

# What role in European defence for a post-Brexit United Kingdom?

## SUMMARY

'Europe's security is our security', states the 2018 British National Security Capability Review. The expected departure of the United Kingdom (UK) from the European Union (EU) will not alter geography, and the UK will remain a European country. The UK and the countries of the EU share the same strategic environment and, by default, the same threats to their peace and security. Historically, pragmatically and geographically, they remain deeply linked from a security and defence perspective, and there is political consensus on the need to nurture this linkage. Official documents from the British government also confirm this: the UK is exiting the EU, not Europe.

In legal terms, after leaving the EU, the UK will become a third country to the EU and cooperation will continue on that basis. While the EU's common security and defence policy has an established precedent in cooperating closely with third countries on missions and operations, albeit without providing them with decision-making roles, the EU's new defence integration initiatives are currently exploring third-party cooperation. As the UK played a founding role in developing the EU's security and defence policy, it is naturally deeply interconnected with the other EU Member States in this area. As one of the EU's biggest military powers, the UK brings a particularly valuable contribution and know-how to the field. Both parties have made commitments to ensure as close as possible a partnership in foreign policy, security and defence matters. The area of security and defence has the potential to result in a positive post-Brexit tale.



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## Political state of play

At the time of writing, the UK is set to remain an EU Member State [until](#) 31 October 2019, with the option of an earlier departure upon the approval of the [withdrawal agreement](#) by the House of Commons. As it stands, the [draft EU-UK political declaration](#) seeks a 'broad, comprehensive and balanced security partnership'. It gives room for close cooperation on shared security threats and challenges, in respect of the UK's sovereignty and the autonomy of the EU. It also seeks to promote lasting cooperation on external action for the protection of citizens and the strengthening of international peace and security, including through the United Nations (UN) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). To achieve this goal, the declaration envisages 'flexible and scalable cooperation' through political dialogue on common foreign and security policy (CFSP) and common security and defence policy (CSDP), as well as sectoral dialogue at all working levels. It is important to note that although the political declaration comes as a package with the withdrawal agreement, it is not legally binding.

## Global Britain and European security

For centuries the UK has invested in maintaining a peaceful continental Europe, in preventing war and in expanding free trade. In addition to its strategic geographical position and history as a great power, the UK currently is a key player in NATO, the leader of the Commonwealth and a member of the G7 and G20. It is also one of the EU's two permanent members of the UN Security Council, one of its largest military powers and, not least, one of its two Member States in possession of a nuclear deterrent. The UK's 'Global Britain' vision set out in the [National Security Capability Review](#) (NSCR) puts emphasis on these characteristics as underpinning the UK's global, open and outward-looking ambition. The strategy accentuates the intention to strengthen overseas relationships and to give prominence to the UK's 'world-class diplomatic, information, security and intelligence, law enforcement, and border security capabilities'. NATO, the EU and the United States (US) are also mentioned as key pillars of the rules-based system. This is the vision through which the UK wishes to redefine its role as a security actor in the international realm. It is expected that after its departure from the EU, the UK will reinforce its role in NATO, given that the NSCR sees the alliance as the 'cornerstone of [its] security posture'.

The UK also has other bilateral defence cooperation structures, most notably its bilateral alliance with France through the 2010 [Lancaster House treaties](#). These agreements also created the Combined Joint Expeditionary Force – a joint Franco-British force deployable in a wide range of crisis scenarios. Other bilateral security and defence arrangements include the [British-Polish Quadriga](#) annual meetings and [British-German cooperation](#) through which the UK can maintain its military presence in Germany post-2020. With regard to multilateral cooperation structures, the [UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force](#) is a military grouping and partnership between the UK and nine northern European countries, including seven EU Member States. [Experts](#) argue that the UK is likely to expand such bilateral and multilateral forums for cooperation on defence matters.

## What lies ahead?

It is clear that it is in the interests of both the EU and the UK to cooperate closely on common challenges such as terrorism, cyber-warfare, crises in the Neighbourhood, and human rights, etc. It is hard to imagine a security situation in which [reduced or no cooperation](#) between the two parties would lead to a lasting resolution of these issues or to increased security. The 2016 [EU Global Strategy](#) and the 2015 British [Strategic Defence and Security Review](#) identify the same global and European security challenges, and place strong emphasis on the importance of alliances, partnerships and a rules-based world order. In the same vein, the 2018 NSCR confirms the need to 'work together globally, defending the international order and our shared values', seeking a 'deep and special partnership between the UK and the EU', going beyond any existing third-party arrangement. It also reinforces the message from the British government's main [policy paper](#) on the future security and defence relationship.

## Defence industrial cooperation

The UK and EU defence and security policies have a shared past, with the UK having played a leading role in establishing the framework of what was then referred to as 'European security and defence policy'. Culminating with the Franco-British [Saint-Malo summit](#) of 1998, there was political momentum behind the idea of giving the European Union capacity for autonomous action. This goal was cemented during the [1999 Helsinki European Council meeting](#), where EU leaders agreed on the aims of the policy. Since then there have been numerous initiatives to deepen military cooperation among EU countries, the latest *defence renaissance* occurring in the years following the launch of the EU Global Strategy in 2016. Options for third-party cooperation are currently being explored through EU defence integration initiatives such as [permanent structured cooperation](#) (PESCO), the [European Defence Fund](#) (EDF) and the [coordinated annual review on defence](#) (CARD). For example, the [provisional agreement](#) on the future EDF allows entities based outside the EU to take part in cooperative projects, though not to receive EU funding. The provisional agreement stipulates that EU-based subsidiaries of third-country companies could be eligible to receive funding under specific conditions to ensure the integrity of the EU's security and defence interests. Discussions about the conditions for third-party cooperation in PESCO are still ongoing between the 25 participating members. Since the UK already participated in the trial run of [CARD](#), which began in autumn 2017, future involvement in the process could be envisaged. This however will depend on the nature of the future administrative arrangement between the UK and the European Defence Agency - the secretariat responsible for CARD. Lastly, the UK's future participation in [Galileo](#), the EU's satellite navigation system, has proven [controversial](#). The EU argues that as a third country the UK will be able to use the system but not take part in the management or have access to the encryption technology. In response, the UK is exploring options to create its [own](#) satellite navigation network.

The UK is one of Europe's biggest military powers. This includes investment in, development and exports of military equipment: around 20 % of all EU [military capabilities](#) are UK-owned. London has [expressed an interest](#) in maintaining close links between British and European defence industries, including through [participation](#) in the EDF. Defence industrial cooperation however [depends](#) on the future agreement on the customs union and single market. In this respect, the 'no deal' scenario would be the most damaging when it comes to defence and security, given potential commercial tariffs and delays, with an impact on supply chains and overall [cross-border collaboration](#). The EU, meanwhile, has expressed a [commitment](#) to ensuring 'as close cooperation as possible'.

## CSDP missions and operations

The EU's CSDP missions and operations already have a system in place for allowing third countries to participate, through what are referred to as framework participation agreements that provide a legal and political basis for their contribution. However, such agreements do not imply any decision-making role in preparation, strategic guidance or command.

According to a [report](#) by the British House of Lords, UK personnel contributions to the EU's CSDP missions and operations are rather modest, amounting to 2.3 % of total contributions by EU Member States and to 4.3 % of the missions and operations to which it was a direct contributor. Therefore, the impact of the UK's departure from the EU is likely to have a limited impact on current and future missions and operations. As the UK was in command of the EU's [counter-piracy Atalanta military operation](#), one of the first direct consequences of Brexit in terms of CSDP missions was the relocation of the operational headquarters of Atalanta from Northwood, UK, to Rota, Spain. Although the UK has [expressed its intention](#) to take part in the operational planning of future missions, as reflecting its contribution, in reality this might be problematic on the EU's side as an exception to the rule of this kind could have [implications](#) for the EU's relations with other external partners.

### What about NATO?

NATO's primacy as the UK's main provider of European defence is [well known](#). NATO is the 'bedrock of the UK's national defence', underpinning its security and that of its allies.

A staunch supporter of EU-NATO cooperation, the British government sees the two as mutually reinforcing for a more secure Europe. NATO is also [seen](#) as a potential platform for EU-UK cooperation. The UK would have the [opportunity](#) to lead this effort and signal its enduring commitment to European security.

During a [speech](#) on 1 April 2019, the EU's chief Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier affirmed that close cooperation in a world of continuous instability was in both parties' mutual interests. However, on [another occasion](#) he also stated that after the UK's departure from the Union there would be no British ambassador on the EU's Political and Security Committee, the UK would not be able to command EU missions, operations or battle groups, and it would cease to be a member of the European Defence Agency and Europol. For each of these aspects, it is in the parties' common interest to devise new forms of cooperation.

## A post-Brexit European defence landscape

[Some authors](#) doubt Brexit will substantially harm the EU's external action or global role, believing rather that it will trigger more pragmatism in foreign policy and increased intergovernmental cooperation on defence among the remaining EU-27. [Others](#) predict that without UK defence industrial expertise, defence capability development will be more difficult and the EU's operational ambitions will decrease. Much debated is also French President Emmanuel Macron's [European Intervention Initiative](#) – a political defence cooperation structure aimed at fostering a European strategic culture through joint operations – of which the UK is a member. The French president has also recently proposed establishing a [European Security Council](#) with the UK included, though how this could materialise is still unclear. Questions relating to the future relationship are also key to the EU's ambitions for strategic autonomy and the rethinking of its global role.

## European Parliament

The November 2018 draft political declaration between the EU and the UK expressed support for the establishment of an official dialogue between the European and British Parliaments in order for parliamentarians 'to share views and expertise on issues related to the future relationship'. The agreements on the future relationship will have to be [ratified](#) by the European Parliament and in some cases, also by national parliaments. The European Parliament will also have to consent to the withdrawal agreement. In its resolutions, Parliament has [stressed](#) that the EU 'should maintain the closest possible partnership in security and defence' with the UK after Brexit and that the EU-NATO strategic partnership is [crucial](#) for future EU-UK relations. Parliament has also [emphasised](#) the UK's status as a third country post-Brexit, stating that although it will no longer have any decision-making role, consultation mechanisms should be established to keep the UK closely involved.

## MAIN REFERENCES

Mölling C. and Giegerich B., [The UK's contribution to European Security and Defence](#), DGAP, 2018.

European Council, [Draft political declaration setting out the framework for the future relationship between the EU and the UK](#), November 2018.

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