



## The real option for UK defence after Brexit

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The Key Withdrawal Agreement Act 2020 implements Mr Johnson's Brexit deal, will allow the UK to leave on January 31<sup>st</sup> and deliver an implementation period until December 31<sup>st</sup> 2020. Addressing both Houses of Parliament, Queen Elizabeth said the Government would embark on an ambitious programme of domestic reform that delivers on the people's priorities. On matters of defence and security, the British PM has made many improvements on Theresa May's previous deal with the EU, not to mention essential sections to assert the UK's Parliamentary sovereignty (s. 38) and vital national interests (s.26). Plans for the "deepest reviews" of Britain's security, defence and foreign policy since the Cold War are now underway. With Boris Johnson holding a substantial majority in the Commons following the General Election, the PM is in a position to protect the independence of the UK's armed forces and intelligence agencies. This is a vital issue for the future of the UK defence and, unlike previous reviews, this new bold strategy will have to identify a new role for Britain post-Brexit, as it will be more distinctive as an international power.

Significantly, issues surrounding the UK's commitment to cooperate and integrate on security matters are placed now into the non-legally binding Political Declaration and the previous UK's commitment to cooperate and integrate on matters of defence "to the extent possible under EU law" have been removed. Once the UK leaves the EU at the end of January, it will no longer be entitled to attend EU Foreign Ministers meetings or discussions

on future defence cooperation (PESCO-EDF). British involvement in EU-led initiatives would remain unclear with EU member states yet to decide on a legal framework for third party participation.

Not surprisingly, the German Defence Minister, Annagret Kramp-Karrenbauer, in an attempt to ensure the EU does not lose the UK's defence assets post-Brexit, in her recent speech in London at the beginning of January, stressed that the EU should "offer Britain a privileged third party status" in defence and foreign policy cooperation after Brexit. This comes in the aftermath of the referendum result, whereby EU legislation and organisations have been put in place to speed up the level of integration on defence and security to the extent that new EU leaders, including the new Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, has, for the first time, openly spoken of EU military operations. But the early days of her Commission, with the recent flare-ups of conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa, have only highlighted the EU's limited capabilities, influence and shortfalls in responding to geopolitical conflicts. The absence of the EU diplomacy in the Mediterranean vis a vis the recent Libyan ceasefire, has starkly exposed the cost of EU division and hesitation.

Irrespective of whether further collaboration with the EU on matters of defence turns out to be a realistic way forward, Britain must now grasp the hold of the opportunities to reinvigorate old alliances which its association

with the EU had suppressed. This would include reversing the UK's historical disengagement in the Middle East and Asia and deploying new forward positions such as naval support in Bahrain, the Caribbean and the Far East. This also applies to UK's membership of the Five Eyes intelligence sharing community which already protects the UK's national security more than any EU collaboration. As for the security of Europe, only NATO truly enables collaboration between allies in an effective manner, while still allowing sovereign decision making by each member. The fundamental distrust of NATO and the US which the EU, led by French President Macron, seems to have developed, is at odds with Britain's traditional alignment, military alliances and global vision of the world.

As pointed out by Gen. Nick Carter, Head of the British Armed Forces, in setting a new direction, British leaders must now think boldly and be prepared to "shatter some Shibboleths" as "we have returned to an era of great power competition, even constant conflict. This requires strategic response that integrates all of the levers of national power". Presently, the biggest threat Europe is facing is in foreign policy, and, as the EU's institutional framework is not prepared, Europe is at risk of ever becoming the theatre of conflicting interests between the US, China and Russia.

Undoubtedly as the UK prepares to leave the EU on January 31<sup>st</sup>, and Brexit moves into a period of complicated trade talks, the security and defence issues should not be considered alongside any future trade deal with the EU, due to their vital national importance. This could, if not properly handled, lead the UK from breaking away from the EU defence and security institutions altogether.