'Global Britain' and 'Europe of Defence'
Prospects, challenges and opportunities

SUMMARY
Since the referendum to leave the European Union (EU) in 2016, the United Kingdom (UK) has been rethinking its role in world affairs. Under the ‘Global Britain’ banner, the UK sees itself as a force for multilateralism, a strong military power with global presence and reach, and a strong pillar of the transatlantic alliance. Reflection on the implications of ‘Global Britain’ for the UK’s future foreign, security and defence policy has resulted in two strategic documents, the Integrated Review and the Defence Command Paper, which outline policy priorities and the government’s strategic vision.

Although the EU as such is to a large extent absent from these strategic documents, there are implications to be considered, particularly as the EU has taken significant steps towards defence and military integration and as it is continuing to deepen its relationship with NATO.

Although foreign, security and defence policy were excluded from the formal negotiations on a new EU-UK partnership, at the British government’s request, it appears that the EU and UK foreign policy positions, strategic considerations, and security interests remain largely aligned. Various experts therefore argue that it is worth considering options for flexible engagements and for cultivating a new relationship through other common multilateral, bilateral and international forums.

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Political state of play

The UK left the EU on 31 January 2020, after 47 years of membership and 40 months of negotiations, and entered a one-year transition period. This ended with the signing of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) on 30 December 2020, concluded after 10 months of negotiations. The TCA was provisionally applied from 1 January 2021, and formally received the European Parliament's consent on 27 April 2021. The TCA, alongside a security of information agreement (which allows the exchange of classified information), then entered fully into force on 1 May 2021, following its conclusion by the Council of the EU. The TCA governs the new EU-UK relationship and covers policy areas such as energy, transport and fisheries, but not foreign policy or security and defence cooperation, which, at the request of the British government, were excluded from the negotiations. Under the current legal framework, any involvement or participation by the UK in the EU’s defence structures will be as a third country.

The revised Political Declaration of October 2019, which accompanied the Withdrawal Agreement, originally included foreign policy and defence cooperation and sought a 'broad, comprehensive and balanced security partnership'. The declaration outlined possibilities for cooperation in areas such as sanctions policy, defence capability development, and missions and operations under the EU common security and defence policy (CSDP). Experts argue that while the EU saw the Political Declaration as a 'roadmap for structuring and organising the negotiations' for the post-Brexit relationship, the UK had interpreted it as 'non-binding guidance'. The UK's February 2020 negotiation guidelines omitted foreign, security and defence policy cooperation, stating that such areas did 'not require an institutionalised relationship'. Arguably, this contributed to a difficult start in the relationship.

Theresa May’s Conservative government (2016-2019) viewed the notion of a security and defence partnership more favourably than Boris Johnson’s (in office since July 2019, also Conservative), and in 2018 had proposed 'an ambitious partnership covering the breadth of security interests including foreign policy, defence, development'. For the moment, discussions on such aspects of the future relationship appear to be 'absent in Westminster and Whitehall'. The initial assumption, according to the Centre for European Reform, 'was that it would be easier to reach agreement on foreign and defence policy co-operation than on other issues'. Similarly, Jim Cloos, former Deputy Director General in the General Secretariat of the Council of the EU, argued that foreign policy and security seemed to be candidates for an immediate agreement because of the close relationship and the UK’s important role.

British opposition to formalising cooperation could be explained by the perception that the EU institutional frameworks for external security cooperation offer 'few incentives for the UK', compared to other, more flexible formats (ad hoc coalitions). The EU's proposals for possible foreign and security policy cooperation with the UK include several areas such as coordination in multilateral organisations, sanctions, crisis management, capability development, intelligence, and development. To this end, the Deputy Secretary General of the European External Action Service (EEAS), Charles Fries, argued before the European Parliament's Subcommittee on Security and Defence (SEDE) in May 2021 that, 'there is huge potential to develop a relationship with the UK once London is ready to engage in a discussion on security and defence with us'.

Finally, tensions such as those over the implementation of the Northern Ireland Protocol have contributed to a difficult political atmosphere and have hampered the advancement of talks on sensitive areas, such as security and defence. As quoted in The Economist: 'the biggest obstacle to a pragmatic solution is lack of trust'.

Prospects for 'Global Britain'

After the start of the Brexit negotiations, the UK began to frame its post-EU membership foreign and security policy under the 'Global Britain' banner, whereby the UK is 'a country actively engaged in Europe and the world ... and playing a leading role in advancing European and international security
and an international rules-based system. This vision was articulated in the 'Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy', resulting from a comprehensive strategic reflection process and which describes the government’s vision for the UK's role in the world over the next decade. Published on 16 March 2021, the integrated review is flanked by a complementary Defence Command Paper, 'Defence in a Competitive Age', published on 22 March 2021. The last such strategic reflection undertaken by the UK resulted in the 2015 'National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review'. These strategic papers have been issued in the context of an intense year for British diplomacy as the country hosted the G7 summit in June 2021, will host the United Nations (UN) Climate Change Conference (COP26) in November 2021 and also held the UN Security Council presidency in February 2021.

Integrated review: Foreign and security policy

Introducing the Integrated Review (IR), Prime Minister Boris Johnson states from the outset that 'the UK has started a new chapter in our history' after leaving the EU, 'free to tread our own path', and with 'the freedom to do things differently and better'. He also voices several goals for the UK in the next decade, such as becoming a 'science and tech superpower by 2030' considering that technology 'is going to be the most fundamental metric of national power'.

The IR makes clear that the UK envisages 'a change of approach', no longer focusing on preserving the post-Cold war rules-based international order but rather on the UK being 'a force for good' in a more fragmented world characterised by great power competition. In such a world, the UK commits to defend 'openness, democracy and human rights' and to seek multilateral solutions to challenges such as climate change or global health. The IR articulates a four-pronged strategic framework to achieve these goals by:

- 'sustaining strategic advantage through science and technology';
- 'shaping the open international order of the future';
- 'strengthening security and defence at home and overseas'; and
- 'building resilience at home and overseas';

Not unlike the goals of the EU's own comprehensive approach, the IR puts forward a British integrated approach in support of faster decision- and policy-making and by 'bringing together defence, diplomacy, development, intelligence and security, trade and aspects of domestic policy' to pursue national objectives. Combining these aspects is seen as necessary to achieve the prime minister's vision in an international context defined by geo-economic shifts, China's assertiveness and the growing strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific, systemic rivalry, rapid technological advancements and transnational challenges such as climate change and terrorism. The UK aims to engage in 'regulatory diplomacy' to influence international norms in this complex environment. The IR’s threat analysis broadly corresponds to that identified in EU strategic documents such as the 2016 EU Global Strategy (see Figure 4 in the EPRS 2021 Peace and Security Outlook).

The Indo-Pacific region is given significant attention in the IR. Dubbed the 'Indo-Pacific tilt', the UK aims to be the European country with 'the broadest, most integrated presence in support of mutually beneficial trade, shared security and values' in the region by 2030. The tilt is not unrelated to the view that China's rise is 'by far the most significant geopolitical factor in the world today', viewing the country as a 'systemic competitor', with repercussions for the shape of the international order. Africa and the Middle East are also mentioned, with the UK aiming to support 'a more resilient region that is increasingly self-reliant in providing for its own security'. Cooperation with the UK is expected to become 'highly prized around the world' as the country aims to be 'a model for an integrated approach to tackling global challenges'. In this context, it is worth noting that the UK is not alone in its emphasis on the Indo-Pacific region as a geopolitical hotspot, with the EU also developing a strategy for the region, the United States having put forward a vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific, and other countries following suit.
Europe in the Integrated Review

The IR envisages ‘constructive and productive relationships with our neighbours in the European Union based on mutual respect for sovereignty and the UK’s freedom to do things differently’ as they remain ‘vital partners’. The main characteristic of post-Brexit foreign policy will be ‘the ability to move swiftly and with greater ability’, and ‘our strong independent voice’ in working with others. The UK sees itself as having ‘uniquely global interests, partnerships and capabilities’, and as one of the most ‘reliable and credible allies around the world’, and intends to become the ‘greatest single European contributor’ to Euro-Atlantic security by 2030.

While the IR makes several mentions of Europe, it tends to emphasise relationships with individual European countries rather than the EU institutions or framework as such. The Economist notes that the IR’s ‘terse treatment of the EU is notable’. Notably, the longstanding security and defence partnership with France stands out, Germany is seen as an ‘essentially ally’, while the other European countries to earn a mention as UK partners are Italy, Poland, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland. The UK remains committed to European security ‘through NATO, the Joint Expeditionary Force and strong bilateral relations’.

The IR notes that the UK ‘will remain deeply invested in the security and prosperity of Europe’ despite marking a ‘distinctive approach to foreign policy’. The ‘important role’ played by the EU in ensuring peace and prosperity is recognised, stating the UK’s willingness to work with the EU where our interests coincide, such as supporting European stability and security and climate action. The United States (US) is singled out as the UK’s ‘most important bilateral relationship’, with emphasis on the ‘Five Eyes’ format, an intelligence alliance between the UK, the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. The goal of improving ‘domestic and international resilience’ among allies and partners is also noted.

Stakeholder views

A Chatham House op-ed notes the IR’s success in signalling that leaving the EU ‘does not make for an introspective Britain with a diminished international role’. The document is commended for giving a clear sense of the UK’s ambitions and priorities; however, it is seen as ‘notably thin’ when it comes to its vision for a long-term foreign policy relationship with the EU. European Leadership Network experts write that the ‘Brussels shaped hole in the review risks weakening European security’ and undermining the UK’s aim of being ‘a transatlantic anchor between Europe and the US’, while Centre for European Reform authors concur on the ‘EU-shaped hole that can only make it harder for the UK to pursue its security interests’.

The absence in the IR of ‘any serious thinking about how the UK should engage with the EU remains a significant shortcoming’ which could limit the UK’s ‘capacity to achieve its objectives’, argues an EU Institute for Security Studies report. Experts from Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik note that although EU Member States pursue their own foreign and security policies, the UK ‘aimed to explicitly differentiate itself from its EU partners’ through its own priorities. Leaving out the EU as a partner in foreign policy sends the message that a strong London is deemed to exclude close relations with the EU, even though several British goals will require cooperation with the EU, such as in the area of sanctions. ‘British priorities would be easier to achieve with the EU than without it, let alone against it’.

What is on the cards for British defence policy?

The IR views the UK’s security environment as deteriorating owing to the proliferation of chemical and biological weapons and the advantages offered by novel high-tech capabilities in the hands of adversaries. It puts the UK on course to take a ‘more robust approach’ in response, by improving its ability to ‘detect, disrupt, defend against and deter the threats we face in the physical world and in cyberspace’. The document recognises the UK’s responsibility to contribute to international security in cooperation with allies and like-minded partners and through a tailored presence and support.
Although the Indo-Pacific is also emphasised from a security perspective, the IR notes that the Euro-Atlantic region ‘will remain critical to the UK’s security and prosperity’, with Russia identified as its ‘most acute direct threat’. The UK intends to meet its security ambitions by matching diplomacy with the ‘credibility of our deterrent and our ability to project power’. More precisely, the UK will remain a nuclear power with global reach, will enjoy integrated full spectrum ‘military capabilities across all five operational domains’, will become a leading ‘democratic cyber power’ and will channel greater investment in ‘rapid technology development and adoption’.

The defence-specific strategic document complementing the IR is the March 2021 Defence Command Paper, ‘an honest assessment’ of the UK’s current capability and future ambitions. The paper intends to set the course for the UK as ‘one of the most integrated, digital, and agile forces in the world’. In November 2020, Boris Johnson announced a £16.5 billion, or 14 %, increase in defence spending, allegedly the largest increase in real terms since Margaret Thatcher’s time in office. The move caused some controversy relating to cuts to foreign aid and school meals. NATO estimates the UK’s 2021 defence expenditure at £52.3 billion, the increase ensuring its place as Europe’s largest defence spender. Complementing the IR, the Defence Command Paper provides a more exhaustive analysis of the British threat assessment, adding Iran and North Korea to the list of challengers to UK interests, next to China and Russia. Terrorism, climate change as a threat multiplier, and the proliferation of chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) weapons also all threaten international stability. Cyberspace and space are seen as new battlefields that pose a number of both civilian and military risks. Combined, such threats have ‘given way to a continuum of conflict’. Since the technological advantages of the UK and its allies have ‘diminished over the past two decades’, investment and preparation for ‘more persistent global engagement’ are required.

Power projection is a ‘defining feature’ of British defence policy, and its armed forces will ‘become more present and active around the world’ and will be designed for ‘permanent and persistent global engagement’. Modernisation of the Army, the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force (RAF) is envisaged, with planned investments of around £23 billion, £40 million and £2 billion respectively in the Future Combat Air System. One element that attracted media attention was the announcement of an Army personnel reduction plan to cut 72 500 troops by 2025. This is in order to achieve an army of the future that is ‘leaner, more lethal, nimbler, and more effectively matched to current and future threats’. The RAF will also see personnel cuts, balanced out by acquiring newer capabilities. As regards the British navy, the Defence Command Paper notes that it is ‘one of only three navies in the world’ able to operate two fifth generation aircraft carriers (HMS Queen Elizabeth

Nuclear deterrence in focus

The Defence Command paper highlights the threats posed by nuclear-armed states that are ‘increasing and diversifying their arsenals’. The UK is one of two nuclear powers in Europe, alongside France, and its main nuclear deterrent is embodied in its nuclear missile-armed submarines. The review therefore sets out a ‘once-in-two-generations programme to modernise our nuclear forces’ by replacing the current submarines (Vanguard Class) with newer ones (Dreadnought Class).

The annual Peace and Security Outlook from EPRS illustrates that the UK’s upgrade will bring it closer to the French nuclear arsenal (290 warheads). By comparison, the US is estimated to have 5 550 warheads, Russia stands at approximately 6 257, and China at 350. The strategy justifies the increase by arguing that threats to strategic stability have emerged and the UK ‘must ensure potential adversaries can never use their capabilities to threaten us or our NATO allies’.

The Financial Times considers this aspect the ‘surprise announcement’ of the review. By increasing the number of nuclear warheads by over 40 %, to reach 260, the newspaper notes that this is a reversal of position, considering that the UK had committed to ‘reduce its nuclear stockpile from 225 to no more than 180 warheads by the mid-2020s’. The decision also prompted concern from arms control groups, raising questions about the UK’s commitment to its nuclear disarmament obligation under the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty. Experts also point out that this increase is a reversal of ‘decades of progress towards nuclear disarmament’ and might come at the cost of the UK’s nuclear diplomacy and credibility as a ‘responsible nuclear power’.

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and HMS Prince of Wales), which are also permanently available to NATO and fully integrated with the US Navy and Marine Corps.

The Defence Ministry plans to invest over £6.6 billion in *research, development and experimentation* to equip the armed forces with advanced technologies, and ensure the UK's 'competitive, innovative and world-class defence'. A complementary 'defence and security industrial strategy' sets out ways to link the government with defence and security industries and academia. It envisions more agile acquisition and procurement policies and ways to accelerate innovation.

What does being a democratic cyber power entail?

The British Defence Command Paper sets out the ambition to build the UK’s 'status as a leading, responsible, democratic cyber power'. It intends to achieve this goal through the modernisation of British defence by, for example, harnessing artificial intelligence capabilities – which are considered detrimental to winning or losing future conflicts. Notably, in November 2020, the [National Cyber Force](https://www.defence.gov.uk/defence-devices-and-capabilities/cyber/national-cyber-force) was launched to 'transform the UK's cyber capabilities to disrupt adversaries and keep the UK safe'. This entity will function as an integrated component of British military capabilities.

Part four of the [EU-UK TCA](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/eu-uk-trade-and-cooperation-agreement-between-the-united-kingdom-and-the-eu) provides for cooperation on cyber issues 'by sharing best practices and through cooperative practical actions', including cooperation to 'strengthen global cyber resilience' and help partner countries fight cybercrime.

The Defence Command Paper makes no mention of the EU as such. Europe is mentioned several times, albeit after cooperation within NATO, Five Eyes and the US. Although the UK’s commitment to European security is clearly expressed, emphasis is placed on the partnerships with individual European countries, which are to be 're-energised' through wider networks of defence attachés and through increased commitment in the Black Sea region, the High North, the Baltics and the Western Balkans. France is considered a 'vital partner' in security and defence, while Germany is recognised as an important member of NATO. Other European countries nominated 'to build influence and cooperation across Europe' are Italy, Spain, Greece, Poland, Cyprus, Bulgaria, and Romania.

Beyond the Euro-Atlantic space, the UK commits to strengthening regional defence cooperation in the **Indo-Pacific**, to increase its maritime presence – indeed the HMS Queen Elizabeth carrier has begun its [first deployment](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/first-deployment-of-the-hms-queen-elizabeth-carrier) in the region – and to pursue closer defence cooperation with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The partnerships with Canada, New Zealand and Australia are seen as being 'at the heart' of the Indo-Pacific tilt.

**Stakeholder views**

Experts from the European Council on Foreign Relations [highlight](https://ecfr.eu/en/papers/13537) that while the Defence Command Paper puts forward an ambitious military re-armament programme it does so 'without specifying what these very expensive capacities are necessary for and according to what strategy they will be used'. One author from the Centre for European Reform sees it as [paradoxical](https://www.centreforeuropeanreform.org/policy-questionnaire/trends-in-uk-defence-strategy) that the UK 'is now largely cutting the EU out of its approach to European security', given that the UK was one of the proponents of closer EU-NATO relations. He also notes the EU's complete absence from the Defence Command Paper. The International Institute for Strategic Studies [notes](https://www.iiss.org/insight/strategy-and-innovation/uk-defense-command-paper-2021) that the analysis and threat assessment appear sound and aligned with major allies such as the US, but criticises the 'lack of real detail' when it comes to transformational proposals. While the authors note that switching the emphasis from traditional capabilities to novel ones is understandable, they express concern about vagueness and the 'pressures of affordability'.
'Global Britain' meets 'Europe of Defence'

The British vote to leave the EU coincided with or, some argue, even facilitated, a wave of defence integration initiatives, foreshadowed by the launch of the EU Global Strategy five days after the referendum, on 28 June 2016. The EU’s toolbox of defence cooperation and frameworks for joint research and defence capability development have been enriched in the years since, in parallel with the Brexit negotiations. Richard Whitman argues that Brexit eliminated the UK’s capacity to ‘influence debate on the future of EU security and defence’ and ‘facilitated an opportunity’ to pursue further integration in this policy area. In a written statement for the UK Parliament, Simon Duke finds it ‘imperative’ for the UK to take seriously into account its potential association with a potential European defence union. He also points out that reaching agreements in sensitive defence-related industrial sectors, such as aerospace, will ‘influence the mood music when it comes to any discussions on CSDP’. Since 2020, the EU has started a strategic reflection – the ‘Strategic Compass’ process, which aims to refine the EU’s level of ambition, and to link strategic, operational and capability needs more effectively. It has a dedicated partnerships ‘basket’, which will also discuss possible ways forward for specific third countries and partners. In parallel, NATO is also undertaking a strategic reflection process under the NATO 2030 banner, the insights from which will feed into the next NATO Strategic Concept. Both strategic documents are scheduled for adoption in 2022.

What does the EU framework offer to third countries?

CSDP missions and operations

Third countries, such as the UK, can participate in CSDP missions and operations through framework participation agreements (FPA). According to the Council, 20 countries have such agreements with the EU. FPAs provide a legal and political basis for partners’ contributions but do not provide for a decision-making role in planning, strategic guidance or command. The May 2017 Council conclusions reiterate Member States’ commitment to develop a ‘more strategic approach’ to CSDP cooperation, focusing on third partners who share EU values and are able to contribute to missions and operations. The conclusions from May 2018 also emphasise that such partnerships should ‘be of mutual benefit and should contribute to strengthen the EU's security and defence efforts’, while the EU’s Military Committee considers that four main conditions are to be fulfilled for third party participation in CSDP: an FPA with the EU, an existing security of information agreement with the EU, good neighbourly relations, and shared values and principles. The UK would fit the bill for all the conditions, barring the lack of an FPA for the moment.

Experts who provided statements for the UK House of Lords in 2018 argue that the EU’s CSDP was ‘never central to the UK defence effort’, never as significant as activities undertaken through NATO or coalitions, also confirmed by the relatively low British personnel contributions. However, two experts note that the value of CSDP for the UK had rather been as a ‘manager than a player’ in terms of foreign policy agenda-setting and in mobilising European countries to get involved in crisis management. Simon Duke argues that any future UK role in CSDP will likely be as a ‘facilitator rather than a leader’, despite the government’s ‘apparent ambition’ (at the time, in January 2018) to negotiate a more privileged partnership in this respect.

Although third-party status appears unlikely to ‘satisfy Britain’s interests and strategic ambitions’ since it limits the type of input that can be provided, several experts have indicated that it does remain in the UK’s strategic interest to contribute to several CSDP missions and operations, most notably Operation Atalanta, Operation Althea and EULEX Kosovo. Therefore, some experts point to the possibility of the EU reforming third-party access to its CSDP which, some argue, would be...
possible given the CSDP’s intergovernmental, and therefore more flexible, nature. Angus Lapsley, currently a Director-General in the UK Ministry of Defence, suggested two models to the House of Lords’ External Affairs Sub-Committee:

- **Finland and Sweden’s relationship with NATO**: non-NATO members, yet active contributors to its operations and intellectual and political discussions. Although lacking a formal decision-making role, they often participate in high-level meetings, second personnel, exchange information and take part in exercises. This is a more formal, multilateral model based on process and structures.

- **The UK–US relationship**: historical, political and military allies yet without any formal decision-making within each other’s governments. Although the UK does not participate in the US National Security Council or the Cabinet, the two share a ‘culture of cooperation and sharing of information’, seconding staff and early consultations. This is a model based on ‘intimacy of contact’ and consultation.

In a future relationship with the EU, Mr Lapsley suggests combining elements of both models. Ian Bond however highlights that the UK has no interest in an FPA with the EU at the moment but that it could cooperate with EU members through NATO, the French-led European Intervention Initiative or ad hoc coalitions of the willing.

### Defence industry and capability development

Similarly to CSDP missions and operations, the UK would enjoy standard third-party access to any EU defence industrial initiatives should it seek it. Effectively, the consequences of Brexit listed by Michel Barnier, the EU’s Chief Negotiator, in November 2017 remain applicable:

- The UK cannot formally and regularly attend EU defence ministers’ meetings or the Political and Security Committee.
- The UK cannot command EU operations or lead EU battlegroups.
- The UK is no longer a member of the European Defence Agency (EDA) or Europol.
- The UK cannot access the European Defence Fund in the same way as EU members.
- The UK cannot be a fully fledged part of permanent structured cooperation.

Initiatives such as the European Defence Fund (EDF), permanent structured cooperation (PESCO), and military mobility have become defining instruments in the EU’s defence industrial and military integration toolbox. Testifying to the UK Parliament, Simon Duke notes that such initiatives, which intend to lead to greater EU collaboration on research, development and procurement, could ‘damage the market access and competitiveness of UK defence industries’. He recommends that the UK seek association with the EDA, explore ‘possibilities for engagement’ through the EDF and Horizon Europe programmes, and coordinate in the margin of the EU’s coordinated annual review on defence process.

An expert for the British Royal United Services Institute think tank points out that a number of companies that contribute greatly to UK prosperity and defence technological prowess are Europe-based. Examples include Airbus, Leonardo, Thales and MBDA, companies worried about future regulatory arrangements between the EU and the UK, and which might consider gradually moving technology and production to the other side of the Channel. A showcase of the disruption to the defence and space sectors was provided by Galileo, the EU’s satellite navigation system, which the UK will be able to use as a third party but without being involved in management or having access to the encryption technology. In response, the UK set out a plan to create its own satellite navigation network but ultimately the idea seems to have been dropped, likely owing to the cost.

Participation in the EDF would be as for any third party, subject to conditions laid out in its regulation. While members of the European Economic Area enjoy more flexible participation, non-EU firms controlled by third countries may not receive EU funds, access classified information or make use of the intellectual property resulting from EDF-financed projects. As regards PESCO, an EU intergovernmental treaty-based framework for military and defence integration, third-party rules...
were agreed by the Council of the EU in November 2020. They include political, substantive and legal conditions to be fulfilled. The first third countries to take part in PESCO are the US, Canada, and Norway, whose participation in the military mobility project was approved on 6 May 2021.

At the time of writing, the UK has not submitted a formal request to participate in PESCO projects. It has the option to take part in projects where a security of information agreement with the EU suffices, but not in those organised in cooperation with the EDA as long as no administrative arrangement is in place. In December 2020, the UK Secretary of Defence, Ben Wallace, expressed the UK’s ‘serious concerns about the intellectual property rights and export controls’ that third-party rules in PESCO would impose, while remaining open to cooperation with European industries ‘on a case-by-case basis’. The position of the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office on PESCO is to keep reviewing how third-party rules are interpreted in practice, and to monitor how current projects are developing and what positions other third countries will take. Experts however warn that the ‘consequences of a deep rift’ as regards defence industrial cooperation ‘will be significant and felt for years’.

Outlook for the ‘special relationship’

UK-US relations are often referred to as ‘special’, hinting at the two countries’ common history, language, shared interests and like-mindedness. The Integrated Review clearly states that there is ‘none more valuable to British citizens than our relationship with the United States’, which will remain the UK’s ‘most important bilateral relationship’ underpinned by alliances such as NATO, Five Eyes and large trading and investment activities. The IR seeks to reinforce this cooperation and to bolster it where it can have greater impact. Striking the same note, the Defence Command Paper labels the two countries as ‘indispensable allies and pre-eminent partners for security, defence and foreign policy’, enjoying the ‘broadest, deepest and most advanced [relationship] of any two countries’, extending across the full spectrum of defence. It is to be further deepened in areas such as cyberspace, space, high tech capabilities and within NATO.

The start of Joe Biden’s mandate as President of the US has brought new momentum to transatlantic relations to deliver lasting change and mark a new stage in the relationship. The stakes for the UK are notably high given the policy changes brought about by its withdrawal from the EU and the pressure to advance on a trade and security agenda with the US. However, President Biden, of Irish descent, has warned against risking peace in Northern Ireland because of Brexit tensions, to the extent of making any potential UK-US trade deal conditional upon it. A bipartisan group of US Congress members have furthermore called on the president to appoint a special representative tasked with safeguarding peace and facilitating negotiations. Nevertheless, the June 2021 G7 summit, hosted by the UK in Cornwall, was an expression of the durability of UK-US relations, with results such as a travel task force and commitment to reduce tensions over Northern Ireland.

The 10 June 2021 bilateral US-UK meeting ahead of that summit also produced a new Atlantic Charter, named after the homonymous original document signed in 1941 by Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill. The new charter outlines a common vision to deepen cooperation on:

- democracy, human rights and multilateralism;
- defence and security;
- science and technology;
- trade and prosperity;
- climate, nature and health;
- and protecting the delicate balance in Northern Ireland.

Richard Whitman considers that the UK is faced with the challenge of working hard ‘to persuade the new [US] administration … that Brexit has not greatly diminished Britain’s European and global influence’. Indeed, the relationship with the US appears to have gained even more importance for the post-Brexit UK, as Boris Johnson stated in his bilateral meeting with President Biden that he will not disagree with him ‘on that or indeed on anything else’. Experts also point out that tensions with
the EU, and London's 'combative approach to prove that Brexit was a good idea' might also affect transatlantic cooperation and cohesion, possibly pushing the US to become more involved in 'finding a way ahead' for future EU-UK relations.

Several areas stand out in terms of UK-US policy alignment. One is China, where the UK's views have moved closer towards the Atlantic, visible through positions on China's access to the British 5G market, on offering Hong Kong residents options to relocate in Xinjiang. The UK's Indo-Pacific tilt is also compatible with the heightened attention of the US to the region. Additionally, the idea of reinforcing cooperation among democracies seems to be a strong Anglo-American priority. In 2020, Boris Johnson put forward an initiative to rename and expand the G7 format (including Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK, the US, as well as the EU) to a Democratic 10 or D10 group of countries which would also include Australia, India and South Korea. Meanwhile, President Biden, already during his presidential campaign, committed to convening a global 'Summit for Democracy' to 'strengthen our democratic institutions' and 'forge a common agenda to address threats to our common values'. Indeed, harnessing the power of democracy, freedom, the rule of law, equality and human rights were key components reflected in the final statements from three June 2021 summits: the G7 communiqué, the EU-US joint statement, and the NATO communiqué.

Since taking office, President Biden has expressed strong support for the European project and for transatlantic relations, demonstrated by his first visit overseas in June 2021 to attend a series of summits, including one between the EU and the US, an event which had not taken place since 2014. He also welcomed the EU's 'growing investment in the military capabilities that enable our shared defence', and agreed during the summit to plan a dedicated dialogue on security and defence.

Prospects and opportunities

Even though foreign policy and security and defence cooperation remain beyond the scope of current formal agreements between the EU and the UK, there are options to be explored within these limits. This is particularly the case considering the strong alignment between the EU and the UK, not only in terms of respect for democratic values and interest in economic prosperity but also as regards the security of the European continent, its neighbourhood and the wider Euro-Atlantic space. The UK's historical involvement and important role in shaping the CSDP as well as its immense security and defence know-how render it an invaluable partner to the EU. Likewise, a more capable and well-equipped EU in defence matters, one that is developing a truly strategic partnership with NATO and the US, should, at least in theory, make for an attractive partner for the UK.

In practice, the UK's foreign policy positions continue to remain close to the EU, as witnessed in the case of Belarus, and there is considerable overlap in terms of both sides' assessments of their shared strategic environment. Other strongly shared interests include cooperating to reform and maintain the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran, and advancing international norms and legal frameworks on human rights sanctions, given that both the EU and the UK have instituted global human rights sanctions regimes. Nevertheless, experts argue that with Brexit the UK 'lost an important platform through which to exercise influence and underscore its relevance'.

Ian Bond identifies three possible scenarios for future EU-UK cooperation on foreign, security and defence policy. The first is a 'legally binding agreement on external security cooperation', which despite being the EU's preferred relationship, is incompatible with the Johnson government's approach. The second is no agreement at all, meaning that any future cooperation would be on an entirely ad hoc basis. And the third scenario envisions various targeted agreements, to cooperate with the EDA for example. Similar scenarios are identified by Atlantic Council experts, who also recommend flexibility from the EU's side in terms of inviting UK representatives to relevant Council meetings relating to the CSDP and CFSP, as well as coordinating between the EU's delegations abroad and British embassies.

Although the IR and the Defence Command Paper confirm that the Johnson government tends to regard other 'major nation-states' as peers to cooperate with, rather than the EU as such, it might be
'underestimating the advantages of regular, structured contacts with the EU institutions' since the Commission and the EEAS have larger roles to play in this policy area. Bond also suggests that once the UK has 'satisfied its domestic political need to show that it is accepted internationally as a fully sovereign and independent player' it might be more open to explore future cooperation paths. Others argue instead that, by definition, 'Global Britain' means that 'there will be a divergence' from the EU's manner of engaging in security and defence policy-making.

While Ian Bond recommends that the EU 'should identify the bare minimum of institutional underpinning needed to facilitate co-operation', Richard Whitman points out the EU's concern at possibly alienating its other third partners by creating a bespoke relationship with the UK. As for the British position, he envisages continued avoidance of 'an overarching framework for EU-UK foreign, security and defence policy cooperation' in favour of a more ad hoc approach where 'appropriate and necessary'. Indeed, polling by the European Council on Foreign Relations illustrates that in a list of 20 policy areas in which the British government consider cooperation with the EU-27 a priority, defence ranked 11th. In the same report, Ulrike Franke argues that the UK's aim might be 'to have flexible structures that allow it to plug into European foreign and defence policy where doing so is in its interests', suggesting the creation of a European Security Council as a possibility. On the contrary, experts from the Polish Institute of International Affairs see the potential for creating such a structure to be low, pointing rather at the more likely prospect of emphasising the E3 format, of France, Germany and the UK.

A report from the Warsaw Institute emphasises that an analysis of potential consequences for defence industries, supply chains, and for EU-UK military interoperability makes the need for a 'special status' in the EU-UK defence relationship 'obvious', since the economic repercussions could be devastating. Author Michał Oleksiejuk also argues that the E3 format might be a preferred avenue for European-British cooperation. Born during the JCPOA negotiations, there are discussions exploring the possibility to make this format permanent, which would allow the UK to take part in security and defence exchanges.

In the absence of more formal or institutional cooperation on foreign, security and defence policy, the EU and the UK are likely to cooperate through other multilateral frameworks or through the various bilateral relationships between the UK and EU Member States. For example, the Joint Expeditionary Force, a military grouping of 10 northern European countries, including seven EU members, and the French-led European Intervention Initiative. NATO will likely remain an important forum for indirect EU-UK cooperation, not least through the vehicle of the EU-NATO partnership, which is gathering steam. Other possible formats include the G7, G20, and the United Nations, while some authors suggest a possible EU-UK-US ‘transatlantic 3’ structure ‘focusing on areas of global strategic importance’ and which could receive President Biden's blessing given his support of smooth EU-UK relations.

European Parliament perspective

The European Parliament gave its consent to the withdrawal agreement on 29 January 2020 and formally approved the EU-UK TCA on 28 April 2021. The UK’s departure led to a reorganisation of Parliament and a decrease in the number of Members from 751 to 705. Parliament had set up a Brexit Steering Group on 6 April 2017 and appointed Guy Verhofstadt (Renew Europe, Belgium) as Brexit coordinator and Chair. The steering group was replaced by a UK Coordination Group, led by Foreign Affairs Committee Chair David McAllister (EPP, Germany), which scrutinised the evolution of EU-UK negotiations and liaised with the European Commission’s Task Force for relations with the United Kingdom, led by Michel Barnier, the EU’s chief Brexit negotiator. In June 2021, the European Parliament has formed a UK Contact Group to ensure the coordination of EU-UK relations and parliamentary scrutiny. The body is co-chaired by the chairs of the Committees on International Trade, Foreign Affairs, and of the Chair of the future delegation for relations with the UK. The creation of a Parliamentary Partnership Assembly, consisting of Members of both the UK and
European Parliaments, is provided for in the EU-UK TCA. This body would be able to request information on the implementation of the TCA and make recommendations.

Parliament’s January 2020 resolution on the CSDP considers ‘strong, closer and special defence and security cooperation’ between the EU and the UK as essential, and proposed the conclusion of a ‘defence and security treaty’ which enables British participation in EU frameworks. In June 2020, Parliament indicated its regret at the UK’s refusal to ‘negotiate an agreement on security and defence matters’, deploring the lack of ambition from the British government to envisage a relationship with the EU in this field. In the same recommendation it stressed that EU-UK cooperation on interoperable defence capabilities, on Galileo and on the fight against disinformation were of mutual interest.

In its January 2021 resolution on the CSDP, Parliament encouraged the UK to participate in CSDP missions and operations and in the EU’s defence capability development initiatives – including in PESCO projects. Parliament’s April 2021 resolution on the outcome of the negotiations expressed regret over the British government’s refusal to negotiate aspects of foreign policy, security and defence. It recalled the mutual interest in maintaining ‘close and lasting cooperation in these fields’ in particular to promote peace and security. To this end, Parliament proposed a systemic platform for high-level consultations and coordination on foreign policy issues, close engagement on security matters, including through EU-NATO cooperation, and preferential cooperation in peacekeeping operations.

MAIN REFERENCES

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