



## UK-EU relations: Time to raise the level of ambition

by Sir Julian King, 21 March 2025

**Geopolitical turbulence has put UK-EU differences in perspective. Britain and the EU need much closer ties.**

There is a lot going on in the world. How much bandwidth is left in the EU and the UK to focus on rebuilding and reinforcing relations between the two? That is a valid question. But as Donald Trump shakes up, to put it mildly, existing alliances and challenges the values-based international order and post-World War II institutions, the question is also how long can the EU and the UK afford not to invest more in their relationship.

I was in Paris at the time of the Brexit vote and worked in the Commission in its aftermath. I do not for a moment underestimate its profound impact, for the deep damage that it did to trust. But the referendum was nine years ago. The world has changed, and not for the better. The things that separated the EU and the UK have been put into perspective. We are on the same side over Ukraine, in the UN, the G7 and the G20. How will the harsh realities of the new geopolitics impact UK-EU relations?

Some might say not so much. The action is elsewhere: in coalitions of the willing, for example, to support Ukraine. That is certainly part of the answer. Reinforcing relations between like-minded governments matters. But so does reinforcing the institutional relationships that underpin our rules-based international order. That is why the UK supports the G7, the World Trade Organisation and the UN, and why the UK's relationship with the EU matters.

With everything that is going on, it is easy to forget that there is an EU-UK summit coming up on May 19<sup>th</sup>. Preparations are underway, largely out of the political spotlight. Given the international context, it is worth looking again at the level of ambition, in London and in Brussels, to make sure it matches the scale of the challenge.

I have argued [elsewhere](#) that on foreign policy, defence, issues of safety and tackling people-smuggling gangs, energy security, wider economic security, as well as economic relations, it is in our mutual self-interest to develop new ways of working together, to counter shared threats and pursue mutual

opportunities. That is even more the case today than it was last year, when the new Labour government in London proposed to pursue a Security Pact with the EU.

As Foreign Secretary David Lammy and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Kaja Kallas argue in a recent [joint article](#): “The seriousness of the moment demands a new era in UK and EU security and defence co-operation... Our shared values and interests make us natural strategic partners.” So, what should we aim for at May’s summit?

First, how ambitious should we be? My view: as ambitious as possible. The times call for it. The two sides have discussed reinforcing co-operation on foreign policy; they are putting that into practice, in the UN and elsewhere. The summit should recognise that. Co-operating more on safety goes wider than tackling the people-smuggling gangs, vital as that is. Given current challenges, we need to strengthen co-operation on countering hybrid and cyber threats, as well as dis- and misinformation and electoral interference. Terrorism, as we have seen in recent radicalised ‘lone wolf’ attacks across the EU, has not gone away. Both the EU and the UK are deploying the latest technology to monitor entry and exit across our borders. We should look together at how to use technology to better share information and alerts to counter terrorism and others who wish us harm, to bolster our mutual security. There are ways to protect the integrity of separate data bases, which the Commission itself uses when linking, for example, law enforcement and migration data bases.

The case for strengthening co-operation on building defence capabilities is both evident and pressing. The CER’s Luigi Scazzieri has [set out some concrete steps](#) that the summit could take, including integrating the UK more closely in collective efforts to reinforce defence capability. Aggregating demand, and giving industry a longer-term perspective to support investment, all works better at scale. Politics aside, UK defence companies are closely integrated with businesses across the EU: new EU arrangements should take account of that practical reality. When it comes to building key transport and energy infrastructure, the EU has developed ways of delivering projects of mutual interest with countries outside the EU. The same kind of inventiveness will be needed to scale up European defence capability at the pace required.

The only thing I would add to Luigi’s arguments, is that we should certainly seize the opportunity on defence but not separate or disentangled from the rest of the relationship. There is increasing debate across the EU about the need to reduce dependencies, on the US as well as China, for some critical technologies, as well as digital and communication infrastructure, and to de-risk key supply chains. It is in both the EU’s and UK’s interests to recognise that the latest events underline the importance of reinforcing discussion and co-operation on these wider economic security issues and wider economic relations too, and that should be properly reflected in the summit outcomes.

Second, how much is it realistic to tie up in May? There is a real urgency about reaching practical agreements now, not kicking the can down the road. But there is a potential trap, I think, in trying to do too much in a single ‘grand package’. There is a long tradition in the EU of pursuing package agreements, and saying “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed”. This can speed up progress; more often it slows everything down to the pace of the most difficult issue. Everyone – or almost everyone – agrees we should reinforce our co-operation on foreign policy and defence. Some on the EU side argue this should not be done before other sensitive issues, like fishing quotas, have been addressed as part of a package. Some on the UK side say there are other pressing economic issues that need to be tackled too, such as a veterinary agreement, mutual recognition of professional qualifications, and mutual recognition

agreements in key sectors. Both sides think they have a point. But there is a risk that the pursuit of a grand package slows everything down. Some issues, like defence capability development, need to be addressed urgently; others may need more work. So, I would argue that we should leave open the possibility of delivering in May on some, more pressing, issues, while agreeing that other issues should be developed further.

In practice this would mean the summit setting out a series of future joint work streams, or strands, blessed at the highest level, to be pursued as a matter of priority. These would need continued ministerial level engagement, reporting back regularly to the summit level. The different strands, crucially, should be set up in a balanced way, so that both sides can identify the important elements they want to see pursued in the future relationship, and to avoid suggestions, from either side, of 'cherry picking'.

Third, can we get beyond the Trade and Co-operation Agreement? It was a necessary agreement, hard fought. But it was and is of its time, forged in the circumstances of 2019-20, and shaped by a difficult divorce. I am not suggesting either side should forget, or be let off, the commitments they took as part of the Withdrawal Agreement or the TCA. Indeed, doing what you said you would is at the core of rebuilding trust and confidence in a partnership. But the TCA has, in a number of ways, been overtaken by events. There are gaps, on foreign policy and defence for example, and limitations on co-operation that might usefully be reviewed, such as working with EU agencies like EUROPOL, or on energy and economic security for instance.

In particular, some of the working methods need to be refreshed: they are too cumbersome for today's fast-moving world. Having to wait for the next specialist committee; running everything through the TCA Partnership Council; in some cases, having to get clearance for EU and UK officials simply to meet, shackles both sides. Co-operation on cybersecurity, to take one example, actually became less effective once it fell into TCA machinery. The TCA should be part of the floor, but not the ceiling of the future relationship. The summit offers an opportunity to complement the agreement with new political priorities, and new more agile ways of working, to be followed up and monitored at the highest level.

Some of this will be challenging. But given the shifts in international relations, the increased geopolitical risk and unpredictability, the UK and the EU have a strong shared incentive to reinforce co-operation, reflecting our shared values and overlapping interests. It is the best, increasingly necessary insurance. We need to start to think – and talk – about the relationship in different terms. Then we can start to build a relationship fit for these times.

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