



Post-Brexit foreign, security and defence co-operation: We don't want to talk about it

by Ian Bond

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Boris Johnson's government has chosen not even to discuss an agreement with the EU on foreign, security and defence co-operation after Brexit, preferring to rely on bilateral contacts with its former EU partners. That may turn out to be a mistake, but the UK is not the only Western democracy that finds foreign policy co-operation with the EU frustrating. London and Brussels should both re-examine their positions. That's the main conclusion of a new policy brief from the Centre for European Reform, '[Post-Brexit foreign, security and defence co-operation: We don't want to talk about it](#)', which examines what the UK wants, and what the EU offers its partners.

Theresa May's government was keen to have a substantial agreement with the EU on foreign, security and defence cooperation after Brexit. Boris Johnson, however, sees little added value in a contractual arrangement with the EU in these areas, and so far these matters have been sidelined in favour of discussing more pressing issues like the future trade relationship and the mechanisms for law enforcement and judicial cooperation.

Boris Johnson's government believes that the UK can instead work bilaterally with major EU member-states on foreign, security and defence co-operation, and they will then bring the rest of the member-states and the EU institutions into line. The lessons from the EU's external security co-operation with other third countries like Canada, Norway or the US are that having a treaty-based relationship with the EU does not give a country any more influence over EU decision-making; and that countries that do not have such relationships can still benefit from EU foreign policy successes.

There is now no chance of an immediate, let alone comprehensive, agreement on foreign, security and defence co-operation. However, if the EU and UK agree on a deal covering trade and law enforcement co-operation, it is possible that they might agree later to limited foreign, security and defence co-operation with a minimal formal structure (or none at all). The EU should be open to this, provided that any arrangement helps the Union to pursue its external policy objectives more effectively. The UK should also leave the door open to a closer relationship in future, and should not underestimate the value of structured contacts with the EU as a complement to bilateral relationships with member-states.

The failure of the EU and the UK to agree on the need for contractually-based future co-operation on external security has highlighted shortcomings in the EU's relationships with third countries in this area. The EU should rationalise these relationships, to give formal channels to influence decisions to those partners (potentially

including the UK in future, whatever its current position) which are more willing to follow co-ordinated policies and contribute to EU operations.

“The UK may be right to think that it can work with European partners on foreign, security and defence challenges without having a formal agreement on co-operation, but it may find that there also advantages to having regular, structured exchanges with the Union. At the same time, the EU should ask itself why other partners, not just the UK, find their foreign and defence policy co-operation with the EU frustrating, even when they have shared aims”, said Ian Bond, director of foreign policy at the CER, and author of the report.

Note for editors:

For further information on the new research and to request an interview with Ian Bond, please contact Rosie Giorgi in the CER press office on pressoffice@cer.eu or +44 (207) 233 1199.

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