

ANALYSES

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European defence: Mourning England

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This time it's over! Brexit is going to happen. The English will leave the European Union and along with them the Welsh, Northern Irish and, whether they like it or not, the Scottish. What consequences will this have for European defence? Probably none at all, for three reasons.

The first is that, far more than any other European nation, Britain depends on its American allies for its defence.

This is a very long story, dating back to the Second World War. The Churchillian doctrine was to retain an American involvement in British defence at all costs. This gives us the famous "*keep the Americans in...*", a phrase coined by Lord Ismay, the first Secretary General of NATO, in 1952. Then, in 1956, learning lessons from the Suez crisis, the British leaders decided that they would never again commit to any overseas expedition *without* the Americans; in the same context, the French swore that they would never again commit to any *with* them.

At a more fundamental level, this dependency is rooted in the Nassau Agreements, signed in late 1962 and renewed in early 2003, just as the military intervention in Iraq was being decided upon. Under these agreements, the British would refrain from building nuclear-armed ballistic missiles and use American ones; this dependency

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was further increased by the fact that the propulsion of British nuclear submarines depends partly on American technology. Finally, the United Kingdom became a member of the *five eyes* community, getting access to the American intelligence without which it would be half deaf and completely blind.

On top of this operational and capability-related cooperation came industrial cooperation in critical fields such as the F-35 fighter jet and, generally speaking, the magnetism of the American industrial and technological base over its British counterpart, particularly its figurehead, BAE, which achieves half of its turnover on the American market.

As senior British figures themselves wrote in the *National Security Strategy* of November 2015, well before Brexit, “*the unparalleled extent of UK-US cooperation on nuclear, intelligence, diplomacy, technology and military capabilities plays a major role in guaranteeing our national security. Our ability to operate together in future is at the heart of our planning*”. This approach, which covers both capability planning and operational planning, effectively means that the construction of the British Army is tied into that of the US Army.

As intelligence and nuclear matters effectively tether the UK to Washington, this puts the British Prime Minister permanently in the debt of the US President.

The second reason is an offshoot of the first. The British have never lent any credence to the idea of European defence—after all, if England’s defence depends on the United States, what would be the point of a European defence system?

With the exception of the short period of time between the Saint-Malo Declaration of 1998 and the outbreak of the Iraq war in 2003, when they paid lip service to the idea of the EU having the “capacity for autonomous action (...), in order to respond to international crises”, the British always thought and declared that the “Atlantic Alliance is the basis for the collective defence of its members”. In their view, the whole idea of this “autonomous capacity” was simply about keeping the Americans happy, as they were calling for the Europeans to take care by themselves of their own “backyard”, just as they are calling it again now for the Middle East.

The very concept of a “European security and defence policy”, later the “common security and defence policy”, is no more and no less than a complex legal structure designed to obviate the need to say the dirty words “European defence” out loud; it is a construct that has become unworkable due to the sheer number of obstructions and compromises. And because they are indebted to the Americans, the British have always sought to block European cooperation initiatives such as Galileo, which drew down the wrath of the American leadership.

The French have found this out the hard way. Studies into nuclear attack submarines, frigates, aircraft carriers, tanks and, lastly, the MALE drone and the Future Combat Air System have invariably ended up being scrapped. Regardless of the cultural proximity France may have to its strategic fraternal twin, and the excellent relations between the armies of the two nations, there will always be a President of the United States to say no to any Franco-British, or even Euro-British, cooperation project that is deemed to be a step too far.

Whatever the scale of British capabilities on paper, they will never be made available to the EU without America’s blessing. They are irrelevant to European defence in the sense of the defence *of Europe by Europe* and *for Europe*. The British contribution to CSDP operations has always proven negligible or non-existent. To add insult to injury, they blocked any increase to the budget of the European Defence Agency and the European Satellite Centre, right up to the eleventh hour. As for their troops involved in EU Battlegroups, they received their orders to withdraw from the EU Headquarters well before 12 December 2019.

Finally, the third reason is that the divorce between the UK and the EU, which is not only institutional and economic, but also cultural in nature, cannot fail to have repercussions in the field of defence. It will simply catalyse the two long-term trends referred to above.

These repercussions will be particularly significant if Boris Johnson does not abandon his goal of a trade deal by the end of the year, bringing about a “hard Brexit” by any other words. If this happens, the UK will have no option but to become a commercial competitor of the EU. It will probably join forces with Donald Trump in order to hold the EU to ransom in the field of defence, in exchange for trade benefits.

In the meantime, the main problem is that there will no longer be any barriers between trade war, political war and war, full stop. As the Edward Snowden case and the *Cambridge Analytica* scandal demonstrated, the purpose of civilian technologies is no longer simply to improve weapons—they have become weapons in their own right. Frequently, the same technologies are used to spy on governments and keep a close eye on citizens, overturn public opinion, decipher messages, obtain commercial advantages and conduct cyber-war. In this battle, fought in cyberspace over information with dual weaponry, the British will have to choose an ally and it is unlikely to be the European Union.

A few pockets of cooperation aside, for instance in the field of missiles, in which it will be vital to save anything that can be saved, the idea that in spite of everything, close ties can be maintained with the UK outside a NATO framework, is just wishful thinking.

As a member of the EU, the UK stayed on the margins of European defence, singing from its own hymn sheet and fostering the ultimate aim of blocking any progress. What would be the point of “close” ties tomorrow, other than to allow Britain a right of scrutiny over European capability projects in order to take advantage of it in the US-UK special relationship?

It is time for the member states of the European Union to open their eyes: they must accept the consequences of the divorce, mourn England and learn to rely on their own forces. From now on, Europeans are on their own.



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