No. 73
May 2016

SECURITY POLICY BRIEF

The UK's foreign and security policy: what's at stake in the referendum?

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Foreign and security policy was not an area in which Prime Minister Cameron sought to alter the relationship between the UK and the European Union (EU) in renegotiating the terms of Britain's membership. However, security has become a key theme in the referendum debate. The airport and metro bombings in Brussels have focused particular attention on the issue of border and 'homeland' security, and whether the UK has its security enhanced, or compromised, through its membership of the EU. There are also broader questions about the EU's historic role in bringing peace to the European continent and its capacity to be a capable security and defence actor. These were raised by David Cameron in what was the most passionate speech on Europe of his Premiership delivered on 9th May.

The argument that the EU is a 'net contributor' to the UK's national security is a key campaign theme of David Cameron and by 'remain' campaigners. The Prime Minister has been especially keen to make a connection in the public mind between EU membership and national security in his speeches and statements making the case for a Remain vote in the Referendum on 23rd June.[1] His argument was that the UK's and the EU's security are intertwined in that '…there is a close relationship between the security and prosperity of the continent to which our island is tied geographically and our own security and prosperity.'

Cameron's claims have been echoed by key international figures, including President Obama, Jens Stoltenberg, NATO Secretary General, and heads of government from Commonwealth countries allowing remain campaigners to highlight how a Brexit might undermine other relationships central to UK national security. The more general concern expressed is that a Brexit would add to a lengthening list of crisis for the EU to address including the existing migration crisis, which has triggered a partial roll back of Schengen free movement area, and to Europe's current economic difficulties. Further, it might then also act as the catalyst for the European integration project to unravel, and thus create a more general European security crisis.

For Brexit campaigners, an exit from the EU would allow the UK greater freedom of choice to fully utilise its diplomatic and military capabilities alongside its soft power, its position as an unrivalled international financial centre and its memberships of the Anglosphere and the Commonwealth to seek new international influence, especially with

rising powers. Brexit campaigners have sought to downplay the EU's security role by making the argument that it is NATO and the United States, not the EU, that have kept the peace in Europe since the Second World War. These campaigners also argue that EU defence policy has the ambition to create a 'Euro army' to replace national militaries.

These competing claims of the Remain and the Brexit campaigners are broad and difficult to verify as they deal in hypotheticals rather than claims that can be tested against available evidence. This paper focuses on the current foreign and defence policy relationship as it is organised between the UK and the EU. It argues that, on the basis of the existing EU policy arrangements, foreign and security policy is an area in which the impact of a vote to leave the EU might be relatively marginal in contrast to other aspects of the UK's EU relationship, such as those upon Britain's economy. This is because existing EU member state cooperation in this area is intergovernmental, disentangling the UK from EU institutions and policies would be relatively straightforward. It is also an area in which EU policy achievement has been modest. Further, it is an area in which the costs of a Brexit might fall more heavily on the EU than the UK, as the loss of a member state with significant diplomatic and military resources would diminish the collective capabilities at the disposal of EU foreign and defence policies.

THE STATE-OF-PLAY IN THE UK-EU FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY RELATIONSHIP

The UK is, alongside France, one of the European Union's two most powerful and ambitious states when it comes to foreign and security policies. The UK remains a globally significant state as a permanent UN Security Council member, recognised nuclear weapons state and a leading member of NATO and the Commonwealth. Its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) sees it economy ranked 5th globally,[2] with the sixth highest defence budget in the world,[3] and the UK hosts a major defence industry which makes the UK the 6th largest arms exporter.[4] The UK also maintains substantial diplomatic, military and intelligence capabilities which would allow it to continue to pursue a separate national foreign, security and defence policy, in the case of either a 'Leave' or 'Remain' outcome in the June referendum. Whether the UK's international influence would be as significant outside the EU is a key issue of significance in determining the impact of any referendum vote to end membership.

FOREIGN POLICY

The UK's current foreign and security policy - which extends to its trade and development policies - are embedded within, and pursued through, the EU. The UK has used its membership of the EU to enhance its international influence and as a vehicle for leveraging and amplifying national foreign and security policy objectives. The EU's mechanisms for foreign policy have provided the UK with the best of both worlds – allowing the UK freedom of action to act independently where it chooses and to act collaboratively and leverage common resources where it prefers. This allows the UK to have a greater influence in world affairs than it could wield if acting purely on its own. The EU mechanisms are also particularly attractive for a large Member State like the UK with historical engagements and widespread commercial interests around the world. A large Member State like the UK has a greater ability to influence EU policy on a wide range of issues as it has a more extensive and ambitious foreign and security policy than the majority of the EU's smaller and medium sized Member States.

The Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) have allowed the UK to preserve national independence in its diplomacy whilst allowing for the coordination of policy where interests are held in common with the EU's other member states. This is already an area in which the UK has been able to preserve autonomy largely uncomplicated by

binding EU policy commitments that intrude significantly on national foreign, security and defence policy.

Within the UK the CFSP's achievements to-date are presented as being rather modest and mixed.[5] The EU's participation in the Iran nuclear diplomacy process and brokering agreement between the Kosovan and Serbian Governments to normalise their relations are presented as successes. The collective sanctions regime against Russia for its invasions of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, despite considerable differences of view between member states, is presented as a success. However, it should be noted that prominent Brexiteers such as Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage have pictured Russia's invasions as the direct consequence of a misguided Eastern Partnership policy.

The UK government has been consistently resistant to any moves to restrict national autonomy in foreign policy making. It has been interested in reforms to EU foreign policy that would increase its visibility and coherence but has not accepted the proposition that member states should converge on a 'single' foreign policy that would replace those of the member states.

DEFENCE AND SECURITY

For the UK the EU's CSDP focus on preventing, managing and resolving conflict using both military and civilian resources has been a policy focus with which recent governments have been comfortable. CSDP roles such as providing peace keeping forces, providing security for elections to take place in states in conflict, training police, armed forces and security personnel in third countries, and monitoring disputed borders, ceasefires and peace agreements all fit with the UK's advocacy of the 'comprehensive approach' to conflict management. The UK has also been comfortable with keeping these missions small scale, and with the majority in the Western Balkans and Sub-Saharan Africa providing the opportunity for NATO to focus its energies elsewhere.

The UK can lay claim to a leading role in kick-starting the CSDP at the 1998 Anglo-French summit in St-Malo, where Tony Blair and Jacques Chirac agreed to a push for greater EU defence capabilities. Subsequently, and despite its position as one of the EU's two militarily most significant member states, the UK has not sought to play a leading role in the development of a European Union defence policy.

Britain has treated the CSDP as an optional extra for UK foreign, security and defence policy, rather than central or integral. The UK's position has always been that NATO is the principal body for cooperation and collaboration on matters of defence, partly also driven by the UK's desire to maintain close links with the US and US interest and commitment to Europe. The UK has committed personnel to the majority of the EU's 'civilian' missions deployed for roles such as border observation and capacity building for third countries. It has made more modest personnel commitments to military operations. The civilian missions fit readily into the UK's development of the 'comprehensive approach' to international conflict management, which brings together diplomacy, defence and development resources to address the problems of failed and failing states.

The CSDP has not been a core component of British security and defence planning over the last decade. The UK's most recent five-yearly Strategic Defence and Security Review made no reference to the CSDP as a component of the UK's approach to providing for its national security and defence. The UK's major defence commitments, including renewal of the Trident nuclear weapon and submarine delivery system and two Queen Elizabeth-class aircraft carriers to be equipped with new F-35B fighter jet aircraft have not been made with direct reference to military roles that might be undertaken by the UK through the EU.

The UK has resisted proposals to deepen further the institutionalisation of European defence by giving the EU's European Defence Agency (EDA) a greater role or budget.

The UK has also blocked the creation of a permanent military EU operational headquarters, an idea which is supported by a majority of other EU member states including France and Germany.

WHAT WOULD BE THE COSTS TO THE UK'S FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY OF A BREXIT?

The effects on the UK of a Brexit might be greater on bilateral EU member state foreign and security policy relationships rather than with the EU *per se*. One example is the UK's relationship with the Republic of Ireland, with which it shares a common travel area and a partnership in the Northern Ireland peace process.

The UK has also invested particularly heavily in its relationship with France in recent years. The 2010 Lancaster House Treaties have created a new Franco-British defence relationship rooted in collaboration on nuclear weapons technology and increased interoperability of armed forces. The treaties are premised on closer cooperation between the UK and France to facilitate greater burden-sharing in the EU and NATO. France has persisted with the idea of Anglo-French coordination at the heart of a successful EU foreign, security and defence policy despite the reticence of recent British governments in respect of an EU defence policy. Were Britain to leave the EU, the rationale for closer links between the UK and France would diminish, and France might turn to other intergovernmental partnerships with member states such as the Weimar grouping (Poland, Germany and France) which offer ready-made substitutes for defence collaboration.

The UK would also face a major complication in the key transatlantic pillar of its foreign policy relationship with the United States. An EU departure would be placing the UK in a contrary position to that of the United States in recent decades, pursued by both Democrat and Republican Administrations, to support and promote EU and NATO enlargements. Outside the EU, the UK would no longer have leverage on future enlargements of the EU or seeking to ensure that EU defence policies are developed in a manner that also strengthens NATO. The United States has become more interested in seeing the EU develop greater conflict management capabilities as a complement to NATO's contribution to European security. With UK no longer in a position to drive these arrangements might the special relationship no longer be quite so special?

Negotiating an exit from the EU itself would occupy extensive diplomatic and political bandwidth for an extended period which would then be unavailable to focus on the extensive and pressing set of security challenges currently faced by the UK. A key priority for British foreign policy for the two years following a Brexit vote would be to negotiate the UK's relationship with the EU as provided for under Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union.

The effects of Brexit on the EU's foreign and security policy would not be one-sided. The loss of one of the EU's "big 3" member states would raise questions about the EU's capacity to weather the future, coming on the heels of the Eurozone and migration crises. Less dramatically, the UK's voice as a key participant in the EU's collective foreign policy would be lost. And the UK's national foreign and security policy will still remain intertwined with the policies, preoccupations and crises of the EU and its remaining member states. The UK will need to reconsider how it organises key landmarks in its bilateral relationships with key European countries such as France and Germany as it would be outside the work and meetings of the European Council and the Foreign Affairs Council.

A UK outside the EU would be a key subject of the EU's foreign security and defence policies. As a country with a significant track record in international engagement, and a range of diplomatic, military, development and other foreign policy resources, the EU would seek the UK's support for its foreign policy initiatives. The EU would want to see the UK

associated with it main foreign, security and defence policy activities. In turn, the UK would want to maintain influence on the EU's policies. This interrelationship would be best served by a mechanism that would allow for the UK to remain closely associated with the EU in the foreign, security and defence policy area. Existing arrangements that allow for non-member states to participate with the EU in this area (such as Norway) would need to be reimagined to incorporate the UK. And perhaps best arranged on a Treaty basis between the UK and the EU's member states.

The question of the impact of a Brexit on the UK's foreign, security and defence policy relationship with the EU needs to be set against the backdrop of a broader discussion of the UK's international role. The UK has already faced recent unfavourable commentary on waning influence due to the effects of austerity on its diplomacy and defence capabilities.[6] The relatively under-developed and intergovernmental nature of the EU's foreign, security and defence policies means that the impact of a Brexit would have a minimal direct effect on UK national foreign and security policy. However, exiting the EU, especially against a backdrop of urging a decision to remain by the UK's key international partners such as the United States, would create a high degree of uncertainty as to the UK's future international role.

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Endnotes

[1]It was a notable component of his remarks at the World Economic Forum in Davos on 21st January. https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/davos-2016-prime-ministers-speech-to-the-world-economic-forum

[2] IMF, 2014, after the US, China, Japan, and Germany.

[3] SIPRI, 2015, after the US, China Russia, Saudi Arabia and France.

[4] SIPRI, 2015.

[5]As the European Council on Foreign Relations annual *EU Foreign Policy Scorecard* illustrates http://www.ecfr.eu/scorecard/2015

[6] The UK's defence budget has been cut in real terms by 19% and the foreign affairs budget by 16% (Chatham House, 2015).

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