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Policy Brief

The UK, France and the  
Challenge of Brexit to European  
Security

Joseph Dobbs

# The UK, France and the Challenge of Brexit to European Security

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On 17 November 2015, a few days after terrorists murdered some 130 civilians in Paris, football fans in London joined their French guests in singing the French national anthem at Wembley Stadium in a deeply moving tribute to the almost fraternal bond between the UK and France. A little over a year later, and the bilateral relationship between the two countries faces its biggest challenge in 50 years.

This paper addresses how, following the Brexit vote, London and Paris should face that challenge, reconstituting cooperation in the realms of foreign, defence and security policy so as to ensure bilateral security and protect European security as a whole.

For a whole series of reasons France is the most important of the many European bilateral relationships the UK must now focus on following the vote to leave the EU. In the context of mounting threats, a weakened working relationship between NATO's two largest European military powers would leave Europe's security weakened. After Brexit, France becomes the EU's preeminent defence and security power, while the UK will reemphasise its strong voice in the region as the biggest European contributor to NATO. Both countries need to ensure that these two institutions are as aligned as possible. It is in both London's and Paris's clear interest to ensure a strong and stable EU post-Brexit. The UK has not voted to leave the continent and its security will still in large part depend on the security and stability of its neighbours. Moreover, the underlying conditions which motivated the landmark 2010 UK-France Lancaster House Treaties on defence and security cooperation have not fundamentally changed.

## The Brexit Challenges

While clearly neither side should want Brexit to have a negative impact on bilateral relations, it would be naïve to ignore four major challenges that the UK's decision presents to the relationship:

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1. Brexit threatens to increase mistrust across the Channel. In France, a widely held belief that the UK is an obstacle to European cooperation has been further endorsed. In London, perceptions of France's role as a hardliner in negotiations and threat to the UK's financial services industry could feed mutual mistrust and acrimony;
2. Brexit will use up already limited human resources and political capital in both governments. For the UK, in particular, it will likely preoccupy almost every government department. For Paris, the French Embassy in London too will become dominated by Brexit. This preoccupation threatens to weaken engagement on the bilateral relationship;
3. Brexit risks misaligning the UK and France on security issues if one side seeks to deepen EU defence cooperation and the other places the emphasis on NATO;
4. The UK's exit from the European Union will leave British ministers and diplomats significantly less networked with their French counterparts. This weakens both sides' ability to cooperate on common challenges.

## **Brexit's Opportunities**

Brexit presents challenges but also potential long-term opportunities for UK-France relations.

The UK's perceived role as a block on EU integration and a long-time reluctant member, and France's perceived zeal for more Europe, have long coloured bilateral relations. Brexit solutions may eventually remove this mutual concern. This could allow the two countries to focus with fewer distractions on issues of clear common interest, with foreign, security and defence policy the most obvious.

In the short-term, despite the difficulties of conducting Brexit negotiations in a positive atmosphere, there may be a willingness on both sides to show that the UK and France, as close allies and neighbours, can maintain a productive and influential role on the world stage through bilateral cooperation. London and Paris could seek to reemphasise the UK and France's joint commitment to European and international security.

This has already resulted in strong statements from both governments on the role of defence and security cooperation in strengthening the bilateral relationship, and early positive signs on the future of UK-EU cooperation. The challenge is to put flesh on the bones of this agenda.

## Recommendations

The UK and France's primary concern should be tackling the Brexit negotiations in a way that does not undermine European security or bilateral cooperation on critical issues of common concern. There are seven measures that can help:

**1. The UK and France should start talking about UK-EU foreign, defence and security policy cooperation.**

As of yet, the UK Government and its EU27 counterparts, including France, have focused mostly on the areas of contention ahead of the upcoming Brexit negotiations. This is no way to prepare for negotiations. A simple statement of the clear areas of agreement would go some way in helping lay the ground work for a less acrimonious divorce and a more collaborative future between London and Paris.

**2. The UK should commit clearly to not using European security as a bargaining chip.**

Using the UK's significant contribution to European defence and security as leverage during the Brexit negotiations would weaken long-term trust in the UK by EU Member States already disturbed by the Brexit vote and threatened by a myriad of security challenges. With regard to France, threats to withdraw UK capability for Europe would raise French concerns about being left as a major guarantor of the continent's security, especially in the context of very real fears across NATO Europe and the EU27 as to the future of US support following the election of Donald Trump.

The UK Government has gone some way to address this. But a more substantial speech by Prime Minister May committing the UK to European security regardless of the outcome of the Brexit negotiations on the eve of triggering Article 50 would serve two purposes. First it would help restore lost trust in Paris and beyond. Second, it would remind the EU27 of the importance of keeping the UK aligned.

**3. The UK should commit to supporting EU foreign, defence and security policy cooperation where appropriate.**

UK Defence Secretary Michael Fallon's comments following the Brexit vote that the UK would block a European army was poorly received in some parts of the EU. It angered his counterparts across the continent and raised the possibility that the UK could become a disruptive neighbour rather than a supportive friend to the EU post-Brexit.

An EU Army, despite the fears of the British press, is not about to be established, and NATO remains the bedrock of European security. What may, however, happen is that the EU27 will seek to establish a greater degree of cooperation in the face of mounting threats and a possible change in US policy under President Trump. The UK should make it clearer that where EU cooperation does not threaten NATO's competences London will support it.

British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson's more recent comments that the UK will not block European defence cooperation were welcome. However, given the competing messaging coming from high-level figures in the UK government, it would be wise for the Prime Minister to make it clear before she begins negotiations on Brexit that the UK will not seek to block further cooperation between EU Member States on foreign, defence and security issues.

The UK has long supported a closer relationship between NATO and the EU, in large part because of the way in which they complement one another and because of the risks involved should they develop asymmetrically. The UK is right to be concerned about the way in which the EU develops in terms of defence cooperation. So cooperation with the French government would help ensure a complementary EU-NATO development.

The French have understandably long believed the UK to be a roadblock to further EU integration. So the UK would increase its stock amongst French politicians if it reinforced Mr Johnson's comments to Chatham House on 2 December: "We work on security with our European friends – and as I have said before, our role is to be a flying buttress, supportive of the EU project, but outside the main body of the church."<sup>2</sup>

#### **4. France should propose an EU+1 model for UK-EU foreign policy coordination and the UK should embrace it.**

In terms of foreign policy, it remains in both the UK and the EU's interest to ensure that the two remain aligned on European regional issues. To help achieve this, it will be important that the UK is not simply offered the chance to align with EU foreign policy decisions but rather is offered a constructive role in those decisions, albeit stopping short of the rights of full membership.

The most persuasive framework so far for UK involvement in EU foreign and security policy comes from former UK Foreign Secretary and ELN Member Sir Malcolm Rifkind. He points out that when permanent members of the UN Security Council accepted that their members

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2 A video and transcript of the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Boris Johnson MP, is available via the Chatham House website - <https://www.chathamhouse.org/event/global-britain-uk-foreign-policy-era-brexit>

alone were not sufficient to negotiate a deal to curtail Iran's nuclear programme, a flexible solution was found to bring Germany into the newly named P5+1 framework. An at least ad hoc EU+1 for specific issues would be a logical proposal from both the UK and France.<sup>3</sup>

The unused EU+6 mechanism that allows for EU liaison with non-EU NATO Allies would not be an appropriate sole framework for UK-EU relations for two reasons. Within the EU, Cyprus has blocked EU cooperation with Turkey on many issues, and within NATO, Turkey has blocked Cyprus. While there are some positive signs regarding the Cyprus question it is unlikely that the overall challenge to EU-NATO cooperation will be overcome in the short term. Moreover, the recent decline in relations between the EU and Turkey, and what is arguably a tilt away from Europe by the Erdogan government in Ankara, further underlines why the EU+6 mechanism should not become the principal mechanism for UK-EU foreign policy cooperation.

The complexities of which issues could constitute issues for the larger EU+1 rather than just the EU27 will require some thought from leaders in London, Paris and across the EU. But issues such as Russian aggression towards Ukraine and others where there is either a clear common interest for the UK and the EU or a clear need to keep the EU and NATO positions as aligned as possible are prime candidates.

Exactly how the UK will continue to contribute to select EU foreign policy challenges will require a great deal of creativity, but the case for a special status for the UK is clear. France, in return for the UK's flexibility in recommendations two and three, should propose this initiative rather than requiring the UK to do so, and propose it early in the Brexit negotiations. This would also likely result in greater support from other EU Member States. The UK should embrace such a French proposal.

## **5. The UK should propose associate membership of the EU's Security Union, and France should support this.**

The appointment of Sir Julian King, who will be the UK's last European Commission representative, as the EU Commissioner for the Security Union perhaps suggests that both the UK and the rest of the EU recognise the importance of keeping the UK as aligned as possible with the EU27 on security issues.

For a France that remains in a state of emergency following the terrorist attacks against its citizens, there is no incentive to allow the UK's intelligence services and vast security

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3 Sir Malcolm Rifkind, "Neither 'hard' nor 'soft': how a smart Brexit should look", European Leadership Network, 18/10/2016, [http://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/neither-hard-nor-soft-how-a-smart-brex-it-should-look\\_4180.html](http://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/neither-hard-nor-soft-how-a-smart-brex-it-should-look_4180.html)

infrastructure to become misaligned from the continent. For the UK, despite a vote to leave the EU, there is no way for the UK to turn its back on Europe's security. Its biggest security challenges will continue to be the same as those of France and the rest of the EU27 and it has every interest in continued collaboration.

The UK should propose associate membership of the Security Union in response to a French offer of cooperation on foreign policy issues. As evidence of seriousness, the UK could offer continued counter-terrorism cooperation, maritime assets for a joint EU coastguard, and financial and personnel support for Frontex, the EU's border agency. These offers, coming during the Brexit negotiations, would demonstrate the UK's commitment to European security and would be welcomed by the French amongst others. France, in return, should recommit to the Le Touquet border deal under the next President.

#### **6. The UK and France should work closely to reinforce their shared international agenda.**

In terms of international security, the UK and France's status as recognised Nuclear Weapons States makes nuclear non-proliferation, security and disarmament clear issues on which London and Paris can and should focus more bilateral attention. With recent moves in the United Nations to initiate negotiations for a nuclear weapons ban treaty and the uncertainty surrounding Donald Trump's policies on nuclear non-proliferation – the threat to the Iran deal should be a huge concern for both the UK and France – nuclear issues are clearly going to be a big part of the debates in international security in coming years.

Indeed, Donald Trump's election potentially challenges the fundamentals that the UK and France have lived by for decades. The Iran Deal, in part secured by UK-France cooperation, is a possible first casualty, but who can really be sure that the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) or attempts to ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) won't also stumble during Mr Trump's presidency.

There are, of course, a host of other international issues on which the UK and France can and should cooperate, including international piracy, the humanitarian tragedy-cum-security nightmare in Syria and climate change.

The UK's and France's positions as the second and third largest NATO defence spenders after the United States make both countries critical in the Alliance's response to concerns in Washington following the election of Mr Trump. London and Paris should, to the best of their ability, agree on a common approach to this.

## **7. The UK and France should further enhance bilateral defence cooperation.**

The UK-France defence partnership is already closer than either side enjoys with any other European countries. From joint armament programs to joint deployments the UK and France's position as two of the world's largest militaries and largest arms manufacturers means that, despite Brexit, there remains ample reason and opportunity to enhance bilateral defence cooperation.<sup>4</sup> Now is the moment to commit to doing so.

## **Conclusion**

This paper outlines reasons for the UK and France to cooperate and the ways in which the two sides can do this after the UK leaves the EU. There were a great many foreign and defence policy experts who argued that the UK should remain a member of the EU. Democracy however took a different approach.

British voters decided in a small majority to leave the European Union. There is a much debate as to exactly what the 51.9% of British voters meant by this, but we can be certain that they, and the other 48.1%, did not vote to make themselves or their neighbours less safe. The recommendations in this paper are designed to help ensure sure they won't be.

The world has entered difficult times. The UK and France's response to difficult times, as it was on that sombre November night at Wembley in 2015, has long been to stand shoulder to shoulder. London and Paris must try to do this once again.

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<sup>4</sup> For more on opportunities for bilateral defence cooperation see Emmanuel Dupuy's November article for the European Leadership Network - "The Implications of Brexit on UK-France Defence Cooperation", 25/11/2016, [http://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/the-implications-of-brexit-on-uk-france-defence-cooperation-\\_4281.html](http://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/the-implications-of-brexit-on-uk-france-defence-cooperation-_4281.html)

## About the Author

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