

Transatlantic turbulence – implications for European security

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This report has illuminated the driving forces and logic behind two separate but interlinked events: the Trump administration's foreign policy agenda and the UK's decision to leave the European Union. Together, these developments have rocked the two pillars of European security: the transatlantic link and European integration. In order to gauge the breadth of possible effects, as well as possible ways to mitigate these effects, four security domains were then analysed in relation to Brexit as well as the Trump administration: defence, cyber security, Intelligence cooperation and resilience. In this final section, overarching trends and possible spin-off effects will be discussed with a specific eye on security in northern Europe. Considering that all three variables in the analysis – the priorities of the Trump administration, the meaning of Brexit and the development of

European security cooperation – are constantly in motion, this should be seen as a tentative analysis highlighting areas of relevance for future strategic planning.¹

Diverging geopolitical outlooks

The single most serious effect of the current transatlantic turbulence on European security is the divergence within the West concerning overall geopolitical outlook. The liberal world order – an international system based on the liberal democratic state's internal characteristics: market economy, rule of law and individual freedom – is the guiding principle holding the West together. The reluctance of the American President to underwrite this order and his obvious ignorance of the benefits it has delivered to the US dwarfs any other concerns Europeans might have over his



policy preferences. Indeed, the major worries that European states have raised concerning President Trump – his disdain for the European Union, his unwillingness to reassure NATO allies of US commitment to article 5 and his uncritical stance on Vladimir Putin and other authoritarian leaders – can all be seen as symptoms for his inability and/or reluctance to believe in this order. Multilateral commitments and a rule-based order, in his view, limits the gains that the US could extract out of interaction with other players in the system. His national security advisor H.R. McMaster and his national economic advisor Gary Cohn put this appreciation of a Hobbesian order in plain text a few days after Trump's May 2017 visit to Europe:

The president embarked on his first foreign trip with a clear-eyed outlook that the world is not a “global community” but an arena where nations, nongovernmental actors and businesses engage and compete for advantage. We bring to this forum unmatched military, political, economic, cultural and moral strength. Rather than deny this elemental nature of international affairs, we embrace it.²

The problem here is that since World War II, the West has invested in and benefitted from an alternative order where Hobbesian competition built on strength alone has been complemented by regions of peaceful interaction and absolute gains, by alliances and relationships built on shared values and by specific domains – such as the climate – which increasingly are managed by a “global community”. Writing of even the aspiration to a liberal and cooperative system based on Hobbesian principles amounts to an abdication from global leadership. This does not imply that ‘the

West’ is over as a force in global politics but its role will be severely weakened as long as this divergence prevails.

This divergence between Europe and the US is of course painful for the European Union, which embodies the characteristics of the liberal world order and which has been instrumental in preserving this form of international relations in Europe, especially at a time when internal development in countries such as Poland and Hungary questions these values and principles from within. But it is potentially even worse for the UK whose exit from the European Union was premised on the liberal order: only under that system could a medium sized player like the UK hope to negotiate trade arrangements and “go global” with the backing of a functioning system of trade and arbitration. In Trump’s preferred system of transnationalism, protectionism and short-sighted competition, the UK has less to gain from cutting itself loose from the Continent. Having decided to do so, the UK might have to adjust its policy stances just to accommodate the US so as to not isolate itself further. Changing positions on Israel/Palestine, being quick to visit Washington, refusing to discuss the US election with its EU partners and avoiding to speak out against Trump on other issues can be seen as indicative of such geopolitical hedging.

In sum, the most serious risk of current transatlantic turbulence is that the EU, the UK and the US are drawn apart in their geopolitical outlooks. From the perspective of European security, such strategic divergence would make it harder to unite on issues such as Russia, the conflicts in the MENA region as well as Europe’s role in its regions security. If European states are keen

to mitigate this risk, or at least alleviate its consequences a few strategies are conservable which will be discussed below.

Division of tasks among security institutions

Another effect that might be viewed more as an opportunity than a risk is an increasingly clear division of tasks between the institutional platforms used to provide for European security. While Trump has failed to signal a strong commitment to NATO allies on the political level, his administration has continued – and even increased – reassurance measures in Europe in face of Russian aggression. The fact that the US has troops on the ground in the Baltic nations and continuously trains and prepares for joint action adds credibility to the US' commitment to being present and its resolve, despite President Trump's own signals. The lukewarm support from President Trump also implies that European allies that worry about Russian behaviour will have to double down on their commitments to territorial defence (as well as lend symbolic support to Trump's preferred focus area of fighting terrorism). The forward presence of the US in the European theatre is also relevant for its projection of power elsewhere in the region, which is in line with the Trump administration's ambition to bring military strength to the competition with other nations as described in the quote above. But while territorial defence backed by the US thus seems to prevail as NATO's prime function, other areas might have to be carried out with less US support. Considering the transactional perspective of President Trump, Libya-style operations in Europe's neighbourhood where vital US

interests are not evident will be a hard sell for European allies.

At the same time, the EU has made considerable headway the last year concerning different areas of security cooperation such as research and development, capacity development and governance. Brexit has been a factor here – both in the sense that the remaining 27 needed to show progress within a challenged Union but also since the UK had put a break on development for many years – as has President Trump. Notably however, none of the advances have in practice impinged on NATO's role as Europe's territorial defender. On the contrary, measures such as the new military planning and conduct capability (MPCC) increases the efficiency of the EU's out-of-area missions and PESCO as well as the new defence fund will help Europeans to shoulder their pre-existing commitments within NATO as well as the EU. Even the rhetoric surrounding this development has been largely void of the traditional calls for a European army and rather the complementary nature of EU security measures has been stressed. This does not imply that the EU does not have a relevant role for the security of Europe, on the contrary, it shows that its methods lie in the areas of crisis management, counter-terrorism, comprehensive engagement in the neighbourhood, and resilience building at home and abroad – not deterrence and traditional defence. This division of tasks has been cemented by Brexit since the possible deterrence capacity of the EU without the UK will be reduced and UK reinvestment in NATO to showcase European engagement will strengthen the core task of territorial defence in that alliance.

Future of European autonomy

The political meaning of autonomy is that Europeans should be vested with some amount of security policy “actorness” that is not dependent on American support. This requires material capacities (tangible military forces and strategic enablers such as airlift and intelligence), decision-making, planning- and command structures (national or centralized) and the political will for collective European action. The idea of European autonomy has long lingered in the background as initiatives to strengthen the EU as a security actor have been discussed. It was a factor in the reinvention of the Western European Union and the Petersberg tasks in the 1990s and the later transfer of these tasks to the new Common Security and Defence Policy of the EU. The 1998 St. Malo declaration of France and the UK struck a balance between ambitions of autonomy and ambitions to preserve the transatlantic security link for years to come.³ Although the US sequentially dropped its hesitation to the idea of European autonomy (as it can be seen as a way of European shouldering more of the responsibility – and costs – of their own security) progress has been slow. Recent efforts to boost autonomy have focused on specific elements (the European Commission has for example highlighted the role of a strong and competitive European armaments industry)⁴ or has qualified the application of autonomy (the 2013 European Global Strategy Report for example suggested the concept of *regional* strategic autonomy). The importance of autonomy was highlighted by Federica Mogherini’s European Union Global Strategy of 2016. Recent events now seem to add to the momentum towards autonomy.

France, traditionally a supporter of European autonomy (but also a fierce guardian of its own sovereignty) now has a government with a strong focus on the EU and an apparent ambition to strengthen the French-German axis of policy making. The role of a stronger military Germany has traditionally worried several European partners but now seems to be a joint European interest. The UK, for long a sceptical observer in the field is now stepping down from its veto-position and might very well appreciate a more capable EU when it does not fear being forced into any future European army. And finally the US, with a President that by example reminds the Europeans why it might be a good idea to be able to act independently of the US.

Will these changes on the continent, in the UK, and in the US lead to a more autonomous EU? A likely scenario is that the level of autonomy within the EU will grow with the current momentum but that its different components (material resources, planning and decision structures and political will) will not develop in sync which decreases the output within the policy field. Brexit and President Trump’s foreign policy agenda will also lead to fragmentation of European security. Without the UK, the EU will not be the platform on which Europeans can enjoy strategic autonomy, at least in terms of demanding military tasks. However, with Trump in the White House, countries such as France and Germany will be hesitant to invest in such a manner for the European pillar of NATO to be the platform for the exercise of European autonomy. Barring these alternatives, real European strategic autonomy will in the medium term only materialize in coalitions in which big

players in European security have aligned interests. The extents to which these countries will agree are then tied to the development of overall geopolitical outlooks, as discussed above. This scenario, of course, carries consequences for smaller countries because they will have less of a role in shaping security policy under such consequences.

Risk and opportunity of European minilateralism

A likely effect of Brexit is the increased focus on sub-regional, bilateral and minilateral groupings, as suggested by Christian Mölling and Claudia Major.⁵ These groupings offer clear benefits as they can push cooperation further among like-minded actors, and could affect larger multilateral groupings such as the EU and NATO. In some cases, these groupings are less geopolitically charged than larger formal alliances. For the UK, engagement in or with smaller groupings offer additional benefits: cooperation with specific partners can be sustained after Brexit; the possibility to influence EU via these formats; and a way to link the continent with the US (the latter two benefits constituting an important geopolitical task within its special relationship with the US).

Northern Europe houses several of these smaller cooperation formats with varying degrees of activity within them. The Nordic-Baltic cooperation spans several portfolios ranging from EU coordination to security policy and transatlantic affairs.⁶ The Northern Group, started by the then-Secretary of Defence of the UK, Liam Fox, aims to facilitate greater partnership between the UK and the Nordic and Baltic states, in addition to Germany and Poland.

Activity has been sparse but the format has the potential to bring together NATO and EU members. Bilaterally, Sweden and Finland has gone far in its security relationship, which now resembles something close to an alliance between two non-aligned states. This cooperation has been closely followed and encouraged by the UK, and has resulted in the imminent membership of two Nordic countries in the British-led Joint Expeditionary Force.

These cooperation formats offer added value in the security realm –especially for countries that build their security on the premise of offering and receiving help in case of security challenges. In case of the UK (especially considering its exit from the EU) caution is warranted. In a positive scenario, where Brexit has not resulted in geopolitical drift between the UK and the continent, cooperation in sub-regional, bilateral and minilateral groupings will be an effective way to “keep the UK close” in matters of European security. This will be a way of compensating for the fact that the UK will no longer be part of the EU's solidarity clauses – which is a potential security loss, especially for the EU's non-NATO member states. In a negative scenario, the UK might take on a role of spoiler rather than constructive partner in relation to European integration. Bi- and minilateral formats then become potential mechanisms with which continental Europe might become divided (but not ruled). The Anglo-French Lancaster House cooperation offer one way to balance the German-French axis of European affairs (and the French would probably see benefits as it allows them to gate-keep British influence over Europe). Engagement with internal policy outliers such as Hungary and Poland would offer other balancing opportunities

against the European core and its institutions.⁷ UK-Nordic engagement could also divert resources away from EU27-cooperation.

However, in reality, the choice is not binary and cooperation will produce effects in both directions. As a rule of thumb, members of the EU that see a value in EU cohesion should make sure that cooperation with the UK in bi- and multilateral formats complement rather than compete with aspects of EU integration.

A new Anglo-European security and solidarity pact?

Several of the essays in this report hint at possible areas of fruitful security cooperation between the EU27 and post-Brexit UK. Resilience-building, counter-terrorism, intelligence sharing, cyber security and crisis management are examples that have been discussed. While this is all good, a range of more or less informal arrangements without any framework or superstructure that offer direction or ensure that different measures are in sync risks delivering suboptimal results. Just as the various EU-UK trade and investment agreements will most likely be grouped in a future comprehensive free trade agreement after Brexit it would be helpful to group and develop future security cooperation within a dedicated framework too. Such a framework could include three vital functions or baskets; a political manifestation of solidarity and cooperative benefits; structures for decision making and policy planning; and finally, formats for operational cooperation and coordination. In the first basket, the UK and the EU could, at the very least, issue a guiding declaration of solidarity and shared interests. A more

ambitious alternative would be to find ways for the UK and the EU to sign a solidarity clause mirroring the substance (but not the processes) of the two existing solidarity clauses of the EU. This would bring meaning and direction to more practical aspects of cooperation. In the second basket one could place an overarching deal for UK involvement in the CFSP and CSDP, including permanent deliberation and policy-shaping roles within the Political and Security Committee (PSC) and expertise within the External Action Service. This could lead to a general policy alignment that in turn would increase the utility and functioning of more practical areas of cooperation. Lastly, in the final basket, one could place practical sectoral cooperation on the issues named above – for example, by regulating UK access to Europol databases, financial contributions and cyber threat sharing protocols. Taken together, an Anglo-European security and solidarity pact like this would offer the best guarantee that both partners could enjoy mutually beneficial security cooperation. A bespoke deal like this would acknowledge the UK's importance, increase security for all European countries, and allow the UK to avoid deeper entanglement within this field while not creating unnecessary risk for contagion. Indeed, it seems farfetched that members without the UK's specific ideational background would prefer an agreement that essentially mirrors EU membership without voting rights.

European integration and national security positions

Finally, current transatlantic turbulence puts several national security policy positions under stress. The overarching effects of Brexit and the Trump

administration on the US, the UK and the EU27 have been discussed in previous essays as well as above. However, individual European countries will see their positions challenged as a consequence. Countries that depend heavily on their bilateral ties to either the US or the UK will have to hedge if the one of the more dramatic scenarios of geopolitical drift and/or spoiler tendencies materializes. EU-NATO relations will likely be affected as indicated above. This might motivate a recalibration and adjustment of engagement and investments by member states in general but in particular by states that are only members of one of the two organisations. Finally, the topic of this report – transatlantic turbulence – is only one of several factors now driving EU security integration. Indeed, it is the confluence of current trends – economies of scale arguments prompted by austerity, the increasing levels of threats in the neighbourhood, internal strategy development in the form the European Union Global Strategy, the need to showcase union in the face of Brexit, new opportunities to develop cooperation now

¹ This essay has been enriched by interviews and discussions at the Defense Committee of the UK Parliament, the Foreign Affairs Committee of the UK Parliament, the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) and the Centre for European Reform (CER) in May 2017.

² <https://www.wsj.com/articles/america-first-doesnt-mean-america-alone-1496187426>

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<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cmsUpload/French-British%20Summit%20Declaration,%20Saint-Malo,%201998%20-%20EN.pdf>

that a sometimes obstructive UK is leaving the union as well as a need for Europeans to take a more active role in catering for the regions security under the Trump administration – that set this area up for rapid policy development. Adding to this, there is strong support for the development of the EU’s role in the security realm.⁸ This confluence of push factors, in addition to a high level of political symbolism, and considerable public support increases the political cost for member states that seek to obstruct cooperation. EU member states hesitant towards deeper cooperation and supranational elements within the security and defence field will thus have to calculate the cost of obstruction in a post-UK EU as well as balance the value of securing their preferred level of integration in relation to the value of EU unity within security and defence.

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⁴ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=celex:52013DC0542>

⁵ See “Brexit, Security and Defence: A political problem, not a military one” in this collection.

⁶ For an overview, see http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/files/publication_pdfs/403/090711_ACUS_NordicBaltic.PDF

⁷ A strategy discussed in <https://www.ft.com/content/7742a102-4132-11e7-82b6-896b95f30f58>

⁸ See Special Eurobarometer 461 - Designing Europe’s future Security and Defence

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