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UK Foreign and Security Policy after Brexit

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Key Points

- The UK should aim to create a new post-Brexit 'special relationship' between the UK and the EU on foreign and security policy, allowing joint initiatives with the EU and action on issues of common concern.
- In order to help fill the gap in diplomatic representation resulting from Brexit, the UK will need to invest more in bilateral, and cross-Whitehall, diplomatic representation in other European capitals.
- The temptation to use the UK's 'security surplus' – its role as the leading West European military and intelligence power – as a bargaining chip should be resisted. The UK's contributions to European security can, however, help to remind other EU states of the strong interests and values that they will continue to have in common.
- It will be hard for the UK to maintain its influence in areas (such as the Balkans, Ukraine, North Africa and Turkey) where access to EU markets and, in some cases, the prospect of EU membership, is a powerful policy lever, and where other EU member states are likely to take advantage of Brexit to increase their own influence.
- UK influence on European security will remain considerable, given its position as NATO's most capable, and willing, European power. Yet it will become harder for the UK to translate this commitment into political influence; it will have to work hard to ensure that its policy inputs are not an afterthought to the results of US/EU dialogue.
- There is already discussion of the possibility that the position of NATO Deputy Supreme Allied Commander (DSACEUR), which the UK has held since 1951, might be transferred to a NATO member that remains part of the EU. There may be creative ways to handle this issue. Even so, the fact that it is already being raised is a clear message that the UK's influence within NATO cannot be entirely ring-fenced from the consequences of Brexit.
- The UK's role as a valued global partner to the US is more likely to survive Brexit relatively unscathed than will its role as a diplomatic 'bridge' between the US and Europe. The prospect of diplomatic isolation in Europe could tempt the government to believe that it would have no alternative to standing 'shoulder to shoulder' with the US in a future military conflict. Yet successive experiences during the last decades have reinforced the

need for caution. Donald J Trump's presidency could further increase the desirability of maintaining strong security relationships with both the US and the EU.

- The UK will need to balance its desire to use Brexit as an opportunity to deepen its influence as a global power with its continuing interest in the security and stability of Europe. During the height of proactive internationalism in the decade after 1997, the UK aspired to be a global 'force for good', an agenda made possible by rapid economic growth, and by the benign security environment in Europe. Today, by contrast, the assertiveness of Russia, together with the multiple spillovers from the collapse of key Arab states, means that the security threats in the UK's European neighbourhood are now more significant than at any time since 1990. If such trends continue, the relative priority that the UK will need to attach to the security of Europe could grow, even as its ability to influence the shape of collective action is set to decline.
- The election of Trump as US president could also lead to further pressure on European states, including the UK, to take a greater share of responsibility for their own security. Given this, the UK is likely to want to further deepen existing efforts to improve bilateral defence cooperation with European NATO members (for example, France). A Trump Presidency may even lead to a greater willingness by the UK, post-Brexit, to discuss greater defence cooperation with the EU itself.

THE LONG-TERM foreign policy consequences of Brexit may depend, above all, on whether it is followed by an economic revival that can provide the resources the UK will need to support a credible role as an independent international power, while also addressing the deep popular resentments that fuelled the vote on 23 June.

Even before its longer-term economic consequences become clear, however, Britain's separation from the EU is likely to have a substantial impact on the avenues through which the UK is able to use its foreign policy capabilities – diplomatic, defence and developmental – to promote its interests and influence.

No Longer at the Table

Prime Minister Theresa May's decision to trigger Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty by March 2017, and her clear commitment to restore full national control over economic regulation and migration, means that the UK now appears to be on course to withdraw from both the single market and, in all probability, the customs union. A radical transformation in the economic relationship with the rest of the EU will take place, giving the government the capability to 'set [its] own rules and forge new and dynamic trading agreements that work for the whole UK'.¹

After Brexit takes place, the UK will no longer be represented at the hundreds of meetings through which the EU decides how to respond to international issues. It is also unrealistic to expect that the UK will be able to maintain a significant observer role. EU foreign policy is increasingly a matter for joint action by commission and council, often brought together with

1. Theresa May, 'PM Speech to the Lord Mayor's Banquet', The Guildhall, London, 14 November 2016.

the External Action Service, and involving complex negotiation of common positions using a range of capabilities – such as energy, environmental and sanctions policy – that transcend any neat divide between economic and security issues.

The UK will continue to have an interest in shaping EU policy across these issues even after it leaves. Yet the primary focus of attention over the next three years is bound to be on the process of repatriation of powers from the EU to the UK and its devolved governments. In the absence of a transition agreement, the UK may only have two years to develop new national (or devolved government) policies and administrative structures for trade regulation (including sanctions), migration, state aid, energy policy, competition, agriculture and fisheries, data protection, and aspects of development cooperation and research. As a result, there is a risk that foreign and security policy could be overlooked as government uses its limited capacity to focus on these more immediate concerns.

The EU, for its part, will need to work out how to adjust its own structures, policies and budgets to account for the UK's exit, a process likely to involve painful burden-sharing discussions between member states as each seeks to minimise economic losses or maximise gains. Over time, it is reasonable to expect that new equilibriums of interests will be reached, both between EU members and between the EU and the UK. But the process will take time.

The repatriation of powers to the UK will provide new opportunities for a joined-up national approach to foreign policy, allowing, for example, the use of sanctions and trade concessions as a policy instrument without reference to European authorities or courts. The price paid for increased national control, however, will be that it may be harder to coordinate collective action in response to emerging security challenges. Other states may be tempted, for example, to look for divergences in practice and priorities as an opportunity to play the UK and EU off against each other.

Once the process of separation is completed, there may be areas of policy in which the UK and the EU become more competitive. Yet their broader geopolitical interests will continue to be closely matched, reflecting their common position as developed Western democracies with many specific shared concerns.

As a consequence, it may still be possible to envisage the emergence of a new post-Brexit 'special relationship' between the UK and the EU on foreign and security policy, resulting in future joint EU/UK initiatives and actions on issues of common concern. Such a relationship, together with some strengthening of long-existing mechanisms for quadrilateral consultation between France, Germany, the UK and the US, could help to ensure that the UK would continue to be closely involved in consultations on the main security policy issues of the day. The UK's place on the UN Security Council will also help in this regard.

Yet it is important to be realistic about the degree of influence that a special relationship could provide. Shared decision-making will not be possible once the UK has left, and each of the parties will want to guard against any suggestion that it is subordinating decision-making to

the other. The UK is often likely to find itself faced with a European fait accompli on key issues, where the very complexity of the processes leading to decisions militates against them being reopened to external parties. The inevitable corollary of the UK gaining more control over its own policies, therefore, will be a significant reduction in its ability to shape the collective approach of EU states.

Taken together with the effort that will be needed to develop new national policies, reduced influence in Brussels is likely to lead to a further deepening of the UK's focus on those areas that are of direct national interest. In order to help fill the gap in diplomatic representation at multilateral level resulting from Brexit, the UK will probably want to invest more in bilateral, and cross-Whitehall, diplomatic representation in other European capitals. Yet, without a seat at the tables where cross-EU compromises are hammered out, this new model of European diplomacy is likely to involve a shift in emphasis away from developing new EU approaches and towards the protection of direct national interests.

The 'Trading Security' Temptation

As concern over the future terms of a Brexit deal grows, some of those involved in shaping policy have been tempted by the argument that the UK should use its 'security surplus' – its role as the leading West European military and intelligence power – as a bargaining chip that could be 'traded' in return for commercial concessions in the post-Brexit settlement with the EU.²

Yet there would be risks in taking this path. It would imply that the UK's contribution to collective defence and security was dependent on whether other states are prepared to recognise its interests in other areas, such as access to the single market. As with Trump linking US security guarantees to increased contributions from European and Asian allies during his presidential campaign, such an approach would undermine the mutual confidence on which those guarantees depend. It would be seen – both by allies and potential adversaries – as suggesting that the UK's move towards isolationism was more deep seated than previously feared. The reassurance value of the UK's contribution to collective defence rests, to a considerable extent, on its reliability. The government would have to think very carefully before calling this, and therefore its wider commitment to NATO, into question.

Where the UK's 'security surplus' can be useful is in making it clear to its EU negotiating peers – especially in security and foreign affairs – that there is more to the relationship with the UK than haggling over tariffs, migration rules and budget contributions. After Brexit, the UK and the EU will continue to share fundamental interests and values, and the UK will continue to be

2. Gary Gibbon, 'Merkel to May on Brexit Negotiations: nein danke', *Channel 4 News*, 29 November 2016. Gibbon reports that 'officials in Whitehall in the context of Brexit trading have referred to Britain's skills and capacity on defence and intelligence issues as a "security surplus"'. The Institute for Government has also argued that, 'if the US does adopt a more isolationist stance, then ongoing security cooperation with the UK becomes more valuable. This could strengthen the UK's negotiating hand in Brexit talks, as it could use the promise of ongoing cooperation on security measures to extract a more favourable deal from the EU'. Robyn Munro, 'What Will President Trump Mean for Brexit and the EU?', Institute for Government, 21 November 2016.

a reliable defence and security partner. In considering how to handle the negotiations as they reach moments of crisis, any desire to punish the UK in order to deter further defections from the EU should be properly considered in the context of the broader relationship with the UK.

Britain and the European Neighbourhood

The UK may be tempted to use the new freedoms created by Brexit to provide further protection from Europe's problems. Just as the UK's opt-outs from the common currency and Schengen passport-free zone have already allowed some distancing from two of the central crises affecting most of the rest of the EU, the UK could seek for example to use new national controls to further strengthen its ability to use the EU as a buffer against unwanted migration from Europe's east and south.

It already seems probable that currently high levels of UK economic assistance to poorer member states in Eastern Europe, channelled through the EU budget, will be sharply reduced, and perhaps in time ended altogether, saving the UK as much as £9 billion a year (in 2015 prices).³ It is also possible that the UK will withdraw from the European Development Fund, the effects of which would be felt disproportionately by sub-Saharan states to Europe's south. The UK could decide to use these resources to reinvest in aid to the same countries on a bilateral basis. Given the relatively low historic priority that the UK has given to Eastern Europe and North Africa in its bilateral assistance, however, it is more likely that much of this funding will instead be diverted to support new nationally determined priorities at home and abroad, or to help mitigate the fiscal costs of a Brexit-induced recession.

As a result, it will be hard for the UK to maintain its influence in areas (such as the Balkans, Belarus and Ukraine) where access to EU markets (and the prospect of EU membership) is a powerful policy lever, and where other EU member states are likely to take advantage of Brexit to increase their own influence. A similar decline seems probable in other neighbouring areas, such as North Africa and Turkey, which are heavily dependent on the EU for trade access and/or aid.

In fact, such a decline has already begun, from the UK's marginalisation from diplomatic activity regarding successive euro and migrant crises, to the negotiation and maintenance of an EU migration deal with Turkey, and to German/French leadership of Ukraine-related diplomacy. Although much will depend on the form that the UK's future association with the EU takes, Brexit is likely to increase this trend.

The UK and European Defence

UK influence on the European security agenda will remain considerable, given its position as NATO's most capable, and willing, European power. The recent coordinated announcements of new deployments of Typhoon aircraft to Romania, 150 army personnel to eastern Poland,

3. Based on currently projected levels of net contribution for 2018 and 2019. Matthew Keep, 'EU Budget and the UK's Contribution', House of Commons Library, Briefing Paper 06455, 1 November 2016, p. 8.

and most significantly, an armoured infantry battalion of 800 personnel to Estonia, all serve to illustrate this commitment.⁴ Of the four 'enhanced presence' battalions deployed in Eastern Europe as a result of NATO's Warsaw summit, three will be led (post-Brexit) by non-EU states.⁵ These deployments may now start to become, albeit on a much smaller scale, the modern equivalent of the multinational forces deployed on West Germany's front line during the Cold War – designed to show that any aggression would risk triggering conflict with NATO's strongest military powers.

Yet, once the UK exits the EU, it could become harder for the UK to translate this important commitment into political influence. The European security agenda is not neatly divided into military and non-military issues. The international response to developments in Ukraine/Russia, Libya or Syria, for example, includes critical economic components – aid, sanctions and trade access – that fall squarely under EU competence. As an important economy in its own right, the UK could still contribute substantially to the non-military dimensions of crisis management and stabilisation. Yet, it will have to work hard to ensure that its policy inputs are not an afterthought to the results of US/EU dialogue. Its influence may be greatest in those areas – such as financial sanctions and expeditionary military operations – where it will continue to have the greatest comparative advantage.

After its exit from the EU, the UK will no longer be a member of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Given its capabilities and interests, it may be asked to contribute to future missions on an ad hoc basis. Yet its willingness to do so on a substantial scale will be diminished if it cannot also share in the development of the missions' purposes and rules. Other states are also likely to be wary of giving the UK a significant formal role in CSDP mechanisms, even if the UK were to request it.

It is possible that the UK's position within the NATO command structure could also be affected by leaving the EU. There is already some discussion of the possibility that the assignment of the position of Deputy Supreme Allied Commander (DSACEUR) to the UK, which it has held since 1951, might have to be transferred to a NATO member that is a member of the EU. The role of DSACEUR is central to ensuring the availability of NATO assets to certain EU missions organised under the 'Berlin Plus' arrangements, for example in Bosnia. There may be creative ways to handle this issue. A second DSACEUR position could be recreated (Germany held this position until 1993), or the UK could swap its current position for the important role of Chief of Staff. Whatever the outcome, the substantive consequences of such changes are likely to be relatively limited. Even so, the fact that they are already being raised is a clear message that the UK's role and influence within NATO cannot be entirely ring-fenced from the consequences of Brexit.

Despite Trump's election as president, the UK's relationship with the US is likely to remain exceptionally strong in relation to nuclear and intelligence cooperation, grounded in strong mutual interest and respect developed over decades. In contrast, however, the role of the

4. Ministry of Defence, 'UK Steps Up Measures to Reassure European Allies', 26 October 2016.

5. The battalions in Latvia, Lithuania and Poland will be led by non-EU states (Canada, the UK and the US), with only one led by an EU member state (Germany).

UK as a valued conduit, or diplomatic ‘bridge’, between the US and Europe could diminish substantially after Brexit.

The Wider World and the Risks of Unilateralism

The UK’s influence outside the European neighbourhood should be easier to maintain, supported by its internationalist political culture, continuing high levels of resource commitment, and its permanent seat on the UNSC. While the foreign policies of other large EU states (with the partial exception of France) remain largely neighbourhood focused, the UK has a strong global outlook, maintaining an extensive diplomatic network, backed by aid and defence resources, across large parts of sub-Saharan Africa, the Gulf, South Asia and Asia-Pacific. As a result, the UK’s role as a valued global partner to the US is more likely to survive Brexit relatively unscathed than will its role as a route through which the US seeks to influence Europe, and vice versa.

While the UK is likely to have a continuing appetite for an active role in the world beyond the EU, there will also be pressure to focus this energy on countries, regions and themes where it has strong interests, or where it has a clear comparative advantage in being able to respond to a specific problem. A more independent approach to foreign policy could lead to new opportunities for the UK to take the lead in international responses, standing up for key principles (for example on human rights) or stepping into vacuums created by policy paralysis in other major powers. The 2000 intervention in Sierra Leone’s civil war was a clear illustration of how the UK maintained the capabilities for leading international actions where others (such as the US and France) lacked the willingness to do so. If an opportunity presented itself, further such actions could help to restore the international credibility of British foreign policy after Brexit.

Yet opportunities for such action are likely to be limited to a relatively small number of cases, primarily former colonies in which no other major power has a strong competing stake, and where the UK itself has a relatively limited economic or security (as opposed to ethical or historical) interest.

In contrast, attempts to pursue a more independent, and assertive, stance in relation to major Eurasian states, such as Russia, China and Iran, will have to be pursued with care, and in close consultation with the US and European allies. Unfriendly powers are likely to look for opportunities to divide the UK from its European partners, for example through the application of targeted diplomatic and economic sanctions.

The risks of unilateralism would be particularly great for military action. Most major potential partners and adversaries in South and East Asia are increasing their defence budgets and investing heavily in capabilities designed to deter each other from military intervention.⁶ The current momentum behind increased bilateral UK military ties with the Gulf countries and Japan

6. Total Asian defence expenditure totalled \$344 billion in 2014, and grew by 16% in real terms between 2010 and 2014. International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2015*, 11 February 2015, p. 210.

could grow after Brexit, but it would have to be carefully circumscribed in order to limit the risks that the UK could be entangled in future conflicts without the support of the US.

A degree of caution may also have to be exercised to maintain the UK's freedom of action in relation to future US military campaigns. The prospect of diplomatic isolation in Europe could tempt a future government to place greater emphasis on the need to stand 'shoulder to shoulder' with the US in a future military conflict. Yet successive experiences during the past decades, most clearly in the decision to invade Iraq in 2003, have reinforced the need for caution. A Trump presidency could further increase the desirability of maintaining strategy autonomy.

Influence or Interests?

Over the past two decades, much of UK foreign policy has been directed towards security crises outside Europe's neighbourhood, most notably in South Asia (especially Pakistan and Afghanistan), the Levant and Gulf (especially GCC partners, Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan), East Africa (especially Kenya, Somalia and South Sudan) and Southeast Asia (working closely with Australia, Singapore, Malaysia and, increasingly, Japan). The relative importance of these wider commitments could increase post-Brexit, as the government seeks to develop its commitment to a 'Global Britain' foreign policy as part of a wider reorientation away from Europe.

However, this may not be the best time to make such a shift. During the height of proactive internationalism in the decade after 1997, the UK aspired to be a 'force for good', playing a major role in supporting the US in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, while also seeking to mobilise the international community in support of ambitious goals for global poverty reduction. This agenda was possible because of the additional resources made available by rapid economic growth, and by the relatively benign security environment in Europe.

Today, by contrast, the UK is struggling to recover from the fiscal aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. The growing assertiveness of Russia, together with the multiple spillovers from the collapse of key Arab states, means that the security threats to the UK from its immediate neighbourhood are now more significant than at any time since the end of the Cold War. At the same time, the election of Trump could lead to further pressure on European states, including the UK, to take a greater share of responsibility in providing for their own security. If these trends continue, the UK's interest in the security of Europe could grow, even if its ability to influence the shape of collective responses is likely to decline. The UK will need to balance its desire to use Brexit as an opportunity to deepen its influence as a global power with its continuing interest in the security and stability of Europe.

An Uncertain Future

By the middle of 2019 at the latest, it is highly probable that the UK will no longer be a member of the EU. The price of more national control over the instruments of foreign policy that this brings – for example in relation to economic diplomacy – will be a significant decline in influence over the common European foreign policies.

The UK's departure from the EU is thus likely to deepen the recent trend towards a security policy focused on national interest. The cumulative effect will be a foreign and security policy that is fundamentally different in emphasis than it was at the height of Blair/Brown internationalism in the decade after 1997.

Trump's election – on a platform of 'America First' – could further encourage this trend, throwing further doubt on whether the post-1945 Western institutional order can now survive. If he seeks to implement the nationalist platform on which he was elected, it may help to bring the UK and the EU closer on defence policy, albeit on a more bilateral basis. It may even lead to a British willingness to discuss defence issues with the EU to a far greater extent than it was prepared to do while it was a member.

Much will depend on Russia's response to the dual shocks in the UK and the US. If it were to redouble efforts to re-establish a sphere of influence on its western borders, perhaps as part of a wider bargain with President Trump over the heads of NATO allies, the pressure on the EU and the UK to deepen their defence cooperation would be considerable, potentially diluting any EU instinct to 'punish' the UK economically for Brexit.

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