cross-sectoral economic agreement with EU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conjoined regionalisation</td>
<td>Bespoke UK-EU trade deal or, post 2017 general elections, seeks access to Single Market on Norwegian lines.</td>
<td>Small number of sectoral economic relationships only</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors, adapted from Warleigh-Lack 2006