

Faced with an overwhelming amount of information about the possible effects of Brexit on the interests of the UK and others, Sandy Johnston, who spent many years working on these issues in an official capacity, writes:

Like many institutions the EU has its faults: Excessive bureaucracy, ponderous processes, a chronic case of the "topsy" principle, and increasingly unaccountable behaviour in the top echelons. The ill-fated Constitution was voted down by French and Dutch referendums. This is often seized on with some justification as further evidence that the EU and its trappings are seen as something of a theme park for political and business elites, and generally distrusted by the man on the Clapham omnibus. We are bombarded with opinions, forecasts, statistics, projections amongst which it is very hard for even relatively well-informed people to discern facts.

In the furore of claim and contradiction that we have witnessed in recent weeks about what Brexit would or would not mean for the UK, the area of defence and security had remained largely ignored, all the focus being on jobs, immigration, the health service, incomes and the economy in general. Then two weeks ago the Prime Minister delivered what has since become caricatured as the "third world war" speech, and when I read in it much of what I myself have been writing and saying in various places it left me wondering what I could add that might seem new. Has the EU been fundamental to keeping the peace in Europe over the last 70 years? Yes, absolutely. Is NATO the cornerstone of European defence? Yes, unquestionably. Do both organisations have a role to play in defence and security? Yes, obviously. Can they work effectively together for the benefit of their members? Not easily is the answer, and it will be a great deal more difficult if the UK is not fully engaged to prevent unhelpful developments. Let us start with some history.

First, ancient history, by which I mean 1956. By way of further reading I strongly recommend the excellent "Atlantis Lost" by the Dutch academic Sebastien Reyn. In the aftermath of the Suez debacle, the UK and France took away different lessons. The French resolved never again to trust or rely on US support, while we in the UK decided never again to find ourselves on a different side from the Americans. When Charles de Gaulle returned to power in 1958 to save France from itself, his singular obsession with European autonomy resulted in the famous "double non" of January 1963 (to the US proposal for a multilateral nuclear force and to the UK's membership of the Communities) and ultimately to the French withdrawal in 1966 from NATO's integrated military structures. For the next 32 years, the French hankered after a distinct European defence and security independent from US (for which read: NATO) authority and oversight, while the UK, backed by the US, continued to insist that NATO was the sole actor in that domain. (The now-defunct Western European Union is largely immaterial to this story.)

The launch of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy at Maastricht in 1992 recognised the logic of an EU forum to discuss security affairs of common interest, though the UK continued to rule out any discussion of "defence" per se. Then in 1998 the recently-elected Tony Blair attended a bilateral summit at Saint-Malo where he and Jacques Chirac signed a declaration that paved the way for the European Security and Defence Policy agreed at the Cologne Summit of 1999. Many of my former colleagues still see this as a Faustian pact, a selling out of 40-odd years of NATO-centric UK policy by the Europhile Blair. But it was a calculated risk. Certainly Blair wanted to demonstrate his European credentials, but he also saw the possibility that in the aftermath of the Balkan wars the Europeans might just be willing to stop taking the Cold War dividend and to invest more in their own defence effort under an EU flag. As 12 of the then 15 member states were also in the Alliance, the rising tide would lift all boats.

The risk lay in the possibility that the new EU policy would somehow detract from or undermine the Alliance, which remained ♦ and still

remains - the highest priority for London. In a recent piece for European Geostrategy I said that the plan had been discussed at length with the Americans, an allegation that drew some fire from US colleagues who were working in the DOD and State Department at the time. But the fact is that so few people were involved, literally a handful of ministers and officials in each capital, that many were unaware of the initiative. George Robertson has described it as "akin to a palace coup." Certainly Madeleine Albright, then US Secretary of State was aware, as evidenced by her seminal piece in the FT in early December 1998, warning that the proposal must respect the "3 Ds" ♦ no divergence from NATO policies, no discrimination against other European Allies and no duplication of NATO command and planning structures, something the Europeans could ill afford in either political or financial terms.

To square the circle of allowing the EU to conduct military operations ♦ albeit up to a relatively modest scale ♦ but not to possess a military planning headquarters and command structure took some creative thinking, and formed the heart of the compromise between French and British visions. It was agreed that EU-led operations could be planned and run either from one of 5 national headquarters declared available to the EU (UK, France, Germany, Italy and Greece) or from the NATO headquarters at SHAPE through a set of arrangements known as Berlin Plus. All these options have now been used at least once, SHAPE is still running op ALTHEA in Bosnia, Northwood is running counter-piracy and capacity building in the Indian Ocean, Potsdam was used for Chad, Paris for several operations in Africa, and the Greek and Italian OHQs for various security missions in and around the Mediterranean. Ideally, SHAPE would be used for all EU-led operations, but the political stand-off between Turkey and Cyprus prevents this happening for the time being.

Despite the fact that Nicolas Sarkozy brought France back into the NATO command structure in 2009 (a step at least as significant in political terms as Blair's decision at Saint-Malo), and notwithstanding the close UK-French bilateral military co-operation evidenced by the Lancaster House treaties of 2010, Paris and others still hanker after an EU OHQ. UK stopped such a development twice, in 2003 and 2011. Our absence would open the door. The so-called "Weimar 3" ♦ Germany, France and Poland ♦ would be quick to propose an EU "planning and conduct capacity" as they did in 2011. Their argument is that such a structure would encourage further investment and political will for action on the part of member states, but recent history tells us that this is far fetched.

What it would do is lead inevitably to the duplication and divergence warned against by Albright all those years ago. A planning and command function would require a commander, an EU equivalent of NATO's SACEUR. He would require a staff structure, including J1 through J9 in military speak, covering everything from plans, operations, logistics, finance, personnel, communications, intelligence and so forth. As plans were formulated, there would be inevitable pressure to set up further structures to support the plans, component commands in different parts of Europe, with member states vying for the prestige, finance and jobs that would go with them, all at the expense of investment better spent on capabilities available to both the EU and NATO. National planners in 22 capitals would be torn between two potentially conflicting sets of requirements.

The US, already long-exasperated at the lack of European burdensharing, would be even more frustrated by duplication and divergence. Already rebalancing its European focus with the Asia-Pacific where China is an increasing risk to stability, new leadership in Washington might be even less sympathetic to Europeans expecting Uncle Sam always to be there in the front line, whatever the antics of a resurgent Russia.

Would Brexit lead to WW 3? No, not directly. Would it increase the risk of disintegration of a system that has contributed substantially to the longest period of peace and stability in the history of Europe (pace the Balkans)? Yes.

Already the slow motion train wreck that is the Euro and the creaking of Schengen under the pressure of migration are both fuelling the rise of right wing parties across the continent. And there is precious little appetite amongst most of the member states' publics for "ever closer political union" no matter what the rhetoric of the political elites. But there is little doubt in my mind that the routine daily, weekly and monthly meetings of officials, diplomats and ministers from 28 independent nation states offers the best possible prophylactic against the catastrophic breakdown of relationships.

Finally, Russia would certainly like to see the EU weakened, and for the EU-NATO relationship to remain difficult, a view that may well play a part in prompting its overtures to Cyprus. Like others I wholeheartedly condemn Russian aggression in the Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, although I confess to an unfashionable twinge of sympathy with the view from Moscow as the West marches relentlessly towards its borders and it gradually sees itself losing the buffer of the Baltic States, Belarus, Ukraine and Georgia. Mikhail Gorbachev's thoughts on developments since glasnost and perestroika make interesting reading. The EU and NATO have worked in tandem on Ukraine, NATO providing military back-up and exercises, the EU maintaining so far an effective sanctions regime. And as noted by Sec Gen Stoltenberg in a recent press conference with Federica Mogherini, the two organisations have also made more progress on co-operation in the last three months than in the previous 13 years, agreeing joint initiatives on hybrid warfare, cyber security, partner support and maritime co-operation. This is enormously gratifying, but such progress requires sustained hard work by member states and Allies in both organisations, including the UK.

Sandy Johnston is an independent expert on European Defence, EU-NATO relations and UK-French defence relations. When serving with the FCO he briefed a U K Defence Forum study trip to EU institutions in Brussels.

By way of full disclosure Sandy also wrote in his original article - I am geographically Irish, politically British, and instinctively European acquainted with the mainland of Europe from an unusually early age amongst my peers. Few young children from Northern Ireland were taken by their parents on driving and camping holidays on the continent in the 1960s. It started a love affair that ultimately saw me spend ten years abroad, including four years working in a French government department in Paris and six years in the "belly of the beast" as UK representative on the EU's Politico-Military working group in Brussels.