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Bridging the Channel

How Europe and the UK can work together in foreign policy

By Luigi Scazzieri

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This paper is the first of a three paper CER-KAS project, 'Bridging the Channel'. The aim is to assess how EU states and the UK can continue work together in foreign and security policy after Brexit. This paper focuses on diplomatic co-operation, while the other two will focus on the defence industrial and nuclear dimensions respectively.

- ★ Britain's exit from the EU, combined with London's unwillingness to deal with the EU as a foreign policy actor, is pushing member-states and the UK to explore new ways of working together in foreign policy.
- ★ The most obvious route to working together is through intensified bilateral co-operation and consultation. Small informal groups like the E3 (France, Germany and the UK) can also play an important role in maintaining trust, facilitating consultations, and potentially acting jointly. The make-up of such groups is likely to vary, with some combination of the US, European countries and non-European countries involved depending on the issue. The use of small groups will be particularly likely when the EU cannot easily reach consensus on foreign policy.
- ★ The UK also wants to co-ordinate more closely in NATO, and London has tried to use its G7 presidency to boost the group's role. In the past, French and German politicians have said they wanted to establish a European Security Council (ESC) to strengthen EU foreign policy and co-operate with the UK. But they never fully fleshed out how an ESC would work. In the near term, there is unlikely to be much appetite in the EU or the UK to set up such formal structures.
- ★ By working together bilaterally, in small groups and in institutions of which they are members, EU member-states and the UK can continue to consult and co-operate. But there are limits to what these formats can achieve. France and Germany want to work with the UK but are also wary of bypassing the EU, as this causes friction with excluded member-states.
- ★ There are ways for the UK and the EU institutions to work together even without a foreign policy agreement. But the UK's reluctance to deal with the EU as an organisation will make co-operation on many issues difficult. Forums like NATO and the G7 can be useful for consultation, but it will be hard to address challenges that have an economic dimension without involving the EU. The EU is the forum where member-states agree and implement economic policies, and member-states can only impose economic sanctions through the Union.
- ★ Finally, on some issues the UK may find itself squeezed out of intensified transatlantic dialogue between the EU and the US. And co-operation will be vulnerable to broader tensions in the EU-UK relationship, which could easily spill over into bilateral relationships and undermine trust. Much depends on whether the UK government can decrease tensions and overcome its deep scepticism towards working with the EU.

The December 2020 EU-UK Trade and Co-operation Agreement marked the start of a new phase in EU-UK relations. The agreement does not include foreign and security policy, even though in theory this should be one of the least controversial areas of co-operation, as it is a field in which the EU and the UK are natural partners. During the Brexit negotiations, the EU had proposed a foreign policy agreement similar to those the EU has with Canada and Japan. But the UK thought that the EU's offer did not give it enough influence and that most European foreign and security policy co-operation happened outside the EU anyway – bilaterally, in small groups like the E3 (France, Germany and the UK), and in NATO.¹

Since Brexit, the UK has continued to be sceptical of working with the EU on foreign policy, although it concluded an agreement to exchange classified information and it reversed its initial decision to not grant the head of the EU delegation in London full ambassadorial status. London has not applied to join an EU project to remove physical and regulatory barriers to moving troops and equipment across European borders – even though the US and Canada have joined, and Turkey has applied to join. The UK has also sought to present itself as a more agile and effective power than the EU, emphasising how it was able to impose sanctions more quickly than the Union in response to China's actions in Hong Kong and Belarus's post-election crackdown on the opposition.

The UK's Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy, released in March 2021,

mirrors London's unwillingness to work with the EU. The review makes very limited reference to the EU's role in European security. However, it acknowledges that the UK's security priorities will remain focused on Europe as a region. The review emphasises London's contribution to NATO, including through planned increases in defence spending totalling £24 billion over a four-year period, and states that the UK will continue to co-operate closely with its European allies.

Working with the UK will also continue to be essential for the EU and its member-states: the UK's security and diplomatic capabilities and its commitment to multilateralism, human rights and the rule of law make it an indispensable partner. Europeans want to keep the UK closely involved in European security and keep it aligned with their own positions.

Bilateral co-operation

EU member-states and the UK recognise that one way to maintain co-operation will be through bilateral exchanges. The integrated review says that the UK wants to strengthen bilateral relationships in Europe and the November 2020 spending review provided an additional £60 million for the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) "to support the UK's new relationship with the EU and to maintain and strengthen diplomatic relations with EU institutions and member-states." The staff in the FCDO's Europe Directorate has roughly doubled compared with five years ago.

“One way to maintain co-operation will be through bilateral exchanges.”

The Integrated Review singles out France and Germany as the UK's most important European partners. Although Brexit has created a toxic atmosphere between them over issues such as fishing rights, London and Paris have deep diplomatic and security links, underpinned by a similar strategic culture and the Lancaster House treaties

on defence co-operation. France and Britain have set up the Combined Joint Expeditionary Force – a common force for military operations – and they carry out joint exercises and co-operate closely in the nuclear field. The UK's diplomatic and defence links with Germany are less developed, although the two signed a 'Joint Vision Statement' in 2018 committing them to closer security and defence co-operation. The tension surrounding Brexit has meant that Germany has been guarded about deepening the relationship, wary that closer co-operation with the UK could undermine EU foreign policy.

The UK also wants to build closer ties to Italy, which is holding the COP26 presidency jointly with the UK and which London sees as sharing its concerns in the Mediterranean and the Levant.² The UK and Italy have close defence industrial links, with the Italian defence firm Leonardo having a sizeable UK arm. The integrated review also singles out Poland as a "vital partner on European security", and additionally states that the UK wants to work with other countries like Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and Turkey.³

1: Ian Bond, 'Brexit and external differentiation in foreign, security and defence policy', EUIDEA policy brief, No.2, September 2020.

2: Ministry of Defence, 'Defence in a competitive age', March 2021.

3: UK Government, 'Global Britain in a competitive age: The integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy', March 2021.

Small groups

Small informal groups are already an important avenue of co-operation between European countries and the UK, and London wants to make greater use of them. There are two kinds of small groups. The first concerns military co-operation and is made up of initiatives like the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) and the Northern Group. The JEF is a UK-led initiative including Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden. It focuses on promoting military interoperability and on developing a rapidly deployable military force to counter Russian aggression. The Northern Group is an initiative for consultation and co-operation in defence which includes Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland and the UK. Aside from improving military readiness, the Northern Group and the JEF can play a role in maintaining trust and consulting on broader issues.

“Looking ahead, the make-up of diplomatic small groups is likely to vary issue by issue.”

The second kind of informal small groups are frameworks for diplomatic co-ordination. These can help facilitate dialogue and allow rapid diplomatic action. The most prominent is the E3, which developed to co-ordinate efforts to halt Iran’s nuclear programme in the early 2000s. The E3, often with the EU’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HRVP) or a senior official from the European External Action Service (EEAS), played a crucial role in negotiating the 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran. Over time, the E3 grew from meetings of foreign ministers to meetings of other officials, including defence ministers. After Brexit, the E3 expanded the subjects of their consultations and issued statements on matters like the conflict in Syria and the South China Sea. The UK saw the E3 as a way to keep open lines of communication with France and Germany and influence EU decision-making without having institutional relations with the Union. At the same time, the E3 were at odds with Trump’s policies on Iran and other issues and saw advantages in uniting around a common position. The E3 have sometimes been joined by other European countries, becoming an ‘E3+’: Italy and Spain have been included in statements on Libya, and Italy has been involved in consultations between the E3 and Iran on security in the Middle East. Non-European countries have also been included, most notably the US, in the so-called Quad format, but also Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, which have issued joint statements with the Quad on the Syrian conflict.

Small group co-operation to improve military readiness in frameworks like the JEF is uncontroversial, as it does not negatively affect excluded states. However, diplomacy-focused groups like the E3 are contentious. Working in the E3 creates friction with other EU member-states, who fear that policies directly affecting them will be decided without them having a say. The inclusion of the High Representative or the EEAS in small groups is essential to help assuage fears of exclusion and make those groups less divisive. After Brexit, the UK is even less willing to involve the EEAS than it was, seeing its presence as unnecessary. But Germany is attuned to smaller member states’ concerns of being excluded and Berlin stresses it does not want to undermine EU foreign policy and wants to involve the EEAS. The same concern is present in France, although to a slightly lesser degree. Other member-states, like Italy and Spain, are open to involving the High Representative and the EEAS, although they would ideally prefer issues to be dealt with through the EU, or to be involved in small groups.

Looking ahead, the make-up of diplomatic small groups is likely to vary issue by issue. The most common could be the Quad. Since Joe Biden became US president, the difference between the positions of the US and those of the E3 has shrunk. Frequent consultations between France, Germany, the UK and the US have resumed, and in February 2021 Quad foreign ministers issued a broad statement covering Iran, the war in Yemen, instability in Iraq, climate change, the challenge from China, NATO, and COVID-19. When dealing with Mediterranean or Middle East issues, the E3 or the Quad might involve Italy and Spain, while Poland, the Nordic countries and the Baltic countries might be involved when dealing with Eastern Europe. Non-European countries like Canada or Japan, the EU High Representative, and potentially the NATO Secretary General will also sometimes be included.

Diplomatic co-operation in small groups between the UK and some EU member-states will be most likely if the largest EU member-states think that working in such formats with the UK (or with other countries like the US) can help them do things that would be difficult to achieve by acting through the EU. For example, small groups can agree and issue a statement during a crisis more quickly than the EU. In other cases, it may not be possible to reach consensus in the EU at all. But if a rapid response is not essential or if the EU can achieve consensus quite easily, there will be pressure on member-states not to use small groups.

NATO, the G7 and a European Security Council

The UK also wants to co-ordinate more closely with its allies in NATO. The UK, together with other allies like the US, wants to increase political consultations in NATO, and at the NATO 2021 summit allies pledged to “make greater use of NATO as a platform for political consultation among allies”⁴ It is likely that allies will consult more on issues like China, climate change, and AI and tech regulation in NATO structures. However, it will not be easy for the alliance to be an effective forum for practical co-operation on issues that are mostly outside its traditional remit. Challenges that have a large economic and regulatory dimension will more naturally fall to the EU – at least in the eyes of EU member-states.

The UK also wants to use the G7 as a forum for co-operation, including with its European partners. In May 2021, G7 foreign ministers issued a broad-ranging statement covering issues such as Russian aggression, China, North Korea, Afghanistan, Libya, Iran, democracy, human rights and the rule of law, COVID-19, and climate change. London has also used its presidency of the G7 to boost the group’s role, inviting Australia, India, South Africa and South Korea to attend the leaders’ summit virtually. The fact that the EU also attends meetings of the G7 reduces smaller member-states’ concerns of exclusion. However, G7 members are not fully united over how to tackle issues like China, which limits the group’s usefulness. And the G7 is an informal group, with no

permanent chair or secretariat to implement decisions – which reduces its ability to act as an avenue of effective co-operation.

In the past, French and German politicians have called for the establishment of a European Security Council (ESC) to strengthen European foreign policy and co-ordinate with the UK. But they never fully fleshed out how the ESC would work. An ESC could take many forms, ranging from a UK-EU format to a group of the largest European states, with permanent and non-permanent members like the UN Security Council. The key issue is again that of membership. If the ESC consisted of a small group it would essentially be a more institutionalised version of the E3, perhaps with a more formal and permanent structure. It would maintain much of the E3’s speed and flexibility but would cause even more friction with other member-states because it would be a more visible reminder of their exclusion. If ESC membership was broader and included most or all member-states, it would lose agility and would have few advantages over more flexible ad-hoc coalitions. For now, the idea of an ESC has lost momentum. France, Germany and the UK want to maintain flexibility and resort to the E3 or other informal groups when it suits them, rather than setting up a new institution. Nevertheless, the idea of an ESC may re-emerge at some point.

The limits of co-operation

EU member-states and the UK recognise they will have to develop new ways of working together effectively. By working together bilaterally, in small groups, and in institutions of which they are members, they can help maintain trust, co-ordinate policy and implement joint responses to many international challenges. But there are limits to what these formats can achieve, and they can also create friction.

“Member-states are wary of potential UK attempts to divide the EU.”

First, while France, Germany and other member-states recognise the need to work with the UK pragmatically, they know that bypassing the EU by working in diplomatic small groups like the E3 creates friction with other member-states and weakens European unity. And member-states are wary of potential UK attempts to

divide the EU, which is likely to constrain their willingness to use small groups. Second, none of the formats examined can replicate the frequency and breadth of contacts or consultations among EU member-states. It will be difficult to sustain trust unless contacts are very regular. Third, at their June 2021 summit, the EU and the US launched a dialogue on security and defence and one on Russia to complement their existing consultations on China. They also launched a variety of initiatives to consult on issues ranging from supply chains and manufacturing to tech.⁵ If these formats prove to work well, the UK could find itself squeezed out of enhanced transatlantic co-ordination, or only involved at a later stage.

Fourth, it will be difficult for the UK and European countries to co-operate on challenges that have an economic dimension without involving the EU. The EU is the forum where member-states agree and implement economic policies. For example, finding ways to reduce

4: NATO, ‘Brussels summit communiqué issued by the heads of state and government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels’, June 14th 2021.

5: EU-US summit statement, ‘Towards a renewed transatlantic partnership’, June 15th 2021.

carbon emissions or to limit supply chain dependency on China will both require policy tools most effectively wielded by the EU. The same is true of issues relating to regulating AI, tech and data flows. In the security field, the EU is generally a weaker actor, but the Union is an important player in the field of sanctions, as they can only be imposed by unanimity. Since Brexit, the UK has sometimes consulted with the EU, for example to co-ordinate in imposing sanctions on China for its abuses of human rights, but normally the UK does not get sanctions information until the EU has finalised its listings.

Finally, co-operation will be vulnerable to broader tensions in the UK-EU relationship. There are many potential sources of tension, from fishing rights to citizens' rights and the Northern Ireland protocol. Tensions in the UK-EU relationship will undermine trust and hurt bilateral relations and broader co-operation. Even without tensions, there is also the potential for foreign policy divergence to weaken co-operation over time. For example, policy differences on controversial issues like how to deal with China and Russia might grow.

Conclusion

EU member-states and the UK are both adjusting to the post-Brexit state of affairs. With no EU-UK agreement on foreign policy in the Trade and Co-operation Agreement, they recognise that co-operation will have to take place in other formats. These will range from bilateral interactions, to small groups like the E3 and the Quad, ad-hoc informal groups and existing institutions like NATO. Working together would be easier with an EU-UK foreign policy agreement, although the lack of a formal agreement does not in itself preclude substantial direct consultations between the EU and the UK, or even US-EU-UK 'trilateral' co-operation. Much will depend on the state of broader relations between the UK and the EU.

It would be in the UK's and the EU's interest to strike a foreign policy agreement. It is primarily up to the UK to overcome its deep scepticism to co-operating with the EU. But if the EU offered more frequent and broad-ranging consultations and staff secondments to the EEAS, perhaps as part of a broader overhaul of the Union's partnership offer to third countries, this could help persuade London to strike an agreement.⁶

In the meantime, it would be in the interest of the UK and of EU member-states to involve the EEAS, the High Representative or the European Commission in their discussions. For Europeans, this would guard against the risk of undermining the EU's internal cohesion. But it would also be to the UK's advantage, because many issues cannot be addressed without bringing in the EU, and because involving the EU institutions will make the UK's European partners less worried about undermining the Union's cohesion and more willing to work with it.

Luigi Scazzieri

Research fellow, Centre for European Reform

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⁶: Ian Bond, Senem Aydin-Düzgüt, Luigi Scazzieri, 'EU foreign security and defence policy co-operation with neighbours: Mapping diversity', CER policy brief, May 2021.