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BRITISH PERSPECTIVES ON TRANSATLANTIC & EUROPEAN SECURITY AFTER CRIMEA, BREXIT AND TRUMP*

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This paper is based on the author's remarks at the Leangkollen Conference 2017

Forecast: Uncertain. At the time of writing this Security Brief, in late February 2017, it is difficult to make anything approaching an informed judgement as to the precise nature of the United Kingdom's strategic outlook in the near- to medium-term future. Who can say with confidence how the UK will engage with Europe, the United States and indeed the rest of the world between now and, say, the mid-2020s?

Formally at least, the 'Brexit' negotiation process has yet to begin and there is deep uncertainty as to what that process will – or should – involve. The pre-negotiation debate in the UK is on the one hand bitterly contested and on the other hand alarmingly unformed. Both the 'Brexit' and the 'Remain' factions appear to be in the grip of a severe allergic reaction to the prospect of serious debate. For the 'Brexiteers', to have such a discussion would be to deny the British public the authority of the referendum decision made in June 2016, sowing doubt and delay in a process that should be pushed through as rapidly as possible. For the 'Remainers', on the other hand, the implication of a serious discussion is that the battle has been lost. The unfortunate result is that few in the UK have a clear, settled idea how the process might begin, how it might proceed, and how it should conclude. Similar things might be said of the European Union. Some European voices call for a mature and amicable divorce while others seem to favour the absurdly petulant idea that the UK and its democratic electorate should somehow be *punished* for the decision to leave the EU.

As to the UK's relations with the United States, Prime Minister May's meeting with the newly inaugurated US President was trumpeted as his first with another national leader. But it resulted in the image of May holding hands with a man who was subsequently excluded from the Palace of Westminster by House of Commons Speaker John Bercow, because it seems Bercow considers Trump to be racist and sexist. And almost two million people signed an online petition demanding in vain that Trump should not be invited to make an official state visit to the UK (and to meet the Queen). Beneath the furore serious questions remain to be answered: what is Trump's international outlook? What exactly is his position on China, Iran, Russia and North Korea? What is his strategic vision?

While it is not clear at this stage how the UK's key strategic partnerships might evolve, there are nevertheless several features of the UK strategic outlook that seem likely to endure. Security policy and defence strategy will be 'business as usual' wherever possible: the UK has been and will remain internationally engaged – culturally, economically and strategically; the UK has an historically, temperamentally and culturally close alliance with the US; the UK will remain a European power and most EU members will remain UK allies (in NATO). All of this suggests that the UK will continue to see itself as a transatlantic bridge of some sort, connecting its North American and European allies; offering

* This Security Brief draws upon a speech given in February 2017 at the 52nd Leangkollen Annual Security Conference hosted by the Norwegian Atlantic Committee in Oslo, Norway. I am grateful to the Atlantic Committee for their invitation to speak and to all Conference participants for the informative and provocative discussion that followed.

something to both in an effort to keep the whole together.

The 'business as usual' approach will not, however, extend to the UK's relations with Russia after Crimea.

Strategic Preferences and Assumptions

Beneath the rhetoric of high policy and grand alliance, the United Kingdom's strategic outlook will be guided by a more precise set of preferences and assumptions.

Full Spectrum Approach

The first strategic preference is for multi-functional, cross-governmental responses to complex security challenges. The Full Spectrum Approach is dismissed by some as mere rebranding; the successor to earlier, unconvincing initiatives known as the 'comprehensive approach' and then the 'integrated approach'. Others see it as the UK's version of Russia's 'hybrid' or 'new generation' warfare. But the Full Spectrum Approach, announced in the 2015 UK Strategic Defence and Security Review, is probably more than mere relabelling. As well as ambition, it has a reasonably solid cross-governmental organisation. It is also the enabler for what the UK Ministry of Defence describes as a strategy of 'persistent engagement' in regions of interest around the world.

International by Design

The 2015 Review also insisted that defence policy and plans should be made 'international by design' (IbD). Secretary of State for Defence Sir Michael Fallon argues that IbD reflects 'the reality of how we operate', observing that 'In a world with global problems we require multi-national solutions'.[1] Fallon is also reported to believe that IbD will be more, rather than less relevant as a result of the June 2016 referendum.

To a considerable extent, IbD tells us nothing about the merits of alliance and co-operation that we did not already know. But the undeniable claim behind this initiative is that it can make no sense to pursue national solutions to vastly complicated international strategic problems. In essence, IbD is driven by two ideas: collaboration with allies and partners will provide a 'force multiplier' for UK strategic and operational capability; and collaboration will make it possible for the UK to be a 'force facilitator' for a much larger effort. And underpinning both ideas is the third UK strategic preference, for efficiency.

Efficiency

With UK defence spending facing another period of constraint and possibly deep retrenchment, the UK Ministry of Defence remains understandably concerned with efficiency. Current thinking is that efficiency can and must be both *cost-reductive* (a very familiar ambition) and *value-additive*. In other words, the goal is not simply to reduce the cash input to defence – "do the same (or often *more*) with less" – but also to increase the defence output by employing methods and means more imaginatively – "do more, but differently."

But if the preference for enhanced effectiveness through both international collaboration and efficiency is to be more than merely declaratory, the UK must bring something tangible, useful and attractive to the security and defence table. It is here that the UK seems to have two related bargains to strike.

The Strategic Bargain

What is it that UK armed forces could offer that would persuade allies and potential international partners – on both sides of the Atlantic – to participate? Most obviously, the UK can offer hard power in the form of maritime, land and air forces. Certainly, these do not come in anything like the quantities seen a decade or two ago. But even the harshest critic would have to accept that UK armed forces are highly experienced and capable, and can operate across the spectrum of conflict and at range. The UK can also offer less tangible – but no less significant – strategic capabilities such as intelligence coverage, air patrolling, cyber power and of course its independent nuclear deterrent.

The Brexit Bargain

Importantly, and perhaps reassuringly for some European governments, UK armed forces are deployable within and around Europe. And there is also a set of more specialist skills that the UK can offer its European allies in the context of the impending Brexit negotiation. There is an obvious irony at play here, in that the UK has been more than gently disparaging of EU

1 Michael Fallon, Speech to RUSI on the SDSR 2015, 22 September 2015: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/defence-secretarys-speech-to-rusi-on-the-sdsr-2015

Professor Paul Cornish during the Leangkollen Security Conference 2017.

defence efforts over the past several decades and has always insisted that whatever the EU pursues in the politico-military sphere the results should not duplicate the broader, NATO-based transatlantic security relationship.

But attitudes have softened somewhat over the years. The UK is now more willing to see NATO as something of a holding company, allowing the development of, and participation in 'clubs within clubs' such as the Northern Group of nine north European NATO members plus Finland and Sweden,[2] the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF)[3] and the UK-France Combined Joint Expeditionary Force (CJEF). It is in this less dogmatic climate that the UK finds itself in the position of being able to offer skills and capabilities that its European Union allies value highly, but do not have in sufficient quantity or depth. The UK defence effort is by no means being subordinated to Brexit pre-negotiation positioning, but it is clear that some of the capabilities that the UK has always insisted were the core of the primary defence effort in or around NATO now have additional strategic significance in the context of the Brexit bargain.

Intelligence, mentioned above, is the first and most obvious of these. Europe needs British intelligence, both in terms of the capability of its national agencies (the Security Service, the Secret Intelligence Service, the Government Communications Headquarters and Defence Intelligence) and in terms of its bilateral and global connections (the UK-US intelligence partnership and the 'Five Eyes' arrangement involving Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and the US). The UK also brings other, specialist skills and experience acquired in a quarter of a century of almost constant operational commitment, and in the climate of austerity-led defence planning:

- Strategic and operational planning;
- Expeditionary command and control;
- The design, development and review of military doctrine;
- 'Dynamic force management'

2 Northern Group members: Denmark, Estonia, *Finland*, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, *Sweden*, UK. [Italics = non-NATO members].
3 JEF members: UK (lead), Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway.

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(the management of concurrent operational, training and operational commitments, and the ability to concentrate, deploy, disperse and redeploy armed forces rapidly);
- Evolution of procurement practices (including the role of small and medium-sized enterprises;
- The changing relationship between armed forces and society.

Conclusion: 'Business as Usual' and 'Unusual Business'

The UK government can be expected to seek as much continuity and stability as possible in its security relations with the United States and Europe. The 'business as usual' mentality is at its clearest in two recent speeches by Prime Minister May. The first, in mid-January 2017, set out the government's Brexit 'negotiating objectives' which are probably best read as statements of broad principle:

> With the threats to our common security becoming more serious, our response cannot be to co-operate with one another less, but to work together more. I therefore want our future relationship with the [EU] to include practical arrangements on matters of law enforcement and the sharing of intelligence material with our EU allies.
>
> We will continue to work closely with our European allies in foreign and defence policy even as we leave the EU itself.
>
> Britain's armed forces are a crucial part of Europe's collective defence.[4]

The second statement of principle was made by the Prime Minister in her speech to the Republican Party conference in Philadelphia, later the same month:

> It has been America's destiny to bear the leadership of the free world and to carry that heavy responsibility on its shoulders. But my country, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, has been proud to share that burden and to walk alongside you at every stage.
>
> …time and again it is the ['unique and special'] relationship between us that has defined the modern world.
>
> It is in our interests – those of Britain and America together – to stand strong together to defend our values, our interests and the very ideas in which we believe.[5]

But 'business as usual' does not apply in all circumstances, and particularly not where Russia is concerned. In a speech made in early February 2017 the UK Secretary of State for Defence argued against complacency and disunity:

> Russia is clearly testing NATO and the West. It is seeking to expand its sphere of influence, destabilise countries, and weaken the Alliance. It is undermining national security for many allies and the international rules-based system.
>
> Therefore it is in our interest and Europe's to keep NATO strong and to deter and dissuade Russia from this course.[6]

The UK government's message could be summarised as follows: 'business as usual' wherever possible – but without overlooking the business of defence.

4 Prime Minister, 'The government's negotiating objectives for exiting the EU', Lancaster House, 17 January 2017: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-governments-negotiating-objectives-for-exiting-the-eu-pm-speech

5 Prime Minister's Speech to the Republican Party conference, 26 January 2017: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-ministers-speech-to-the-republican-party-conference-2017

6 Sir Michael Fallon, 'Coping with Russia' (St Andrews University, 2 February 2017): https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/coping-with-russia

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