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Three's company? France, Germany, the UK and European defence post-Brexit

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Theme

It is vital that France, Germany and the UK cooperate constructively on military matters after the British leave the EU.

Summary

Supporters of EU defence policy have seized on the Brexit decision of the British people as an opportunity to strengthen that policy. In the past the UK had blocked some proposals, which France, Germany and others now wish to implement. But a more energised EU defence on paper will not quickly transform into a stronger policy in practice. More important for the security of Europeans is that France, Germany and the UK ensure that they cooperate constructively on military matters after the British leave the EU.

Analysis

The British exit from the EU is occurring while European governments face an unprecedented confluence of security crises, ranging from an unpredictable Russia to conflicts across the Middle East, which are generating internal security tests such as terrorist attacks and refugee flows. The US is ambiguous about putting out all of Europe's fires and expects allies to take on more of the military burden. And no European country can cope alone. Aside from their complexity, one key new dimension of these security challenges is that Europeans now have to simultaneously defend their territories and manage external crises. Plus the lines between internal and external security are increasingly blurred.

That Brexit will reduce the potential usefulness of EU security and defence policies should be self-evident, since the UK is the strongest European military power in NATO. But since Britain remains a nuclear-armed member of NATO, will nothing really change for European defence? Think again. Brexit might hinder European military cooperation because it could greatly strain political relationships with other European allies, especially with the next two leading military powers in NATO-Europe: France and Germany. But handled correctly, military collaboration could become one of the most constructive areas for cooperation between the UK and the EU post-Brexit.

The election of Donald Trump as US President has an even greater potential to transform Europe's strategic landscape than Brexit, if he scales back American military commitments in Europe (this subject is beyond the scope of this analysis). But regardless

of what the Trump Administration does, European defence post-Brexit will require much closer trilateral political and military cooperation between France, Germany and the UK.

The Brexit effect

Following the British vote to leave the EU in June, the remaining 27 Union governments have committed themselves to improving the performance of EU security and defence policies. Although it is not fair to blame the UK alone for the EU's prior lack of progress on defence, cheerleaders for that policy in Berlin, Paris and elsewhere have seized on the Brexit vote as an opportunity to strengthen that policy area. Partly based on a number of subsequent practical Franco-German proposals, EU Foreign and Defence Ministers approved new proposals for EU security and defence policies in mid-November.

Since the Brexit vote, the German Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen has at times accused the UK of paralysing progress on EU defence in the past, and asked it not to veto new plans. In turn, the British Defence Secretary, Michael Fallon, has sometimes suggested that London would veto anything that smacked of an 'EU army' or undermined NATO (such as an EU version of NATO's military headquarters, SHAPE). Thankfully, this divisive rhetoric has recently died down as it has become clear that EU security and defence plans will not undermine NATO and that the UK will not use its veto.

With the approval of the UK (which retains its veto until it departs the Union), EU heads-of-governments approved a package of three plans covering aspects of capability development, operational planning and military research, among other issues, at a summit on 15 December. However, despite their good intentions, the proposals are unlikely to have much immediate impact, and whether or not the remaining 27 EU governments will collectively deliver more on defence remains an open question.

For instance, while they agree on much, there are some major differences in strategic culture between Berlin and Paris. For one, France, as a nuclear-armed permanent member of the UN Security Council, has a special sense of responsibility for global security, and is prepared to act unilaterally if necessary. Germany, in contrast, will only act in coalition with others, and remains much more reluctant than France to deploy robust military force abroad.

For another, Berlin and Paris do not necessarily agree on the end goal of EU defence policy. Calls in the 2016 German defence white paper for a 'European Security and Defence Union' in the long-term give the impression that EU defence is primarily a political integration project for some in Berlin.

The French are more interested in a stronger inter-governmental EU defence policy today than a symbolic integration project for the future, since Paris perceives acting militarily through the EU as an important option for those times the US does not want to intervene in crises in and around Europe. Because of their different strategic cultures, therefore, France and Germany may struggle to develop a substantially more active EU defence policy more than their joint proposals would suggest.

The French do not assume that their EU partners will always rush to support their military operations. In general, they have not robustly supported France in Africa in recent years, although Germany has enhanced its presence in Mali since the 2015 Paris terrorist attacks. But if acting through the EU could help ensure more military support from other EU members, France would find that preferable to acting alone. The trouble for France has been that it has been stuck in the middle between a Germany reluctant to use robust military force abroad and a UK reluctant to act militarily through the EU.

Post-Brexit, French strategic culture will remain closest to that of the British. The EU could only develop a defence policy because France and the UK agreed that it should, at St. Malo in 1998. Moreover, London and Paris have been prepared to act together, leading the charge for what became NATO's intervention in Libya in early 2011. The ongoing quiet deepening of bilateral Franco-British military cooperation, based on the 2010 Lancaster House treaties, is vitally important for European military cooperation post-Brexit. For example, London and Paris announced in November 2016 that they will deepen their dependence on each other for missile technology. In sum, Franco-British cooperation is more militarily significant for European security than the trumpeted developments through the EU.

But bilateral Franco-British military cooperation may not be immune to politics. And it is important to try to avoid a spill-over effect from the Brexit decision onto NATO, especially any political rift between Europe's two leading military powers, the traditionally more 'Europeanist' France and more 'Atlanticist' UK. In a speech on 5 September, the British Defence Secretary said 'Given the overlap in NATO and EU membership, it's surely in all our interests to ensure the EU doesn't duplicate existing structures… Our Trans-Atlantic alliance works for the UK and for Europe making us stronger and better able to meet the threats and challenges of the future'.

In contrast, on 6 October, the French President, François Hollande, said that there are European countries 'that think the United States will always be there to protect them… if they don't defend themselves they will no longer be defended'. Hollande added 'Europeans must realize…they must also be a political power with a defence capability'.

If these Franco-British positions were to harden –because of difficult Brexit negotiations– and cause a political rift, it could hinder not only their bilateral cooperation, but also cooperation through both NATO and the EU. Strong Franco-British cooperation is vital for European security, not only because of their combined military power, but also because Europeans need to be able both to contribute more to NATO (as the UK prioritises) and to act autonomously if necessary (like France advocates via the EU or in other ways).

The UK and EU military cooperation

The British government should hope that EU governments do deliver on their defence promises, including after the British exit from the EU. There are three reasons for this. First, some EU operations are useful for coping with the vast array of security challenges facing Europe at large. NATO cannot –and the US does not want to– be everywhere. This largely explains why most EU military operations have taken place in the broad

geographic space (beyond EU territory) stretching from the Western Balkans via the Mediterranean and Africa to the Indian Ocean, to counter pirates, terrorists and people smugglers among other tasks. This emerging strategic necessity helps explain why the British Defence Secretary said in July that after its departure the UK could still contribute to EU operations.

Secondly, Europeans need to improve their military capabilities and spend their sparse defence monies more effectively. The EU institutions in Brussels can help the governments with funding for defence research, opening up protected national military procurement markets and providing financial incentives for more efficient multinational equipment programmes. All of this would benefit both taxpayers and soldiers, as well as NATO, since 21 countries will remain members of both the Union and the Alliance post-Brexit.

Third, the EU and NATO are deepening their practical cooperation, and European security can only benefit from these two organisations working together. To tackle terrorism or the migration crisis, the EU and NATO can connect everything from internal policing and intelligence networks to external military operations. Both bodies are conducting operations to combat people smuggling in the Mediterranean for example. To counter Russian hybrid belligerence, they are also trying to better combine their various efforts, from economic sanctions to territorial defence, cyber-defence and countering propaganda.

This is why NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has welcomed the (mainly) Franco-German proposals for strengthening EU security and defence policies. At an October informal meeting of EU Defence Ministers in Bratislava, Stoltenberg highlighted that there is no contradiction between better EU military cooperation and a strong NATO, noting that both are mutually reinforcing.

Because of these three reasons –alongside Britain's substantial military capacity and experience– it is in everyone's interest to have as close a relationship as possible between the UK and the EU on military matters after Brexit. The UK, for example, may wish to continue contributing to useful EU operations. Non-EU countries, such as Norway and Turkey, have made significant contributions to some EU operations in the past.

But the UK cannot expect a formal say over EU defence policy in return for such contributions. Other non-EU NATO members, particularly Norway and Turkey, would likely expect similar arrangements, and the remaining 27 EU governments are keen to protect their decision-making autonomy. Instead London should aim for *de facto* rather than *de jure* influence post-Brexit. This could involve ad hoc observer status in inter-governmental EU decision-making committees, based on London's willingness to participate in a particular capability project or contribute to an operation at hand.

This type of arrangement would require a lot of political trust between the UK and the remaining 27 governments. But given the UK's deep knowledge of EU procedures and challenges –alongside its global outlook, strong military capabilities and vast operational experience– it is likely that London would have considerable *de facto* influence on other

EU governments if it chose to. Handled correctly, defence policy could become one of the most constructive areas for cooperation between the UK and the EU after Brexit.

As long as it remains an EU member, therefore, there is not much point in London threatening to veto any future agreements on EU military cooperation, as they would almost certainly happen anyway after the UK has left the EU. It would also needlessly antagonise France, Germany and others when the UK has much more important things to negotiate with its EU partners. The British government should wish its EU partners well in their endeavours to make EU military cooperation more effective, safe in the knowledge that the UK can no longer be blamed for any future lack of progress on EU defence policy.

Furthermore, post-Brexit European military cooperation will continue to be pushed more by the coming together of national priorities than by the efforts of the EU and NATO. European military cooperation is mainly bottom up –driven by national governments– not top down, meaning directed and organised by the institutions in Brussels. For example, some countries are working more closely in regional formats, such as Baltic, Nordic and Visegrád (Central European) cooperation. And a number of European governments are pursuing deeper bilateral cooperation, including the integration of parts of their armed forces in some cases. Examples include (the aforementioned) Franco-British, German-Dutch and Finnish-Swedish initiatives.

European governments are increasingly picking and choosing which forms of military cooperation they wish to pursue, depending on the capability project or military operation at hand. Sometimes they act through NATO or the EU, but almost all European governments are using other formats as well, whether regional, bilateral, or ad hoc coalitions. The combination of more complex security crises and reduced resources has meant that European governments are more focused on their core national interests than before, and both more targeted and flexible about how they wish to cooperate.

Other EU governments will continue to want to work with the UK in bilateral or other settings, as well as at NATO, as should the UK with them. But the overall success of European military cooperation post-Brexit will depend on the convergence or divergence of national policies, in particular the abilities of France, Germany and the UK to not only agree among themselves but also convince other European governments to support their approaches.

Conclusion

One misfortune of Brexit is that it is occurring just when British, French and German defence policies have been showing some signs of convergence in recent years. Tasks-wise, each country is aiming –to varying degrees– to be as full-spectrum as possible, maintaining the ability to both adequately defend territory and deploy abroad. Each of them has promised to increase defence spending in the coming years, reflecting the difficult security crises that Europe faces today. All three have made important contributions to NATO's reassurance measures to allies in Eastern Europe, such as participating in Baltic air policing. And all three have deployed forces to help fight Islamist terrorists in Africa and the Middle East.

Granted, **Germany** has been reluctant to take on full-blown combat roles abroad. But its beefed-up support to the anti-Islamic State coalition, following the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, alongside its willingness to lead one of NATO's four new battalions in Eastern Europe, suggests that Germany realises that it needs to be prepared to contribute more militarily to European security.

France has sometimes been suspected of being too Russia-friendly, but it cancelled the delivery of two Mistral amphibious assault ships to Moscow after the 2014 annexation of Crimea. Britain has long been accused of being anti-EU military cooperation. But the EU's most successful military mission to date, an anti-piracy operation on the waters off Somalia, has been run from a British military headquarters.

In essence European military cooperation –whether through the EU, NATO or other formats– is a tale of three cities, because it can fully work only if Berlin, London and Paris agree. Encouragingly, in November 2016 a joint meeting of French, British and German defence chiefs took place in Paris. Regardless of what the incoming Trump Administration does, the minimum challenge now for France, Germany and the UK will be to ensure that the British exit from the EU will not make political alignments on European defence more difficult to achieve.