

# Britain in the Post-Brexit European Security Architecture

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## KEY INSIGHTS

Britain's impending withdrawal from the EU raises important questions about the future of EU–UK security cooperation. This policy brief explores the content and scope of European security cooperation after Brexit by analysing the respective strategies, institutional structures, and operational capabilities of the EU and the UK.

THE EU STANDS TO LOSE ACCESS TO THE UK'S CAPABILITIES AND BRITAIN WILL CEASE TO BENEFIT FROM ITS MEMBERSHIP OF THE EU'S DECISION-MAKING STRUCTURES.

## STRATEGIES: EUROPEAN AUTONOMY VS. GLOBAL BRITAIN

Brexit will have important consequences for European security. The UK stands to lose access to the EU's multifaceted network of foreign policy and security coordination, and the British voice will no longer be represented in the EU's foreign policy.

THE TERMS OF FUTURE COLLABORATION WILL BE CONTENTIOUS: THE UK REFUSES TO BE A 'RULE TAKER'; THE EU INSISTS THAT THE UK FOLLOW EXISTING THIRD-COUNTRY ARRANGEMENTS.

Britain requires a new, post-Brexit diplomatic strategy. The key choice is whether it wishes to remain involved in EU foreign policy structures or whether it is willing—or able—to shift its attention to the world outside Europe. The UK has emphasised its commitment to maintaining a high level of international engagement and to strengthening bilateral alliances outside the EU, especially with the United States and Commonwealth countries.

But 'global Britain' will require greater public resources and bureaucratic capacity than the UK government is presently able to commit given the squeeze on public finances and calls to focus on domestic issues such as housing and health care. An important question is therefore whether the UK will commit to increasing its international involvement or whether a lack of public support will limit its options. The global Britain strategy also lacks

NATO PROVIDES ONE AVENUE FOR CONTINUED SECURITY COOPERATION BUT CANNOT COVER ALL THE GAPS ENTAILED BY BRITISH WITHDRAWAL.

clarity. As a March 2018 House of Commons report put it: “the only thing that is clear about Global Britain is that it is unclear what it means, what it stands for or how its success should be measured.” EU member states also struggle to comprehend the value of global Britain,

**THE UK INSISTS IT WILL NOT ACCEPT ANY ROLE THAT LEAVES IT AS A ‘RULE TAKER,’ WHICH CLASHES WITH THE EU27’S DESIRE TO LIMIT DECISION-MAKING POWER TO EU MEMBERS.**

since Europe’s geopolitical challenges—border tensions and fears of American isolationism—will likely require a stronger European defence and security capability.

The alternative to global Britain is a renewed commitment to Europe. This is more realistic and preferred by the EU27, which fears British disengagement. The main questions from the

European side on the future EU–UK relationship concern the type of agreement the UK is seeking as well as the institutional form any future cooperation will take.

It is unclear at present how a broader security partnership fits into the UK’s European diplomatic strategy and this ambiguity may create problems further down the line. Moreover, the UK’s emphasis on grand foreign policy ambitions may come at the expense of its ability to respond flexibly and pragmatically to short-term developments. Also problematic may be the EU’s reluctance to speed up discussions on the foreign policy and security aspects of the withdrawal agreement.

## **INSTITUTIONS: ACCESS, FLEXIBILITY AND (IN)FORMALITY**

The EU is anxious not to lose the UK’s military resources and diplomatic influence after Brexit and is well aware of Britain’s importance as a security provider in Europe. As a result, the Union should be keen to enter into informal cooperation with the UK in this domain. This arrangement would also suit the UK well, since it seeks a flexible arrangement that goes beyond existing third-country structures.

The UK, for its part, is keen for any agreement to include consultation through both formal and informal structures, coordination in key policy areas, and cooperation from the initial stages of policy, operations, and capability development. To achieve this, the UK is likely to engage

in ‘venue shopping’ with a view to establishing a mix of bilateral, mini-lateral (by issue area), and multilateral cooperation with European partners. New and imaginative forms of partnership are likely to be needed after Brexit, particularly where the UK has expertise, such as where sanctions are concerned.

The institutional structures of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), unlike other EU policy areas, operate on an intergovernmental basis outside the jurisdiction of the Court of Justice of the EU. They may, as a result, offer one potential venue for viable UK–EU collaboration, since there is less risk of compromise to the EU’s internal institutional framework, and since the sovereignty cost entailed for the UK is lower than in other policy areas. The UK’s engagement in EU strategic reviews and bespoke multilateral cooperation outside the treaty, including conversations about shared risks and frameworks to continue the dialogue, may represent one potential avenue of British engagement in CFSP and CSDP.

A potentially complicating factor, however, is the gap between the UK’s expectations of access to and influence within EU institutions on the one hand and the EU’s eagerness to preserve its decision-making autonomy. Because of its significance as a security actor, the UK insists it will not accept any role that leaves it as a ‘rule taker’ rather than a ‘rule maker’, which clashes with the EU27’s desire to limit decision-making power to EU members. While some fear that EU institutions have become too restrictive and inflexible to respond to the need to include third countries, others are more cautious and warn that preferential treatment of the UK may create a worrying precedent for other countries.

Political concerns come to the fore here. Too generous an agreement with the UK may increase the moral hazard inherent in offering the benefits of membership to non-members. Whether this will be the case depends on how plausible of an argument can be made that the UK deserves special treatment in this regard. Either way, security and defence should be ring-fenced from the negotiations to the greatest extent possible. In order to prevent CSDP from becoming a bargaining chip, both the UK and the EU will need to move fast to change institutional structures and regulations in areas where both sides seek continued cooperation after Brexit.

Recent defence developments in the EU potentially complicate the equation. Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the Coordinated Annual Review

on Defence (CARD) and the Commission's newfound role in the European Defence Fund (EDF) all herald a move towards greater supranational coordination, which could complicate future relations. On the one hand, these developments potentially increase the cost to the UK of participating in EU structures and the risk to the EU that British involvement will scupper new initiatives. On the other hand, these projects may be made credible only through British participation and the involvement of the sizeable UK defence industry.

A lack of clarity about the UK's willingness to contribute to EU defence in the future complicates matters. Some member states worry that the UK would not contribute much even if offered a substantial role. Still, Britain is expected to remain involved in the general security dialogue due to convergent interests in areas such as intelligence, maritime security, and military-industrial collaboration.

## OPERATIONS: SECURITY COOPERATION OR COMPETITION?

Despite being Europe's largest defence spender, the UK has contributed very little to CSDP missions in terms of personnel (2.3%) or costs of military (16%) and civilian (15%) missions. Brexit will have an operational impact, however, on missions such as Operation Atalanta, which has its headquarters in Northwood, UK. The EU has made it clear it does not regard the continuation of this arrangement as viable, and a number of other member states have offered to host the operational headquarters after Brexit. Another issue is the planned British contribution to the EU's Battlegroups in the second half of 2019, which has now been abandoned by the UK.

These specific issues aside, the EU expects the UK to stay broadly committed to shared missions. It is also conceivable that Brexit will encourage greater participation in future missions, since the UK will be able to pick its issues of interest without interfering with the broader development of CSDP, to which it has generally been opposed. For this to work as a basis for future collaboration, however, the UK's involvement cannot clash with the autonomy of the EU's decision-making process within CSDP, creating a situation in which the UK's only option would be to contribute to operations over which it would have no formal say.

Britain's key role in NATO, the pre-eminent security and defence provider in Europe, will keep the UK inextricably involved in European security after Brexit. Yet the alliance

represents potential friction as well as continuity. It is far from clear that NATO is as able to guarantee Europe's security as it once was, not least given recent concerns about alliance cohesion, squeezed defence budgets, and the credibility of Article 5 under the Trump presidency.

There is also the possibility that, should the Brexit negotiations themselves turn sour, UK–EU discord will contribute to greater incoherence within the alliance. This is especially relevant vis-à-vis the EUFOR Althea mission, so far the only example of NATO–EU cooperation under the Berlin Plus agreement, which is highly dependent on mutual trust between the two institutions. Preventing discord within NATO and further developing cooperation between the EU and NATO will be key challenges for the UK after Brexit, especially as the EU has now introduced defence initiatives of its own.

In terms of bilateral relations with key NATO allies, Brexit may not endanger the long-standing relationship between the UK and France,

which is considered key to European security. It will, however, complicate the development of UK–German military cooperation, which only started recently and does not have a similarly strong historical basis.

Further friction between the UK and the EU may arise over the question of British involvement in the European defence industry and its emerging space programme (through Galileo), areas in which EU and UK expertise are closely intertwined.

When it comes to defence funding, the new role of the Commission in relation to the EDF changes the way the EU thinks about defence investment. As third countries do not pay into the Commission budget, the Commission is unlikely to allow their participation in the EDF. Another source of insecurity stems from the lack of reform of the Athena mechanism, the current financing scheme for EU military operations in which costs lie where they fall. This system was supposed to be reformed last year, but no new agreement has been reached as of yet, raising further questions about the extent to which the EU will allow UK engagement in future CSDP missions.

**'GLOBAL BRITAIN' WILL REQUIRE GREATER PUBLIC RESOURCES AND BUREAUCRATIC CAPACITY THAN THE UK GOVERNMENT IS PRESENTLY ABLE TO COMMIT, GIVEN THE SQUEEZE ON PUBLIC FINANCES AND CALLS TO FOCUS ON DOMESTIC ISSUES.**

Recent exchanges concerning the Galileo programme, moreover, show the scope for friction, especially if the UK is excluded from all classified aspects of the programme after Brexit. In response to complications raised over Galileo, the UK has indicated it intends to develop its own satellite navigation programme, which critics regard as an unnecessary and costly duplication of resources.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

This policy brief highlights a variety of challenges to confront in redefining the security and defence relationship between the UK and the EU after Brexit. The following specific recommendations are put forward to stimulate debate in the broader policy environment:

1. A new security treaty should be at the core of the future EU–UK relationship. This should provide for intelligence-sharing and include a defence pact designed to replicate Article 42.7 of the Lisbon Treaty.
2. Since both sides stand to gain from collaboration in joint projects, the EU should allow the UK to participate in PESCO.
3. While the UK cannot realistically demand status equal to the EU27, it should expect to be consulted whenever British capabilities can make a sizeable contribution.
4. Recognising that the EU is attempting to enhance its security and defence capabilities, the UK should facilitate rather than obstruct greater EU–NATO collaboration. ■

*This policy brief draws on the wide-ranging discussion at a workshop organised by the Dahrendorf Forum and the 28+ programme at Loughborough University London on 9 March 2018 with senior diplomats, policymakers, and analysts under the Chatham House rule. It reflects the authors' interpretation and analysis of the discussion and does not necessarily represent the views of those participating.*

## FURTHER READING

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**The Dahrendorf Forum** is a joint initiative by the Hertie School of Governance, the London School of Economics and Political Science, and Stiftung Mercator that recognises expert knowledge and public debate can each benefit from mutual exposition.

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