



Playing defence

by Sophia Besch

Prime Minister Theresa May considers Britain's contributions to European defence to be one of her best moves in the Brexit negotiation chess game. But how could it help her win a favourable Brexit deal from the EU?

Crude blackmail would not work, and thankfully seems unlikely in any case. It is true that some Brexiters are asking why British troops should risk their lives for EU member-states that want to impose a 'punitive' Brexit deal on the UK. But May knows that any open threat – for example to withdraw troops from NATO deployments in Central and Eastern Europe if Poland or the Baltic states dig in their heels over freedom of movement for their citizens – would not just be unhelpful, but would also lack credibility.

Britain, unlike Donald Trump, knows that the value of collective defence and security is greater than the sum of its parts. During the EU referendum campaign, 'Brexiters' and 'Remainers' alike stressed the value of NATO as the bedrock of British security. And the UK government will continue to invest time and resources in Europe's defence, not only to protect its own national interests, but also to generate goodwill abroad as the Brexit negotiations unfold. Britain wants to show other allies (not least the US) its enduring or – as Brexiters argue – renewed ambition to be a global player.

Thus, in her 'Brexit speech' at Lancaster House in January, May said she was optimistic that Britain and the EU would come to "the right agreement",

because the EU needed the UK as a partner in matters of security and defence.

May knows that her negotiating position depends on the support of allies in the EU, so she has invested a lot of political capital in bilateral security and defence relationships lately. Following a Polish-British summit in December 2016, she announced that from April 2017 Britain would station 150 troops in Poland, near the border with Russia's Kaliningrad enclave. During the summit, Poland's prime minister, Beata Szydlo, sounded very positive about London's efforts to conclude a free trade agreement with the EU. But some EU capitals frown upon the British pursuit of bilateral agreements and partnerships. Berlin, Paris and others worry that the focus on exclusive deals between governments will undermine EU cohesion at a critical time.

May also wants to use the UK's 'special relationship' with the United States to gain political capital: she is offering to act as a bridge between the US and the EU. On a visit to Washington she managed to wrest a – reluctant – commitment to NATO from Donald Trump, while in Brussels she conveyed Trump's message that Europeans need to invest more in defence spending through NATO.

Many EU leaders, however, do not want the UK to be a go-between in their relations with the Trump administration. They see Trump's erratic approach to the EU and NATO as a real concern. If they are to spend more on Europe's defence, it is because they want to hedge against the risk of the US reducing its contribution in Europe, not because they want to cosy up to him. May would do better to work with other Europeans to channel defence spending into filling the most important gaps in their capabilities. In Brexit negotiations, playing the 'defence card' as an open threat would backfire: it would be considered an assault on core common interests and European values; and it would put the UK's own security at risk. Instead, London should make clearer how it aims to contribute to European security, prosperity and stability once it has left the EU.

Britain, like France, will still be a European nuclear power, and a permanent member of the UN Security Council. The global outlook of the British and the professionalism and training of their military personnel all contribute to European security (even if it is currently far from clear that the British armed forces can afford to stick to their ambitious defence equipment plan). The EU would benefit from Britain's input in combating the threats of terrorism in Europe, a belligerent Russia, an unstable southern neighbourhood, and the weakening of transatlantic relations and American security guarantees under President Trump. EU governments would be well advised to take a pragmatic stance on security and defence policy co-operation with the UK.

It is not just the EU that will benefit from cordial relations, however. Britain would also gain from European goodwill, and not just during the divorce negotiations: once the UK's exit has been negotiated, London will want to agree some form of association agreement on EU defence, for the sake of its own security. The less obstructive Britain is now, the more it can ask for voting and operational planning privileges in the future.

The EU's negotiating strategy is currently guided by one basic principle: Britain cannot be better off outside the EU than as a member. The EU hopes in this way to undermine eurosceptic movements in other member-states. Following this rationale, many EU member-states are quick to dismiss 'privileges' for the UK post Brexit, including giving it a vote in operational planning decisions or on European Defence Agency projects. Moreover, the EU is keen to establish 'strategic autonomy' on defence matters (the ability to operate and deploy independently). Today more than ever the EU is reluctant to make itself dependent on third states.

But in reality the EU cannot afford to lose British capabilities at a time when the European security situation has deteriorated significantly and there is a risk the United States might withdraw from the world. Close defence co-operation between Britain and the EU, guided strictly by shared interests, should be the end game for both sides.

Sophia Besch
 Research fellow, CER

CER in the press

The New York Times

14th March 2017
 "We have seen the ECJ being much more attentive to the political winds rather than being so legalistic, because of the recognition that the EU is at risk of collapse," said Camino Mortera-Martinez of the CER, describing the ruling [on head scarves] as a landmark decision.

The Times

13th March 2017
 Rem Korteweg of the CER, believes that Mr Wilders wins even if he loses. Put another way, a fractured, fragile pro-EU centrist establishment loses even if it wins, as France could be about to discover.

The Irish Times

11th March 2017
 "The West's policy towards eastern Europe so far has been one of relatively benign indecision," Ian Bond writes in a paper for the CER.

The Economist

23rd February 2017
 In a new paper, Charles Grant director of the CER notes that "both the UK and the EU-27 are placing politics and principles ahead of economically optimal outcomes."

The Telegraph

23rd February 2017
 There have also been fears that member-states angered by Brexit could try to put

pressure on British expats in revenge. Spain could ask British retirees to pay for their own healthcare, according to the CER's John Springford.

The Economist

9th February 2017
 In a paper for the CER, Alex Barker of the *FT*, puts the [Brexit bill] figure at anything between €24.5bn and €72.8bn. The government will struggle to explain why voters should be on the hook for payments made after Brexit.

The Sunday Times

29th January 2017
 Simon Tilford, deputy director of the CER puts it:

"The British economy has not weathered the Brexit storm. It is just that the calm before the storm has lasted a bit longer than many had assumed. There is no reason to think Britain will escape serious and permanent damage to its foreign trade and investment and hence living standards."

The Express

25th January 2017
 Mr Schulz plans to focus on social justice and equality, according to Sophia Besch, a research fellow at the CER. "He's going to have to prove himself over the next couple of months. He is an unknown quantity in German domestic politics," she said.