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# The 2024 UK General Election

The Implications for the European Union

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## AIIES COMMENT



## The 2024 UK General Election: The Implications for the European Union

### Introduction

For fourteen years the Conservative Party of the United Kingdom have been at the helm of British Government policies. The most notorious, if not infamous, of all was Brexit or Britain's exit from the European Union. However, on Thursday 4<sup>th</sup> July that came to an end with the landslide victory of the Labour Party led by Sir Keir Starmer. The Labour Party originally campaigned during the Brexit Referendum to remain in the EU, however, the Labour Leader, and now new Prime Minister, has made it very clear that his Government will not seek to rejoin the EU, the Single Market, nor the Customs Union. The new British Government, however, does seek a closer relationship with the EU and its Member States in-order to promote economic growth and improve diplomatic relations and goodwill. This AIES Comment will delve into what the UK elections mean for the EU and what exactly the new British Government will seek to do, and what it wants in its relations with the EU.

### No Rejoining the EU, the Single Market or the Customs Union

The first component to address is what Labour's position is towards the EU. During the Brexit referendum both the Labour Party and Sir Keir Starmer supported to remain in the EU, arguing that leaving the EU would negatively impact the UK economy and strain relations between the UK and its biggest trading partner. However, in the

years before the 2024 general election, and during the election campaign itself, Keir Starmer made it very clear that the UK would not seek a second referendum, nor rejoin the EU, the Single Market nor the EU's Customs Union. In fact, in the Labour Party Manifesto the word Brexit is mentioned only once in the 142 page document, and in it the position is very clear that *"With Labour, Britain will stay outside the EU. But to seize the opportunities ahead, we must make Brexit work."*<sup>1</sup> So the reality is that even though Labour and Keir Starmer acknowledge that Brexit was a mistake, the Labour Government's policy will be to maintain Britain's position as a third country and outside the EU framework. The reasoning behind this move is very clear. It would have lost the Labour Party votes.

*"It is true that opinion polls suggest that more people would vote remain than leave in a hypothetical rerun of the EU referendum. But that does not mean that a Labour policy of rejoining the EU would be a vote winner. An expressed intention of voting 'remain' in a second referendum does not, it seems, automatically translate in to support for rejoining the EU."*<sup>2</sup>

Brexit was and still remains an incredibly divisive issue, and one that both the Labour Party and the Conservative Party chose not to touch in the general election. The Conservative Party didn't want to talk about Brexit because an increasing majority of

the UK population believes leaving the EU was a mistake; and the Labour Party did not mention Brexit because it needed to win back working class voters in the North of England, who are traditional Labour voters but crucially also voted for Brexit.

Another very important factor that the Labour Party had to consider relating to Brexit was the sheer level of voter fatigue around this issue. From the referendum in 2016, four years of negotiations followed in which Brexit was pretty much the only issue discussed in British politics, the media, and in British society. And after the UK finally left the EU on 1<sup>st</sup> February 2020 at midnight CET, what has followed is another four years of various economic and public finance issues that all have some connection to Brexit. By the time the general election was announced, the UK population's collective voter fatigue of Brexit had reached exhaustion levels, even though Brexit still remains *the* cause, or at least *a* cause, of continued inflation, cuts to public spending, the cost-of-living crisis, and bureaucratic headaches, and loss of revenue for many British businesses.

*"But perhaps the most significant issue underpinning the Brexit silence is voter fatigue. Johnson's victory in 2019 was based partly on sheer exhaustion with an issue that had dominated media coverage for the preceding three years, not least because an election held after*

*the Brexit vote, in 2017, had produced a parliament without a majority for a single party. - 'If you do focus groups and mention Brexit, the biggest reaction you get from voters is a yawn and an eye-roll, '...'<sup>8</sup>*

So the Labour Party decided that as an election strategy Brexit as an issue needed to be silenced, and it appears that this strategy has worked for Labour as it won back many seats it lost to the Conservatives in the North of England.

### **Closer EU-UK Cooperation**

If the new Labour Government under Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer does not want to rejoin the EU, Single Market or Customs Union, then what is Labour's policy toward the EU? According to the Labour Party manifesto for the 4<sup>th</sup> July election, Labour's approach will be to improve the existing trade agreement and "*deepen ties with our European friends, neighbours and allies*".<sup>4</sup> The Labour Party manifesto goes into some specific details of what the EU can potentially expect in terms of negotiations.

*"Labour will work to improve the UK's trade and investment relationship with the EU, by tearing down necessary barriers to trade. We will seek to negotiate a veterinary agreement to prevent unnecessary border checks and help tackle the cost of food; will help our touring artists; and secure a mutual recognition agreement for professional qualifications to help open up markets for UK service exporters."*<sup>5</sup>

Though details are deliberately vague in the manifesto in order to not risk alienation of certain voters, and to give some room for manoeuvrability in the negotiations, there is enough to analyse at least how the new British Government will begin in improving its relations with the EU. The bureaucratic and physical barriers that have appeared as a result of Brexit are costing British businesses millions, with one estimate from Bloomberg Economics placing the number at £100 Billion (€118 Billion) a year.<sup>6</sup> Any relaxation of bureaucratic paperwork of border checks will go a long way to improving the UK's economic output. In practical terms this could mean further alignment from the UK to EU standards and regulations.

Of particular note, as it is raised in the Labour Manifesto, is the importance of an agreement regarding veterinary checks at the UK border on meat products and other animal related perishable goods. This has become a very large post-Brexit headache as some trucks are held up by as much as 20 hours at the British border;<sup>7</sup> in one incident last month an Italian truck was held for 55 hours at the UK border.<sup>8</sup> Having an agreement with the EU that will alleviate pressure at the border and allow perishable goods to flow more smoothly through UK Customs will do much to counteract some food shortages in the UK supermarkets and increase shelf-life of food stuffs.

Two other priorities mentioned in the Manifesto concern the ability for UK and EU artists to tour unhindered, and on the mutual recognition of professional qualifications. The specific mentioning of these two post-Brexit issues is interesting. They are not majorly concerning issues in contrast to the British Banking sector having access to the Single Market, for example. The reason is that in theory these two issues should be relatively easy to negotiate with the EU, thereby giving the new Labour Government two easy victories and fulfilling two Manifesto pledges. They also would be two great non-contentious ways of improving relations between the UK and EU.

Overall, the position of the new Labour Government is to create a more harmonious relationship with the EU. To attempt to ease the bureaucratic and economic problems caused by Brexit and in many respects to repair the damage in relations done by Brexiteer politicians.

### **A New EU-UK Security Pact**

At first glance it would appear that not much will happen under a new Labour Government. However, one crucial detail in the Labour Manifesto with regards to EU-UK relations is the ambition to create a new security pact.

*"Labour will seek an ambitious new UK-EU security pact to strengthen co-operation on the threats we face. We will rebuild relationships with key European allies, including France and Ger-*

*many, through increased defence and security co-operation. We will seek new bilateral agreements and closer working with Joint Expeditionary Force partners. This will strengthen NATO and keep Britain safe.”<sup>8</sup>*

Given how Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has radically changed Europe’s security and defence architecture, and brought a conventional land war back to mainland Europe, it is logical, even necessary, that the UK would seek closer security ties with the EU. The Political Declaration between the EU and the UK signed in 2019 originally envisioned a security partnership with even the possibility of the UK participating in EU CSDP operations.<sup>10</sup> However, this never came to fruition under Boris Johnson’s Government. Now under a Labour Government, it looks as if Britain is willing to revisit this and create a deeper security relationship with the EU as opposed to how the Conservative Party was doing so, which was on a purely bilateral basis and through NATO. The Manifesto does make it clear that the UK will continue the approach of bilateral relations and strengthening security through NATO; however, the UK will finally be willing to engage with the EU as a security actor in its own right and not purely as an economic or regional partner.

Such a security partnership could be wide ranging or very limited in scope; it is entirely dependent on what the UK Government wishes. Based on the La-

bour Party Manifesto and statements from Labour politicians the new British Government’s ambitions seem to encompass a broad array of issues. The first thing to take into consideration is the new Defence Industrial Strategy announced in Labour’s Manifesto.

*“Labour will bring forward a defence industrial strategy aligning our security and economic priorities. We will ensure a strong defence sector and resilient supply chains, including steel, across the whole of the UK. We will establish long-term partnerships between business and government, promote innovation, and improve resilience. We will prioritise UK businesses for defence investment and will reform procurement to reduce waste. Labour will support industry to benefit from export opportunities, in line with a robust arms export regime committed to upholding international law.”<sup>11</sup>*

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The new Labour Government wants to reinvigorate the UK defence industry as a means to drive economic growth. Many analysts have already suggested that part of an EU-UK security pact could focus on defence industry cooperation. This comes at a crucial time when Europe needs more consolidation and cooperation in the defence industry, as has been shown by Russia’s invasion in Ukraine “the

*crisis has put the spotlight back on the enduring importance of a robust and capable defence industrial and technological base in Europe – one that can, for example, produce 155mm shells at the pace and scale required.”<sup>12</sup> The Political Declaration signed in 2019 allows for the possibility for the EU and UK defence industries to work together.*

*“102. The future relationship should benefit from research and industrial cooperation between the Parties’ entities in specific European collaborative projects to facilitate interoperability and to promote joint effectiveness of Armed Forces...”<sup>13</sup>*

This was, however, rejected by Boris Johnson’s Government in the final negotiations of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA). The new Labour Government could revive this from the Political Declaration as part of their planned UK-EU security pact: However, there are some limitations. *“on defence research and industrial cooperation, the political declaration offers British involvement only in the latest EU initiatives (the EDF*

*and permanent structured cooperation), as well as the EDA.”<sup>14</sup> In addition to this another limitation could be the EU’s own defence industrial strategy. “EU initiatives like the European Defence Industrial Strategy are currently aimed at bolstering industries in EU member states and generally exclude third countries, including the UK. This could stymie any push to create*

*a wider European defence industrial base that features the UK.*<sup>15</sup>

There is a possibility though that in the interest of obtaining better trading conditions from the EU, the UK would be willing to reopen negotiations on the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement. A possibility that will present itself in May 2026 when under Article 776 of the EU-UK TCA the agreement will have its first five year review. During this time the treaty will be open to review, negotiation, and amendments and this could present the new British Government with the opportunity to gain better access for the British defence industry into the EU's defence industrial base.

The Labour Government's ambition for the EU-UK security pact goes further, more in line with what had been envisioned in the Political Declaration on the UK potentially participating in EU CSDP operations. *"Defence Secretary John Healey wants a 'UK-EU defence pact' as a 'bespoke relationship' that could include UK third-party participation in EU military and civilian Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions and enhanced cooperation on 'internal' security issues such as illegal migration, border control and terrorism."*<sup>16</sup> Such a possibility had been envisioned within the Political Declaration of 2019 under Article 99.

*"99. The Parties welcome close cooperation in Union-led crisis management missions and operations, both civilian and military. The future relationship should therefore enable the United Kingdom to participate on a case by case basis in CSDP missions and operations through a Framework Participation Agreement."*<sup>17</sup>

In addition, the new Defence Secretary John Healey has envisioned a security pact that will go even further than the Political Declaration and beyond involvement in PESCO and CSDP operations. *"But Healey says a Labour Government would look to expand that to include cooperation on logistics projects and cyber-security along with a broader strategic dialogue. 'We in the U.K. have particular expertise in military and security intelligence,' he said."*<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

Whilst it has firmly stated that it will not rejoin the EU, or the Single Market or the Customs Union, the new British Government has signalled its enthusiastic intent for an improved relationship between the UK and the EU. The implications for the EU are that it can expect to work with a British Government that is dedicated to actively solving trade, customs and bureaucratic problems left as a result of the Brexit deal. The

EU can also look forward to the prospect of an EU-UK security pact within the next couple of years. How deep and comprehensive that security pact will exactly be, is up to the government in Westminster. In addition, the EU can, with regards to Ukraine and Russia, look forward to 'business as usual' with the Labour Government stating that it will continue to support Ukraine and continue coordinating sanctions against Russia with the EU.

## About the Author

Lawrence Kettle graduated from the University of Groningen with a Masters in International Relations and International Organization specialising in International Security; and with a Bachelors degree in International Relations, with honours, from Aberystwyth University. He is a Research Associate with the AIES and is an EU Security and Defence specialist. Prior to coming to the AIES, he was the recipient of the prestigious Bruno Kreisky Forum grant and fellowship which he completed at the Austrian Institute for International Affairs (ÖIIP). His areas of expertise are EU-UK relations, Security in the Western Balkans, and EU/European security and defence issues.

<sup>15</sup>Change-Labour-Party-Manifesto-2024-Large-Print.Pdf', accessed 8 July 2024, <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Change-Labour-Party-Manifesto-2024-large-print.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup>Why Keir Starmer Has Ruled out the UK Rejoining the EU and Accepted That Brexit Has Brought Benefits', *British Politics and Policy at LSE* (blog), 16 March

2022, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/keir-starmer-brexit/>.

<sup>17</sup>Dan Sabbagh, 'Why Is Nobody Talking about Brexit in the UK Election?', *The Guardian*, 12 June 2024, sec. Politics,



<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/article/2024/jun/12/why-is-nobody-talking-about-brex-it-in-the-uk-election>.

<sup>4</sup>‘Change-Labour-Party-Manifesto-2024-Large-Print.Pdf’. p.121.

<sup>5</sup>‘Change-Labour-Party-Manifesto-2024-Large-Print.Pdf’. p.122.

<sup>6</sup>Andrew Atkinson, ‘Brexit Costs UK £100 Billion a Year in Lost Output From Hiring to Inv...’, *Bloomberg*, 31 January 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-01-31/brexit-is-costing-the-uk-100-billion-a-year-in-lost-output>.

<sup>7</sup>Jack Simpson, ‘Dutch Lorry Drivers Could Stop Bringing Goods to UK If Post-Brexit Delays Not Cut’, *The Guardian*, 13 June 2024, sec. Politics, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/article/2024/jun/13/dutch-lorry-drivers-uk-post-brexit-delays-dutch-hauliers>.

<sup>8</sup>Jack Simpson and Angela Giuffrida, ‘Post-Brexit “Mess” as Italian Driver’s Lorry Held for 55 Hours at UK Border Post’, *The Guardian*, 10 June 2024, sec. Politics, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/article/2024/jun/10/brexit-italian-driver-lorry-uk-border-post-sevington>.

<sup>9</sup>‘Change-Labour-Party-Manifesto-2024-Large-Print.Pdf’. p.122.

<sup>10</sup>Political Declaration Setting out the Framework for the Future Relationship between the European Union and the United Kingdom 2019/C 384 I/02’, 384I OJ C § (2019), [http://data.europa.eu/eli/treaty/withd\\_2019\(3\)/dcl\\_1/oj/eng](http://data.europa.eu/eli/treaty/withd_2019(3)/dcl_1/oj/eng).

<sup>11</sup>‘Change-Labour-Party-Manifesto-2024-Large-Print.Pdf’. p.123.

<sup>12</sup>Nick Witney, ‘Labour’s Intent: Resetting Britain’s Defence Relationship with Europe’, ECFR, 30 October 2023, <https://ecfr.eu/article/labours-intent-re-setting-britains-defence-relationship-with-europe/>.

<sup>13</sup>Political declaration setting out the framework for the future relationship between the European Union and the United Kingdom 2019/C 384 I/02.

<sup>14</sup>Witney, ‘Labour’s Intent’.

<sup>15</sup>‘UK Election Manifestos Make Promises on Security and Foreign Policy – but Tough Choices Await a New Government | Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank’, 20 June 2024, <https://www.chatham-house.org/2024/06/uk-election-manifestos-make-promises-security-and-foreign-policy-tough-choices-await-new>.

<sup>16</sup>Ed Arnold and Professor Richard G Whitman, ‘What Can the New Government’s Proposed UK–EU Security Pact

Achieve?’, RUSI Commentary, 8 July 2024, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/what-can-new-governments-proposed-uk-eu-security-pact-achieve>.

<sup>17</sup>Political declaration setting out the framework for the future relationship between the European Union and the United Kingdom 2019/C 384 I/02.

<sup>18</sup>Joshua Posaner, Laura Kayali and Jon Stone, ‘UK’s Labour would target defense ‘pact’ with EU’, *Politico*, 7 December 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/labour-targets-defense-security-pact-eu-if-wins-general-election-uk-2024-sunak/>.

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