Security and Defense in Northern Europe

European Defence under Pressure: Brexit and Beyond

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Joint Roundtable Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP, Berlin), Norwegian Institute for Defense Studies (IFS, Oslo), and Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS, Washington, D.C.)
Summary

On March 1st, 2017 20 international security and defence experts gathered at SWP Berlin for the workshop “European Defence under Pressure: Brexit and Beyond” organised in the framework of the research program “Security and Defence in Northern Europe (SNE)”. SNE is a joint project of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), the Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies (IFS, Oslo), and Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS, Washington, D.C.).

Held under Chatham House rule, the workshop brought together leading thinkers and policymakers to discuss the implications of the Brexit for European defence and the transatlantic relationship. The first session sought to set the scene by sketching the bigger picture in three scenarios. The second session focused on the effect of Brexit on political power in Europe, cohesion and the capacity to act. The third session focused on military power and addressed issues such as the impact of the Brexit on European military capabilities and on bi- and multilateral defence cooperation outside EU and NATO frameworks.

Session 1: European Defence in 2020: Three scenarios on European Defence in view of Brexit

The first session was devoted to three different scenarios on European Defence in 2020 in view of Brexit. In the first scenario, it was invoked that Brexit had the potential for a loss of trust between the EU and the UK especially in the case of a “hard” Brexit. One participant emphasized that there is a clear risk that in light of the upcoming elections in various EU countries (particularly in France, Germany), there could no longer be enough EU left for Great Britain to negotiate with. Together with a US Administration which could try to actively weaken the EU, the support for bilateral deals over multilateral cooperation could grow, and the UK could then seek to negotiate bilaterally in order to strengthen its position vis-à-vis the EU. This could lead to further fragmentation and drive EU member states further apart.

In a second scenario, additional risks to the European defence architecture were listed. Next to a domino effect which could result in increased nationalization, geographically differentiated defence systems or a weakened security partnership between the EU and the UK could pose threats to Europe’s security. Moreover, the missing contribution of the UK and a lack of coordination in topics such as economic sanctions could reduce Europe’s scope of action. The second scenario predicted that Britain would implement a more nationalistic defence policy and face internal threats such as the re-opening of the Irish or Scottish questions. Also, it was highlighted that with the UK and the US withdrawing from the international security system, other actors might test the EU’s willingness to engage globally.

The third scenario stressed the importance of positive visions to shape political outcome. It was argued that Brexit also offered the possibility to be a catalyst for the evolution of the EU, i.e. that it would undertake a necessary self-assessment and readdress its structural problems. Three stages of Brexit were outlined: The first stage involved the realisation that Brexit will in fact happen, the second stage would include specific and detailed negotiations. As Brexit is a process, the way the negotiations are conducted were of high importance to contribute to a climate of cooperation. If a focus on facts could be generated, this cooperation could last until phase three in which the UK had actually left the EU.

In the following discussion, participants agreed on the fact that Britain was to become more inward looking but doubted that the UK would really withdraw from global security discussions. The potential problem of increasing bilateral cooperation and more coalitions of the willing was also widely acknowledged. Nevertheless, the question was raised whether Brexit played a role for European defence cooperation at all. Financing its operations appeared to be a major obstacle for
British ambitions in light of the economic consequences of Brexit. Another problem commonly agreed upon was that Britain is not preparing communication channels outside a formal setting even if such dialogue could gain in importance.

**Session 2: Power, Cohesion and Solidarity: Maintaining Europe’s political capacity to act**

With regard to the way Brexit could affect defence cooperation, it was emphasized that there had always been various formats of cooperation. The Brexit would neither result in positive nor negative changes to the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) of the EU, because the UK had never been fond of the CSDP and had vetoed decisions in the past. Also, the UK was never the only sceptic of CSDP, other member states had also made use of their veto powers. Moreover, many of the problems were of political nature (e.g. lack of trust) which meant they cannot be solved by technical solutions. As a result of Brexit, other formats such as NATO could gain in importance as they offer proven alternatives for Europe’s defence. Even if this tendency could strengthen the European pillar in NATO, it was emphasized that Europe’s influence could decrease due to increased bilateralism and fragmentation. A possible burden-sharing in which the EU engaged in crisis management and NATO in defence seemed more plausible in the future. The lack of trust and the economic damage following Brexit could nevertheless affect European defence even if it might only have little effect on the CSDP.

Further, it was highlighted that the Brexit could have less impact on defence issues as generally anticipated. States, such as Norway, that are not a member of the EU can nonetheless take part in CSDP operations and shape political outcomes without being part of a formal EU setting. However, this would still be of a disadvantage to the UK because it can no longer formally influence decisions. Participants emphasized that the existence of external threats, such as from Russia or IS, raises the question of stronger military cooperation throughout Europe. Yet, it was pointed out that even if there was increased European defence cooperation, it could never be an alternative to the American security guarantee provided through NATO.

In general, participants agreed that CSDP would not undergo a substantial change. However, defence cooperation could be the area in which an agreement could be facilitated easiest compared to other areas such as economics. This narrative applied to EU-UK as well as to EU-internal negotiations. Because of the strong UK-US axis, Britain could engage more strongly in NATO. During the discussion Norway was repeatedly invoked as a good example of what outside lobbying could achieve and what not. Also it was stressed that the new realism in EU affairs could highlight the added value of EU-NATO burden sharing.

**Session 3: Defending Europe: Europe’s military power, multilateral defence cooperation and industrial developments**

The last panel focused on Europe’s military power, multilateral defence cooperation and industrial developments. It was highlighted that although European countries began to increase their defence spending since the Ukraine crisis, they still rely on the UK and especially the US to guarantee their security. Therefore, states could prefer to go directly to Washington or London instead of trying to engage other EU member states in defence cooperation. Nevertheless, participants agreed that European capabilities had to be built in formats outside the EU. It was emphasized that these capabilities would be impacted by Brexit in general and especially by a lack of research funding.

Also the concern was raised whether the German question could resurface. As Germany was situated in the centre of the continent and had increasingly entered into defence cooperation agreements with other European nations, others could be concerned that Berlin was becoming too dominant.
Particularly worrying could be the fact that some German initiatives are placed outside of a NATO framework. In the discussion, a possible burden sharing approach was suggested in which Germany could engage strongly in Europe whereas the UK and France could engage globally. In the end, participants agreed that capability building was one option which might easily be agreed upon with the UK but that there were many challenges and questions left to be answered.