
After Brexit: Prospects for UK-EU cooperation on foreign and security policy

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There is a strong case for close cooperation between the UK and the EU in the area of foreign and security policy after Brexit. The UK will remain a significant if somewhat diminished global actor after Brexit. It is one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, it is a member of NATO, the G7 and G20, it is the sixth largest global economy, it has a substantial diplomatic and military footprint and has been one of the few developed countries to maintain a 0.7% of GNI commitment to development assistance.

These assets will not disappear after Brexit but the UK will lose influence as a result of its withdrawal from the EU. One former FCO minister described Brexit as 'the biggest influencing-reducing move in the history of Britain's international relations.'¹ The UK's very likely weakened economic and financial situation will also impact, for example, on resources for the armed forces and development assistance. Furthermore, it will probably be consumed with internal constitutional, political, economic and social disputes for the foreseeable future. The question of a second Scottish independence referendum hangs in the air while the Irish question may also resurface. There will thus be less time and energy for foreign and security policy.

In principle, the EU wishes to maintain a close relationship with the UK on the common foreign and security policy (CFSP) and the common security and defence policy (CSDP), perhaps using the existing treaties or perhaps crafting a new partnership agreement. The EU's chief negotiator, Michel Barnier, has stated that although the UK will not participate in Council meetings on foreign and security policy he would like the EU and UK to work together rather than in parallel.²

But the devil is in the detail and although there is a general desire to cooperate on foreign and security policy, much will depend on the overall atmosphere of the Brexit negotiations. An acrimonious divorce will have consequences across the board while an amicable parting of ways would lead to a more cooperative relationship including in CFSF/CSDP.

BACKGROUND

Since 1945, the UK has traditionally viewed its foreign policy as having three overlapping circles: the US, Europe and the Commonwealth. In recent decades, the importance of the Commonwealth has steadily declined which leaves Britain looking to the continent and across the Atlantic. The Foreign Office has been regarded as more pro-EU while the Ministry of Defence more pro-US.³ Ever since the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, the UK has blocked plans for closer defence cooperation in the EU and any moves to introduce majority voting in CFSP. But it has not been a passenger in policymaking regarding EU foreign and security policy. It provided the first double-hatted High Representative/Vice President of the Commission (Catherine Ashton) and has seconded a number of senior diplomats to the EEAS. In the 1990s it was a major troop provider in stabilisation missions in the Balkans, it was an early supporter of the EU's role in the Iran negotiations, it pushed for a tough EU response to Russia after the annexation of Crimea (but then absented itself from the Minsk process), and it has taken the lead on a few CSDP missions such as Operation Atalanta. It has tended to support the EU role more in the immediate neighbourhood (Balkans, North Africa) than further afield. Rather than work consistently through the EU, the UK has preferred to plough its own furrow with major powers such as the US, China and India, and with other Commonwealth countries such as Australia, Canada, Kenya, Nigeria and Malaysia. The UK is not alone in this tendency but it has rarely been a strong supporter of a cohesive EU voice in third countries.⁴

During the referendum campaign, there was little reference to foreign policy. Proponents of Brexit made much of alleged plans for a European army but there was little serious discussion of the potential implications for the UK operating on its own outside the EU framework. After the Brexit vote the government seemed confused as to the foreign and security policy implications. Nearly all third countries had made clear their preference for the UK to remain within the EU. Leave campaigners had made much of a revived special relationship with the US. Theresa May made a point of visiting Washington soon after the inauguration of President Trump. But the president's behaviour has alienated many Britons (and Europeans) and over two million have signed a petition against a Trump state visit to the UK.⁵ His 'America First' doctrine and opposition to important UK objectives such as fighting climate change, the Iran nuclear deal and expanding free trade is hardly conducive to a balanced US-UK relationship.

During her visit to the US, May said Britain would take on an 'even more internationalist role, where we meet our responsibilities to our friends and allies, champion the international cooperation and partnerships that project our values around the world, and continue to act as one of the strongest and most forceful advocates for business, free markets and free trade anywhere around the globe.'⁶

In her letter of March 2017 that triggered the procedure for the UK to leave the EU through article 50, Theresa May repeated the UK's wish to see a strong and secure EU and later stated that the UK was unconditionally committed to maintaining European security. At the same time, Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson has angered many of his EU colleagues with his role in the Leave campaign and his insulting remarks about the European project. It is difficult to envisage a close and trusting partnership in the foreign policy field as long as he remains in his current position.⁷

STATE OF PLAY

The UK's position paper on foreign and security policy published in mid-September, stated that the UK wanted 'a deep and special partnership' across the board in external relations that 'goes beyond existing third country arrangements.' It trumpeted the UK's major role in providing for European security and defence and stated that 'this will continue, and UK interests will also be served, through strengthened bilateral relationships.' It envisaged that the UK 'would contribute military assets to EU operations, cooperate on sanctions and agree joint positions on foreign policy' as part of a Brexit deal.⁸

In a foreword, Boris Johnson wrote: 'In recent years, the EU has helped achieve crucial foreign policy goals – from bringing Iran to the negotiating table, to uniting in response to Russian aggression in Ukraine. We want this EU role to continue after we leave.' Brexit Secretary David Davis added: 'It is in our mutual interest to work closely with the EU and its member states on terrorism and extremism, illegal migration, cyber-crime, and conventional state-based military aggression.'

While there remains little discussion of the implications of the UK going it alone in foreign and security policy there has been much wishful thinking that Brexit will open new trading opportunities thus allowing the UK to pursue its 'Global Britain' strategy. The mercantilist drive has indeed become a dominant foreign policy theme with Johnson and International Trade Secretary Liam Fox, arguing that free from the restraints of the EU, the UK will be able to pursue advantageous deals with the US, China, India, Australia and others.⁹ President Trump has made some encouraging remarks about a trade deal with the UK but some of his officials have also talked about reviving TTIP. There is clearly much uncertainty as regards trade policy in the US. What Brexiteers also fail to understand is the likely time it will take to negotiate such deals and the fact that the UK will be in a supplicant position.¹⁰ Few have really grasped that no number of FTAs can match the amount of trade the UK does with the EU. The UK sends just under 50% of its exports to the EU compared to 8% to the five BRICS.

Partly as a consequence of the orientation towards a mercantilist foreign policy, there will be less willingness to support the EU's already weakening normative agenda. The refusal of the UK to criticize China or Saudi Arabia in any manner is indicative of the likely approach towards human rights.¹¹ There is also a risk of a reduced commitment to the development agenda. The UK has had a good record in development assistance but two factors may influence future directions. First, there is likely to be a lack of resources given a weakened economy. Second, at least in the short term, there is likely to be a preference for trade promotion over development aid, which was never a priority for most Conservative MPs. The former head of MI6, Sir John Sawyers, has also warned of the negative impact on 'how we take part in coercive foreign policy strategies and how we deal with difficult countries like Russia, Iran or North Korea or how we deal with terrorist organisations like Al Qaeda or ISIS.'¹²

Overall, while the UK now operates as a semi-detached member of the CFSP, there is little sign of an activist foreign policy. In July, *The Economist* opined that 'Britain has not cut such a pathetic figure on the global stage since Suez.'¹ Much of the blame has been placed on Boris Johnson. Lord Kerr, former head of the UK diplomatic service, wrote in August that 'in a whole range of foreign policy crises situations, from North Korea to Venezuela, and global issues

including migration and climate change, the foreign secretary was silent.' This silence, he suggested 'devalues the prospect of continued foreign policy cooperation which should be a card in our Brexit hand.'¹³

PROSPECTS

Post-Brexit, the UK will likely give more priority to NATO, at a time when pressure on its military budget and capabilities will grow. Defence Secretary, Michael Fallon, has trumpeted the arrival of two new aircraft carriers by 2019 but already announced budget cuts will mean only a limited number of fighter planes will be able to join the carriers. The UK will almost certainly maintain its Trident nuclear deterrent even though the resources it consumes has been widely criticized. Exactly how the deterrent helps the UK meet its strategic interests (or that of the EU) have never been fully explained in or out of parliament. Expenditure on Trident and the aircraft carriers will mean further army reductions, which will make it difficult for the UK to assume any additional responsibilities.

Apart from May's speech in the US (and one in similar vein at Lancaster House)¹⁴ there has been no official guidance on Britain's future foreign policy cooperation with the EU until the September paper, which provided few specifics. It said that the UK and the EU should remain 'close partners' in foreign policy issues and this could be done 'through regular dialogue and specific cooperation.' There should be an option to agree joint positions and cooperate on sanctions. The UK could also join existing mechanisms such as election observation missions.

The paper added that the UK could continue to participate in CSDP missions and would expect to be involved as closely as possible in the detailed operational planning even if formally excluded from the decision-making level. It would be prepared to offer existing command and control facilities. It would also wish to collaborate with the European Defence Agency (EDA) and participate in the Commission's various research programmes. Cyber, development policy and migration were other priority areas singled out for future cooperation. There could be a reciprocal exchange of foreign and security policy experts and military personnel; and even mutual provision of consular services and continued co-location of diplomatic premises. Apart from readiness to support EU positions and operations there was also a strong message on the importance of bilateral relations, something that may go against moves to strengthen European defence cooperation.

Giving evidence to a House of Lords committee in July 2017, the former Foreign Secretary, William Hague, agreed that after Brexit the UK would have diminished influence and urged the closest possible cooperation with the EU on foreign and security policy. To enhance British influence, Hague suggested that Britain should seek to keep its seat as an observer on the EU's Political and Security Committee (PSC). He also proposed that the UK might still second experts to the European External Action Service (EEAS), share intelligence and continue to participate in CSDP operations.

Some have suggested the UK could copy the Norwegian model as it enjoys a regular dialogue with the EU on foreign and security policy via the EEA agreement and usually aligns itself with EU positions and declarations. Norway also has an agreement which allows it to engage in CSDP operations and another agreement allowing cooperation with the European Defence Agency. If the UK were to join the EEA it could copy paste the Norwegian model. But this would be unlikely to satisfy a country with global interests and ambitions.

It seems more likely that any future cooperation would involve a bespoke arrangement, perhaps a Norway Plus arrangement, taking into account the decades of UK involvement in EU policymaking and its substantial resources in the foreign and security policy fields. Crispin Blunt, the chair of the UK House of Commons foreign affairs committee, has suggested that there could be a special enhanced framework participation agreement, including permanent observer status in the PSC and regular high-level dialogues.¹⁵

Another idea might be to follow the Schengen model where non EU countries sit in Coreper discussions and then leave when there is a vote. It might also be more advantageous to work through the Political Directors/European Correspondents senior officials' network which is more flexible and dynamic.

The EU treaties do not offer much guidance. They outline how a third country may be associated with the CFSP but of course foreign policy is only partly driven by treaties. There are various informal formats outside the EU structures to which the UK belongs (Quad, Quint, etc) and these are likely to continue.¹⁶ Much will depend, however, on how the UK will try to play its cards during and after the negotiations and therefore on the atmosphere surrounding the final Brexit deal. A willingness to put money on the table usually improves the atmosphere.

There is, however, a further caveat concerning the Trump administration. If the UK were to put all its eggs into the Trump basket and support the broad thrust of Trump's foreign policy (partly to help secure a trade deal) this could open a serious rift with the openly critical stance of most EU members towards Trump.

CONCLUSION

How Britain develops its future relationship with the EU in foreign and security policy will depend on three issues. First, the broader positioning of the UK in global affairs. To what extent will it seek to act autonomously, and to what extent as a close partner of the EU, or even as the junior transatlantic partner to the US? Second, developments within the EU itself. It is an open question whether post-Brexit the EU will form a more cohesive and effective foreign and security policy or whether it will remain divided as it was on Iraq, Libya and Syria. Various European leaders are now pushing for a stronger EU in security and defence matters but history shows how difficult it is to move forward in this sensitive area. The differences in outlook between France and Germany, for example, remain very significant. Third, one cannot separate the future UK-EU relationship in foreign and security policy from the final Brexit divorce settlement. An amicable separation will create goodwill to cooperate while a nasty parting of the ways will also impact on foreign and security policy.

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The views expressed in this Policy Brief are the sole responsibility of the author.

- ¹ Macshane, Denis (2017), "Brexit and the decline of British Foreign Policy", Carnegie Europe, available at: <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/72665>.
- ² Barnier, Michel (2017), "The defence angle in Brexit negotiations", available at: <https://medium.com/eu-security-and-defence-in-a-volatile-world/the-defence-angle-in-brexit-negotiations-b074c0b6636c>.
- ³ During conversations in London during September 2017. The pro-EU orientation of most FCO officials is still very much in evidence.
- ⁴ According to EEAS sources, UK ambassadors now rarely attend EU coordination meetings in third countries.
- ⁵ Now downgraded to a working visit sometime in 2018.
- ⁶ Speech in Philadelphia, 25 January 2017.
- ⁷ The Guardian, "With a liar like Boris Johnson as foreign secretary how can Europe trust Britain?", 21 September 2017.
- ⁸ UK Government (2017), "Foreign policy, defence and development: a future partnership paper", available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/foreign-policy-defence-and-development-a-future-partnership-paper>.
- ⁹ UK Government (2017), "Preparing for our future trade policy", available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/651192/CCS207_CCS0917000298-1_Preparing_for_our_future_UK_trade_policy_Report_H....pdf.
- ¹⁰ The harsh reality of US trade power was displayed when Washington slapped on 200% tariffs on Bombardier aircraft. The planes are Canadian but the wings are made in Northern Ireland and engage over 4,000 workers there. May's plea to Trump to prevent this move fell on deaf ears.
- ¹¹ Reprieve, "FCO human rights report: UK assisting world's worst executioners", 25 February 2017, available at: <https://www.reprieve.org.uk/press/fco-human-rights-report-uk-assisting-worlds-worst-executione/>.
- ¹² The Daily Telegraph, 19 October 2017.
- ¹³ Evening Standard, "Brexit is about foreign policy. Why is Britain being so silent?", 22 August 2017.
- ¹⁴ Theresa May's Lancaster House speech, 17 January 2017.
- ¹⁵ MP, Blunt, Crispin (2017), "Post-Brexit EU-UK cooperation on Foreign and Security Policy", available at: <https://www.blunt4reigate.com/sites/www.blunt4reigate.com/files/2017-04/Post-Brexit%20EU-UK%20cooperation%20on%20foreign%20%26%20security%20policy%20April%202017.pdf>.
- ¹⁶ The Quad features the US, UK, France and Germany while the Quint is the Big Four plus Italy. These informal groupings focus on major strategic issues and usually try and narrow policy differences between their members.

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