

EU–UK Cooperation in CSDP After Brexit

Living apart together?

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With increasing tensions between Russia and the West, uncertainty in the transatlantic relationship, rising terrorism in Europe, and contestation over migration policies, the UK's vote in June 2016 to exit the EU could not have come at a less convenient time. While this challenging international context has heightened the need for a more unified European security policy, Brexit has instead unleashed forces of disintegration.

The growing rift between the EU and the UK in the area of security and defence long precedes the Brexit referendum. While the UK was at the forefront of the formation of what is now called the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) in the late nineties, London gradually became a more reluctant partner in CSDP. This shift manifested itself through the UK putting a brake on further integration, reducing personnel contributions to CSDP operations, and opposing Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), a treaty that further integrates European defence forces.

Meanwhile the EU has launched 34 civilian and military CSDP missions since 2003 (although they have been relatively small in size), and developed the institutional machinery to support this new role. Despite ongoing criticism of its operational effectiveness, institutional efficiency, and reliance on soft power, the EU has recently shown renewed interest in advancing CSDP. New ambitions are echoed in the European Commission's "Reflection Paper on the Future of European Defence", which outlines several scenarios for moving towards a European security and defence union. The recent developments in PESCO also demonstrate political willingness to pursue such a union, in particular with regard to the pooling of military assets, joint training and exercises, capability coordination, and enhancing interoperability across national militaries.

These recent trends seem to suggest that the EU is seeking to strengthen CSDP, while the UK has lost interest in furthering cooperation under this umbrella. These seemingly diverging trends need not mean that there is no scope for

KEY INSIGHTS

THE CURRENT EUROPEAN SECURITY LANDSCAPE AND TENSE TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS PRESENT A STRONG CASE FOR A SPECIAL SECURITY RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE EU AND THE UK BEYOND BREXIT.

THE INTERGOVERNMENTAL NATURE OF CSDP ALLOWS FOR CREATIVE GOVERNANCE SOLUTIONS FOR FUTURE COOPERATION BETWEEN THE EU AND THE UK.

PARADOXICALLY, BREXIT STRENGTHENS THE NEED FOR CLOSER SECURITY AND DEFENCE COOPERATION BETWEEN THE EU AND THE UK, AND MAY EVEN FACILITATE IT.

close cooperation in the post-Brexit era. On the contrary, Brexit may, paradoxically, reinforce the need for closer EU–UK security and defence cooperation.

While the wider set of political questions regarding the impact of Brexit on the EU’s foreign, security, and defence policy has been discussed extensively elsewhere, this policy brief focuses on CSDP. In what follows, we explore the rationale for continued close cooperation between the EU and the UK beyond Brexit and outline potential frameworks for such cooperation.

WHY WOULD THE UK REMAIN INVOLVED IN CSDP?

There are several reasons why, after Brexit, it will be both attractive and important for the UK to continue to cooperate with the EU on security and defence. First, the challenges emerging in the international security context cannot be addressed by one country alone. Some

BREXIT MAY, PARADOXICALLY, REINFORCE THE NEED FOR CLOSER EU–UK SECURITY AND DEFENCE COOPERATION.

political discourse seems to suggest that the UK may confront these challenges through a cooperative security relationship with the US instead of with Europe. However, several factors specific to the American context may present challenges to this cooperation: NATO is under severe pressure, President

Trump has made the US a less predictable partner, and the Obama administration had already signalled a pivot to Asia, urging Europe to start looking after its own security.

Putting all the British defence eggs in the transatlantic basket at a time of shifting interests and new security challenges therefore seems a risky strategy. While the EU’s political support for the UK following the attempted murder of the former double agent Sergei Skripal strengthened the UK’s stance in standing up to Russia, it is especially in cases where the US and UK do not see eye to eye that close cooperation matters. Trump’s recent decision to end the nuclear framework with Iran is a case in point.

Another reason for the UK to continue cooperating is its interest in many of the geographical and thematic areas of CSDP, where EU crisis management missions and operations can enhance UK national influence. For

example, Britain and the EU share an interest in security developments in the Mediterranean, Ukraine, the Balkans, and off the Horn of Africa. The UK is as eager to combat piracy in Somalia and people smuggling across the Mediterranean as the EU, and this will not change after Brexit.

Additionally, in times of budgetary constraints and sophisticated weaponry, it is becoming increasingly difficult to act alone, not least where there are economies of scale to exploit in procurement. For the UK to act unilaterally in security areas where the two actors have a shared interest will not only potentially duplicate EU efforts, but is also unlikely to have the same impact as the EU, with its broad range of tools and instruments that are able to enhance the impact of CSDP. Especially in countries that have a desire to join the EU, CSDP missions benefit from substantial ‘carrots’ that the UK alone cannot offer. For example, the criteria set for visa liberalisation and enlargement policy, or the benefits of the European Neighbourhood Policy are key tools to help achieve the objectives of CSDP missions, especially in areas such as political reform, security sector reform, human rights, and anti-corruption. In addition, the benefits that EU trade agreements can offer reach far beyond Europe’s immediate neighbourhood and can serve as a substantial carrot in achieving the objectives of CSDP missions further afield—something NATO is unable to offer in the same way.

Although the UK has diminished its contributions to CSDP missions in recent years, it is still considered a strong partner for defence in terms of capabilities. With the UK’s involvement in a European army off the table, there may be less domestic resistance to UK contributions to CSDP after Brexit in areas of joint interest. As CSDP is already a ‘pick and choose’ policy to some degree (member states often don’t deploy personnel to missions outside of their strategic interest), CSDP could help to further UK interests without a requirement that it contributes to every mission.

WHY WOULD THE EU WANT CONTINUED UK INVOLVEMENT?

Despite the signs that CSDP has been re-energised, there are several reasons for the EU to continue close cooperation with the UK on security and defence. With the exception of France, most of the remaining member states are close to insignificant compared to the UK when it comes to security and defence capacity. With the UK leaving, CSDP loses 20 percent of its military capabilities,

and it will become a difficult balancing act for France to shoulder this burden. This is important in operational as well as strategic terms.

Operationally, the UK is one of two military powers in the EU, and one of the few European countries that can lead a CSDP mission by deploying an operational HQ, as it currently does for Operation Atalanta. In addition, cutting certain strategic assets that the UK can offer would limit the capabilities of CSDP—examples are surveillance and reconnaissance assets, intelligence, and tactical airlift.

In losing the UK, the EU loses an important international player, a nuclear power, and a permanent member of the UN Security Council. With 270 diplomatic posts in 168 countries and territories, Britain maintains a strong presence throughout the world. It has a long and strong foreign policy tradition underpinned by a well-trained and competent foreign policy service, which has always played an important role in the context of the Common Foreign and Security Policy.

A final reason for the EU to invest in a special security relationship is that the UK's departure will leave a security vacuum that will not be easily filled. While Germany and France have indeed demonstrated unity since the Brexit referendum, simply replacing the UK with a more visible and active Germany will not do the trick. Recent actions in Syria have demonstrated that when the UK and France act together, Germany still primarily supports from the sidelines.

Moreover, the two countries have different priorities with regard to furthering security and defence integration and enhancing CSDP effectiveness. France sees it as a way to provide a viable tool for civilian and military crisis management through the EU, while Germany considers EU defence primarily as a tool for further political integration. These strategic differences will need to be overcome before CSDP can get the boost it needs. An irony of Brexit is that UK involvement in European security may be required for the EU to move beyond its 'soft power' image.

THE POST-BREXIT PARADOX: TOWARDS A BESPOKE RELATIONSHIP?

The changing European and international security context and the mutual benefits make a very strong case for continued CSDP cooperation between the EU and the UK after Brexit. Partnership in the field of security and defence can be a positive-sum game, not least because uncertainty about the transatlantic relationship makes

CSDP an attractive tool to complement NATO. The intergovernmental character of CSDP cooperation and the relatively high scope for flexibility could be a further catalyst for a successful deal.

Although the development of a new partnership will not be easy, there are reasons for a certain degree of optimism. While this has also been recognised at the political level, the main question now is what this cooperation will look like. We have three concrete recommendations:

1. In recognition of the UK's international position and operational resources, EU–UK cooperation in CSDP should go beyond existing third-state agreements, which only allow for non-member personnel and asset contributions once a Council Decision has been reached. The likes of Turkey may consider such a 'bespoke' relationship as unfair, but we argue that the UK's international position and operational resources justify a special arrangement.

2. The EU and the UK should look to existing models such as NATO's 'Enhanced Opportunity Partners for Dialogue and Cooperation' (EOP) to help form this special arrangement. EOP allows third states to express their views and participate in the discussion much earlier in the decision-making process, albeit without formal involvement in terms of voting rights.

3. In terms of governance, the EU should consider inviting the UK to meetings of the Foreign Affairs Council when CSDP matters are on the agenda. This 'EU27+1' arrangement would be a good middle ground between having a European External Action Service liaison officer in the UK, which may not satisfy the UK, and having a UK representative inside CSDP, which may be a bridge too far for some member states. ■

THE UK'S DEPARTURE FROM THE EU WILL LEAVE A SECURITY VACUUM THAT WILL NOT BE EASILY FILLED.

FURTHER READING

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