

Security and the Brexit Effect

Written by Anand Menon

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ANAND MENON, JAN 17 2017

Since Britain voted to leave the EU on 23rd June this year, other EU member states have come to see defence as an area where European integration can flourish in our absence. They are almost certainly mistaken. Brexit will neither strengthen, nor obviously weaken, the Common Security and Defence Policy. It may, however, reduce the UK's ability to contribute to European security, while a lack of attention paid to security issues during the Brexit process will itself be damaging.

Brexit has triggered a wave of CSDP-related initiatives. Following the referendum, the French and German Foreign Ministers produced a joint contribution arguing in favour of a 'European Security Compact.' Annual European Council meetings should, they argued, be rebranded a 'European Security Council' to address the security and defence issues facing the EU. They also renewed their calls for the creation of a permanent EU chain of command. The following month, German Defence Minister, Ursula von der Leyen launched Germany's new Defence White Paper, calling for greater integration of EU military capabilities and defence industries. More recently still, the European Commission and European Defence Agency announced that they were planning to launch a preparatory action on CSDP-related research as a means of beefing up European military capabilities.

The German Minister of Defence, von der Leyden has argued that Britain had 'paralysed' the EU when it came to foreign and security policy. She is not the only one to assume that, absent this malign influence, real progress might be possible. However, the notion that the lack of progress with CSDP has been down to British obstructionism is largely misleading. Certainly, London has, since the 'Chocolate summit' of 2003, vetoed the creation of an EU Headquarters. And it is conceivable that such an institution might enhance EU military effectiveness. Equally, the absence of a British veto may allow for more adequate funding for the European Defence Agency.

But institutional tinkering is not the answer to the major shortcomings that have conspired to hamper the CSDPs effectiveness. These shortcomings be attributed to several inter-related phenomena.

First, the EU27 vary tremendously in terms of their appetite for using military force. For all the obvious enthusiasm of Germany for a rejuvenated CSDP, Berlin has never shared the enthusiasm of Paris when it comes to global deployment of force. It is far from clear that even apparent commitment in Berlin to increased defence spending will address this issue.

Second, member states remain somewhat parochial in terms of their approach to security. Not only are many firmly focussed on regional rather than global concerns, but there remains a tendency for them to focus on their own priorities rather than seeing threats to one as threats to all. Whilst the southern states are preoccupied with events in the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa, their Eastern partners remain obsessed with the threat from Moscow. There is not much in the way of solidarity around from Eastern states when it comes to refugees from the south, or from some western capitals when it comes to Russia.

Third, a lack of political will is reflected in a concomitant failure to invest adequately in military resources. This itself involves not merely insufficient resources committed to defence, but also a reluctance to take difficult decisions to cut redundant capacity rather than to protect inefficient aspects of domestic arms production. Equally, for all the fine words about 'pooling and sharing,' there is little evidence that member states are willing to use such collaborative

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tools as a means of compensating for the inadequacies of national resource bases.

All of which implies that, even absent Britain, plenty of constraints will continue to hamstring attempts to resuscitate the EU's faltering defence policy. Indeed, it is hard to avoid the impression that, just as in several other areas of EU activities, British obstructionism has served as a handy alibi for other member states, London acting as a scapegoat to blame for their own inadequacies. Let's see what happens once the alibi is no more.

None of which is to argue that British absence from CSDP will necessarily prove to be a huge blow. London has increasingly stood aside from EU defence initiatives, and its contributions to EU missions has been token at best. Moreover, because defence policy is not an area of EU activity falling under the scope of EU law, flexible ways of ensuring the continued participation of the UK in CSDP activities will be easier to come up with than, say, partial membership of the single market.

However, as debates swirl in London and continental Europe about what Brexit will actually entail, security issues are rarely mentioned (for a rare and extremely interesting exception, see this paper by Malcolm Chalmers). What with the need to negotiate an article 50 deal, to negotiate a trade deal with the EU, to sort out a tariff schedule, to hire customs inspectors, to sign trade deals with other countries and to figure out how to deal with regulatory functions previously carried out by the EU, politicians and civil servants will have little time for trivia such as security. There is a real danger, then, that consideration of how the UK should continue to work with its European partners in areas such as defence procurement, peacekeeping, intelligence sharing and counter terrorism will be pushed, as the saying goes, 'to the back of the queue'.

What is needed is a broad, strategic assessment of what Britain should aim for, followed by negotiations with our partners. This does not seem to be happening. Rather, the resolute focus on the economics means that security issues are viewed in purely tactical terms. Thus, there is talk of using Britain's 'security surplus' as a bargaining chip to be 'traded' in return for commercial concessions in the post-Brexit settlement with the EU.

This is a dangerous way of thinking. For one thing, it risks simply antagonising our partners. Moreover, the focus on the short term and the tactical comes at the expense of the long term and the strategic. Europe faces a period of profound insecurity as instability in its neighborhood shows no signs of diminishing. Even prior to the referendum, Britain's approach to European security was in need of a drastic overhaul. Now, with the institutional setting of that approach also in doubt, the need for clear thinking is greater than ever. Sadly, there does not seem to be much of it about.

The implications of Brexit for CSDP are neither as positive nor as damaging as many have tried to claim. The EU will doubtless continue to stumble on inchoately even absent London's presence, whilst there seems no reason to assume that Brexit offers any real opportunity for an effective relaunch. The real danger is that the sheer scale of the challenge facing British policy makers means that security issues are simply not given their due consideration. The security implications of Brexit might thus prove more severe than they should.

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About the author:

Prof. **Anand Menon** is Professor of European Politics and Foreign Affairs at King's College London and Director of the UK in a Changing Europe initiative.