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## **Brexit, trade and foreign affairs - the view from party conference**

Written by Arpinder Baryana, Political Consultant on 10 October 2017



Brexit was everywhere and nowhere this Conference season. Barely a fringe went by without mention of it, and yet little clarity was provided by either of the major parties and there were no big announcements.

Whilst Labour Conference waived through a statement backing Keir Starmer's Brexit policy, votes to pin down the position in key areas such as the single market and free movement were avoided to spare the party from embarrassing splits.

At Conservative Conference, Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson's interventions on Brexit in the press overshadowed the event and tested the patience of his colleagues, prompting the British Chambers of Commerce to warn that businesses needed "competence, not division".

And the message from industry could not have been clearer: agree on a comprehensive transition and provide certainty for business on key areas like citizens' rights and immigration.

On trade, Liam Fox was naturally one of the more optimistic of Cabinet ministers, though he did accept it would be "much better to have an agreement" than a no deal scenario. He said his

Department would shortly have a fully established complement of Trade Commissioners to lead nine new regions across the world but did not provide a view on the Government's preferred future trade models.

It is hoped the trade Bill, expected before the end of the year may provide some clarity, and this will also be a key flashpoint for many NGOs looking to feed into the Brexit legislative process. In particular, the spotlight will remain on arms trade with Saudi Arabia, but also workers' rights, environmental protection and relations with developing countries.

Shadow foreign secretary Emily Thornberry continued her criticism of the UK's arms trade, stating a Labour government would institute "wholesale reform of the legal and regulatory framework fully implementing the International Arms Trade Treaty" and reiterated the manifesto commitment to a more "ethical" foreign policy, declaring "Conference, it does not have to be this way. Labour can and will do things differently when we are back in power."

But some Labour MPs like Conor McGinn and Graham Jones felt there had been a "missed opportunity" to engage with Arab countries due to the barring of Saudi Arabia and Sudan, which had led to other Arab ambassadors boycotting conference.

Boris Johnson, meanwhile, far from letting "the British Lion roar" struggled to find a voice on key issues such as North Korea and instead lost more credibility over his ill-judged remarks on Libya. It comes, of course, at a time when diplomatic engagement is more important than ever and the Government will be looking to key allies to shore up its global influence and show it is a serious player on the world stage.

And against this background, on Tuesday the European Parliament overwhelmingly passed a resolution to delay talks on the UK's future relationship with the EU due to lack of progress. Although the vote is not binding, it does indicate where MEPs are on the negotiations, and don't forget they will get a vote on the final deal.

So where does this leave us? Ostensibly not far from where we were pre-conference. With the EU (Withdrawal) Bill about to enter Committee stage, however, we'll see some of the real battles commence.

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