



NATO, the EU and Brexit: Joining forces?

by Ian Bond

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NATO and the EU must work together to manage crises in Europe's neighbourhood. The UK's referendum vote has given them one more problem to solve.

The NATO Summit in Warsaw on July 8th and 9th was not supposed to be about Britain. NATO and the EU are fully occupied in trying to deal with security threats to their south and east. But NATO leaders will not be able to ignore the security implications of the UK's vote to leave the EU.

Paradoxically, the departure from the EU of one of its most pro-NATO member-states could give new impetus to EU-NATO co-operation. But it will be an opportunity wasted if either organisation sees Brexit as a chance to strengthen its own position at the expense of the other.

The longstanding obstacles to EU-NATO co-operation have not disappeared; in particular, the unresolved conflict in Cyprus still gets in the way. But NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg was at the European Council on June 28th when the EU's High Representative for foreign and security policy Federica Mogherini presented the new 'Global strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy' (EUGS). Now Mogherini will attend the Warsaw Summit. The two organisations will issue a joint statement in Warsaw on co-operation in areas including countering hybrid and cyber threats, defence capacity building and maritime security.

NATO and the EU have realised that the crises to the east and south do not fit neatly into institutional boxes. Russia's annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine demanded both sanctions, imposed by the EU, and military reassurance to NATO allies in Central and Eastern Europe. Russia's use of hybrid warfare made NATO and the EU see that they had to work together in areas such as improved border control, strengthened capabilities to resist cyber-attacks, and countering propaganda and disinformation.

In the south, also, both organisations have a role to play in dealing with the migration crisis. NATO's contribution has been limited so far, with a naval operation in the Aegean working with Greece and Turkey to spot refugees and migrants trying to reach the Greek islands. It has the capacity to do

more: the alliance has access to greater surveillance capabilities and naval assets to help the EU's own operations against people smugglers in the Mediterranean.

Ironically, Mogherini's new strategy takes a very British line on the importance of NATO and the EU's relationship with the alliance. The strategy describes NATO as "the primary framework" for collective defence for most member-states and "the bedrock of Euro-Atlantic security for almost 70 years". It also recognises that Europe needs to do more for its own defence if it is to have "a healthy transatlantic partnership with the United States".

The problem now is that the EU's largest military power, and one of the most active member-states in foreign policy, is on its way out of the Union. If France and the UK have traditionally been the leading countries in EU foreign and security policy, who will now take up the slack? France still hankers after a more independent European defence policy and capability. But it is not clear how many other member-states (let alone European publics) back these ideas. Germany (next in line in terms of its global foreign policy reach, if not in terms of its military heft or willingness to use it), may have more limited ambitions for EU foreign and defence policy, even at a time when the problems on Europe's periphery demand something more. Thoughtful officials in many EU countries know that the loss of the UK's influence will damage the Union.

A few, however, see the UK's departure as an opportunity to get away from Britain's Atlanticist approach to defence and security. The UK will no longer be able to obstruct progress towards a separate European defence identity. That may encourage France and others to ignore the EU's reduced defence resources. They may focus instead on building the institutions for what the global strategy calls "strategic autonomy", in particular an EU military headquarters separate from NATO.

There are indeed arguments for the EU to have some permanent planning capability; but there is little value in it unless the forces to implement the plans exist. The UK accounts for about a quarter of EU member-states' defence spending, and almost a quarter of deployable European troops; and the total number of deployable forces available to EU member-states fell by 13 per cent in 2014 (the last year for which figures are available). Unless European countries can put more forces in the field, reversing past cuts and compensating for the UK's absence, EU strategic autonomy will be a mirage.

For the US, there are advantages in having an EU willing and able to carry out operations (as in Mali) in which the US (and therefore NATO) does not wish to get involved. But an EU minus the UK will be less capable of operating in distant theatres, and more reliant on the US for help. While most US officials these days would like to see Europeans doing more for their own defence and security, there are still a few who take the view that keeping Europe dependent is a useful way to guarantee Washington's influence.

It would be wrong, however, for Americans to think that the EU's loss will be NATO's or America's gain. The suggestion by former NATO Supreme Allied Commander James Stavridis that a significant number of British forces would be released from EU duties and available to NATO is mistaken: the UK has generally contributed small numbers of specialists to EU missions, rather than large units. Rather, there is a risk that the EU will become even less able to contribute to international security operations, while the UK itself could become more isolationist as a result of Brexit. Some of the most ardent Brexiters opposed airstrikes on Syria in 2013, even though US president Barack Obama was counting on UK support.

While none of the candidates to succeed David Cameron as British prime minister voted against military action in 2013, they will have to contend with a Conservative Party and a country that is decreasingly interested in other countries' problems. If Brexit hits the UK economy as badly as forecast by the IMF and other experts, defence and overseas assistance will be among the budgets vulnerable to cuts. And if Scotland at some point votes in favour of independence, the UK would lose a significant part of its defence infrastructure, including Faslane naval base, the home of the submarines that carry its Trident nuclear missiles.

Whatever the pressures on Britain's defence effort, however, any new prime minister will want to reinforce the message that leaving the EU has not diminished Britain's role as a major power. And both the EU and NATO have an interest in showing that Brexit will not undermine either the capability or the resolve of the two organisations. The UK will be represented in Warsaw by a lame-duck prime minister. He should still take the opportunity to show that while Britain may be leaving the EU, it recognises that it has a responsibility for and an interest in the security of its European partners. The EU and NATO should show that regardless of Brexit, they are committed to co-operating rather than competing to provide security and defence in and for Europe.

Most international summit declarations are ignored as soon as they are adopted, until it is time to quote from them (selectively) at the next summit. The EU/NATO statement in Warsaw and the EU global strategy should not be left to gather dust, however. The two organisations need to take them as a mandate to work together in the interests of the 34 countries that are members of one or both of them, and especially of the 22 (21, once the UK leaves the EU) that are in both. The UK may often have irritated its European partners by insisting that everything the EU did in the defence field should be compatible with NATO, but since 2014 most member-states have recognised that there is something in British arguments. Each organisation has its own competences; they need to ensure that they use their limited resources to complement each other, rather than to compete. NATO should welcome the fact that the EU has adopted the alliance's target of having 20 per cent of defence budgets spent on equipment procurement and on research and technology; and the two organisations should work together to ensure that national priorities for investment are better co-ordinated.

European security will be damaged in the long term if the UK's perception of its interests diverges too much from that of its European partners. Britain will no longer be able to thrash out its differences in EU working groups or council meetings; it will need other mechanisms. Whatever arrangements are eventually agreed for the UK's future relationship with the EU, the UK should have an administrative agreement with the European Defence Agency (EDA) – like Norway and others – to enable it to take part in EDA programmes, so that its forces are as interoperable as possible with those of its European allies and partners. Brexit or not, the UK will almost always find itself working in coalition with other Europeans when it decides to use force. It has an interest in ensuring that co-operation is as smooth as possible.

Britain will also still sit in NATO meetings with most of its former EU partners. Political consultations in NATO have often been overshadowed by EU discussions, to the frustration of allies (including Turkey) who are not members of the EU. The UK should work with leading EU countries to ensure that NATO discussions on political issues have real content. There is already concern in NATO that Brexit could remove the main obstacle to EU member-states caucusing within the alliance. This fear may be exaggerated (France values its independence of action in NATO too much to submit entirely to EU discipline); but if the EU presents inflexible pre-cooked positions to the rest of the alliance, it will create unnecessary stress in the relationship. There will have to be more give and take.

In the Cold War, NATO and the EEC could operate completely independently of each other (even after the EEC began to discuss foreign policy issues in 1970). Today, NATO and the EU face security threats which can only be tackled successfully by the two organisations working together. NATO and the EU have finally accepted that they need to stop seeing each other as rivals. The UK, which has always argued that there is room for the alliance and the Union to work together rather than treading on each other's toes, has unfortunately chosen to leave the EU just when relations between the Union and NATO have improved. Traditionally, the UK has acted as a bridge between NATO (and especially the US) and the EU. Once outside the EU, it will no longer be able to play that role. Instead, Britain's partners in NATO and the EU will have to work to ensure that Britain does not turn in on itself, and that it continues to contribute its considerable military and diplomatic assets to European security. NATO may even find itself acting as a bridge between the EU and the UK.

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