



EUROPEAN
LEADERSHIP
NETWORK

Building better security for wider Europe

UK defence policy and Brexit: Time to rethink London's European strategy

EUROPEAN DEFENCE
POLICY BRIEF

Alice Billon-Galland
October 2019

About the Author

Alice Billon-Galland is a Policy Fellow at the European Leadership Network (ELN), where she leads the European Defence programme. Her current work focuses on transatlantic burden-sharing, EU defence initiatives, EU-NATO relations, and French foreign and defence policy. Alice is part of the Leadership Team of Women in International Security UK (WIIS UK) and a GLOBSEC Young Leader. She regularly comments on defence issues for international media from Deutsche Welle to *The Wall Street Journal*.

Follow Alice on Twitter: [@AliceBillon](https://twitter.com/AliceBillon)

The opinions articulated in this report represent the views of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the European Leadership Network or any of its members. The ELN's aim is to encourage debates that will help develop Europe's capacity to address pressing foreign, defence, and security challenges.

UK defence policy and Brexit: Time to rethink London's European strategy

Introduction

The last three years of the Brexit process have weakened the UK's influence on defence matters with both the European Union and the United States. Irrespective of the outcome of Brexit, the UK's hand on defence will remain weaker for some years to come.

Even as the UK leaves the EU, Europe is its security hinterland just as much as the North Atlantic is. This reality, which the British government acknowledges, has nevertheless strategic implications which it has not fully accepted yet. The fact that the UK provides Europe's strategic depth to the West – and would be a key European military actor in a confrontation with Russia, for example – does not preclude it from being side-lined from some important strategic and industrial conversations as the EU presses on with big projects without London and the US puts more effort into relations with European capitals.

The present British approach – emphasising NATO, bilateralism, and occasional political threat – is little more than policy drift while larger Brexit battles are fought out. British officials understand this, even if their Ministers do not. Simply standing back from the EU will do little for the UK in Washington, let alone in Brussels. And putting more of the UK's defence eggs in the US or NATO's basket will only offer limited strategic returns. The best way for London to improve its defence leverage in Washington and Brussels is to change course and demonstrate in word and deed that the UK wishes to remain as closely integrated into European defence arrangements as possible. This "third way" of neither following the US blindly nor standing idly would turn the UK into an independent actor, supportive and active in both Atlantic and European developments.

Despite current political turbulences, London should lean in on UK defence collaboration with the EU, European partners, and between the EU and NATO. In doing so it would encourage the strengthening of EU defence and security and of European military capabilities not as alternatives to NATO or US leadership but as ways of making Europeans better military partners to Washington and thus retaining essential US engagement.

This approach is virtually impossible for as long as the government feels the need to maintain its no-deal Brexit stance, and is improbable under any hard Brexiteer government. But it is neither impossible nor irrational. The UK should not forbid itself from fleshing out ambitious European defence cooperation simply because it is politically difficult. The sooner the British government has a clear strategy on Europe's defence, the faster the UK's recovery on defence matters from any given Brexit outcome will be. The current political climate and lack of long-term thinking only strengthen the urgent case for a serious strategy.¹

¹ This report is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with a range of UK, European, and US former and serving officials from June to September 2019.

I. Mixed signals from London

Three years after the Brexit vote, the UK's lack of clarity over its intentions on European defence has deep implications, not just for the future relationship between the UK and the EU, but for the UK and Europe as a whole.

All sides have tried to insulate security and defence issues from Brexit toxicity. Under Theresa May's government (2016-2019),² the British strategy was to negotiate as part of the Brexit deal "the closest possible relationship" with the EU on security while making up for the loss of influence inside the Union by investing greater resources in NATO and strengthening the UK's defence relations with European partners. There has been no official change of policy since Boris Johnson took office in July 2019, but the tone of the Brexit negotiations has changed. After decades of carefully balanced relations between Europe and the US, in which the UK played both hands and came out stronger, London is now sending mixed signals to its European partners.

It would be unfair to characterise the strategy of Johnson's government as being to burn bridges with Europe. The government is likely to be genuine in saying it wants good relations with European partners, including on defence. This message is however clouded by the approach and rhetoric coming from London. Promises of an ever-closer US-UK relationship and veiled threats to sail further West in the Atlantic, should the EU fail to compromise, seem to play into the possibility of the UK "leaving Europe" – as far as EU-related defence and security are concerned. Far from being a carefully thought-through strategic realignment, these developments appear to be a combination of short-term politically motivated tactics to show good will to a difficult White House, and wishful thinking over potential US-UK cooperation.³ American political uncertainties add to the UK's challenges, and it is hard to see a strengthening of UK-US relations should Washington remain unpredictable, grow

more isolationist, or focus its attention on the Chinese geo-political question even more.

Meanwhile, little long-term strategic thinking on European defence is taking place in London, where there has been no hard-nosed reflection on Europe's future for the coming decades.⁴ The UK still does not have a clear European engagement strategy outside of the Brexit negotiations. Today British politicians and officials alike are well-aware that they do not share many of the Trump administration's policy choices (e.g. on the Iran nuclear deal, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, or the Paris Agreement to combat climate change) and they do not want to risk being cornered into a highly asymmetrical relationship with a difficult Administration.⁵ Yet, given the tense political climate with Europe, there seems to be no easy partnership for the UK. Both ends of its traditional strategic balance will be increasingly difficult to maintain.

II. Europe and the US: Between a rock and a hard place

The UK faces very real and practical choices concerning its strategic positioning between Europe and the United States. Can it maintain its mid-Atlantic balance? If so, how?

Europe is, albeit slowly, becoming more serious about its defence. Expenditures have been rising since the 2014 NATO Wales summit⁶ and there now seems to be a clearer understanding that Europeans need to "take their fate into their own hands."⁷ This energy is being channelled through different fora, mostly through NATO, bilateral, and mini-lateral cooperation. Yet recent years have also seen strong political activism and commitment on defence from the European Commission. Several EU tools have been launched, among which are the European

² See the 2017 Conservative Party manifesto: "[Forward Together: The Conservative Manifesto](#)."

³ Jeremy Shapiro, "[Boris Johnson and the Politics of Neo-Poodleism](#)," *Foreign Affairs*, 8 August, 2019.

⁴ Richard Whitman, "[Britain Is Failing to Plan for a Post-Brexit Europe](#)," *Chatham House*, 21 May, 2019.

⁵ Emilio Casalicchio, "[Boris Johnson hugs Trump close – for now](#)," *Politico*, 23 September, 2019.

⁶ Jonathan Stearns, "[U.S. Allies in Europe to Boost Defense Spending for Fourth Year](#)," *Bloomberg*, 25 June, 2019.

⁷ Giulia Paravicini, "[Angela Merkel: Europe must take 'our fate' into own hands](#)," *Politico*, 28 May, 2017.

Defence Fund (EDF) and the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). These very recent initiatives have so far yielded few quantifiable results.⁸ They have, nonetheless, made the US and the UK worry about being pushed away from the European defence market. Despite having little to show in 2019, they have potential for the future and are an indication of the direction Europeans are taking – and from which London is currently being excluded.

As Brussels set up the EDF and PESCO, London discovered two things. First the world did not end when the UK failed to block EU defence initiatives. The new European Commission is even doubling down on its efforts to set up a “genuine European Defence Union” by creating a Directorate General (DG) for Defence and Space,⁹ which will answer to the Commissioner for the Internal Market.¹⁰

There is a glass ceiling to what the UK can do for the US, both globally and in Europe.

Second, given that Brexit already means that the UK has been unable to block and influence the direction of the new EU defence toolkit even *before* it has left the EU, it will almost certainly be unable to do so once it has left. European defence efforts – at least on industry consolidation and capability development – are likely to increasingly be conducted within an EU framework, whether the UK likes it or not. This is an inconvenient truth for London.

The other side of the Atlantic presents another reality check. The UK is undoubtedly a key ally of Washington for intelligence and cybersecurity,¹¹ a trusted partner within

NATO, and a go-to European friend. There are, however, limited options for growth in the “special relationship.” Political goodwill does not change the fact that the British military is small and has limited military hardware, personnel, and cash.¹² As a result, it is of little added value in the US’s grand geopolitical scheme. There is a glass ceiling to what the UK can do for the US, both globally and in Europe, and today there is little proof that Mr Johnson’s relationship with President Trump can bypass that reality.¹³

This trend started before Brexit and before the Trump Administration framed alliances with long-standing European partners in a more transactional way, yet it has accelerated since 2016. Washington may not only be losing interest in Europe¹⁴ but is also increasingly losing interest in the UK as an interlocutor on Europe. Instead, the US Administration is thickening its dialogue with, among others, France, Sweden, and the Netherlands.¹⁵ The US-UK-Europe “bridge” paradigm on which London has rested for the past three or four decades (particularly on security and defence issues) is now, for the most part, gone. The UK was strong in Brussels in part because it was strong in Washington, and vice versa. Once London entered the muddy waters of Brexit negotiations, it became a less relevant broker for the US. Gone is the time when the US believed that London was in an optimal position to get Europe to act, and when Europe believed that London understood and conveyed US views and was able to exercise influence in Washington on Europe’s behalf.

8 Alice Billon-Galland and Yvonne-Stefania Efstathiou, “[Are PESCO projects fit for purpose?](#)”, *The International Institute for Strategic Studies*, 21 February, 2019.

9 Justyna Gotkowska, “[DG for Defence Industry and Space in the new European Commission](#),” OSW, 18 September, 2019.

10 On 10 October 2019, the EU Parliament rejected the nomination of former French defence minister Ms Sylvie Goulard. See Maia de La Baume and Laura Kayali, “[France’s Commission pick Sylvie Goulard rejected by Parliament](#),” *Politico*, 10 October, 2019.

11 David Bond and Katrina Manson, “[US spy chiefs](#)

[look to UK for guidance in cyber security battle](#),” *Financial Times*, 1 March, 2018.

12 “[Defence Equipment Plan 2018-28](#),” House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, 77th Report of Session 2017-19, 23 January, 2019.

13 Jeremy Shapiro, “[Boris Johnson and the Politics of Neo-Poodleism](#),” *Foreign Affairs*, 8 August, 2019.

14 Jim Townsend, “[Trump’s Defense Cuts in Europe Will Backfire](#),” *Foreign Policy*, 17 September, 2019.

15 Alexandra de Hoop Scheffer and Martin Quencez, “[The U.S.-France Special Relationship: Testing the Macron Method](#),” *The German Marshall Fund of the United States*, 18 April, 2018.

The UK will continue to play a special role in transatlantic security and remain an important operational partner for the US.¹⁶ Washington will still turn to London to try and understand how Brussels works, and Europeans know that British officials have special access in Washington. But London has already lost strategic relevance for the US in accessing and influencing not just EU circles, but possibly also European defence developments at large.¹⁷

The US-UK-Europe “bridge” paradigm on which London has rested for the past three or four decades is now, for the most part, gone.

On both sides of the Atlantic, there is no going back to the *status quo ante*¹⁸ and there are limits to how much the UK can really capitalise on its “special relationship” now that it brings even less to the table. The UK will, in the short to medium term, most likely move away from Europe. How much and for how long is still to be determined. Yet whether it will move closer to the United States is uncertain and depends largely on where Washington decides to go, and how far London is ready to follow. London finds itself in an awkward position: it has little wiggle room to make up for the loss of the EU and nowhere truly comfortable to go. So how should it now position itself, in order to remain relevant to both sides and advance its own national interests?

¹⁶ Interviews with senior officials.

¹⁷ There have been talks but limited alignment between London and Washington concerning the new EU defence initiatives. Although both have been lobbying the EU for an inclusive third state access, going at it together was seen as counterproductive. While the UK’s hands were tied by Brexit and London did not want to risk being seen as a vehicle for US influence, Washington saw little added value in using the UK as a broker and risk getting involved in Brexit dynamics. Source: interviews with senior officials.

¹⁸ Hans Kundnani and Jana Puglierin, “Atlanticist and ‘Post-Atlanticist’ Wishful Thinking,” *The German Marshall Fund of the United States*, 3 January, 2018.

III. Play the Europe card

The damage done by Brexit in Brussels over the past three years, in political and reputational terms, is not entirely reparable and has already undermined the UK’s capacity to shape the European debate. Even if Brexit does not happen, or if a “soft Brexit” comes about, the UK would not be easily forgiven or regain its former position. British military power, however well respected and important it is in Europe, has not been enough to convince the EU to give it any special status. London will need to make a number of politically difficult compromises to avoid isolation in Europe. Yet current politics are unpromising and political leadership scarce. Moreover, despite the recent increase in the defence budget, London has limited resources to devote to its foreign and defence policy engagements.¹⁹

There are nevertheless steps that could realistically be taken.

It would be tempting for London to succumb to the US’s gravitational pull, particularly as the British armed forces have a clear “American reflex” given that they are used to working with the US and are sceptical as to what Europeans can deliver operationally.²⁰ There is a real possibility that the UK will increasingly turn to the United States while distancing itself from Europe. This would be a short-sighted move.

London will need to make a number of politically difficult compromises to avoid isolation in Europe.

Europe alone does not constitute a serious substitute to American capabilities, but the UK-US relationship is not a viable or sufficient alternative either. Despite the size of the US defence budget and its investment in the key new technologies, Washington will be increasingly distracted by Indo-Pacific pressures and the UK cannot

¹⁹ Douglas Barrie, “UK defence-budget boost provides short-term relief, but uncertainty looms,” *The International Institute for Strategic Studies*, 20 September, 2019.

²⁰ Interviews with senior officials.

realistically expect to resist the trend of the US becoming more transactional with European allies. Although some British politicians tend to exaggerate the potential of the “special relationship,” the vast majority of British diplomats recognise the fact that Washington acts unsentimentally rather than nostalgically.²¹

Rather than spread itself too thinly as “Global Britain” or put all its eggs in the US basket, the UK should actively engage with Europe and recognise it fully as its security hinterland. A commitment to make the UK strong in Europe would in turn make London more relevant to Washington. This is not about picking a side but about returning to a constructive balance beneficial to transatlantic security in its entirety. As the bridge paradigm erodes, the UK needs to reinvent itself as an independent actor actively looking at variable geometry arrangements and searching for new relationships; close to the US on certain issues, close to Europe on others, and engaging both constructively through NATO.

The UK should show by deeds and not just words that it is not “leaving Europe.”

Europe needs to stop talking and start planning²² for greater military capabilities and an increased capacity to act. Despite Brexit distractions, the UK remains a serious European defence industrial Research and Development (R&D) actor, a full-spectrum military and nuclear power, alongside France, with a (so far) bipartisan domestic consensus²³ to keep spending above 2% of GDP on defence.

The UK should show by deeds and not just words that it is not “leaving Europe.” This will require collaboration with Brussels, as well as with Paris and Berlin and through a patchwork of European unilateral initiatives. There may be resistance from some US-leaning British

politicians and military officers, who would raise the false spectre of a European army or the “betrayal” of the Brexit vote.²⁴ Yet the UK should not satisfy itself with muddling through, opposing EU initiatives, and being an observer of European developments. British leadership would help keep European capability developments NATO-friendly and maintain US attention and engagement, which would be welcomed by European states and the EU alike.

Playing its Europe card fully would be the best positioning for Britain to build its influence on the continent as well as across the Atlantic. Although doing so seems improbable under the current government, it should be politically feasible under a more moderate one – Brexit or no Brexit. Even if London does not hold all the cards, developing a genuine strategy on Europe’s defence is a pragmatic necessity that would enable the UK to faster recover its influence.

IV. Avoid a clean break with the European Union

Even in the case of a Brexit deal, little is to be expected from EU-UK security and defence collaboration in the short-term. The UK’s optimistic mood quickly turned sour as the EU repeatedly refused to make exceptions to its established third country arrangements. No special status was granted during negotiations, meaning the UK will have no say in the operational mandate and planning of EU missions.²⁵ Nor will it have preferential access to the EDF and PESCO – the legislation for which is now almost fully enacted.

Moreover, the EU refused to grant a post-Brexit UK access to the encrypted Public Regulated Service (PRS) of the Galileo satellite navigation system and blocked British companies from providing security elements to the satellite programme. This led to the announcement in late 2018 that the UK

21 Interviews with senior officials.

22 Alice Billon-Galland and Sir Adam Thomson, “[European Strategic Autonomy: Stop Talking, Start Planning](#),” *European Leadership Network*, 11 May, 2018.

23 See the 2017 manifestos of the Conservative Party (“[Forward Together: The Conservative Manifesto](#)”) and the Labour Party (“[Manifesto: A Global Britain](#)”).

24 See “[Lt Gen Riley’s Briefing on the defence threat from hidden EU deals](#),” *Veterans for Britain*, 5 September, 2019.

25 Alice Billon-Galland and Nicholas Williams, “[How militarily willing and able is the EU? Operation Althea struggles in Bosnia and Herzegovina](#),” *European Leadership Network*, 10 July, 2019.

was pulling out of the project entirely.²⁶ The episode caused fury in the UK, convincing British officials that the EU was not serious about wanting to maintain close defence links post-Brexit. The bitterness of what was felt to be “bad faith” negotiation is still palpable in London and it will take some time before the UK-EU relationship is normalised. There are likely to be a bad few years ahead, during which the EU will steer its own way and the UK risks being side-lined.

However limited the prospect of fruitful collaboration, the UK should not go so far as to stand back and cut its links to the EU entirely. Not all is in London’s hands, but the choice of whether to engage or not is one that can only come from London. Making the effort to engage – even if unsuccessfully – is different from standing back. London should not wait for the Brexit dust to settle before re-engaging.

However limited the prospect of fruitful collaboration, the UK should not go so far as to stand back and cut its links to the EU entirely.

Deal or no deal, there will still be the need for defence cooperation with the EU in a post-Brexit life. UK officials and politicians argue that the inflexibility shown by the EU – and certain Member States – will render close relations impossible and result in a weakening of European security. They have a point. The French strategy²⁷ of compartmentalising EU defence on one side (favouring EU institution-building, industrial benefits from EDF and PESCO legislation, and working with Germany) and Franco-British relations on the other (close operationally, strategically, and work on nuclear issues) is seen as duplicitous and opportunistic in London. This has caused much ill-feeling with Paris but also, to a lesser extent, with other Member States for seemingly conniving with it.

²⁶ Andrew Chuter and Aaron Mehta, “London turns to America after EU excludes Britain from Galileo satellite program,” *Defense News*, 4 December, 2018.

²⁷ Alice Pannier, “France’s Defense Partnerships and the Dilemmas of Brexit,” *The German Marshall Fund of the United States*, 30 May, 2018.

Nevertheless, the UK-EU negotiation is not one of equals. London does not hold a negotiating position strong enough to change this and will have to accept becoming a junior partner post-Brexit. Under the new Von der Leyen Commission, and with a directorate now dedicated to defence industries and space,²⁸ the EU will deepen its involvement in European defence issues, even if only on industrial and capability matters. In this context, it is not in the UK’s interest to isolate itself even more from the Union.²⁹ The UK has already chosen not to block EU developments that it had previously opposed – such as the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC),³⁰ PESCO, and EDF – and could learn from this experience.

Confronted with the EU’s firm stance and given deep frustration in London, the UK could be tempted to use its military assets to leverage concessions elsewhere in the Brexit negotiations. However, this approach is sure to backfire. In the grand Brexit scheme, security and defence arrangements are a minor preoccupation on both sides, although important overall. A tough British line is unlikely to yield any result now, as it is not a big enough incentive to make the EU change its broader Brexit negotiating position three years in – especially now that the EDF and Galileo cases are virtually closed. The UK using its defence assets as a bargaining chip would be perceived by European partners as an attempt at blackmail and a dilution of the UK’s “unconditional” commitment to European security – weakening further the trust in its reliability as a partner. Given that the Johnson government has already harmed relations with European allies, this would only make a bad situation worse.

Cooperation, however limited, is mutually beneficial and should not be allowed to become collateral damage in the broader Brexit fight. Reports that Mr. Johnson is

²⁸ Martin Banks, “EU creates top post to herd its fragmented defense industry,” *Defense News*, 16 September, 2019.

²⁹ “UK officials will stop attending most EU meetings from 1 September,” *UK Department for Exiting the European Union*, 20 August, 2019.

³⁰ “The Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC),” *European External Action Service*, November, 2018.

considering ditching Theresa May's goal of the "closest possible relationship"³¹ should not be exaggerated, as little has changed in practice and the UK officially remains committed to the "mutual interest" wording of the Political Declaration. However, a more transactional approach to security and defence, and any temptation to enact a "clean break" from the EU would be ill-advised, as security relationships depend heavily on mutual trust built over time.

Cooperation, however limited, is mutually beneficial and should not be allowed to become collateral damage in the broader Brexit fight.

The UK should try to be as close as possible to the EU, even with limited prospects. It is highly unlikely that the UK will be given any type of associate membership of the Political and Security Committee (PSC), and it will thus be shut out from collective consultations. Despite recent calls – started by President Macron and later taken over by Chancellor Merkel – to establish a European Security Council (ESC) to improve the cohesion and efficiency of EU foreign and defence policy, there have so far been no concrete proposal as to how this structure could work in practice and how the UK could be associated.³²

After Brexit, London will need to invest important resources to remain plugged in and make its voice heard, which will mean upgrading its embassy in Brussels as well as those in key EU capitals. It should also find ways for UK foreign policy to align visibly and vocally with the EU's where relevant – for instance on the Western Balkans, Hong Kong, or on sanctions – particularly through its position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. On issues of mutual interest, aligning with the EU could have a "power-multiplier" effect for the UK which will be seeking cover against diplomatic isolation and the weight of bigger players such as

China and the US.

In time, the UK should renew its earlier effort to agree defence arrangements with the EU. In the short-term it will be hard for the UK to agree to participate in EU missions and operations – and there may be limited British interest in discussing operational collaboration if close capability and procurement partnerships are off-the-table. But the UK should not abandon EU allies in crisis should they ask for British participation in naval or military operations. Although there is a limit to what can be done through back channels – and the ultimate decision on the extent of UK involvement will be up to EU Member States – London should sustain its efforts to agree at least informal UK-EU consultations in the planning of future operations. On defence industry, the UK should try to maintain a close relationship with the European Defence Agency (EDA) independent of the US – which does not have any Administrative Agreement (AA) with the EDA. This may in time facilitate British involvement in EDF and PESCO projects.

V. Practice strategic balance at NATO

The core of British European and transatlantic defence strategy resides in NATO and will do so even more in the coming years. There has been no distinctive shift between the May and Johnson governments on this issue, as the natural Conservative approach is close to the Alliance. Through NATO the UK should seek to lead European efforts by proving it is neither abandoning its commitment to European security, nor its title of "best European ally" to Washington.

London is aware that Europe is heavily reliant on the US and that Europeans need to work together to ensure their collective security. Post-Brexit, Washington will still expect the UK to lead European defence efforts, even if only by example, and to avoid any distraction from its departure from the EU.³³ This means continuing to invest resources and political will into NATO: reaching and furthering the 2% threshold,³⁴ providing operational assets and

31 Daniel Boffey, "[Boris Johnson seeking to rewrite EU defence pledges](#)," *The Guardian*, 5 September, 2019.

32 Niklas Nováký, "[EU It Yourself: A Blueprint for a European Security Council](#)," *Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies*, March 2019.

33 Interviews with senior officials.

34 Joe Watts, "[US pushes Britain to spend more on military or warns France will be 'partner of choice'](#)," *The Independent*, 2 July, 2018.

capabilities, and taking greater responsibility for the security of the European continent and its immediate neighbourhood.

Although the UK needs to invest more to counterbalance the loss of the EU, it can seem difficult to see what more it could do at NATO in practice given that it already does so much – including leading a battle group of the Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) in Estonia – and has little cash to spend on new initiatives.³⁵ London should aim to show increased leadership, whenever possible, on issues such as readiness, the reinforcement of NATO's 360 deterrence strategy (Four Thirties initiative, EFP, military mobility) and on European efforts on new technologies. Moreover, London could provide new ideas on increasing common funding or pushing for more rapid European capability development.

Post-Brexit, Washington will still expect the UK to lead European defence efforts, even if only by example.

One wonders the extent to which NATO will remain shielded from Brexit tensions, particularly given that the Alliance's cohesion is already under strain. The UK should not try and reinforce its NATO standing by adopting an anti-EU approach opposing useful EU-NATO collaboration. The UK has been a champion of such collaboration in the past and, although it will not be able to support it as strongly from the outside, it should position itself as a leader and facilitator of close EU-NATO relations after Brexit – ensuring that cooperation results in added value rather than duplication.³⁶ Better EU-NATO cooperation remains in the Alliance's and UK's interest, particularly on military mobility, exercises, and emerging threats. However divergent their approaches may end up being, the EU27 and the UK must also sustain the drive for inter-operability. British leadership would send a strong signal to EU partners that London aims to be a constructive force,

³⁵ Interviews with senior officials.

³⁶ Alicia von Voss and Torben Schütz, "[The UK's potential role in enabling EU-NATO cooperation after Brexit](#)," *The International Institute for Strategic Studies – Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik*, June 2018.

acting in the interest of Europe and the transatlantic community, thus giving more credibility to UK-led initiatives.

The ideal moment to lay out this strategy will be at the NATO leaders' meeting that London is hosting on 3-4 December. The British Prime Minister should take advantage of this opportunity at home to demonstrate constructive and credible leadership. They should reaffirm UK commitment to strategic balance despite domestic turmoil. The United States, worried about Brexit's impact on UK defence budgets and intellectual leadership, would be reassured to see London lead by example and show initiative. European partners would be equally reassured to see the UK championing EU-NATO cooperation, something the EU itself has been seeking to further in recent years. This can and should be a mutually beneficial game, rather than a zero sum one, for Europe.

VI. Make the most of the patchwork of European initiatives

Beyond NATO, much of the UK's defence cooperation will fall back on bilateral and mini-lateral relations, which London has been prioritising since 2016.³⁷ Despite the fact that all European states – members of the EU, NATO, or neither – acknowledge that defence and security relations will need to be protected from Brexit toxicity, it is unclear how much appetite there would be for further engagement in the immediate aftermath of a no-deal.³⁸ Political considerations have already had some impact on cooperation.

The attempt by the May government to deepen the British-German defence relation through the October 2018 UK-Germany Joint Vision Statement³⁹ has so far been

³⁷ The British government has made efforts to strengthen bilateral relations with several European countries including Germany, Sweden, Finland, Romania, and Italy, with a focus on Northern Europe due to Russia and the High North. This also includes equipment collaboration outside of the EU, such as the output from the Franco-British Lancaster House Treaties or, more recently, the reported adherence of Italy and Sweden to the UK's sixth-generation fighter jet "Tempest" programme.

³⁸ Interviews with senior officials.

³⁹ "[UK deepens defence cooperation with Germany](#)," *UK Government*, 5 October, 2018.

only mildly successful. This is in part due to Germany's lack of appetite for military issues, but also because of a reluctance to be seen complicating EU27 unity while Brexit is still under negotiation. Germany clearly wants to associate the UK closely to European defence efforts, but not at the cost of EU unity. However, British attempts to strengthen the third side of the triangle with Paris should not be downplayed, and they are a step in the right direction.⁴⁰

Germany clearly wants to associate the UK closely to European defence efforts, but not at the cost of EU unity.

As NATO cannot be the go-to operational planner for all missions, London needs to strengthen and use flexible formats to engage with European partners directly. The question of whether the UK is more likely to join a US military operation, rather than try and forge a European one, is increasingly likely to be asked in the future. The calculus will rest on two factors. First, it could be harder for the UK to resist aligning with the US after Brexit, and second, the UK could be disinclined to engage if Europeans again reveal they are not serious about capabilities or have a poor record of joint deployment, such as in the Strait of Hormuz in summer 2019.⁴¹

A good way for the UK to retain its ability to shape and lead some European operations is to continue to invest in the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) – whose aim is to bring key Northern European partners into a British military framework and form a pool of high-readiness assets for rapid

deployment.⁴² Going forward, the UK should increase its ambitions and activities as part of JEF, which could become its go-to platform for operational thinking and planning in its Northern European neighbourhood. It is also likely that London will aim to deepen already close bilateral operational cooperation, such as its relationship with France through its flagship project the Franco-British Combined Joint Expeditionary Force (CJEF) – a non-permanent military force deployable for combat operations.⁴³

In addition to strengthening its role at NATO through direct means, the UK may also choose to channel energy into formats that strengthen NATO indirectly.

As the UK prefers to work in small groups, it is likely to prioritise low-key engagement with European partners on key strategic issues of mutual interest – rather than suggesting new ambitious formats that risk European partners not following and accusing it of undermining EU efforts.⁴⁴ The UK should invest itself more in the European Intervention Initiative (E2I) whose objective is to create a dynamic between “able and willing” European states, sharing strategic outlooks and enabling a more joint reaction to the next crisis.⁴⁵ Despite initial misunderstandings around the notion of “intervention”, the E2I's goal is very different from that of JEF, for

40 Michelle Shevin-Coetzee, [“An overlooked alliance: a case for greater UK-German defence cooperation,”](#) *European Leadership Network*, 4 June, 2019.

41 The UK needed to act following the seizure of a British tanker and there was little show of either EU or European solidarity in practice. It is interesting to wonder how different the European reaction would have been if said tanker had been German or French. The 2019 Strait of Hormuz case is unique, given the delicate political context opposing Europeans and Americans on the fate of Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA). It is nevertheless representative of the fact that the European inability to act (decision-making and capabilities) and the British need to remain close to the US do not fare well for their cooperation in the future.

42 In June 2018, the nine participating countries (United Kingdom, Denmark, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Sweden and Norway) signed a memorandum of understanding through which JEF reached full operational capacity. See [“Minister for Defence Peter Hultqvist signs JEF agreement in London,”](#) *Government Offices of Sweden*, 28 June, 2018.

43 London has strengthened further its bilateral defence relations with France by building on the 2010 Lancaster House agreements at the 2018 Sandhurst summit and through close operational collaboration (e.g. British CH-47 Chinook helicopters in the French operation Barkhane in the Sahel, cooperation as part of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence [EFP] in Estonia, and counter-Daesch collaboration in Syria). On the Franco-British Combined Joint Expeditionary Force (CJEF), see Alice Pannier, [“The Anglo-French defence partnership after the ‘Brexit’ vote: new incentives and new dilemmas,”](#) *Global Affairs*, 2016, Vol. 2, No. 5.

44 Interviews with senior officials.

45 See Dick Zandee and Kimberley Kruijver, [“The European Intervention Initiative. Developing a shared strategic culture for European defence,”](#) *Clingendael*, 12 September, 2019.

example.⁴⁶ The UK defence secretary did not himself attend either the first or second E2I ministerial meetings. This is a missed opportunity, as the UK will benefit from all the platforms of engagement with its European partners after Brexit. As Italy, Sweden and Norway have now joined E2I,⁴⁷ it constitutes a key group of European countries which the UK should be eager to engage with more both at the working-level and politically – and, importantly, to be seen doing so. This could also mean the UK leading an E2I working group, alongside the ones on the Baltic (led by Estonia), Sahel (led by France), and disaster relief in the Caribbean (led by the Netherlands). London could present this engagement as a means to empower the EU as well as NATO.

As the UK prefers to work in small groups, it is likely to prioritise low-key engagement with European partners on key strategic issues of mutual interest.

Finally, an E3+EU format to deal with crises and events of mutual interest would be a good starting point to build a strategic dialogue on European security. Arguably, it could be challenging to come up with an ambitious agenda for sustained strategic dialogue between France, Germany, and the UK (plus the EU) given their different strategic cultures. Moreover, establishing such a grouping could be made difficult by any Brexit bad blood. A good approach would therefore be to start from a crisis (e.g. Iran, Ukraine) and broaden the agenda once the format has proven useful to all parties. E3+EU meetings could bring together the Defence and Foreign Ministers of the three countries plus the EU High Representative, enabling France and Germany to keep the UK plugged into EU thinking on strategic issues. Moreover, this would chart a way forward that would not bypass the EU, symbolically, on key real-world issues. Such a loose format would not require

much structure – meetings could happen in the margins of NATO summits or UN General Assembly weeks, as was the case for the E3 in September 2019⁴⁸ – yet provide a useful go-to framework for strategic discussions. A helping hand from Europeans would go a long way and help dock the UK on Europe's coasts.

Another grouping that could be useful to resuscitate is the quadrilateral security dialogue (“Quad”) between the US, UK, France, and Germany. This Cold War forum enabled informal discussions between the four big countries in the margins of NATO meetings. A renewed Quad format, which recently issued a joint statement condemning the 2018 Salisbury attacks,⁴⁹ could help avoid misunderstanding in EU defence developments and ensure that European efforts on burden-sharing and more “autonomy” include the UK and are understood by the US.

Conclusion

Real world events and crises could well drive Europeans, including the UK, to work closely together on defence issues. Given the current political climate, these may provide a more significant push than any bureaucratic arrangements. However, waiting for a crisis is not a long-term strategy. The recent case of the Strait of Hormuz demonstrates that pressure from outside events will not necessarily result in fruitful European cooperation but instead may encourage British decision-makers to fall back on their “American reflex” – even if this is not their preferred option.

Europe still has a long way to go before it can defend its interests without the assistance of the United States – which is what Washington asks for – and London should take an active role in building this European capacity, not retreat from it.

46 Alice Billon-Galland and Martin Quencez, “A Military Workshop,” *Berlin Policy Journal*, 30 October, 2018.

47 Alexandra Brzozowski, “Macron’s coalition of European militaries grows in force,” *Euractiv*, 24 September, 2019.

48 “European leaders blame Iran for Saudi attack ahead of Trump UN speech,” *France 24*, 23 September, 2019.

49 “Statement from the United States, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom on the Attack in Salisbury,” *The White House*, 15 March, 2018.

Waiting for a crisis to bring Europeans together will also not preclude the UK from being excluded from key strategic and industrial conversations. Europeans pressing on with big projects, such as the Future Combat Air System (FCAS), without London proves this. Moreover, the US is increasingly distracted by Indo-Pacific developments and is looking for new partners on the continent.

Despite political turbulence and limitations, London should aim for an ambitious European defence strategy to strengthen its hands on both sides of the Atlantic. The UK should avoid a mutually-detrimental and short-sighted “clean break” with the European Union. It should support EU-NATO collaboration, practice strategic balance within the Alliance, and make the most of the many bilateral and minilateral formats for European engagement. There will undoubtedly be rocky years ahead, and Brexit will not be solved quickly, but the UK should not settle for being an onlooker and instead lean in, playing its Europe card fully.



EUROPEAN LEADERSHIP NETWORK

The European Leadership Network (ELN) works to advance the idea of a cooperative and cohesive Europe and to develop collaborative European capacity to address the pressing foreign, defence and security policy challenges of our time. It does this through its active network of former and emerging European political, military, and diplomatic leaders, through its high-quality research, publications and events, and through its institutional partnerships across Europe, North America, Latin America and the Asia-Pacific region.