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## **EPILOGUE: EUROPEAN SECURITY AND DEFENCE IN THE SHADOW OF BREXIT**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This piece provides an epilogue to the Forum on European security following the UK EU Referendum. The EU has been a centrepiece in Britain's foreign policy. The piece argues that Brexit presents the prospect of a major rethink in the aims, ambitions and conduct of British diplomacy and defence.

From the perspective of third parties – and most especially for the EU and its member states – the reaction to the prospect of Brexit has been no less clear and the impact on European security no less certain. The piece highlights how contributors to this Forum all share the assessment of an uncertain future whether discussing bilateral relationships, the impact on the EU and NATO or the political economy of European defence.

This Forum illustrates that it will be a European security and defence future of considerable uncertainty. A central issue to be resolved will be whether the EU and the UK are able to build a strategic partnership that encompasses issues of foreign policy, security and defence.

The UK will also need to recalibrate its key bilateral relationships in Europe and with the United States. This creates an ambitious agenda for practitioners alike.

Key words: UK, foreign, security, defence, European Union, Brexit

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Since the referendum vote in June the majority of attention has focused on what might be the future economic relationship between the UK and the European Union (EU) and the prospects for the UK's trade relationships with third countries once outside the EU. The future for the UK's foreign, security and defence policy has been given much less attention. The pieces in this forum seek to address this lacuna.

Security and defence policy gives effects to the broader foreign policy aims and ambitions for a state. The EU has been a centrepiece in Britain's foreign policy. Consequently exiting the EU presents the prospect of a major rethink in the aims, ambitions and conduct of British diplomacy and defence (Whitman, 2016). Neither Prime Minister Theresa May's UN General Assembly address in September nor Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson's 2<sup>nd</sup> October speech to the Conservative Party conference provided sufficient detail on the objectives of future UK foreign policy and so allow for a sufficiently solid basis to assess the country's future stance on security and defence policy (May, 2016; Johnson, 2016). The Prime Minister's speech on 26<sup>th</sup> January 2017 provided a more detailed prospectus on a 'Global Britain' future role for UK (that will remain outward rather than inward looking) but with little fine detail on the future role envisioned for the UK in European security (May, 2017)

From the perspective of third parties – and most especially for the EU and its member states – the reaction to the prospect of Brexit has been no less clear and the impact on European security no less certain. The contributions to this Forum all share the assessment of an uncertain future whether discussing bilateral relationships, the impact on the EU and NATO or the political economy of European defence.

### **The future of the UK's security and defence policy**

There is no precedent for a country choosing to leave the EU. This means that the consequences of departure for the UK's foreign and security policy are uncertain and because EU membership has been a key component of the UK's diplomacy and foreign policy since 1973. Since the more recent development of a defence dimension of the EU the UK has also been a participant in an evolving security and defence policy landscape that now encompasses commitments to EU member states and operations in addition to the long-standing commitments to NATO.

What might the future hold for the UK's security and defence policy? The UK's pre-accession past is not a helpful guide to an alternative future, as the contemporary international context is very different from the Cold War environment within which the UK joined the EU in the early 1970s. Further, through its current membership of the EU, Britain participates in a set of policies that structure relationships between the EU and other states and organizations involved in international relations. With Brexit, this set of policies—covering trade, development and foreign policy will need to be recalibrated – and as this issue Forum illustrates this in the areas of security and defence.

Alteration of Britain's status in relation to the EU will also require an extensive recalibration of its bilateral relationships with both its EU and non-EU European neighbours. As this

Forum illustrates, through its examination of the EU's other two major security and defence actors in the EU, France and Germany, and their cooperation in the area of defence procurement. The future of Anglo-German and Franco-British relations are difficult to predict as, respectively, Alice Pannier and Inez von Weitershausen illustrate.

There is no *direct* impact on the UK's position in NATO but it does complicate the UK's defence diplomacy. The NATO Warsaw Summit commitment to deepen the EU-NATO relationship sees a subtle evolution of the UK's position from a participant on both sides of that relationship to an outsider in the EU's deliberations.

The area in which the UK's future security and defence policy looks to be most complicated is in its relationship with the United States. The election of President Trump has introduced a considerable degree of uncertainty into what has been the UK's most important bilateral security relationship. As the relationship with the US has been the UK's most significant bilateral relationship since 1945, any substantive ongoing alteration to the 'special relationship' would present a substantive change for the UK. Having already taken the decision to depart from the EU, which has been one of two pillars upon which Britain has built its role in the world since 1973, a diminished relationship with the US would shake the transatlantic relationship pillar.

Negotiating the exit from the EU itself now occupies extensive diplomatic and political bandwidth for at least the next two years (possibly as much as a decade)—capacity which will be hard-pressed to also focus on the other extensive and pressing set of security challenges currently faced by the UK. This includes the relationship with Russia which, as Tracey German highlights, the UK found to be challenging even prior to the invasion of the Crimea and Eastern Ukraine.

Aside from negotiating its own exit from the EU the UK also has to determine its own strategic objectives for its future relationship with the EU – including the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). The EU will remain the UK's neighbour and most important market for goods and services for the foreseeable future. Consequently the political and economic stability of the EU will be a first-order concern for the UK. However, the degree to which the UK will be associated with the development of the EU's CSDP is highly uncertain.

Membership of the EU has provided the UK with significant efficiencies for the UK in enabling it to address a wide range of policy issues via a multilateral format with 27 other European countries. The EU has provided a forum for the resolution of interstate disagreements between its members, the ironing out of differences with other European states and the pursuit of collective policies and positions on issues of common concern. The UK will want to ensure that it is not frozen-out of influence on the future strategic priorities of the EU and Europe more generally.

There may, however, be more prosaic determinants of the UK's security and defence policy. As Mark Weber and David Dunn note the uncertainty over the UK's economic growth post-Brexit raises the question as to whether the UK will be able to keep to its current commitment to spend 2% of GDP on defence. The political economy of the UK's future

defence policy, as Matthew Uttley and Ben Wilkinson argue, is conditioned by the UK's access to the EU's single market. Altering that status will see the landscape of defence procurement policies in Europe altered and a more complicated context for the operations of both the UK and other European major defence contractors.

The question of the territorial integrity of the UK has also been raised by the EU referendum vote. With the electorates of Scotland and Northern Ireland voting to remain within the EU – and contrary to the position of the English and Welsh electorates – the future of the UK's political order has been called into question. The assertive position of the First Minister in Scotland that the territories existing status within the EU should remain unaltered is contradictory to the position of the UK government in Westminster.

The situation with Northern Ireland is additionally complicated with political parties dividing along sectarian lines as to whether to accept the result as binding for the six counties. Further, the bilateral relationship between the UK and the Irish Republic which share close links, a Common Travel Area, and the Good Friday Agreement (the latter being predicated on Britain and the Irish Republic both being EU member states) is now thrown into a state of considerable complexity.

Developments in Scotland and Northern Ireland feed into a more general perspective of third parties that in exiting the EU the UK will be preoccupied with domestic political affairs and have less time for international affairs. And further that Brexit means that British public in voting to leave a major regional organisation has opted for a reduced international role and declining influence. For the UK defining the ambitions of a post-EU foreign, security and defence policy will be a major undertaking for the next decade.

### **Wider costs (and benefits) of Brexit**

The UK's departure from the EU does, of course, also impinge on other member states and institutions. Mark Weber and David Dunn rehearse the possible costs for NATO (they note no benefits) at length. The UK's departure from the EU could diminish the EU's collective foreign policy. As a country with a significant track record in international engagement, and a range of diplomatic, military, development and other foreign policy resources, the UK's departure has a high degree of significance for the EU. As illustrative, the EU's diplomacy (conducted by the EU's three largest member states and the EU's High Representative) with Iran on its nuclear programme might not have been received as seriously in Washington without the presence of the UK and Europe's ability to influence the behaviour of other international actors.

The UK has also played a contributing role in the EU's CSDP operations and notably a leading role in the anti-piracy operation off the coast of Somalia in providing the Operational Headquarters for Operation Atalanta. The UK's ambitions for CSDP have been limited. It has seen the CSDP as a key instrument to create capabilities for crisis and conflict management not possessed by other organisations such as NATO. It has also seen it as a vehicle through which to strengthen other Member States' military capabilities to thereby boost European defence (and to better serve NATO's objectives as much as those of the EU) by providing

experience for countries to deploy and sustain their forces overseas for extended periods in combination with other nations.

The UK's position in EU foreign, security and defence policy can also be read less favourably – and so its departure from the EU represents an opportunity for other member states. It has held back the development of the CFSP by seeking to preserve its intergovernmental mode of operation. The UK has opposed reforms proposed to the CFSP during the Amsterdam, Nice and Lisbon Treaty negotiations which would have strengthened decision making within the CFSP. The UK's position on the development of an EU defence policy and capability shifted from that of being a leader to that of a laggard. 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 substantive reference to the CSDP as a component of the UK's approach to providing for its national security and defence. On the operational aspects of the CSDP, Atlanta notwithstanding, the UK has not been willing to engage at a level of significant scale and scope with CSDP military operations.

The UK has also vetoed modest proposals for the development of the CSDP supported by the other Member States. The UK has been resistant to proposals to further deepen the institutionalisation and resources of the European Defence Agency (EDA) and hindered its development. The UK has also vetoed the creation of a permanent military EU operational headquarters which is supported by a number of other EU Member States including France and Germany who have revived this idea since the June referendum vote.

### **What future for European security and defence after Brexit?**

This Forum illustrates that it will be a European security and defence future of considerable uncertainty. A central issue to be resolved will be whether the EU and the UK are able to build a strategic partnership that encompasses issues of foreign policy, security and defence alongside access to markets and migration. A failure to build a strong EU-UK relationship will have spill-over consequences for the broader European security order.

The UK will also need to recalibrate its key bilateral relationships in Europe and with the United States. This creates an ambitious agenda that will test the capacity of the UK's diplomacy to its limits.

Pity the poor analysts of European security and defence who will face considerable challenges in explaining and understanding what will inevitably be a shifting landscape of policy and practice. Capturing this change whilst mapping continuity will be a formidable undertaking. The contributions in this Forum provide early indications as to the key questions that will preoccupy scholars.

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