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# Britain's Foreign & Security Policy after Brexit: the European Dimension



# Britain's Foreign & Security Policy after Brexit: the European Dimension

## Introduction

As a member of the European Union (EU), the UK was an active and key player in the formulation and implementation of EU foreign and security policy (CFSP). On leaving, the UK rejected an EU proposal to agree a framework for structured co-operation in this field, despite the fact that such a framework was envisaged in the Political Declaration agreed by the parties at the time of the conclusion of the Withdrawal Treaty.<sup>1</sup> The reason given for this rejection was that the UK did not wish to be inhibited in adopting future policies (although such constraints do not exist in any of the EU's other third party agreements which provide for such structured co-operation in the fields of foreign and security policy and the EU has no power to bind non-members into its decisions).

The UK set out its new approach to foreign and security policy in a White Paper in March 2021, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age*.<sup>2</sup> This offers a strong analysis of the current global environment but a less credible policy response. There is a clear gap between rhetoric and reality, most recently illustrated by events in Afghanistan. The UK is intending to increase its defence expenditure, including expanding its nuclear arsenal, adopt a tilt towards the Indo-Pacific and introduce a new model for integrated operations by the UK's armed forces. In a notable omission, however, the paper offers little comment on how the UK would relate to the EU, which includes many of the UK's nearest neighbours and allies, nor did it explain how the UK could be a leader in international development and poverty reduction while sharply reducing its overseas aid budget.

This paper focuses on the European dimension of these challenges and inter-related issues and on the implications for Britain's own policy choices. What should the UK's foreign and security policy be after Brexit and, in particular, what kind of relationship should it have with the EU as such, as well as with its larger Member States (for example, France and Germany), in relation to these issues?

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<sup>1</sup> See HM Government, *Political Declaration setting out the framework for the future relationship between the European Union and the United Kingdom*, 19 October 2019, p. 18, para 95

<sup>2</sup> HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, CP 403, 16 March 2021

## **Background**

The challenge the Government has set itself is to turn "Global Britain" into a detailed, credible set of policies that can marry the reality of the UK's economic size to Ministers' global ambitions.

UK policy has to take into account its long-standing objective of remaining close to the United States with the reality of a downward shift in US involvement in Europe and the Middle East and a greater US focus on China and the Pacific region. From the US point of view, the UK has been diminished by its absence from the EU. The Biden administration has indicated that it would prefer the UK to be more active in Europe in foreign and defence policy terms, to take a greater interest in Africa (where the US is largely absent) and to confront China economically (in alliance with the EU) rather than militarily.<sup>3</sup>

All European countries, including the UK, have significant international issues to address. A more assertive Russia (for example in Belarus, Syria, and Ukraine and with mercenaries in several parts of Africa), the growth of irregular migration and the level of insecurity in North Africa and the Middle East all threaten European regional security. Yet while the EU has long talked about greater defence co-operation, European nations have often failed to live up to these ambitions. In contrast to its earlier coolness towards European defence co-operation, the US now supports it if it does not undermine NATO.

Some of the EU's interventions, such as the anti-piracy operation in the Indian Ocean and the military presence in Bosnia, have been effective and useful but the EU remains divided about the extent of its role in defence policy. This debate is starting again following the debacle in Afghanistan and the UK will be affected either way by its outcome.

NATO faces the challenge of the declining priority of the European theatre to US interests, Russian aggression in Ukraine and the Caucasus and the reluctance of some of its European members to commit forces to operations. The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 prompted a renewed effort to invest in high-readiness capabilities suitable for deterrence and territorial defence. Since then European defence budgets have risen steadily every year with most allies on track to meet NATO targets by 2024. However, changes in the nature of warfare and defence technology (hybrid attacks, cyber, artificial intelligence, missile technology, missile defence, space) have created new and stretching demands, most of them beyond the capacity of the UK (or other European countries) to tackle on its own. A NATO summit in 2022, which is due to draw up a new strategic concept for the alliance, will address many of these issues.

## **The strategic context**

The world is going through a period of volatility, troubled by the growth in populism expressed in increasingly nationalist terms, terrorism, economic inequality and climate change. The US no longer self-evidently dominates world affairs. China has emerged first as a major economic power but increasingly also as a more assertive political and military one. Russia remains in strategic decline, weak economically but an often disruptive foreign policy actor. There are significant challenges in every part of the world reinforced by inter-dependence (a point driven

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the speech made by the US Defence Secretary, Lloyd Austin, on 27 July 2021 and his subsequent remarks: 'Britain 'more helpful' closer to home than in Asia, says US defence chief', Jasmine Cameron-Chileshe, *Financial Times*, 27 July 2021

home by the Covid-19 pandemic). These challenges include the sharp growth in migration, which has affected relationships between countries and also has security implications.

Post-war structures for international co-operation, such as the UN and the World Trade Organisation (WTO), are still essential but under strain and sometimes suffering from neglect. While many countries (including the UK) endorse the need to reform and strengthen multilateral institutions, domestic politics often drives them in a different direction (again seen in the response to the Covid-19 pandemic).

The US chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan in the summer of 2021 felt like a big moment. There was a sense that the West has been weakened both in terms of its credibility as a reliable partner and in security terms. There is a danger that potential adversaries will ask whether the West's commitments (for example, to mutual defence in the NATO Treaty and US promises of support to Taiwan) would in fact be honoured. Any misjudgement by China or Russia about the strength of these commitments could have very serious consequences.

But there is a danger of overreaction. With the defeat of Al-Qaeda, Afghanistan was no longer of strategic significance to the US or its allies. The US defeat in Vietnam 1975, to which the hurried and chaotic US exit from Afghanistan was often compared, felt momentous but 15 years later Communism collapsed in Europe, the Cold War ended in victory for the West and Germany was reunited. And in 1990 Saddam Hussein discovered that the US was prepared to stand by its allies when he invaded Kuwait. What mattered after 1975 was that although the US had left Vietnam, it did not abandon its other broader security commitments. One additional question now is whether the West has the appetite and the ability to maintain its relative economic, scientific and technical advantage over China as it was arguably the economic and social failure of the USSR that was its downfall as much as the West's effective deterrence militarily.

For the UK, and most Member States of the EU, NATO is central to the territorial defence of Europe and the wider North Atlantic area. Any suggestion of a weakening US commitment to NATO is of great concern. When President Trump appeared to question America's mutual defence obligations under Article 5 of the NATO Treaty in July 2018, he caused alarm in European capitals.<sup>4</sup> President Biden re-asserted US support for NATO and the Article 5 commitment after he took office.<sup>5</sup>

### **The UK and the EU today**

The absence of a structured foreign and security policy co-operation mechanism in the UK and EU Trade & Co-operation Agreement (TCA) was a decision of the UK Government. In fact, the words "foreign policy" do not appear anywhere in the TCA. The parties did agree to co-operate in a number of related areas, including on cyber security but mostly these are internal rather than external security policy areas. This reflected the UK desire to have a free hand in foreign and security policy. The Prime Minister subsequently explained this in the integrated review White Paper:

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<sup>4</sup> 'Trump Questions the Core of NATO: Mutual Defense, Including Montenegro', Eileen Sullivan, *New York Times*, 18 July 2018

<sup>5</sup> 'Biden embraces NATO, but European allies are weak', David M. Herszenhorn, *Politico*, 14 June 2021

Our Trade and Cooperation Agreement with the EU gives us the freedom to do things differently and better, both economically and politically.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, the approach of the Integrated Review towards the EU emphasises sovereignty rather than co-operation: “we will work with the EU where our interests coincide”.<sup>7</sup>

The institutional structures of the EU provide a vehicle for dialogue and co-operation in foreign and security policy on a routine basis. For example, the UK had its own CFSP Ambassador in Brussels and there are twice-weekly meetings of the Political and Security Committee where foreign and security policy questions are discussed by the Member States. The importance of these structures was partly that they required the UK Government to consider what its own position should be, just as NATO and UN structures have a similar effect in forcing officials and ministers to decide policy. The absence from these EU structures may lead not to the UK having a freer hand so much as the UK losing a large part of its ability to shape EU policies, being less active, and either rallying to EU positions or finding itself relatively isolated. The lack of structured dialogue with the EU also risks isolation in the UN Security Council and the UN General Assembly. And a reduced ability to influence or to anticipate the positions which European allies will take at NATO.

### **The UK's integrated foreign and defence policy review**

In March 2021, the British Government published the long-awaited report of its integrated defence and foreign policy review.<sup>8</sup> The review provides a good analysis of the threats and opportunities the UK faces. These include cyber warfare, artificial intelligence, and space – all key areas of international competition in the future. It rightly emphasises the importance of climate change and it is frank about danger posed by Russia and realistic about the need for the UK to work with China.

But the review is much less impressive on policy solutions to these problems. It is not clear why the UK should tilt towards the Indo-Pacific at the expense of Europe (where there are major security and economic challenges which the UK has to address). Much has been made of the subsequently announced defence deal agreed between Australia, the UK and the US (AUKUS) to provide nuclear propelled submarines. But it is important to note that the latter is not a treaty but largely an understanding about defence procurement in support of Australia's increased defence spending. It is true that the UK has long had strong ties to the Indo-Pacific region and continues to have important partners there, including Australia and New Zealand. But there are questions about whether the UK is now too small militarily and economically in that region to make a difference.

The review also shows a lack of awareness that we need to up our game in Europe given Brexit in order to safeguard our interests. As the Office of Budget Responsibility has pointed out, Brexit will have twice the long-term impact on the UK economy of the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>9</sup> This means the UK will have to work harder to protect and develop its

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<sup>6</sup> HM Government, *supra* n. 2, p. 3

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21

<sup>8</sup> *Supra* n. 2

<sup>9</sup> 'Impact of Brexit on economy 'worse than Covid'', *BBC News*, 27 October 2021

economic ties to EU countries as well as to work with them effectively on foreign and defence issues of mutual concern.

A welcome aspect of the review was its recognition of the importance of Africa (including its economic potential) but there was little detail on how UK can do more there despite the importance of Africa to UK and European security.<sup>10</sup>

An overreliance on the UK's relationship with the US underpins assumptions in the paper. This looks especially questionable in the light of recent developments in the Biden Administration's emerging foreign and security policies (for example, not just leaving Afghanistan but the manner of doing so without the UK or other European allies having an effective role in the decision-making). It is not that the US is becoming hostile to the UK but that its priorities lie outside Europe and the UK is no longer able to act as a bridge into the EU, a role past US administrations found valuable.

### **What is Global Britain?**

The phrase "Global Britain" is widely used by ministers and commentators in the UK but it is often said that there is a lack of clarity about what it means. The phrase, first used by Theresa May after the 2016 referendum, was later explained by Dominic Raab, the-then Foreign Secretary, as being made up of three pillars, with the UK being:

- the "best possible allies, partners and friends with our European neighbours";
- an "energetic champion of free and open trade";
- and "an even stronger force for good in the world".<sup>11</sup>

The integrated review added two additional points: "a shift to a more robust position on security and deterrence" and a renewed emphasis on seeking multilateral solutions to the world's problems. It also added a comment with which many of the Government's critics would agree: "What Global Britain means in practice is best defined by actions rather than words".<sup>12</sup>

The review does not offer a detailed explanation as to how the UK should implement the first pillar, the relationship with the EU. The paper says that the UK "recognises the important role played by the EU in the peace and prosperity of Europe" and adds that the UK "will find new ways of working with it on shared challenges" but without any further detail. The UK Government does seem to see what is often called the E3 (i.e. France, Germany and UK) and the same countries plus the US as the way to maintain a dialogue with key EU powers but both these forums exclude large and important EU member states, such as Italy, Poland and Spain, who resent these alternative forums for co-operation because they are excluded and it overlooks the fact that much of EU policy is shaped and executed through its institutions.<sup>13</sup> The UK's ability to convene the E3 is in any case undermined by its current poor relationship with the EU.

<sup>10</sup> Jose Ignacio Torreblanca, 'Home alone: The UK's foreign policy after Brexit', European Council on Foreign Relations, 18 May 2021

<sup>11</sup> HC Deb 3 February 2020, vol 671, cols 26-27

<sup>12</sup> HM Government, *supra* n. 2, p. 14, paras 17-19

<sup>13</sup> Discussed in Claudia Major & Nicolai von Ondarza, 'UK-EU cooperation in foreign and security policy: how to be friends again!', UK in a Changing Europe, 14 June 2021

France, Germany, Ireland, Poland and a number of other European countries are specifically mentioned as partners in the review but these bilateral relationships, which vary in breadth and depth, are (France and Ireland excepted) mostly defined in vague terms.<sup>14</sup>

The uncertainties as to the UK's medium-term economic position after Brexit and Covid raise questions about affordability of the UK's external ambitions as set out in the integrated review. The UK is a medium-sized power but with global ambitions that history suggests it is unlikely to be able to afford.<sup>15</sup>

### **The security challenges facing the EU**

The EU has developed into a major actor in foreign policy over last 30 years, partly because of its economic size and regulatory outreach, which makes it an attractive trading partner, but also because of its extensive development work and more recently because of its leadership on climate change. How it will adapt to the UK not being at the table is an important question for the EU. France is the key foreign and defence power in the EU with the inclination to act but Germany and many smaller EU Member States have a less interventionist culture.

Since the 1990s the EU has focused on building structures to improve defence co-operation among its members and the development of the European defence industry but has not succeeded in creating a credible military force. This partly because of the reluctance of some of its members who see their territorial defence as being guaranteed through NATO but also because of the presence of neutral and/or non-aligned Member States (Austria, Cyprus, Finland, Ireland, Malta and Sweden). The UK often acted as a brake on EU defence initiatives, particularly after 2010. A more fundamental problem has been the lack of German enthusiasm for a substantial EU military role; there are few signs yet that German political opinion may shift far on that following the September 2021 Bundestag election.<sup>16</sup>

The EU's role in defence policy is one that has been complementary to NATO rather than as a rival, acting where NATO cannot act or when it does not wish to do so, and with an emphasis on crisis management rather than high-intensity war-fighting capabilities. EU-NATO cooperation has developed considerably since the 2014 Ukraine/Crimea crisis. But the EU lacks effective command and control systems, partly because its institutional structures do not lend themselves to the rapid decision-making necessary for combat missions.

In recent years the EU has faced calls to increase its own strategic autonomy, that is, its capacity to act without the support of third countries, notably the US. At an informal European Council in October 2021, the Member States reaffirmed their commitment to acting together and identified a number of areas in both economic and external relations (including energy, cyber security and the digital economy) where they wanted to reduce dependency on third countries and increase their resilience.<sup>17</sup> As with previous EU initiatives to strengthen its autonomy, only time will tell whether its members are able to align these ambitions with their domestic policies. For example, Germany faces a difficult decision as whether or not to

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<sup>14</sup> HM Government, *supra* n. 2, pp. 60-61

<sup>15</sup> Nick Witney, 'Britain's global pipe dream', European Council on Foreign Relations, 19 March 2021

<sup>16</sup> Ulrike Franke, 'Foreign and defence policy in the German election', European Council on Foreign Relations, 16 September 2021

<sup>17</sup> European Council, *Oral conclusions drawn by President Charles Michel following the informal meeting of the members of the European Council in Brdo pri Kranju, Slovenia, 742/21*, 6 October 2021

authorise the use of the new Nord Stream gas pipeline which will increase its dependence (and therefore the EU's) on Russia for natural gas and reduce Poland and Ukraine's income from the transit of gas through existing pipelines, potentially weakening Ukraine's security.<sup>18</sup>

Other difficulties for the EU include its internal divisions over how to handle Russia and China, its difficult but important relationship with Turkey and its reluctance to include the remaining countries in the Western Balkans in its membership (Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia). It also needs to decide on its future role in North Africa and the Sahel as it is a continuing area of instability, a hub for jihadi terrorism and the source of much irregular migration to Europe.

The EU urgently needs to rediscover its sense of unity and purpose in order to regain momentum after Brexit. For its part, the EU needs to find a way to work with the UK on foreign and security policy issues of mutual interest and to make a reality of its defence co-operation ambitions while remaining close to the Americans.

### **British and EU co-operation: a way forward**

The UK and the EU need each other. In many ways the UK Government is still in denial about this – as illustrated in the integrated review report which falsely claimed that the UK “has a seat in every major multilateral organisation” when UK is not in the EU or co-operating with it as such.

It is true that, on both sides, the aftermath of Brexit, including disputes over the Northern Ireland Protocol and the implementation of the Trade & Co-operation Agreement (TCA), make it harder for them to move closer but they need to do so in their mutual interest. While close bilateral ties with the principal EU actors on foreign and security policy are essential to the UK, many EU policies are shaped and implemented collectively (sanctions for example) and therefore a close working relationship with the Brussels-based institutions is equally essential. Some working together is happening but largely at official level. UK politicians and policymakers should recognise that the TCA is the only major third country agreement that the EU has with no provision for annual or biannual discussion of foreign policy at ministerial level. Moreover, both the UK and the EU would benefit not only from formal discussions but also with more operational and frequent consultations. The UK does not have to choose between closer working bilaterally with some EU countries and working with the EU as a whole; it can and should do both.

There are some more positive signs. Despite Anglo-French disputes over fishing, UK-French co-operation continues at the UN. There are other EU Member States who are also members of NATO which have a strong relationship with the UK and want to continue to do so. And while it is true that the UK should make more effort to keep EU capitals informed of its views and plans, the EU institutions should seek to keep the UK in the loop on areas of mutual interest. Ukraine and other Russia-related issues are important examples as is the developing situation in and around Afghanistan. The UK and the EU have a mutual interest in preventing exploitation of Taliban rule by terrorists, in

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<sup>18</sup> Ukraine stands to lose \$2.5 billion annually for gas transit through the existing pipeline: see Margarita Assenova, 'Mitigating the Nord Stream Two Impact on Ukraine', Eurasia Daily Monitor, 18(93), 2021

preventing a humanitarian and a migration crisis and in supporting Afghanistan's neighbours. Good co-operation on this issue could be a model for a closer relationship.

When it comes to defence co-operation, there are different ways of working with the EU. In EU terms, defence policy forms part of its European Defence and Security Policy (and not just CFSP). A more recent EU defence policy initiative in the EU is the permanent structured co-operation programmes (PESCO), run by several Member States working together. Could the UK join PESCO projects that are relevant and where we can add value, as the US has done? Or do we need something bespoke for EDSP? Can the UK support strengthening of European NATO countries to improve capability and reach? There is an on-going need to encourage NATO-EU co-operation. For any initiative to be successful in this area it would need the EU to be willing to make it work. It is troubling that some EU Member States refused co-operation after Brexit, for example, on the more sensitive elements of the Galileo satellite navigation system because of supposed "security concerns" about sharing information with the UK.<sup>19</sup>

A key point for the UK is that it is easier to influence the direction and policy of multinational organisations if you have like-minded partners within them. This is, and will continue to be, important in the UN, the World Trade Organisation, the World Health Organisation and other bodies. EU Member States co-ordinate their positions regularly at these bodies, not least because many of the policy issues cut across mixed national and EU competences. This, and the influence that the EU exerts in these organisations, is another factor that strengthens the argument for greater UK-EU co-operation, not just in foreign policy but in other aspects of external relations such as trade and development.

Events have shown both parties that they have more to gain by co-operating on foreign and security policy than by not doing so. Both have had experience of irrelevance and of being fifth wheels (Afghanistan, AUKAS, the Middle East) and both realise they can achieve more by working together (Iran's nuclear ambitions, the Western Balkans, resisting Russian assertiveness, being firm with China but avoiding a new Cold War, in development and in the deployment of military forces). We need structures that make that possible but not obligatory. Both can help the other achieve viable policy choices and have much to contribute to each other in crisis management.

There is clear evidence that the EU does wish to work with the UK; the reluctance has been on the UK side. Despite recent squabbles, and its ambitious plans for UK foreign policy beyond Europe, the Government should move beyond its public recognition that it is in the UK's interest to achieve more effective and constructive foreign policy co-operation with our neighbours in the EU and seek to make that a reality.

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<sup>19</sup> 'UK industry bids farewell to EU's Galileo system', Jonathan Amos, *BBC News*, 14 January 2021



## Senior European Experts

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