

# Post-Brexit Relations between the EU and the UK in the Field of Security and Defence Policy

## Introduction

The Austrian Government included security as one of the three priorities for its EU Presidency. Although it framed security primarily in terms of border protection and the control of immigration, it also committed itself to strengthening the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and promoting the development of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). Progress on both was, in the end, limited, overtaken in part by the focus on the need to secure a Brexit withdrawal agreement with the UK. Brexit itself has significant implications for European defence and security, given Britain's military and intelligence assets. While various pronouncements have been made during the Austrian Presidency about the need to strengthen European security, and even move towards a European army, these have mainly been in response to the perceived shifting relation between Europe and the United States due to the unreliability of the Trump administration. Most recently President Macron has argued in favour of enhanced European military cooperation to improve European defence against Russia and China given that Europe can no longer rely on the US. However, less attention has been paid to how to retain UK collaboration in EU security post-Brexit. Partly this is because such discussions have largely been limited to the framework of the UK's negotiations with the European Commission on the Withdrawal Agreement. There is some evidence that in these discussions the Commission has allowed ideology to trump Europe's security needs.

## The Geopolitical Background

The European Union faces a series of security and foreign policy challenges. Its ability to respond to these challenges could be undermined by Brexit if no way is found to continue to integrate the UK into Europe's security architecture. The prob-

lems are compounded by uncertainty over the future of NATO, where questions are being raised about the reliability and commitment of its largest and second largest armies (the US and Turkey). This article examines the challenges and argues that pragmatism should outweigh ideology in ensuring the continued participation of the UK in European security architectures.

The EU is facing a series of security and foreign policy challenges, some of which could call into question the continued coherence of the Union itself. These include:

- ★ A US administration that not only questions the degree of security support it should give the European Union but has repeatedly made clear its hostility towards the concept of the European Union itself. Additionally, downgrading the EU from nation state entity to the status of an international organisation sends a clear symbolic message with diplomatic implications. President Trump has stated that the existence of the European Union is prejudicial to US interests, congratulated the UK on its Brexit decision and encouraged France to follow suit. He has even berated Prime Minister May for not taking a harder line in the Brexit negotiations. One consequence has been the imposition of tariffs on European steel and aluminium exports to the US, and the threat of escalation to a trade war (although this seems to be temporarily in abeyance, while the US focuses its attention on China, the unpredictable nature of the Trump administration suggests the danger has not gone away).
- ★ A Russian government that also seeks to destabilise the European Union, as well as individual European countries. Putin's government has demonstrated its willingness to use force in Ukraine and Georgia, as well as deploying

nerve agents to murder a Russian former intelligence officer in the UK. It has interfered in the Brexit referendum and has attempted to interfere in elections in France and Germany. It finances right-wing anti-European political parties throughout Europe. Its online troll farms use social media to undermine political and social debate, spreading systematic misinformation and encouraging the fragmentation of Western societies into echo chambers, while the Baltic Republics suffer more direct forms of cyber-attacks. Russia has upgraded its armed forces and uses its new capabilities to test the readiness of European armed forces in ways reminiscent of the Cold War. These activities are encapsulated in the so-called Gerasimov doctrine of hybrid warfare, which claims to respond to European attempts to undermine Russian influence in its near abroad.

- ★ The EU's relations with Turkey have deteriorated significantly in recent years. In part this results from Europe failing to live up to its promises on EU accession, and in part from President Erdogan's reactions to the 2016 attempted coup. The slowness of support from European political leaders during the coup itself, as well as their criticism of the subsequent crackdown have angered Erdogan. The Turkish president continues to restrain migration to the EU from Turkey, but at substantial financial cost to Europe and knowing that it gives him significant leverage. Turkey needs strategic partners in the Middle East, especially given the instability in neighbouring Syria and Iraq, but Erdogan appears to believe that neither the US nor the EU can fill the role. Hence the current rapprochement with Russia was possible. It is not clear how solid or long-lasting the new friendship between Ankara and Moscow is, thus

Europe should be aimed at avoiding a simultaneous geopolitical isolation from both regional actors. The current confrontation between Turkey and the US is likely to strengthen the relationship with Moscow, as much or more than it allows a relaxation of relation with Europe.

- ★ Instability in the Middle East and North Africa is compounded by the apparent withdrawal of the US from the region and the increasing influence of Russia. Conflicts in Iraq, Syria and Yemen increasingly look like proxy wars for regional hegemony between Iran and Saudi Arabia and beyond. While the migration agreement with Turkey has limited migration to the EU from Syria and Iraq, the continued instability and humanitarian crisis in Libya has given space to organised crime and opened ways for migration from North Africa and the Sahel zone, increasing the pressure on Italy and Spain. In principle, Europe should have more influence in Libya, but its ability to act in a unified and coherent way is undermined by conflicting economic interests of individual member states (e.g. France and Italy). The migration issue itself is existential for the EU, with populist Eurosceptic parties using it as an issue to undermine the influence of Brussels, and growing disagreements between European states.
- ★ China's influence in Southern and Eastern Europe has been growing. China took advantage of the economic crisis to increase its presence in countries like Greece and Spain. While major European powers like France and Germany remain sceptical, smaller Eastern European countries appear keen to embrace the promised economic benefits of the Belt Road Initiative (BRI), unconcerned by the geopolitical implications. China's increasingly close alliance with Russia ("Dragonbear"), combined with the US tendency to increasing isolationism, increases the pressure on Europe to craft a coherent approach to Beijing, but it seems hard to do. The presence of Renminbi trading in London will

help protect the City from the effects of Brexit, while increasing China's financial presence in the region.

#### NATO

The main framework for European security since 1949 has been the NATO alliance. However, doubts are growing about the future coherence or reliability of NATO. President Trump has been reluctant to reiterate US commitment to Article 5 (the mutual defence commitment), while railing against European members of NATO for failing to pay their share. At the same time, Turkey, NATO's second biggest army, is in open confrontation with the US, which has imposed economic tariffs on its goods, while moving closer to Russia, NATO's principal rival. It is not clear to what extent Turkey will build on the purchase of the S400 missile system from Russia, but the closeness of Ankara's relations with Moscow must call into question its reliability as a NATO partner.

Nor is it a question of out waiting Trump in the expectation that normal service will be resumed with the next US administration. Given the severity of the security challenges facing the European Union, it is not advisable for Europe to leave its security in abeyance until Trump departs the scene, quite aside from the risk that he may be re-elected, meaning Europe being in a vacuum for six more years considering the pool of possible geopolitical choices. Even were Trump to lose the 2020 elections (or be removed before then), it is far from certain that normal service would be renewed. While a new administration would be more willing than Trump to reaffirm the commitment to mutual defence, there is a consensus across the US security establishment that the Europeans should contribute more to their defence, and that the US's security concerns should be focused more on the Asia-Pacific region.

#### Brexit

The uncertainties over the future of NATO are compounded by Brexit. The departure of the UK from the European Union significantly undermines the Union's

security capabilities. The UK has a series of security-related assets which could contribute to future European defence for various reasons:

- ★ Significant armed forces. Currently the British army has 85,000 full time personnel, with 27,000 in the reserve. Equally important as size is that the British army has significant combat experience (most recently in Afghanistan and Iraq).
- ★ An air force of 34,000 personnel, with air to air and air to ground strike capabilities as well as transport and re-fuelling.
- ★ A reduced navy, but in the process of acquiring two new aircraft carriers (HMS Queen Elizabeth II, currently completing trials, and HMS Prince of Wales), as well as 6 nuclear powered fleet submarines.
- ★ A nuclear deterrent built around four Vanguard class submarines carrying Trident II nuclear weapons. Combined with the French Force Frappe, this could provide the European Union with a sufficient nuclear deterrent for the Russians.
- ★ Significant intelligence gathering and counter-intelligence capabilities, both human and signal intelligence. Aside from its own capabilities, the UK is a member of the Five Eyes intelligence network (US, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the UK). While it cannot always pass on direct information gained from this network, it can pass on analysis based on that information.
- ★ In recent years the UK has developed significant cyber capacities, both offensive and defensive, reinforced by the close collaboration between Britain's GCHQ and America's NSA.

The only European country with comparable security capabilities, and combat experience, is France. The French armed forces and nuclear deterrent are larger than the UK (the French army, navy and airforce amounted to some 208,916 personnel at the end of 2017<sup>1)</sup> and are the largest armed forces in Europe. However, France's capacity for deployment in new opera-

<sup>1)</sup> Chiffres clés de la Défense, Defense.gouv.fr

tions is limited. France already has 37,000 personnel deployed abroad, largely in Francophone West Africa. A further 10,000 are deployed in Operation Sentinelle protecting sensitive targets against Islamic terrorism. The deployment regarding this operation is causing problems because of the lack of training and the damage to morale from poor living conditions. The overseas deployments fall especially heavily on the French army, which has very limited excess capacity.

The British Government, as the only European country that meets both the NATO target to spend 2% of GDP on defence and the UN target to devote 0.7% of GDP to development aid, has made it clear that it wants to continue to cooperate closely with the EU on security issues even after Brexit. In a note it produced on "Consultation and Cooperation on External Security"<sup>2</sup> it sought a framework of consultation and cooperation that would allow it and the EU to combine foreign policy efforts around the world to the greatest effect. Specifically, it proposed:

- ★ Sharing of intelligence and analysis through INTCEN;
- ★ A bespoke administrative arrangement with the European Defence Agency (EDA);
- ★ Arrangements to participate in the Commission's European Defence Fund;
- ★ The option to participate in PESCO projects as a third party.

The kind of arrangements proposed by the British Government would require the European Commission to show flexibility and prioritise pragmatism over EU ideological purity. The omens so far are not good, at least in relation to the security related Galileo project. Galileo is the EU's Global Navigation Satellite System (GNSS). It is being developed to end European dependence on the US GPS system. Although it has widespread civilian uses, it also has an important defence and security component. The UK has so far participated actively in the project, with British aerospace companies providing much of the sensitive technolo-

gy, as well as British Dependent Territories reinforcing its global reach. The British Government sees the UK's future participation in Galileo as a "strategic choice which will have a permanent effect on our future defence and defence industrial collaboration": "The UK wants Galileo to be a core part of a future UK-EU security partnership." The British government has argued that excluding British companies from the security related areas of Galileo would<sup>3</sup>:

- ★ Risk delays of up to three years and additional costs of up to 1 billion Euro;
- ★ Prevent Galileo taking advantage of British crown territories and dependencies;
- ★ Cause the UK to develop its own Global Navigation Satellite System – GNSS (which it would be able to do relatively cheaply as much of the preparatory work for Galileo was done in the UK);
- ★ Have negative implications for UK-EU security cooperation (including interoperability).

However, the European Commission argues that granting Britain access to Galileo after Brexit will damage EU security. It has begun to block the UK space industry from manufacturing the security elements of the satellite programme (even though the UK has been developing the critical encryption software for the system). The Commission appears unmoved by arguments about Galileo's centrality to future UK-EU security collaboration, or the advantages to the project of Britain's continued participation (and costs of the UK's exclusion). The public statement that Britain's participation would put EU security at risk does not augur well for wider trust or security collaboration. Therefore, the British government has announced initial steps and budgeting towards developing an independent UK GNSS.

#### **Permanent Structured Cooperation – PESCO**

The initial reaction came from the European Commission to Brexit in the defence and security field was defiant, and almost triumphalist. It was argued that without

Britain blocking the way, Europe would now be able to move towards a more integrated approach to defence and security. This is ironic as it was Britain and France in the 1998 Saint-Malo Declaration that proposed that the EU should strengthen its defence capabilities and ability to act independently, only to be thwarted by the reluctance of other EU members to increase defence spending. The initiative to "take advantage" of Brexit to deepen the integration of European defence and security policy, far from resulting in a "European army", resulted in the more modest Permanent Structured Cooperation on Security and Defence (PESCO)<sup>4</sup>. This aimed to deepen defence cooperation amongst EU members who are capable and willing to do so. Specific projects to improve cooperation and inter-operability would be developed. Participation in the projects would be voluntary, but the commitments made by those who volunteered would be binding. Overall PESCO would make European defence more efficient and deliver more output to reinforce the EU's strategic autonomy, while national sovereignty remains effectively untouched. So far 25 EU members, with radically different military capabilities, have signed up, and 34 projects, with varying levels of participation, have been approved.

There are several problems with PESCO<sup>5</sup>. Firstly, by limiting membership to the EU, it by definition excludes the UK's military capabilities (although the UK government is asking to participate in individual projects as a third party). Secondly, the projects themselves are very modest, limited to strengthening cooperation in very narrowly defined areas (Germany for example has only proposed projects aimed at strengthening cooperation and capabilities in non-combat areas such as medical support and logistics). PESCO does not offer definite incentives for integrated armed forces in the EU and contributes to capability development only to a limited extent. Most seriously, it reflects a growing

2) HM Government: Technical Note: Consultation and Cooperation on External Security

3) HM Government: Technical Note: UK Participation in Galileo

4) EU Commission: Permanent Structured Cooperation – PESCO: Deepening Defence Cooperation among EU Member States

5) Justyna Gotkowska: The Trouble with PESCO: The Mirages of European Defence, Centre for Eastern Studies Point of View, N° 69, February 2018

gap between political rhetoric and military reality on the ground. PESCO seeks to reinforce the EU's "strategic autonomy", while leaving national sovereignty untouched. But talking up EU strategic autonomy is a dangerous game if the EU does not have the military wherewithal to back it up. Such talk will only encourage those in the Trump administration, and more widely in the US defence establishment, who want to reduce the US commitment to NATO and European defence. The risk is that the US will take the EU's strategic autonomy seriously, leaving the EU without the military capability to make it a reality.

The point can be made by an examination of the German armed forces. With nearly 180,000 soldiers, the Bundeswehr is the second largest army in Europe behind the French, and larger than the British army. But since the end of the Cold War it has seen a dramatic decline in spending, training and morale. For political reasons, its overseas deployments are in support and logistical roles. Consequently, unlike the British and French armies, it has practically no combat experience. In 2015 an increase in funding to improve training and allow modernisation was announced. Even so, German defence spending will not exceed 1.3% by 2021<sup>6</sup>. More concerning is the state of preparedness of German armed forces. A report on the Operational Readiness of the Bundeswehr's Primary Weapons Systems presented to the Bundestag in February 2018 admitted that only 29% of fighter aircraft, 22% of transport helicopters, 19% of attack helicopters, 20% of transport aircraft, 47% of tanks and 30% of frigates are ready for action. At the time of the report no German submarines were operational. Germany may have insufficient tanks operational to take up its role as leader of NATO's Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) in early 2019<sup>7</sup>. While Berlin specialises in ambitious rhetoric and declares itself ready "to assume responsibility for European security", it is unwilling to invest in the necessary resources in the Bundeswehr. The lack of operational

preparedness revealed in the Bundestag report will take considerable time and investment to resolve. It is perhaps not surprising that Germany has preferred to propose PESCO projects focusing on non-combat cooperation, or that those EU countries most vulnerable to Russian pressure are sceptical about the EU strategic autonomy that PESCO promises.

Indeed, rather than reinforcing EU strategic autonomy, by leaving national sovereignty untouched, PESCO may be reinforcing, or at least making more public, the differences in national strategies between EU countries or groups of countries. France is focused on the EU's volatile southern neighbours. It aims not only at EU strategic autonomy (a long-time plank of French security policy), but also EU defence industry autonomy (with benefits for the French industry). Essentially it seeks to translate its own security policy objectives to the whole of the EU. Germany has traditionally preferred to rely on NATO for European security. Its conversion to European strategic autonomy could be seen as a reaction to the Trump administration. Germany remains reluctant to use military instruments for managing conflicts and crises. The EU's Eastern front, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria and the Baltic states are sceptical about the value of PESCO. They see it excessively focused on challenges posed by Southern neighbours, rather than the Russian threat which most concerns them. It is beneficial primarily to develop military capabilities for crisis operations and interventions, rather than defence and deterrence of attacks. It also seems to be mainly advantageous for the defence industries of the largest states. Other East European countries share these doubts but are more willing to appear enthusiastic about PESCO to avoid adding PESCO to migration in their disputes with Paris and Berlin.

#### European Intervention Initiative – E2I

Despite official support for PESCO, France too seems to doubt its real value. Its 2017 Strategic Review of Defence and National Security introduced the European

Intervention Initiative (E2I)<sup>8</sup>. This would launch common doctrine and common budgetary instruments for military interventions outside the territory of the EU. France appears to be seeking the strategic cultural convergence for quick multilateral deployments in semi-permissive operational environments. Two major differences between the E2I and PESCO stand out: it is focused on operational issues, and it is open to non-EU European countries (primarily, the post-Brexit UK).

This should not come as a surprise. Despite the much-vaunted Franco-German Brigade (in which the French downgraded its contribution in 2014, and whose effectiveness is further undermined by poor German operational preparedness), in recent years the French have focused their attentions on bilateral cooperation with the British. This began with the 1998 St Malo Declaration and culminated in the Defence and Security Cooperation Treaty signed in 2010 (separate agreements were reached at the time on Nuclear Stockpile Stewardship, Operational Matters and Industry and Armaments). The treaty was outside both the NATO and EU frameworks. One consequence of the Treaty was the development over six years of the France-UK Combined Joint Expeditionary Force (CJEF), on which the E2I seems to have been based. In practice CJEF amounted to books of procedures which would allow France and Britain to maintain high readiness forces to operate together when necessary.

France argues that the E2I must have the necessary operational capabilities in the future. Otherwise European strategic autonomy will be impossible. So far eight EU states have signed up (France, Germany, Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, Estonia, Spain and Portugal) plus the UK. The presence of Germany, with its lack of enthusiasm for operational preparedness, could call into question the effectiveness of E2I. It will operate independently from the EU's Military Committee and Staff, which will allow the creation of a more flexible, adaptable and responsive gover-

6) George Allison: Less than a third of German military assets are operational says report, UK Defence Journal, June 21, 2018

7) George Allison: Less than a third of German military assets are operational says report, UK Defence Journal, June 21, 2018

8) Alice Pannier: Macron's "European Intervention Initiative": More Questions than Answers, European Leadership Network, 23 November 2017

nance structure. It will also be separate from NATO, although it will coordinate closely with it. It is still unclear whether E2I will focus on a defensive mission in the North and East of Europe, expeditionary missions in Francophone Africa or peace-keeping and civil/military missions. Given French policy priorities, and the preference for multinational deployment in semi-permissive operational environments, it would appear to be the latter two. This will be a disappointment to those countries in Northern and Eastern Europe who complain already that PESCO is too directed towards the Southern neighbours, and underestimates the threat posed to their security by Russia.

#### **United Kingdom led Joint Expeditionary Force – UK JEF**

An alternative approach to pragmatic collaboration which would allow continued British participation in European security after Brexit is the UK led Joint Expeditionary Force<sup>9</sup>. Set up in 2012 as part of the NATO Framework Nations concept, it is built on the experience of the UK working with other northern European countries in Afghanistan and Iraq. Originally focused on the Middle East, it was re-targeted against the Russian threat following Moscow's seizure of the Crimea and destabilisation of Eastern Ukraine. It consists of a UK led force aimed at rapid deployment, especially to Northern Europe, to which eight other countries contribute. Three are old NATO (Denmark, Norway, and the Netherlands), three are new NATO (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) and two are militarily non-aligned members of the EU (Sweden and Finland). Although part of the NATO framework, the deployment of the JEF is a sovereign decision of the UK government (presumably in consultation with the other participating governments). This makes it a far more flexible and agile instrument than, for example, the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), which can only be deployed with the agreement of the full 29 members of the North Atlantic Council. Such agreement can take time to secure,

and, with Turkey's growing alienation from the rest of the Council, may not be possible to secure. Furthermore, the focus of the JEF on the Russian threat fits better with the concerns and preoccupations of the Northern and Eastern members of the Union.

#### **Conclusions**

The EU confronts a series of external challenges, the most imminent of which, and threatening in the short-term, are a hostile Russia and continued instability in the Middle East and North Africa. Doubts about the commitment of President Trump to NATO and the increasing closeness between Ankara and Moscow means that European countries may not be able to rely on NATO to meet their security needs. Certainly, NATO instruments requiring approval of all 29 members, for example the VJTF, may be difficult to activate in a timely fashion against Turkish objections. Combined with increasing tensions between Brussels and Washington and growing foreign policy disagreements with the latter (for example over the Iran nuclear deal), this has reinforced arguments in favour of European strategic autonomy, which underlies the European Union's Global Strategy. But the Eastern members of the Union are not alone in fearing that there is a growing gap between aspirations and reality.

Europe's current military capabilities do not meet the aspirations for strategic autonomy. Britain has made clear that it wants to continue to contribute to European defence and security after Brexit, but so far there is no EU security architecture in place that would allow it to do so. So far, the European Commission seems to prefer ideological purity to pragmatism. As long as this continues and as long as the UK's military and intelligence capacities are seen as important to European security, the UK's involvement is likely to be through initiatives like E2I or JEF. However, this could prove a dangerous development for the European Commission, and the EU as a whole. At the moment, both the E2I and JEF are outside the EU's security architecture. Both are nationally led

and focused on the needs of their sponsor. Both tend to emphasize the irrelevance of PESCO to improving the EU's independent operational capabilities. More seriously, neither comes within CSDP, which means that the "muscle" to back up Europe's strategic autonomy is commanded separately from the CSDP, which is supposed to set the strategy. The influence of both the EC and EEAS over European security policy will be diminished.

There is a risk of Europe's major military powers following their own strategic priorities through bilateral or multilateral initiatives with favoured partners. Thus, while France uses E2I to reinforce its presence in Francophone and North Africa, the UK could use the JEF model to strengthen the Baltic Republics and Eastern Europe against the Russian threat. European defence policy, both within and without the EU, could lose even the limited strategic coherence it currently enjoys. The extent to which this happens may depend on the details of the political agreement on the UK's future relations with the EU. The massive rejection of the withdrawal agreement by the British Parliament leaves this in doubt, as it does the whole Brexit process.

*Shaun Riordan is Director of the Department of Diplomacy and Cyberspace at the European Institute for International Relations. A former British diplomat, he is the author of „The New Diplomacy“ (2003) and „Cyberdiplomacy: Managing Security and Governance in Cyberspace“ (2019).*

© Austria Institut für Europa- und Sicherheitspolitik, 2019

Alle Rechte vorbehalten. Nachdruck oder vergleichbare Verwendungen von Arbeiten des Austria Instituts für Europa- und Sicherheitspolitik (AIES) sind auch in Auszügen nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung gestattet. Die im AIES-Fokus veröffentlichten Beiträge geben ausschließlich die Meinung der jeweiligen Autorinnen und Autoren wieder.

Dr. Langweg 3, 2410 Hainburg/Donau  
Tel. +43 (1) 3583080  
E-Mail: [office@aies.at](mailto:office@aies.at)  
Website: [www.aies.at](http://www.aies.at)

Layout: Medienbüro Meyer

<sup>9</sup> Håkon Lunde Saxi: The UK Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), IFS Insights 5/2018, Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies