



European Defence After Brexit: A Plus or a Minus?

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Abstract

The departure of the UK from the EU is taking place at a time when the Union is ramping up its own ambitions in the field of security and defence. The EU is pursuing the goal of strategic autonomy to make itself a more influential actor on the world stage. It has initiated a number of programmes, such as Permanent Structured Cooperation and the European Defence Fund, with the aim of spending its defence euros more productively. These European initiatives may well drive the UK further away from the EU as they embody the very integration that had driven the UK to distance itself from the Continent in the first place. Yet this article will argue that the EU still needs to engage the important military capabilities of the UK to be successful in its new ventures and that the UK will also be exposed to many of the security threats that will keep the EU busy in the future.

Keywords

UK, Brexit, Strategic autonomy, CSDP, Defence

Introduction

The departure of the UK from the EU on 31 January 2020 presents both a risk and an opportunity for the future of European defence cooperation. It is a risk because the EU is losing one of its two major military powers—one with a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, a modernised nuclear deterrent and a global power projection capability based on the recent acquisition of two aircraft carriers which will soon be equipped with F35 vertical take-off and landing stealth fighter jets. The UK has spent about a quarter of the total combined EU defence budget and is one of only six European NATO member states to reach the target of devoting 2% of its GDP to defence. It

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currently provides around 20% of the EU's list of critical capabilities, including modern maritime patrol aircraft, tanks and armoured personnel vehicles, multipurpose frigates, electronic warfare assets and an early warning satellite. This article argues that losing this UK capability (even if previously there had been no guarantee that the UK would commit parts of it to the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) operations) makes the EU, overnight, a much less impressive military actor and its goal of strategic autonomy less convincing in strictly military terms. Therefore, it is of pragmatic mutual interest to the EU and the UK to find ways to continue to work together on security and defence.

Yet at the same time, prior to Brexit the UK acted as a brake on the development of a more integrated and coherent EU defence. It constantly challenged the necessity of such an ambition (based on a fear of alienating the US and undermining NATO) and for many years was a reluctant participant in EU-led CSDP missions, even though these were often in areas of strategic interest to London, such as the Balkans, Georgia, the Middle East, Ukraine and Indonesia. The UK did contribute a special forces unit to Operation Artemis in the Democratic Republic of Congo; equally, when EUFOR Althea took over from the NATO SFOR operation in Bosnia in 2004 the operation's first commander was British (Major General David Leakey). However, the latter situation was due to the fact that the Bosnia operation was carried out under the NATO Berlin Plus formula, whereby the Deputy Supreme Commander Europe (a British NATO position) functioned as the overall mission coordinator. The first EU operation that London agreed to lead was the 2008 EU maritime anti-piracy operation, *Atalanta*, in the Gulf of Aden, for which it also put its national naval command in Northwood at the EU's disposal. This proved successful not only in terms of directing the EU fleet in the Gulf, but also with regard to coordinating the military deployment with the civilian actors and other international military organisations (e.g. the UN, NATO and the International Maritime Organization) that were part and parcel of the overall international effort. This said, the fact remains that the UK undoubtedly slowed down progress on the formation of a unified EU defence. It blocked the creation of an EU operational headquarters, starved the European Defence Agency of the funds necessary to launch multinational EU projects or coordinate national capability planning, and consistently preferred to work bilaterally with partners such as France (via the 2010 Lancaster House agreement), Denmark and Estonia. This is not to demonise the UK. It built its Tornado and Typhoon fighter aircraft in European consortia with Germans, Italians and Spaniards; gave its carrier contract to Thales; and went along with a Franco-German proposal to merge EADS with BAE Systems to create a European aerospace champion. It was Berlin rather than London that ultimately scuttled this particular deal.

With the UK out of the EU, the remaining 27 member states face a dual challenge in their quest for geopolitical heft and relevance. On the one hand they need to strengthen the EU's operational readiness, so that it is capable of handling crises on Europe's periphery and beyond, including combat missions, without UK capabilities. This will mean finding ways to make up the capability shortfall. On the other hand, as part of the future EU-UK relationship the member states need to conclude a security agreement with the UK that ties the country closely into EU operational and capability planning, as well as

crisis management and foreign-policy initiatives. Negotiations for this agreement are likely to be happening at the same time that the UK may well be heading in the opposite direction in economic relations by diverging from EU rules and standards. This concern lies behind the idea of French President Emmanuel Macron to set up a European Security Council which would include the UK. Whether this idea is implemented or not, the EU has an interest in making it as easy as possible—both politically and militarily—for the UK to contribute to CSDP as well as to ad hoc European operations. The EU's hope has to be that as Brexit passions fade into history, and a more rational calculus of interests and security priorities prevails in London, the traditional pattern of close intelligence, military and industrial cooperation between London and its key EU partners is quickly resumed. So how can these two challenges of EU strategic autonomy and cross-Channel strategic solidarity best be addressed by the EU's leaders and their new 'geopolitical' Commission?

The London–Brussels dimension

Remainers in the UK's post-referendum debate were always counting on the importance of defence and security to limit the damage of the UK's departure from the EU. Whatever the differences in trade and regulatory alignment, here was an area where London and Brussels were almost condemned to need each other given their geographical proximity and concordance of interests in areas such as illegal migration, counterterrorism and organised crime. Cooperation in security became a key feature of the political declaration on the future relationship, although neither Brussels nor London set out concrete proposals or levels of ambition during the withdrawal process, which came to be dominated by more immediate concerns, such as the UK's financial obligations, the rights of EU and UK citizens, and the Irish border issue. The problem now is that the forthcoming negotiations look set to be even more contentious, with the UK wanting a loose Canada-style free-trade agreement, allowing it to diverge from EU standards, while the EU insists on a regulatory level playing field. With the UK having legislated for a one-year negotiating time frame, there is a risk that security and defence will once again be pushed to the back of the queue.

Not engaging early on security and defence, or seeing this area as being held hostage to contentious trade talks, would not make sense for either side. Illegal migrants, traffickers, members of criminal gangs and radicalised extremists cross the Channel virtually every day of the week. The UK with its extensive intelligence and signals apparatus has been a major contributor to Europol, the Schengen database, the common arrest warrant, and the information and tracking system on criminal activity. It also accesses these databases to look for information on literally millions of occasions every year. So even if the UK can no longer legally be a member of these networks, the urgency of maintaining the unimpeded two-way flow of information necessitates finding a quick solution and a legal work-around, especially at a time when both the UK and the EU need to track the complex movements of the potentially thousands of people affected (or infected) by the coronavirus. The question is whether security and defence should be negotiated in the same joint body as the trade talks or dealt with through a separate channel.

Beyond this immediate priority there should be no fear in Brussels that the UK is abandoning the defence of Europe, even if it has never particularly liked European defence. In recent decades the UK has structured its participation in the maintenance of peace and stability on the Continent around four pillars: NATO, bringing the EU and NATO as close together as possible, nurturing bilateral and regional arrangements away from the Brussels institutions, and coming to terms with the CSDP and the new defence structures in the EU (e.g. the Political and Security Committee, the EU Military Committee, the EU Military Staff and the European Defence Agency) as they have evolved. Brexit only changes the last of these pillars, as these institutions are designed for members only, and offer no or only limited access to third parties. The UK will compensate for its exclusion from the EU-led areas by doubling down on the others. We have seen this already in the emphasis on NATO and the transatlantic relationship as the primary mechanisms for the defence of Europe. At a time when, according to a February 2020 Pew Research poll (Fagan and Poushter 2020), NATO is losing public support in the US, France and Germany, support in the UK has risen by five percentage points. The UK leads a NATO battalion in Estonia and is a large contributor to NATO exercises, such as Trident Juncture in Norway and Defender Europe. It seeks thereby to demonstrate that it is willing and able to reinforce NATO's flanks in a crisis and has the mobility to quickly move its military across the Channel. Conscious of the need to keep the US engaged in the alliance, the UK has been a cheerleader for spending a minimum of 2% of GDP on defence and for US initiatives to give NATO a larger role in the Middle East (Iraq) and to focus on emerging threats such as cyber-conflict, terrorism and the militarisation of space. In a nutshell, the stronger NATO remains, the more influential the UK's voice will be in Europe and the harder it will be for President Macron to convince Germany, the Netherlands, Poland or the Baltic states of the need for EU strategic autonomy. So it should be expected that the UK will argue that French initiatives, such as a proposed EU dialogue on nuclear deterrence built around France's national nuclear force, are redundant, given that the job is already being handled perfectly well by NATO.

The second pillar of UK engagement follows logically from the first. The UK will be an enthusiastic supporter of closer EU–NATO cooperation based on the two Joint Declarations that these institutions signed in 2016 and 2018. Regular consultations between the EU and NATO will give the UK a backdoor voice in EU debates, and it may use this opportunity to press for greater access and privileges for third parties, as Turkey has tried to do (unsuccessfully) for years. It may also push for a clearer division of labour between the two institutions, particularly when it comes to the alliance's core mission of collective defence. The UK's departure from the EU pushes the centre of gravity more towards NATO as henceforth only one EU member state will command a NATO battalion in Eastern Europe (Germany) and the non-EU allies will together be paying more than 80% of the alliance's total defence budget. Non-EU countries will also be dominant in NATO's military commands, with only France holding a supreme commander position. If EU–NATO cooperation leads to more coordinated missions, such as Atalanta and Ocean Shield in the Gulf of Aden or Sophia and Active Endeavour in the Mediterranean, or perhaps to future ones in Libya or elsewhere in North Africa, the UK will be able to further reduce the significance of its exclusion from the CSDP.

The third pillar concerns bilateral or regional groupings. The UK has often preferred to seek out privileged partners with whom it shares a particular strategic vision or affinity. Many years ago it formed a joint amphibious force with the Dutch. It is developing an expeditionary force with France and involving the Scandinavian countries in its pre-existing Joint Expeditionary Force. It has recently established a Joint Command to direct these forces and to organise the requisite training and exercises. The UK has actively sponsored the Northern Group¹ to take a coordinated approach to the North Atlantic and Baltic regions, for instance in anti-submarine warfare and maritime air patrolling. The UK will undoubtedly not allow Brexit to disrupt these well-established partnerships. EU countries may even be happier to pursue them as an additional insurance policy alongside NATO and the EU's own efforts to achieve strategic autonomy. France, for instance, has invited the UK to join its European Intervention Initiative given their shared global outlook, and the UK has responded by sending three Chinook helicopters to support the French Barkhane operation in the Sahel. Franco-British nuclear and drone cooperation continues apace, and no doubt Johnson and Macron will celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Lancaster House Treaty in 2020 with all due pomp and ceremony. The UK will argue that European defence is too big a task for the EU alone and that these bilateral and regional arrangements—where the UK is also willing to function as a framework nation—provide much needed ballast.

The UK's view on new EU defence initiatives

That brings us to the fourth and final issue arising from Brexit. What will be the UK's reaction to the current EU-specific defence initiatives? As mentioned previously, this will be the hardest area for post-Brexit Britain to engage in. Even if the UK wanted to participate in future CSDP operations, it would probably be put off by not being allowed into EU military planning and decision-making fora. This would make it difficult for a UK government to engage given the vociferous Brexiteer faction in the House of Commons. British hostility to EU defence initiatives has often been based on the dual beliefs that they threaten national sovereignty and are not likely to work in any case. So the UK attitude is likely to be to wait and see if initiatives such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF) start to produce real additional capabilities, help the EU to exploit new technologies and begin to build up its defence industry. The UK will also want to see if the ambitious budgets announced for these programmes are finally agreed in the EU's new Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021–7.

This said, the history of the UK's engagement with Brussels is to be sceptical at first and then, when it sees that something is actually working, to take a more pragmatic view on how to become involved. So, paradoxically, the best antidote to Brexit is for the EU to forge ahead in the direction that the UK has opposed, bringing it back into the fold later on. If PESCO and the EDF lead to the establishment of innovative high-tech programmes, the big UK defence contractors will soon be lobbying Whitehall to facilitate a slice of the pie. Initiatives such as the UK–Italian–Swedish air combat system and the Franco–German Future Combat Air System seem almost destined to merge before too

long, given the enormous research, development and investment costs involved. Similarly it makes no sense to keep the UK out of the EU Galileo satellite system's encrypted military network given the major role of UK industry in its development.

So here is an area where the EU could hopefully signal some flexibility as it waits for the UK to come to terms with Brexit (which will not really begin until the end of the transition period at the end of 2020). For instance, the EU could offer the UK closer involvement in the running of CSDP missions if it commits a truly significant military contribution and share of the budget (not just a symbolic officer or two in the headquarters to gain a seat at the table). The EU could decide quickly on generous third-party access to PESCO and EDF projects subject to the implementation of some ground rules on intellectual property protection and export controls, as well as financial contributions. This would be a good way of inducing Whitehall and the UK defence industry to 'think European' and not lose connectivity with their European counterparts. The UK could be regularly invited to meetings of EU foreign and defence ministers (especially when an EU Council for defence ministers is established) to share its insights on topics where it has an interest and can be helpful to EU foreign-policy goals, as in the UN Security Council or the G7 and G20. The EU Military Staff and the European External Action Service can keep the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Ministry of Defence abreast of their contingency planning in order to facilitate deconfliction and encourage London to define its own options for contributing—either directly or indirectly. The more the EU engages in this way and rebuilds daily channels of communication, the more it will help the Remainers in the UK not to give up in despair but to continue to make the case for a close symbiotic relationship.

Conclusion

President Macron is probably being alarmist when he claims that absent a surge in EU defence cooperation the EU member states will imperil their security given US disengagement and the more dangerous regional environment. The EU, in contrast to many other regions of the world, is fortunate in having so many non-EU states willing to defend it—with troops as well as treaties. Brexit only reinforces this situation by making the core of Europe dependent on a number of non-EU flank countries (the US, Canada, the UK, Norway and Turkey). This outer rim has remained remarkably resilient over the decades.

Yet Macron's initiative for closer EU defence cooperation or even an EU Defence Union could be useful in two ways. First, it could produce capabilities that help NATO to plug its own shortfalls and help to make the alliance's collective defence less of a burden and a risk for the US and the other outer rim countries that are on the front line of forward defence. For instance, this could be achieved by using the EU Battle Groups as part of NATO's rotating battalions in the Baltic states. Such a collective EU effort could, in turn, convince the US and the UK to look more favourably on EU defence cooperation as a genuinely military and not only political or industrial endeavour. The second way the EU defence initiatives can fit usefully into a broader transatlantic framework is to do the things that NATO and the European bilateral arrangements do not do particularly effectively. These

include, for instance, providing support to UN and African Union peacekeeping and conflict resolution in Africa, and building capacity in local forces engaged in counterterrorism and other operations. Another possibility would be for EU initiatives to deal with the whole spectrum of non-conventional or hybrid threats, where the private sector and other government departments are at the forefront in protecting critical infrastructure and responding to cyber-attacks or disinformation campaigns. Two articles in the EU treaties (i.e. art. 42(7) Treaty on European Union and art. 222 Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union) provide for EU solidarity in responding to these homeland security challenges, and the EU could usefully reflect on which capabilities and procedures it should package to create a coordinated and collective response to crises, whether natural disasters or terrorist attacks. A PESCO project sponsored by Lithuania for EU cyber rapid response teams is a good example in this respect. These two directions for EU defence cooperation would also help to reconcile Eastern European countries such as Poland to France's current initiatives by demonstrating that they aim to complement NATO and the core US role rather than duplicate or challenge it. Even with all the uncertainties of Trump and Brexit, the EU can still have the best of both worlds: learning how to stand on its own feet and use its various instruments while developing greater solidarity and perception of common threats, and, at the same time, continuing to rely on its parallel Atlantic community to ward off threats of great power interference or conflict that it is currently unable to address.

Note

1. The Northern Group is an informal forum for NATO members and partners bordering the Baltic or North Sea. It includes Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Iceland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the Netherlands, the UK and Germany.

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