



Brexit and European defence

An in-depth analysis

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The Centre for Security and Defence Studies (CSDS) of the Royal Higher Institute for Defence produces on an occasional basis brief assessments about current events in its e-Note series. These series and other publications are available on our website www.rhid.be.

On 23 June 2016 the British people will go to the polls to decide in a referendum whether they will remain part of the European Union or leave it (British Exit or Brexit) after 44 years of membership. In spite of the convictional strategy followed by Prime Minister David Cameron, through the agreement negotiated on 18 and 19 February 2016 in order to take into account some EU reform proposals requested by the British² (letter from the head of government to the president of the European Council on 10 November 2015), the dramatic effect is achieved.

Through the compromise adopted in February, the British wish to recall, inter alia, that they are not bound by the objective of “an increasingly close union between peoples” should the treaties be revised or amended in the future.

London does not want a political Europe, a federal Union, although David Cameron is aware that the Brexit would end his political career! This clearly implies a multi-speed Europe or a Europe of concentric circles to be the vision of a future where free trade would be the first frame of reference supporting its enlargement (dilution process) instead of its consolidation. After having benefited from these arrangements that will become effective “on the date the Government of the United Kingdom informs the Secretary-General of the Council that the United Kingdom has decided to remain a member of the European Union” (conclusions of the European Council, 19 February 2016), the Prime Minister had no option but to advocate, with conviction, the United Kingdom’s continued

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² “Britain will never be part of a European superstate, Britain will never join the euro, we will be out of the parts of Europe that do not work for us [Schengen, the euro]”, press statement by David Cameron after the negotiations, Brussels, 19 February 2016. According to various observers, there are several reasons for the British ambitions: throwing off the regulations from Brussels, trading freely with the rest of the world, controlling immigration, restoring national sovereignty and leave the EU that is in crisis (Schengen, euro, Greece, ...).

membership of the European Union (“Brexit”), in order to counter the lobbying of Eurosceptics, nationalists and populists.

Several consequences could ensue from the Brexit: loss of its decision-making power within the European institutions, weakening of the economic growth with 6% in two years, loss of income for each inhabitant, loss of jobs, rise in inflation, loss of status as Europe’s leading financial centre, flight of investments, cancellation of the agreements on the European single market in favour of one of the three possible models³, inability to influence European legislation, declining importance of the Eurosceptics in the European Parliament, possible departure of the British large companies from London in order to be able to enjoy the benefits of the European single market, legal complexities with mixed populations, renewed populism, possible “disintegration” of the European Union by a “domino effect”, deteriorating relations with the independentist and Europhile Scottish Government, etc.

Conversely, the EU would “lose” one of its three great powers, as well as a world’s leading financial centre, a bridge to the United States, the fifth economy in the world, whereas some anglophile countries in Europe (Ireland, Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark) would be “a bit isolated” or lose a powerful ally in EU discussions on some issues. Furthermore, British positions often allowed the EU to consider a realist view of international relations, as the UK was proactive in the field of making proposals within the EU in some European crises (terrorism, Ukraine, Iran, Ebola, Syria).

Moreover, the United States have, through President Obama, called for the United Kingdom to remain within the EU, as this decision is in its interest and the EU does not reduce the British influence, but increases it. It should be mentioned that the USA would like to have a foot in the EU through a British “bridgehead” and therefore have a “spokesperson”. Obama stated that “the US and the world need your outsized influence to continue – including within Europe”⁴.

Article 50

1. Any Member State may decide to withdraw from the Union in accordance with its own constitutional requirements.
2. A Member State which decides to withdraw shall notify the European Council of its intention. In the light of the guidelines provided by the European Council, the Union shall negotiate and conclude an agreement with that State, setting out the arrangements for its withdrawal, taking account of the framework for its future relationship with the Union. That agreement shall be negotiated in accordance with Article 218(3) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. It shall be concluded on behalf of the Union by the Council, acting by a qualified majority, after obtaining the consent of the European Parliament.
3. The Treaties shall cease to apply to the State in question from the date of entry into force of the withdrawal agreement or, failing that, two years after the notification referred to in paragraph 2, unless the European Council, in agreement with the Member State concerned, unanimously decides to extend this period.
4. For the purposes of paragraphs 2 and 3, the member of the European Council or of the Council representing the withdrawing Member State shall not participate in the discussions of the European Council or Council or in decisions concerning it.

³ Integration in the European Economic Area, bilateral agreements with the EU, WTO status.

⁴ *Daily Telegraph*, tribune, 22 April 2016.

Therefore, the question to be asked in June is whether David Cameron will succeed in closing the Pandora's box that he opened himself when he made a campaign promise in January 2013 (in order to appease the Tories' Eurosceptical wing), while the "Eurosceptics" and "Eurorealists" present in every major political party in the United Kingdom are facing each other. Since the British are part of the EU from a historical, geographical and cultural perspective, a British exit from the EU could change the Old Continent's landscape and affect the triangular relationships with the EU and the United States. Conversely, it is not impossible that a new government will organise a second referendum that cancels the result of the first.

A military Brexit

In 2015 several EU member states made either substantial or smaller budget cuts in defence spending, including the United Kingdom with a decrease of 3,5%. However, that year, the British just met the target of spending the equivalent of 2% of their GDP. In publishing its *Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015*, the British ministry of Defence intended to have a capability in order to mount a major combat operation involving 50.000 militaries, to invest in special forces and to acquire urgently a fleet of 9 P-8 Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft (2020) following the Russian-Ukrainian crisis. London confirmed the entry into service of the second aircraft carrier HMS *Prince of Wales* (testing in 2019) and upgraded, as of 2015, its 227 Challenger 2 battle tanks. Also this year, British authorities should announce the entry into operational service of a combined French-UK task force (Combined Joint Expeditionary Force) consisting of up to 10.000 militaries. Certainly, even if London intends to remain a key player in military matters, budgetary constraints persist and choices will still need to be made as to the intention to rebuild military forces which have been badly affected in recent years (7.5% less between 2010 and 2014). The United Kingdom is the only country, together with France, to have the largest range of means of combat, including high-intensity spectrum weapons and a "first entry" doctrine – notwithstanding the principle of limitation in time requiring US assistance (cf. intervention in Libya).

The British posture is closely linked with the Anglo-American and NATO framework. The country's participation in the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) is quite modest for political reasons as the United Kingdom objects to this policy increasing in power and being federalised. This explains in large part the British refusal to create a genuine European-based headquarters in Brussels or the veto on the increase of the European Defence Agency's limited budget (EDA), as well as its low-level commitment⁵ in European missions and operations, which is by the way less important than many small member states. The principle of national sovereignty in defence-related issues is the British diplomacy's leitmotiv, its tropism being Atlanticist, not the integrative intra-European perspective.

London defends the CSDP every now and then, but with the intention of confining it to security sector reforms and to the softest post-conflict missions.

Although a Brexit would weaken the British influence within NATO as well, it would definitely not mean the end of cooperation agreements, whether bilateral (Franco-British agreements through their "entente cordiale" and the Lancaster House Treaties, Anglo-Dutch agreements, etc.) or trilateral (France, United Kingdom, Germany), or affect the choice to participate in coalitions for

⁵ For instance EUFOR Tchad/RCA (2008), EUMM Georgia (2008), EUNAVFOR Atalanta, EUFOR RCA (2014), EUTM Somalia.

crisis management operations. Similarly, London could still participate, as third country, in CSDP missions and operations, as well as in industrial cooperation programmes in the field of security and defence. Intelligence cooperation will remain essentially a *quid pro quo*. Pragmatism and flexibility will always be at the heart of ad hoc commitments on a case-by-case basis.

Scenarios and consequences

In the light of a possible Brexit, two main hypotheses can be considered (apart from variants, institutional subtleties and other transverse options). With the exception of the codified procedures in the articles of the EU Treaty (cf. *supra*), several scenarios could unfold.

The first hypothesis would be that the withdrawal of the United Kingdom leads to the temptation of other member states wanting to engage in that process, as a result of the current negative climate, the nationalist critique of the EU institutions in Brussels and the rise of populism fuelled by issues such as security, future of the euro and immigration. This breakup might, in absolute terms, deliver a “death blow” to the European adventure.

The second favourable post-Brexit hypothesis would prompt the member states to redefine the scope of the CSDP while taking this opportunity to progress towards the integration of the European security and defence, both in the operational (EU Battlegroup, European Union Military Staff, role of the Eurocorps), political-military (PSC), budgetary (future of the EDA) and diplomatic (the issue of the borders) field. This will inevitably lead to the adoption of a “white paper” in 2017, which would now be the backbone of further and more proactive progress instead of the EU’s experience in the 2000s. Several politicians and other officials would endorse the Brexit without regret in order to be able to “make a push” and to allow the establishment of a “true” CSDP. In other words, the Brexit is in this scenario an opportunity for the more federalist-minded and pro-European EU member states. A variant of this would involve the highlighting of a European vanguard, of a differentiated integration, in the required field whose dynamics could be generated, free from the British *double jeu* and its hostility towards the EU as well as the “British excuse” to do nothing.

The issue at stake will be how to find the perfect match between this new landscape and the content adopted by the new European Security Strategy to be endorsed a few days after the referendum of 23 June, which date had initially been chosen for the EU summit and which was changed because of the events in the United Kingdom! As a matter of urgency, its content might be reviewed after the Brexit. Still, whether the British withdraw or not from the European Union, this issue sounds alarm bells and encourages a profound reflection – one more time – on the future of the Union.

Of course, this might also be a false alarm requiring the European states to renegotiate a treaty with a community content that could therefore be unravelled in part, notwithstanding the fact that the CSDP is regulated by state sovereignty and unanimity decisions for now.

Conclusion

For now, it is very difficult to predict whether the Brexit is going to be confirmed by the referendum on 23 June 2016, as polls may not be reliable and the British have always been volatile on numerous international issues. The international context is, of course, not favourable to the careful management of this “institutional crisis” and the consequences might be very harmful, knowing that the British need the EU as much as the EU needs them. The fact remains that for several decades London has been preventing “running around in circles” in EU matters, undermining the CSDP when

it was necessary, while remaining a reliable strategic player in defence matters when transatlantic and bilateral crises arose.

However, a successful and effectively managed Brexit would open the door to another vision for the future of the EU, its foreign policy and its outgrowth “security-defence”. In this case, the issue of European identity should also be on the agenda.

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