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European Foreign Policy Unit engaged in debate on Brexit

Blog editor

The current debates in the UK about the future of its relationship with the European Union are heating up, with pressure groups being formed to press the case for a yes or a no vote in the referendum on British membership in the EU, due in 2016 or 2017. The European Foreign Policy Unit is contributing to the debate by providing expertise on the EU's foreign policy system, the position of the UK within that system, and the costs and benefits of cooperation on foreign policy issues within the EU.

Over the past year, the European Foreign Policy Unit has responded to several calls for evidence from the UK government and parliament, to contribute its combined expertise to ongoing debates about the UK's future relationship with the EU, and the future direction of EU foreign and security policy. In December 2014, the evidence submitted by EFPU members to the UK government's 'Review of the Balance of Competences between the UK and the EU: Enlargement', was cited extensively in [the final report](#). In September 2015, EFPU members [submitted evidence](#) to the House of Lords Sub-Committee on EU External Affairs about the ongoing review of the EU's foreign policy strategy. And in October 2015, EFPU members [contributed evidence](#) to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee about the implications of 'Brexit' for British foreign policy. EFPU's director, Professor Karen E Smith, also participated in a panel on [Brexit and European defence policy](#).



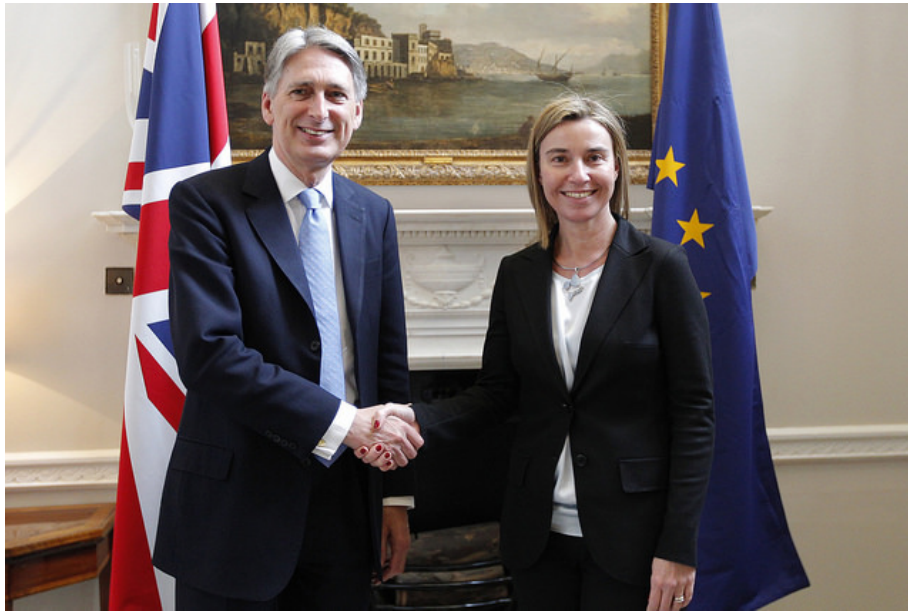
Some of the key points we make in our evidence are:

- EU collective action is of clear and overwhelming benefit to the UK and is crucial in helping the UK achieve its key foreign policy objectives.
- The EU is unique and uniquely advantageous in that it is highly institutionalised (fostering very tight links between the EU's central institutions and the member states, and between the member states themselves, both formally and informally), and has considerable collective resources (stemming, for example, from the fact that it is a very large single market, the largest trading bloc in the world, one of the largest aid donors in the world, and can deploy civilian and military missions in a wide variety of situations). Although size is not the only thing that matters in terms of the ability to exercise influence in international affairs, the European Union's sheer size (as well as its considerable collective resources) enables it to have an impact far beyond what any of its member states could have independently.
- Participation in the EU's intergovernmental foreign policy-making system imposes few costs – for it is relatively easy for a member state to block an undesirable policy and it is easy to raise concerns and influence outcomes, especially for a large member state such as the UK.
- The strategic interests of the UK and the EU are largely identical: driving instead of reacting to changes in international affairs; maintaining stability in Europe and at the European borders; managing Europe's relative decline; supporting international law and multilateralism.
- The UK has been a strong supporter of EU enlargement, and has been a driving force behind the process.
- Outside of the EU, the UK would find it extremely challenging to protect its interests. Its foreign policy, security and defence policy, and trade policy would be negatively affected by Brexit.

We also express concerns that the Brexit debate is draining UK attention away key European policy debates, with detrimental effects not just for British influence but for European policy as well:

- In anticipation of the referendum, the UK has been somewhat disengaged from European negotiations and the other member states have reacted by not involving it in ongoing discussions. As a result, the UK has missed an opportunity to play a more leading role in the Ukrainian crisis and the refugee crisis.
- Another such example is cooperation in defence. The Common Security and Defence Policy has long been considered a dual directorate: the UK and France set the parameters of and steer the process in the CSDP. Yet more recently the role of the UK has been reduced, and it has isolated itself from the mainstream of the discussions. Arguably UK distancing has contributed to the underwhelming performance of the CSDP.
- In many quarters the UK's significance in terms of enlargement is diminishing. This results both from internal UK debates on the EU and the process of integration, and the ambivalence it brings with it, as well as the predominant position of Germany in Europe in economic and geopolitical terms. If the UK shies away from taking a leading role in the EU enlargement process, or shows disinterest, then candidate countries will take the concerns and positions of the UK less seriously than they have in the past. This, of course, would be increasingly damaging to UK interests both in practical

terms, on the economic/trade front, but also in terms of credibility and the ability to foster strong relations with candidate countries if and when they finally join the EU.



UK foreign secretary Philip Hammond and EU high representative Federica Mogherini

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