

A historic reminder, an ever-present dilemma? Assessing Brexit's potential consequences for European security

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A politically timely and intellectually stimulating impulse

On 9 May 2016, in a further attempt to discourage the British public opinion from opting for their country's abandonment of the European Union (EU) in the 'in/out' referendum on 23 June, Prime Minister David Cameron stated that the UK has regretted "turning its back" on Europe in the past, and that the EU had "helped reconcile" countries and maintain peace on the Old Continent.

Cameron's powerful reference to the past British reluctance to fully engage in European security, notably but not solely during the *entre-guerre* period in the 1920s and 1930s, provides a politically timely and intellectually stimulating impulse to further examine the UK's role in European security in the past few years, and the possible implications of a 'Brexit' in that respect.

When assessing the potential repercussions of Brexit on European security at large, a distinction should be made between the two increasingly connected but still distinct dimensions of the UK's security engagement with its European partners, namely through NATO and via its contribution to the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), as well as between its short and long-term implications.

Such analytical differentiation seems to suggest that, while the short-term impacts of a Brexit scenario might not fundamentally shake up the current European security landscape, its long-term implications might raise some concrete concerns for the very future of Europe's political and security integration, and for the UK's international posture as well.

Limited short-term implications ...

Firstly, it seems quite unlikely that a Brexit would strongly affect the 'NATO leg' of European security in the immediate future. In fact, London has always been keen to put most of its politico-military weight behind the Atlantic Alliance, firstly because NATO's genuinely transatlantic dimension always fitted the UK's traditional strategic orientations much better than the 'Europe-only' security format entailed by the CSDP, and secondly because membership in the Alliance never undermined the UK's (or any other NATO member state's) sovereignty in the military domain. As a consequence, a possible Brexit might lead to an even stronger British investment into NATO in the next few months, starting perhaps with the next NATO Summit scheduled in Warsaw in early July, as a compensation for its 'EU divorce'.

With respect to the EU, London's membership was never really accompanied by a consistently active commitment to the CSDP. In fact, although the very engine of European defence cooperation since the late 1990s clearly was the Franco-British tandem, given the key importance of the bilateral 1998 Saint-Malo Declaration, and with the exception of its decisive support to specific initiatives like the EU Battlegroups, London has adopted a rather selective stance on European military matters, which tended to underplay the possibility of deeper political and institutional integration in European defence cooperation. Rather, it privileged pragmatic cooperation with some European 'heavy weights', as witnessed for instance by the 2010 Lancaster House Treaties and the 2014 Brize Norton Summit, again with France.

While CSDP's underperformance is deep-rooted in the visible absence of a truly common vision among all EU member states, particularly the (few) most militarily capable European capitals, it was also because of London's relative detachment from – and sometimes fully-fledged distrust towards – CSDP matters, that comparatively little progress was achieved in the past in areas such as force generation, capability development and defence industrial cooperation, or in the implementation of some innovative CSDP clauses of the 2009 Lisbon Treaty, e.g. the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), not to mention the never-ending spat over the establishment of a permanent CSDP headquarter, regularly vetoed by Downing Street.

Consequently, in the short term Brexit might paradoxically 'free' the CSDP from a rather assertive and often sceptical player, but would also – and problematically so – pose the painful question to the other EU members, notably the bigger ones, of how to deal with an already under-resourced CSDP deprived of London's defence assets.

... but more serious long-term impacts?

While the short-term implications of Brexit for European security might differ with respect to the two key pillars of Europe's 'hardcore' security architecture, the long-term consequences could be even more negative.

Britain leaving the Union would send the political message to continental partners that the UK is unwilling to keep engaging in what can arguably be considered as Europe's best peace guarantee, namely the European integration process that started in the 1950s. And while no intra-European conflict is foreseeable in the future, an EU already weakened by a formidable combination of domestic and external crises might become even more vulnerable and unstable after Brexit.

From a more distinctive security viewpoint, London's absence from the EU and hence CSDP is likely to become a 'lose-lose' situation both for the UK and Europe at large. Among other things, it would leave London without an important 'entry point' to influence the European integration process in the wider realm of foreign and security policy, where possibly greater cooperation among EU member states can often help advance London's international agenda, as it has done in the recent past with the stabilisation of Western Balkans, *vis-à-vis* Iran or against piracy in the Gulf of Aden.

On the other hand, a UK-deprived CSDP would further struggle to make progress in the military domain, both in terms of operational capabilities and industrial capacities, as well as at the higher level of strategic reflection, with the consequent risks of a more 'peripheral' role for the EU in regional and global affairs alike.

Finally, Brexit could also impact the way the United States will look at the UK as a key strategic partner in the long-term future, including in the security domain, given Washington's current preference for a stronger European (and, potentially, sometimes even EU-only) security involvement in its own, turbulent neighbourhood; and how this could, in turn, affect Britain's role within NATO as well.

While security is unlikely to become a major topic in the current UK domestic debate over Brexit, especially when compared to the economy and migration *dossiers*, the potential implications of Brexit in this domain deserve proper reflection at both the political and public opinion levels. In that sense, Prime Minister Cameron's recent remarks not only offer a powerful historic reminder, but also an ever-present strategic dilemma both for Britain and the EU.

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