



As we all know, by a relatively small margin and with a simple majority of those voting, the United Kingdom decided in 2016 to leave the European Union, writes Robert Walter. Two parliamentary elections and three prime ministers later, the UK finally withdrew from the EU on 31st January this year.

But Brexit is not done yet, because we are in the "transition period" and still trying to determine the nature of the future relationship. Most of the discussions have centred around the concept of a "level playing field" with the very real complications of Northern Ireland and the desire of what is now a third country seeking to minimise the disruption to existing trade patterns. The UK has appeared to want to "have its cake", freeing itself from the EU, "and eating it", retaining access to the single market.

Disappointingly, although it was clearly stated as the third pillar of the Political Declaration signed in October 2019, discussions on future foreign policy, security and defence cooperation have not featured. The EU's adopted negotiating mandate saw any partnership agreement as single package including foreign and defence policy.

The first paragraph of the section on Foreign Policy Security and Defence of the Political Declaration clearly states "The parties support ambitious, close and lasting cooperation on external action to protect citizens from external threats, including new emerging threats, prevent conflicts, strengthen international peace and security". It then continues to say, "The parties welcome close cooperation in Union-led crisis management missions and operations, both civilian and military". Then on defence capabilities is quite specific on "the United Kingdom's collaboration in relevant existing and future projects of the European Defence Agency", "the participation of eligible United Kingdom entities in collaborative defence projects bringing together Union entities supported by the European Defence Fund" and "the United Kingdom's collaboration in projects in the framework of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO)". In March of this year the European Commission published a draft text on the foreign policy, security and defence provisions of the Agreement on the New Partnership with the UK. It did so while acknowledging "that the United Kingdom has stated that it does not wish to engage in

negotiations on these matters". The document, whilst sticking to the terms of the Political Declaration, was also provocative in emphasising that the UK was now an outsider and should be treated no differently to any other third country.

In fact, the UK's negotiating objectives published on 27 February stated that foreign policy will be determined "within a framework of broader friendly dialogue and cooperation between the UK and the EU". The document makes no direct reference to defence or participation in EU programmes such as the EDF and PESCO. In May the UK Government published its draft agreement texts which excluded foreign affairs and defence cooperation from the future relationship negotiations.

The theme of this year's Berlin Security conference is "Europe – a cohesive bond for strong power". In terms of military power, the United Kingdom spends more on defence than any other European nation. It is one of the two nations in Europe both with nuclear weapons capability and permanent seats at the UN Security Council. It would therefore be very short-sighted to exclude the UK from the wider European security and defence debate.

Back in 2017 the UK offered to put its defence, security and aid assets at the disposal of the European Union. That offer extended to continuing to share embassies with the EU, provide intelligence information and undertake regular joint EU-led military missions. It also set out plans for continuing to contribute to the Commission's European Defence Fund, including the European defence research programme and the European defence industrial development programme. The UK expressed a desire to work with the EU on its defence missions and help with operational planning and developing their mandate. They expressed the wish that the level of UK involvement in the planning process for EU military missions should reflect the UK's contributions. In other words, the UK was proposing, that whatever the final outcome of the post-Brexit settlement, in defence it would as far as possible be "business as usual".

But the UK has to rebuild trust, because this is not a "cake and eat it" scenario. The UK has significant military resources, far more than most European nations. The defence of Europe and the security of our citizens and the values we all share are too precious to be sacrificed on the altar of institutional pique.

In this article last year I highlighted that Brexit is the opportunity for good Europeans to wake up to the reality of threats and opportunities for Europe and start to become more inclusive in the pursuit of our common goals and the security of our continent. We must work to ensure that all the initiatives both within EU structures and those created outside are properly coordinated. That must be done without undermining the existing NATO architecture, but be complimentary to it.

National prejudices and well-intentioned European idealism are the enemies of progress. We need a pragmatic, inclusive approach that puts the effective defence of Europe, and our influence in the world, first and foremost.

Robert Walter is the President, of the European Security and Defence Association and a Board Member of Eurodefense-UK. This article was to have been a foreword to the ESDA conference in Berlin, postponed because of the pandemic