Strong together? The impact of Brexit on security and defence cooperation

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The Brexit vote in 2016 sounded an alarm in European capitals in terms of security and defence. The ensuing withdrawal of a major (i.e. hard) security actor from the EU was considered a potential fracture in European and Western unity amid mounting security challenges, including wars in the southern and eastern neighbourhoods of the EU. The election of Donald Trump as the President of the United States some six months later caused another shockwave in Europe by casting a shadow over the transatlantic security relationship. Despite quadrupling the US' defence budget for Europe in 2017, President Trump's ambivalent political statements on the US commitments and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) left a lasting mark on the European security mind-set.

In light of these developments, EU member states prioritised security and defence when they started to implement the EU's 2016 Global Strategy for foreign and security policy. Even if NATO remains the cornerstone of European defence, we are witnessing a determined effort to build a stronger European pillar for security and defence in a longer-term perspective. The member states have decided to deepen their defence cooperation both within and outside the EU framework.

This chapter discusses the implications of Brexit for the EU in the field of security and defence. It suggests that embedding the UK into EU defence initiatives is challenging in the short term. Increasing EU-NATO cooperation as well as different forms of bi- and minilateral defence cooperation, however, create a platform where collaboration can be sustained and a deeper EU-UK relationship in security and defence built in the longer run.

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EU developments towards a defence union?

Security and defence has emerged as one of the policy fields in which EU integration has been consolidated and advanced in response to Brexit. Even if this development was already set into motion in the 2013 European Council meeting, security and defence featured high on the agenda of the 2016 Bratislava meeting, which addressed the immediate implications of the Brexit vote. Security and defence then became one of the main topics in the ensuing Leader's Agenda and future of EU debate, aiming to consolidate the EU in light of Brexit.

This is because the leaders understood that Brexit could weaken the EU's position in foreign and security policy, due to the UK's notable role in hard security matters, including its nuclear deterrent and permanent seat in the UN Security Council. In addition, the prospects of moving forward in this policy field looked promising, considering the member states' interests. Brexit could unlock some defence initiatives for the EU that the UK traditionally opposed. The pertinent national budgetary constraints, which were aggravated by the 2008 financial and economic crisis, as well as the increasing cost of defence materials and weapons systems, highlighted the benefits of deeper EU defence cooperation.

This became more evident during the 2010s, as EU member states' interest in launching new military crisis management operations – the initial purpose of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) – waned.[1] Concurrently, EU members increasingly favoured strengthening the European defence research and industrial base, which would support European military capability development even beyond the CSDP operations.[2]

Against this background, and in a relatively short period, defence cooperation within the EU framework has deepened considerably. In late 2017, the member states decided to launch the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO): the Treaty-based mechanism allowed willing and able member states to deepen defence cooperation. The adopted broad and modular approach implies that 25 of the 27 member states collaborate, in varying groupings, in 47 projects aimed for military capability development. Relatedly, the member states have launched an annual coordinated defence review of the national defence budgets (i.e. CARD), which also helps identify gaps for potential PESCO collaborative projects.

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Importantly, the European Commission has moved into the field of defence by establishing the European Defence Fund (EDF) and Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space. These actions aim to contribute to the funding of defence research and collaborative projects and, in doing so, strengthen the European defence industrial base. While the Commission initially proposed assigning €13 billion from the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) to the EDF, the ongoing MFF negotiations are likely to lead to a much smaller budget for the EDF. Losing the UK's financial contribution to the EU budget makes the funding of new priorities, such as defence, a daunting task. Moreover, financing the EDF is likely to become increasingly difficult due to the significant economic crisis resulting from the COVID-19 crisis.[3] However, the very purpose of the EU's defence initiatives is to enable the member states to meet their defence capability targets cost-effectively.

Notwithstanding the significance of these developments, there also seems to be much less clarity about the strategic direction of the EU's defence efforts.[4] This comes as no surprise, given the divergent security interests and priorities of the member states, which is also evident in the Franco-German cooperation. Contrary to some expectations, the UK withdrawal has not altered the transatlantic orientation of many member states, which has led to a vivid debate on the nature and scope of European strategic autonomy. Relatedly, some member states' dissatisfaction with some EU initiatives' level of ambition has led to them launch their own initiatives outside of the EU framework.

For example, the French European Intervention Initiative (EI2), made up of 14 states, aims to forge a common strategic culture to enhance the readiness for joint military action in varying institutions and coalitions. Importantly, the initiative includes the UK and can be seen (at least, in part) as aiming to retain the close defence relationship between the two major European military powers, and maintain the UK's connection to European defence developments.[5]

What role for the UK?

So far, the UK has proven the most pessimistic scenarios of a more inward UK approach to security and defence wrong. It has played a very active role in the NATO's reassuring measures in its eastern flank, most notably in the Baltic Sea region, in which the number of new UK deployments is highly significant.[6] Moreover, the UK is one of the few European NATO members which has largely lived up to the jointly agreed spending commitments. The UK has also deepened its bi- and minilateral defence cooperation in Europe, including the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) which comprises eight Northern European NATO and non-NATO members. As part of its renewed foreign policy aspirations under the rubric of 'Global Britain', the UK is also (re)introducing the military defence dimension to its Arctic policy.[7]

Significant and recognised budgetary constraints might hinder, however, the actualisation of these UK objectives. These are partly related to the negative economic implications of Brexit, which the COVID-19 crisis will increase. Moreover, the UK's aspirations have so far lacked detail, and the long-awaited, integrated foreign, security and defence policy review has been delayed to at least October 2020

due to the pandemic and the government's need to assess its implications for UK security and economy.

Against this background, the most pressing short- and medium-term question related to Brexit in the field of security and defence is the EU-UK relationship. Although the post-membership security relationship could, in principle, take an institutionalised form, recent developments point to less integrated options.

During the withdrawal negotiations, the UK government and EU27 aspired after the closest possible relationship in security and defence. The UK proposed to go beyond third-country precedents, thereby allowing the UK and EU to benefit "from closer, more intense and more productive cooperation than the EU enjoys with any other partner." [8] In practice, this could have meant at least limited UK access to EU policy-planning and -making in foreign and security policy, and favourable terms to participate in EU defence initiatives (e.g. PESCO, EDF). Importantly, this could have led to continuing and potentially increasing UK contribution to CSDP operations without significant limitations concerning the planning and conduct of EU missions. The largely shared security interests and weight of the UK as a security and defence actor could have propelled a novel type of relationship with the EU in security and defence, which could then be institutionalised. [9]

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However, the stated objectives of the current UK government regarding EU-UK future relations suggest that an institutionalised relationship with the EU on security and defence is not on the cards, at least not in the short term. The UK seems to have accepted a third-country status as the starting point of the second phase of negotiations.

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This approach appears to be in line with Prime Minister Boris Johnson's objective to distance the UK from the EU in general. However, EU member states have also hesitated to grant the UK a privileged status in or access to the EU's developing defence initiatives and structures, or EU policy processes in general. This reflects the shared general view that the rights and obligations of an EU member and non-member must be clearly distinguishable. EU members also remember the UK's reservations towards and consequent blocking of deeper forms of EU defence cooperation in the past, and some members are concerned with implications of UK influence should it gain a privileged role. [10] Importantly, any novel type of privilege granted to a former member state would invite the question of whether to apply equal treatment to other close security partners with a third-country status, such as the US or Norway.

Recently, these concerns have been reflected in the EU's decision-making on the terms of third-country participation in the PESCO and EDF. Although the Council of the EU agreed to allow third-country participation, there seems to be a continuing tension between the EU and US over provisions in the PESCO and EDF. The concerns pertain to the role of third countries' participation in EU defence research and ownership of related intellectual property rights.[11] Against this backdrop, the UK's participation is also increasingly framed in the broader context of transatlantic collaboration in defence research and industry, where major

industrial interests and pertinent issues of duplication feature high.

Despite the UK's reluctance to engage in negotiations on security and defence relationship – this policy field is not among the 11 key topics of the ongoing negotiations over future relations –, the EU has nevertheless published a draft treaty on future relations which also covers security and defence matters.[12] This builds on the Political Declaration of the Withdrawal Agreement and offers a somewhat deeper relationship than is usually granted to a third country, particularly in the field of CSDP missions.

Building cooperation in the longer run

In the longer-term perspective, the most notable challenges of UK defence policy relate to Brexit both directly and indirectly. The potential negative economic implications of leaving the EU could limit the UK's security and defence policy aspirations in terms of budgetary constraints. Relatedly, should the political acrimony between the UK and EU increase – as the result of the failure to conclude the negotiations over the future relations, for instance –, domestic political pressure to review the UK commitments to European defence might rise over time.

An in-depth and comprehensive EU-UK relationship in security and defence might be difficult to achieve, given the limited timeframe for the negotiations, as well as the priorities and objectives of both parties. Nonetheless, managing to conclude the negotiations and ratify the agreement on the future relations could provide a solid foundation for deepening the relationship in the years to come.

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A notable UK contribution to the EU's CSDP missions, for instance, would certainly underline the need for ever-closer coordination, starting with the realisation of shared security interests underpinning the objectives of the operations. Continuing close collaboration in security and defence could also prove useful for building trust and finding ways to work around some of the thorniest questions, such as third-country participation in EU defence initiatives. It could also highlight the benefits of joint capability development projects.

The defence initiatives taking place outside the EU framework and which include the UK, as well the increasing NATO-EU collaboration, could also provide a conducive environment for enhancing the EU-UK relationship in the future. In terms of the NATO-EU collaboration, non-traditional security challenges (i.e. terrorism, hybrid and cyber threats) reiterate the shared security interests

and benefits of EU-UK cooperation. The management of pandemics, such as the current COVID-19 crisis, also provides strong incentives for EU-UK cooperation in the field of human and societal security in the international and multilateral context.

A deeper and more institutionalised relationship might return to EU-UK agenda should the post-Brexit environment expose the limits of case-by-case coordination, and fail to secure a sufficient level of predictability and reliability between the EU and the UK in the field of security and defence.

1. Gowan, Richard and Nick Witney (2014), "Why Europe must stop outsourcing its security", London: European Council on Foreign Relations.

2. See European Union Institute for Security Studies (2016), Report of the Group of Personalities on the Preparatory Action for CSDP-related research. The case for an EU-funded defence R&T programme: Catalysing cooperation, enabling capabilities, sustaining competitiveness, Paris.

3. Fiott, Daniel (2020), "Will European defence survive coronavirus?", Elcano Royal Institute.

4. Biscop, Sven (2020), European Defence and PESCO: Don't waste the chance, EU Integration and Differentiation for Effectiveness and Accountability.

5. The UK and France have a long-standing bilateral defence cooperation relationship, which was consolidated further in 2010 via the Lancaster House Treaties. The two treaties set out a framework for cooperation between the two countries, and a roadmap to increase interoperability between their armed forces and engagement on a number of joint initiatives on equipment.

6. Kennedy-Pipe, Caroline and Duncan Depledge (2019), "Britain, Estonia and the Wider North", London: The Royal United Services Institute.

7. Cepinskyte, Agne (2019), "Global Britain's Arctic security policy: Going forward while looking back", Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs.

8. UK Government (2018), "The future relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union", London, para.66.

9. Scazzieri, Luigi (2020), "The UK and European security cooperation, post-Brexit", Rome/Milan: Aspen Institute Italia.

10. Ibid.

11. Brattberg, Erik and Tomáš Valášek (2019), "EU Defense Cooperation: Progress Amid Transatlantic Concerns", Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

12. European Commission (2020), Foreign Policy, Security and Defence part of the Draft text of the Agreement on the New Partnership with the United Kingdom, UKTF (2020) 15.