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Research Report

No "global Britain" after Brexit: Leaving the EU weakens UK foreign and security policy, closer ties remain in Germany's interest

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SWP Comment

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No “Global Britain” after Brexit

Leaving the EU Weakens UK Foreign and Security Policy,
Closer Ties Remain in Germany’s Interest

Claudia Major and Nicolai von Ondarza

Under the leitmotif of “Global Britain”, the British government is painting Brexit as a unique opportunity to rethink its foreign and security policy: stronger, more influential, more global. The heart of the concept is a global outlook and bilateral agreements to compensate the loss of EU ties. In fact, however, the looming reality of Brexit appears to be weakening the United Kingdom diplomatically and spotlighting the constraints that individual nation states face. Confronted with rising transatlantic tensions and a resurgent China and Russia, the EU has no interest in having a weakened and insecure neighbour right across the Channel. But neither will the EU offer the UK special access to its foreign and security policy as a third country. In parallel to the Brexit negotiations, Germany should therefore keep channels open by intensifying the bilateral relationship and proposing new European foreign policy consultation formats.

The United Kingdom traditionally sees itself as a global actor with diplomatic and military influence. Yet London’s geopolitical influence was fading even before the 2016 Brexit referendum, which has only accelerated the process. With attention distracted by domestic issues (especially the Scottish independence referendum in 2014, the Brexit referendum and the ensuing exit process), the British have been largely absent from central international conflicts, including the Ukraine crisis and the war in Syria.

At the same time Prime Minister Theresa May and her ministers expound major foreign policy ambitions under the motto “Global Britain”. In the utopian version of Brexit the UK, freed from the constraints

of EU membership, steps out into the world to renew its globalist outlook and influence. In this sense Prime Minister Theresa May and Foreign Minister Boris Johnson envision a global foreign policy that establishes a presence in every region of the globe, revives old alliances, creates new partnerships, strengthens the multilateral order and – after leaving the EU – a UK that creates its own system of free trade agreements with the rest of the world.

At this juncture, London has neither spelled out what those lofty goals would mean in conceptual terms nor allocated adequate resources to their fulfilment, as the British Parliament recently criticised. Even after Brexit, the three traditional



pillars of British foreign policy – relations with the EU and European states, with the United States, and with the most important international organisations – will remain structurally defining. But London will find itself forced to adapt them to the new circumstances.

A Difficult Relationship with the EU

As the UK shapes its post-Brexit relationship with the EU, in the sphere of foreign and security policy it is seeking to preserve the greatest possible access to EU policies and processes.

To date foreign and security policy has been explicitly bracketed out of the Brexit talks. Following the political agreement in March 2018 on most of the separation issues (with the crucial exception of the Northern Ireland question) and the transition period, the talks now move on to translating the political agreement into legal form, seeking a solution for Northern Ireland and setting the framework for the future relationship. Both sides aim to discuss cooperation on foreign and security policy separately from the economic relationship. Two areas are specifically involved here: Firstly, access to the EU's existing structures and processes, including the European Defence Agency (EDA) and the planning process for EU operations. Here the question of how the UK can participate in the EU's security debates as a third country needs to be answered, along with the conditions under which it is permitted to participate in joint projects (if at all).

Secondly, access to the emerging EU defence structures will need to be clarified. Since 2016 the EU has initiated a set of changes which can produce a qualitative leap. This applies above all to the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), which enables groups of EU states to cooperate more closely; the European Defence Fund (EDF), through which the Commission intends to fund joint research, development and procurement; and CARD (Coordinated

Annual Review on Defence), to coordinate defence planning at EU level.

One irony of Brexit is that London is seeking to participate as a third state in parts of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) that it rejected while it was a member of the EU. Until recently, for example, the British were blocking an increase in the European Defence Agency's budget. Although London supplied personnel and equipment for operations (for example for EU Operation Atalanta), its contribution remained small compared to the capabilities of the British armed forces. Especially in foreign and security policy, the Brexiteers have failed to make the case that EU membership effectively constrained the United Kingdom's room for manoeuvre. After all, like all member states London possessed a veto – of which it made regular use, in particular in defence matters.

At the 2018 Munich Security Conference in February, Prime Minister May named two reasons why the United Kingdom wishes to cooperate closely with the EU on foreign and security policy: Firstly London wants to avoid being excluded from the major European diplomatic debates. Shortly after that speech, in March 2018, the British experienced the EU's value as a diplomatic forum, when the EU institutions coordinated the European response to the poisoning of the former Russian double agent Sergei Skripal.

Secondly, London wishes to limit the repercussions of Brexit on its own defence industry and preserve its access to the EU market and future cooperation projects like the EDF. The latter has the potential to become a decisive factor for the development of the EU's defence industry. Recent doubts over the reliability of the transatlantic relationship have reinforced calls for more EU security and defence cooperation. At the same time, the legal framework of EU defence cooperation – in particular single market rules – makes it harder for the non-member UK and its defence industry to participate. The diplomatic row over Galileo, where UK firms are to be excluded from future contracts, has highlighted this challenge.

But the EU-27 also has an interest in cooperation with London. Even after Brexit, security problems affecting the EU will also touch on the United Kingdom (and vice versa), be they stabilisation operations in the European neighbourhood or dealing with a resurgent Russia. In contrast to the rest of the EU (bar France), the UK continues to possess unique security and defence capabilities. For example, the United Kingdom has Europe's strongest reconnaissance capabilities, with 44 percent of the EU's airborne early warning and control planes and almost half of its military transport aircraft.

Nevertheless, the EU's post-Brexit relationship with the United Kingdom will be no substitute for the current integration in the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. There are two reasons for this: Firstly, the EU has made it clear that it takes a hard line on the CSDP too. As a third state the United Kingdom will not have a seat at the table when the Union takes decisions on foreign and security policy. On the other hand, an arrangement like Norway's – which has no vote on EU foreign policy but participates in sanctions and supplies funding and troops for EU operations – will not be acceptable for the United Kingdom.

Secondly, talks between the EU and third states are generally conducted between senior EU officials (like the High Representative) and their counterparts, in this case the British foreign secretary. But in foreign and security policy this is no substitute for direct dialogue between member states within the EU institutions. This faces both sides with a geostrategic dilemma: Despite shared interests, the EU will keep the United Kingdom at arm's length where its foreign and security policy is concerned.

Bilateralism and Small Formats

Faced with the prospect of limited participation in EU processes, London is looking for alternative forums. Especially in the field of security, this has led the UK to seek to strengthen their bilateral relationships in Europe, as evidenced by agreements with

France, Poland and – prospectively – Germany.

Security and defence relations with **France** were already close before the Brexit vote. In the Lancaster House Treaties of 2010 London and Paris agreed to deepen ties in a wide range of defence and security topics. Both sides emphasise the importance of their cooperation and their leading roles in security and defence matters, pointing to their status as nuclear powers and UN Security Council members, their high defence spending and their experienced armed forces. In January 2018 they agreed a further deepening of cooperation, including in the maritime sector and the fight against terrorism and instability especially in the Sahel.

The United Kingdom also wants to participate in France's new prestige project, the European Intervention Initiative (EI2). EI2 seeks to unite politically willing and militarily able European states, such as Denmark, Estonia and Italy, to jointly carry out military interventions more effectively. While Germany criticises the EI2 for organising defence cooperation outside the EU structures, the French see exactly this European (rather than EU) character as a pragmatic possibility for keeping London in the European security cooperation after Brexit and therefore ensuring Europe's capacity to act.

Yet, the decisions of January 2018 are not a quantum leap. Rather they reflect the efforts of both countries to preserve continuity in the relationship despite Brexit. In view of the strict French positions on other Brexit questions, this serves the British interests.

The closer cooperation with **Poland** agreed in December 2017 is new. Although planning began before the Brexit referendum, both states have noticeably stepped up their efforts since the Brexit vote. They intend to expand cooperation in areas like training, cyber-security and defence industries. Cooperation on fighting Russian disinformation represents a central element, to which London has committed five million pounds.

Germany, in contrast, initially scaled back bilateral cooperation after the Brexit

vote in 2016, to avoid undermining the EU's Brexit negotiations. Not until April 2018 did the foreign ministers of the two states announce a "strategic dialogue on foreign and security policy" to direct attention to shared challenges beyond Brexit. The first goal of this dialogue is the adoption of a bilateral "Compact on Global Responsibilities" in autumn 2018, in which London and Berlin intend to name topics for cooperation. The two defence ministers also hope to agree closer cooperation in summer 2018, for example on cyber-security. Thus far, however, both announced initiatives remain empty shells. This is symptomatic for German-British relations in the Brexit context: One reason for London to seek a closer partnership with Berlin in security questions is its belief that Germany holds decisive sway over the Brexit talks. Berlin on the other hand prioritises cooperation with the EU-27.

Alongside bilateral relationships, London is also seeking to deepen cooperation in existing formats. These include the hitherto rather marginal Northern Group, to which Germany also belongs. In addition, the British government hopes to strengthen the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), in which the Baltic states, Denmark, the Netherlands and Norway participate. The June 2017 decision by Sweden and Finland to join the JEF represented a success for London. The British focus on these formats and its command of a multinational battalion in Estonia (within NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence, eFP) underline how the United Kingdom is consolidating its role as a regional leader in the Baltic states and northern Europe.

These formats can serve to link the UK into the EU, and possibly as a way to channel UK interests into EU debates. They also offer opportunities to shape collective responses to security problems in and around Europe that will also continue to affect London. With the exception of British-French relations, this strategy has proven largely fruitless to date. There remains a yawning gap between the rhetoric of qualitatively new relations and the practice.

An Increasingly Unbalanced "Special Relationship"

The most important pillar of British foreign and security policy has traditionally been its "special relationship" with the United States, in the sense of a dense web of political, economic and military ties. The United Kingdom's uppermost security objective remains to keep the United States committed to Europe and to stay a relevant military partner for the Americans. To underline its value it therefore was the United Kingdom that supplied the largest non-US contingents for the US interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq.

But the relationship was already in flux before Brexit. On the one hand, the United Kingdom's military significance for the United States has declined markedly; on the other, British public support for major military interventions collapsed after the experience of the Iraq War. This was starkly underlined in 2013 when the House of Commons voted against military intervention in Syria. In the fight against the so-called Islamic State, London initially restricted its support for the United States to Iraq and only intervened in Syria after France triggered the EU's military assistance clause following the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris.

The Brexit vote has caused another shift in the strategic importance of the "special relationship" for the United Kingdom, and amplified the asymmetry. From US perspective London becomes a less valuable diplomatic asset after Brexit, as it can no longer represent Washington's interests within the EU.

May's government, on the other hand, has made a free trade agreement with the United States a cornerstone of her Brexit strategy. In line with her "Global Britain" plans, Theresa May hopes to negotiate comprehensive free trade agreements with the rest of the world. The flagship of this venture is a deep free trade agreement with the United States, which is the destination for about 18 percent of British exports and thus the United Kingdom's second-largest trading

partner (after the EU-27 with about 48 per cent). The Trump Administration, which itself tends towards bilateral rather than multilateral trade agreements, has already declared its fundamental willingness to negotiate. But to date the process has not moved beyond preliminary talks while even close partners such as Canada have been targeted with additional tariffs. In any case, such an agreement cannot come into effect before 2021 at the earliest, when the transition period is foreseen to end. It is certainly clear that a British-American free trade agreement is a significantly higher priority for London than for Washington.

In fact, striking diplomatic tensions have arisen between London and Washington. During the presidential election campaign, Donald Trump was one of the few international leaders to openly support Brexit. Initially, Theresa May was the first European leader Trump received in Washington, complete with public celebration of the “special relationship”.

But in January 2018 Trump cancelled a planned trip to London to open the new US embassy, in expectation of large-scale protests. He had already visited five other EU states: Belgium, France, Germany, Italy and Poland. A state visit to the United Kingdom has been postponed several times in the face of major public and parliamentary push-back, and is now scheduled for summer 2018. After Donald Trump disseminated videos by the extreme right-wing “Britain First” movement on Twitter even Prime Minister May felt forced to publicly criticise him. Although those diplomatic spats can be attributed to President Trump’s idiosyncratic style of communication it is striking that they have been conducted in such a visible manner. On the other hand cooperation at working level has been largely unaffected. And finally the United States (like the European allies) granted the British unambiguous support over the Skripal incident, and expelled sixty Russian diplomats.

Diverging Priorities

What is even more striking is that the United Kingdom has joined the other EU states in opposing central strategic shifts in foreign and security policy by the Trump Administration, despite its heavy dependency. Four examples stand out:

Firstly the Iran nuclear agreement, which the United Kingdom was central to negotiating as part of the EU-3. When Trump first called the agreement into question and finally withdrew from it, London joined Berlin and Paris in defending the deal in explicit opposition to Washington.

The second example is the Paris Climate Accord, from which President Trump has announced the United States will also withdraw. During the G-7 summit the United Kingdom sided with the EU and the other three European members (France, Germany, Italy) in defending the Accord and has committed to abide by its own climate commitments after Brexit.

In the growing trade conflict between the United States and the EU (as well as Canada, Japan and other US allies), the Trump administration’s additional tariffs on steel and aluminium also affect the EU, including the UK. This has been criticised by UK Prime Minister May, as has Trump’s decision to “unsign” the June 2018 G-7 declaration. With the UK presumably bound to the EU customs union until at least 2021, it will likely be caught in the crossfire if the EU-US trade conflict further intensifies.

Donald Trump’s decision to move the US embassy in Israel to Jerusalem is a fourth example, calling into question the two-state solution for the Israel-Palestine conflict. Here again London joined the EU in criticism. Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson has made it clear that the United Kingdom will be maintaining its embassy in Tel Aviv and upholding the two-state solution.

It is striking, finally, that the United States under Trump – even more than in the past – picks and chooses European partners according to policy area and convenience, and has no qualms about playing them off against each other. London was

especially peeved that President Trump coordinated most closely with French President Emmanuel Macron in advance of the April 2018 air strikes against Syria. Prime Minister May then deliberately disregarded usual parliamentary procedure to enable Britain to participate in the attacks.

All in all, the “special relationship” is not transpiring to be the foreign and security policy lifeline that leading Brexiteers like Boris Johnson wished for. While the asymmetry has expanded to London’s disadvantage, British responses to Trump’s major strategic policy shifts have been closer to the EU’s. That should not lead Germany and the EU-27 to gloat, but encourage them – whether despite or because of Brexit – to keep London close in central foreign policy and security matters.

International Organisations

The third traditional pillar of British foreign and security policy is its presence in international organisations, the most important being its permanent seat in the UN Security Council, NATO membership, participation in the G7/G20 summits, and voting rights in institutions like the IMF, the OECD and the WTO. Although London potentially loses access to EU coordination in international organisations, it will presumably continue to coordinate closely with its European partners, whether bilaterally or multilaterally.

But the influence it can exercise through these forums is limited: London’s most recent veto in the UN Security Council was close to thirty years ago, its last solo veto (without the United States or France) almost half a century ago. On the other hand, London almost always introduces its resolutions in the UN Security Council jointly with Paris and/or Washington. Meanwhile, the fifty-three-member Commonwealth of Nations is too heterogeneous to become a relevant foreign policy and security forum.

NATO as Potential Beneficiary

NATO is a different matter. If the United Kingdom can no longer shape collective answers to security problems within the EU framework, NATO will become the main forum for coordination with allies. London already appears to be stepping up its engagement, and emphasises that it is one of the few countries to fulfil both NATO’s 2 percent and 20 percent targets (2 percent of GDP spent on defence, with 20 percent of that going to investment).

In absolute figures the United Kingdom has the highest defence spending of all European NATO members. Together with France it deploys the most troops on operations. London has already announced its intention to boost its engagement, although without naming details. Cyber-security, in which it has great expertise, would be conceivable. London is also increasing its personnel and seeking to assume political leadership. Finally the British also point to their contributions to NATO’s defence and deterrence measures, such as leading one of the four multinational battalions that form NATO’s eFP on its Eastern flank. But that was decided before the Brexit vote and therefore cannot be regarded as an expression of heightened commitment.

NATO stands to benefit from greater British engagement nonetheless, as it will represent the only defence forum in Europe where London continues to play a role and can back up its “Global Britain” ambitions.

The Limits of the Nation State

The analysis of the three pillars of British foreign policy demonstrates that the United Kingdom’s desire to compensate the negative consequences of Brexit by stepping up its international engagement shows little by way of results to date. In practice London can point above all to continuity, for example in the Franco-British context, but not as yet to anything substantially new. That said, in these times continuity is itself

positive. And it will take time before agreements produce results.

At the same time there are very clear limits to what a single nation state can achieve on its own in terms of foreign policy, even one as large as the United Kingdom. Close cooperation with partners will be crucial in tackling central foreign and security policy challenges, be it the future of the Iran deal or dealing with Russia or North Korea. This was illustrated very clearly by the Skripal incident, where London required the support of its European partners because unilateral foreign policy responses have little impact against a country the size of Russia. As a non-EU member the United Kingdom will no longer be able to shape EU decisions but will simply have to decide whether to accept them.

Another factor is that London has yet to put much in the way of resources behind its “Global Britain” concept. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has recruited additional civil servants, but most of the extra resources have gone into dealing with the consequences of Brexit, for example in the area of trade or increasing the resources for bilateral relations in Europe. The UK will keep or even expand its Brussels representation to substitute the coordination done via EU bodies. Nor is the military dimension of “Global Britain” by any means secure. In the 2015 Spending Review, defence was spared from cuts, with defence spending due to rise by 5 percent in real terms by 2020/21. Yet the parallel 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review made a range of new commitments, more in fact than the Ministry of Defence (MoD) can afford from the 5 percent increase (partly because it was over-optimistic on efficiency savings). Now London has to choose between providing additional funds to uphold its military planning or reducing capabilities and re-scheduling programmes to stay within budget. The British MOD has even commissioned a study on a UK substitute for the EU’s Galileo Global Positioning System, which would siphon substantial resources away from other programmes to duplicate a capability that already exists.

The British MOD will offer answers in summer 2018 with the publication of the Modernising Defence Programme (MDP). Here it is confronted with the tricky task of preserving traditional capabilities while proposing cuts and planning changes in order to establish new ones (for example new technologies, artificial intelligence). And that is before the potential consequences of Brexit are taken into account. If the British economy suffers even more after Brexit, London will be unlikely to be able to maintain its military spending at the current level.

A Geostrategic Dilemma

So Brexit represents a foreign policy and security challenge for London as well as an economic one. The United Kingdom’s military relevance for the United States has declined. The goal of a “Global Britain” contrasts with a reality in which the United Kingdom is forced to concentrate more on Europe while its global influence dwindles. Since the Brexit vote London has therefore been concentrating increasingly on the larger EU states. This is largely a symbolic affair, however, that has produced little in the way of substance.

For the EU-27 and specifically Germany this complicates foreign policy and security interactions with the United Kingdom. Two geostrategic interests need to be reconciled here. On the one side, the principle that the EU has no interest in offering a third country the benefits of membership without the obligations also applies to foreign and security policy. On the other, however future economic relations pan out, Germany and the rest of the EU-27 have an interest in keeping the United Kingdom on their side in important international issues – especially in light of deteriorating transatlantic relations.

In view of these conflicting interests, it is necessary to look beyond EU-UK security relations, which will inevitably be less close after Brexit. Damage control is in the interests of both sides and requires maintaining

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dialogue as well as the willingness and ability for joint action. As a fall-back, a three-pronged approach can ensure that the United Kingdom remains close: firstly intensified bilateral exchange, secondly and in parallel better use of informal minilateral formats in Europe, and thirdly cooperation between the EU as a whole and the United Kingdom as a third country. The challenge will be to avoid both undermining ongoing Brexit talks and weakening existing institutional consultation formats.

The bilateral strategic dialogue between Berlin and London announced in April 2018 can contribute to damage limitation. With respect to Brexit three conditions should be applied: Firstly the EU's decision-making autonomy must be preserved; all questions of cooperation between the EU and the United Kingdom should be regulated collectively via the EU institutions rather than among the largest EU states. Secondly, bilateral cooperation cannot preempt the future shape of the EU-UK relationship, including in CFSP/CSDP. In addition, it is still uncertain whether a new arrangement for foreign and security policy cooperation between the UK and the EU will be ready as envisioned in March 2019, when most political attention in the Brexit talks will focus on securing a withdrawal agreement first. Thirdly, the EU member states must ward against the danger of the United Kingdom playing "divide and rule", for example through regular discussions in the EU-27 context on how to deal with the United Kingdom as a third country. This allows space for bilateral engagements with the UK, where for instance the new German-British strategic dialogue could address issues such as crisis prevention and management in Europe's neighbourhood, cybersecurity, counter-terrorism, procurement, and the continuation of the Berlin Process for the Western Balkans (which began as a bilateral British-German initiative).

In parallel to improved bilateral dialogue, minilateral formats could ensure

foreign and security policy coordination between London and the EU states, following the pattern of existing quad (United States, France, Germany, United Kingdom) and EU-3 formats. There are numerous recent examples, including the Iran Nuclear Agreement, where central foreign policy initiatives have been prepared in smaller formats before the traditional instruments became involved. The joint declaration by London, Paris, Washington and Berlin in March 2018 condemning the use of a chemical agent in the Skripal incident also demonstrates the power of these formats. Wherever possible existing channels should be used to coordinate responses to current developments, rather than creating new formats.

This does not mean bypassing the new formal EU-UK relationship. Instead pragmatic use should be made of existing channels and established working relations, to the benefit of both the European Union and the United Kingdom.

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