

EVENT REPORT

REPRESENTATIVE OFFICE UK AND IRELAND

Defence in Europe in the shadow of Brexit – Implications for Germany and the UK

London, 5th November 2018

In this final conference of the year's series of discussions jointly organised by the Federal Trust, the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung and the Global Policy Institute, the topic of the security relationship between the UK and the EU in the shadow of Brexit was discussed by a panel of experts with wide experience of European defence issues.

PRESENTATIONS

Introducing the discussion, **Felix Dane**, the current Director of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung noted that the security components in his organisation's activities were steadily increasing as the subject of European security cooperation moves up the agenda. Whatever might happen to the UK- EU relationship Post-Brexit, the inescapable truth was that the security challenges faced by Europeans would not change.

Elisabeth Braw (Director Modern Deterrence Programme RUSI) was at pains to point out that there were many misunderstandings concerning Germany's contribution to NATO and European defence. The view that Germany was not pulling its weight was not borne out by the facts. Germany did not "freeload off" Nato. Quite the opposite. Germany's contributions compared, in terms of numbers of boots on the ground, favourably with both France and the UK when it came to deployments in the Baltic States and Poland where, for example in Lithuania, Berlin had stationed 500 troops compared with only 270 from France and 180 from the UK.

Nevertheless, there was no widespread perception of an external security threat in Germany and this inhibited debate especially when it came to the idea of increasing spending on defence. There was also no defence commentariat in Germany to ventilate in a mature way these ideas. Instead the discussion often revolved around the well-known, much repeated mantra of member states of NATO contributing 2% of GDP by 2024.

A useful compromise for Germany, in Ms Braw's view, would be increased focus on the country's well-known logistic capabilities. Every US soldier, wherever his ultimate posting, sooner or later arrived in Germany and here was an opportunity for Germany to "improve her roads and bridges" which would in turn generate more domestic support for increased military spending. Even the socialists would support infrastructure projects.

Brendan Donnelly (Director of the Federal Trust) noted the contradictions frequently expressed by Germans in discussion of their country's contribution to the defence of Europe. On the one hand one heard frequently the argument: "We are doing much more than people know", while on the other hand it was also often heard from German policy makers that "we must do much more". How could these views be reconciled in a way which reflected a policy which did not undermine the combat readiness of Germany's armed forces?

Ms Braw replied that the German Ministry of Defence was "admirably transparent" although its reports made "pretty depressing reading" but combat readiness was steadily improving.

Often a state of unreadiness was the result of insignificant details like the battery of a single vehicle needing replacing. Offensive capability still was influenced by the legacy of German history. "It would be ridiculous for Germany to play a leading role in the invasion of country, such as Iraq".

Ben Jones (Kings College London) articulated the fundamental paradox that while there was greater scope for European defence cooperation there were also significant barriers. Autonomy and Sovereignty were two considerable brakes. In many ways European defence capabilities were in a "slow motion car crash". Deficiency in quantity was as much a factor as quality; a navy of any country wishing to play a global role needs a certain number of ships. European defence budgets failed to keep up with inflation. Defence inflation as defined by the late American industrialist Norman Augustin meant that at current rates of inflation in defence equipment pricing, countries which do not substantially increase their budgets will only be able to afford ever dwindling amounts of equipment. To avoid the consequences of "Augustin's Law" defence budgets needed to be increased by between 3% and 5% annually. Greater cooperation on procurement has been widely perceived as part of the answer even though it entails some loss of independence.

Dr Jones identified two dimensions of cooperation: effectiveness (for example NATO, interoperability etc.) and efficiency (for example specialisations/ sharing of assets). Sharing of assets, however, created inter-dependence issues between states whose relations are inherently unpredictable. What academics in international relations refer to as "entrapment and abandonment dynamics" militated against developing levels of cooperation.

Nevertheless, European countries enjoyed a reasonable level of trust. This was particularly the case between London and Paris following the Lancaster House treaties which stimulated greater cooperation on nuclear and missile technology between France and the UK. Such cooperation had come in recent years closer to the front line. For example, those European countries deploying the US made F-16 fighter aircraft (Norway, Denmark, Netherlands and Belgium) have joined forces to create a joint maintenance platform for the aircraft. An arguably even bigger step was taken by Belgium and Holland when they recently agreed a joint territorial air defence system, a move involving mechanisms of legal obligations and other modifications of conventional parameters of national sovereignty and autonomy.

Such modifications are only possible where, as in the case of Belgium and Holland, the interests of both countries are highly aligned but even though sovereignty and autonomy need not prove barriers to greater defence cooperation, certain areas of defence are likely to remain reserved.

With regard to Brexit, defence cooperation with the EU was likely to prove in future more difficult and it was hard to see how departure from the Single Market and the Customs Union could not fail to impact negatively the cross border supply chains which are at the heart of for example Anglo-French missile construction where both countries' industrial bases are extremely aligned.

Brendan Donnelly raised the question of "defence industry sovereignty" and the likely effects of Brexit. **Dr Jones** noted that problems in that context usually emerged when there were different national approaches to defence industry. It was too early to say how those approaches would be affected by the UK's departure from the EU.

Ben Martill (London School of Economics) noted that Brexit was taking place in "an unhappy context". In the US, Trump was prioritising US interests over Europe and developing the isolationism which his predecessor President Obama's tilt towards East Asia had already implied. American foreign policy was currently informed by extreme unpredictability and a growing divergence between the EU and the US (Iran being but one vivid example). All this was occurring against the backdrop of increasing Russian assertiveness. Was Brexit the best gift imaginable for Putin?

The positives of any imaginable post Brexit scenarios could still be stressed as: the enduring stability of Nato, the continuing commonality of interests and therefore easy agreement on security with cooperation if necessary, taking place "beneath the radar". In addition, the UK's

influence over the European Common Security Policy had been arguably on the wane for some time.

The negatives, however, were also present: The UK's divergence in policy and politics was an undermining of notions of solidarity which underpin all European policies and that inevitably would have consequences, notably the exclusion of the UK from basic participation in areas of collaboration where the stakes are highest (i.e. security and defence). Theresa May's red lines would impair UK and European security.

These black and white scenarios were, however, in Dr Martill's view, both misleading. "We are sure of only one thing which is that Brexit will trigger integrative and disintegrative tendencies. But if International Relations teaches us one thing: it is that commonality of interests need not equal political alignment". There were five paradoxes arising from UK withdrawal: --

1/ Even though it is leaving the EU, the UK will need even greater cooperation with European structures and will need to renew its commitment by seeking replacement institutions to compensate for the existing structures lost with Brexit.

2/ There is a danger that security cooperation (as is already happening) is becoming politicised precisely at a time when it needs to be dispassionately discussed and developed. Many hard-line Brexit organisations and individuals are calling for an end to all collaboration and cooperation.

3/ Brexit supposedly resolves once and for all the decade old dichotomy between security atlanticists and those favouring a stronger independent European defence capability. Brexit can only increase the UK dependency on the US. Yet how eager will the US be to maintain the "special relationship" with a country whose ability to influence European decision-making in a pro-American direction will be post Brexit drastically reduced?

4/ Brexit removes from the EU a frequently used UK veto on issues of greater military cooperation but ironically the UK's absence may well trigger a more articulated opposition from other European states reluctant to move forward on integration but who have hitherto found it convenient to hide these views behind the "shield" of a UK veto.

5/ In the wake of Brexit, the EU may well boost its commitment to Nato especially if President Macron of France wishes to pursue a more interventionist policy.

These paradoxes illustrated the need to "wait and see" how the Brexit drama and its aftermath unfold. "Security and defence are hostages in this drama and there are political uncertainties on all sides".

Richard Whitman (University of Kent) introduced a more pessimistic note, observing that both EU and UK perspectives agreed that the present security environment was "the most challenging since the Cold War". As a result of that environment the UK faced unique challenges. On the one hand it was committed to a broader role both globally and in Europe (e.g. Defence 20/25). On the other hand, Brexit was soaking up considerable "political bandwidth". As a counterpoint to this UK dilemma, the EU was embarking on a most ambitious set of undertakings in the field of defence while navigating an ongoing debate on the future direction of political integration in Europe.

The UK's commitment to active engagement in global affairs was also having to endure the challenge of the present incumbent of the White House. Trump challenges multi-lateralism in general and in particular those states who subscribe to it. This challenge also undermined attempts by the UK post Brexit to position itself globally in terms of the Commonwealth or the Anglosphere. Well might one ask what is the UK's position in the world?

As the recent controversy over Iran indicates, the UK is prepared to persist in its commonality of foreign policy interests with the EU even if they bring the UK into diplomatic conflict with the US.

Nevertheless, as the dispute over UK access to the European Satellite project "Galileo" illustrated, the UK will not be able to enjoy the relationship with the members of the EU that it has hitherto designed. During transition the UK would become, Dr Whitman said, a kind of "Hokey-Cokey" partner "shaking it all about" in the hope of maintaining influence even as its

means to achieve this apparently dwindle. The challenge for the UK will be how to play this weakening hand with skill and finesse. There would be "difficult times ahead".

QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION

A number of questions from the floor highlighted the inconsistencies of the UK position on security in a post Brexit Europe raised by panel members. Attention, however, was also drawn to the still largely undeveloped pan-European defence capability. The 2% of GDP member states of Nato were expected to contribute by 2024 was seen as an arbitrary and unquantifiable figure. In any case, irrespective of such contributions, the Europeans were incapable of launching any serious operation without US help. In the recent dramatic examples of cyber-warfare, Europe seemed also ill-prepared and vulnerable.

Dr Whitman acknowledged that the Europeans had placed too many eggs in one basket (Nato) which was why Trump was proving such a challenge for them. But just as De Gaulle's decision to leave Nato had led to that organisation restructuring itself successfully, it might also be the case that post Brexit, the Europeans would radically improve their defence capabilities and structures.

Ms Braw noted that the "2% by 2024" was "deliberately vague language" to allow flexibility for Nato members. On Cyber-security she pointed out that most of the "actors and indeed victims" in that field were private companies using infrastructure which was not in the hands of governments. Public and private sectors alike had to work together to combat attacks.

In response to a question concerning Moscow's feelings of betrayal following the agreements reached in 1989 which as seen from Moscow implied Nato would not expand into Eastern Europe, **Ms Braw** observed that even Gorbachov had noted in his memoirs that no organisation could "ever promise never to expand".

Dr Jones pointed out that most European defence capabilities were configured with a view to offering the US defence establishment a portfolio of military possibilities. Were Europe to break up, it was inconceivable that Belgium would maintain its present diverse and wide range of military capabilities. For the Europeans however to try to compete with US capabilities and technology head-on would be economically suicidal.

With regard to Russia's sense of betrayal over Nato expansion into Eastern Europe, it was worth remembering that the Baltic states and Poland did not regard joining Nato as a mistake. But the quid pro quo for this development has been a recognition that there is now a definite Russian sphere of influence in Eastern Europe.

Dr Martill observed that Europe could change radically over the next twenty years but at least the 1990s liberal elite's closing down of the debate over what was promised to Moscow in 1989, has come to an end and there is an increasing trope emerging from the political fringes that "we have antagonised the Russian bear".

With regard to the UK, Mrs May's lack of authority was making security a hostage in the negotiations and unlike trade it was more susceptible to governmental miscalculation. It was worth remembering, however, that Nato had been in disarray "long before the advent of Trump".

Dr Jones noted that Brexit would impact the UK's GDP negatively and this in itself would put huge downward pressure on UK defence budgets. Another austerity cut of 8% of the armed services budget would inflict huge damage on the UK's capabilities.

In response to a question as to whether the Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn represented the "*Neue Sachlichkeit*" **Dr Whitman** noted that the debate on the role of Britain in the world had begun and this would of course be impacted by domestic political considerations and the agendas of different parties.

Ms Braw took some solace in recent surveys of German public opinion which indicated that 91% of Germans supported and had faith in the Bundeswehr defending Germany's frontiers. It was good that Nato was focusing again on Europe, she said. Out of area was "out of character".



Summing up Brendan Donnelly noted that the different approaches in the debate on European defence reflected many of the contradictions that were also present among Brexiteers in the UK. At the heart of these contradictions was the transition to an end state which was neither agreed nor predictable. “If you do not know where you are going or why or indeed how you are going to get there, there can be little ground for optimism.”

CONCLUSION

Summing up the conference’s dynamic, it would be fair to say that the “jury” was still out on whether Brexit, if it occurred, would lead to a weakening or acceleration in Europe’s defence structures. “Wait and See” seemed to be the consensus view. Although the panel avoided the highly controversial topic of a “European Army”, anathema to the British military establishment (and perhaps also to a lesser degree to the French), it appeared likely that the debate around such a structure would be reopened with vigour once the UK departed.

As the conference was largely governed by the parameters of an Anglo-German discourse, the intriguing and probably increasingly important attitude of the French military leadership could only be hinted at. Yet as, (after March 2019), the sole remaining EU nuclear power and the only member state with a credible offensive military capability, France’s decisions in the wake of the UK withdrawal would be critical to any reconfiguring of the present modest pan-European defence effort. The speculation that this could impact the existing equilibrium between France and Germany was not discussed.

Despite these lacunae, inevitable in a conference of such short duration, the debate highlighted once again the negative consequences for the UK’s defence budgets, defence interoperability and defence industry should the UK fail to agree a withdrawal arrangement which continued to allow UK unfettered access to the Single Market. As much of the UK defence elite was notably in favour of Brexit (including several high-profile retired generals), the conference’s ability to shine a spotlight on these baneful results of Brexit for the British defence establishment were a valuable contribution to this often neglected aspect of the entire Brexit debate.

Richard Bassett
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