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Interoperability Between European Armed Forces in 2022

What Continental Europe and the United Kingdom
Have to Gain from Deeper Cooperation,
and How to Achieve It

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This Food for Thought paper is a document that gives an initial reflection on the theme. The content is not reflecting the positions of the member states but consists of elements that can initiate and feed the discussions and analyses in the domain of the theme. All our studies are available on www.finabel.org

DIRECTOR'S EDITORIAL

Since the Second World War, European defence cooperation has been an indecisive and equivocal issue. While European nations recognise the need to work together to ensure the continent's safety and tackle world issues, they also permanently refrain from merging and integrating their national forces into one united body or licensing a supranational authority to make decisions over their actions. Over the past 70 years, this omnipresent contradiction has led to a highly complex security environment in Europe. One in which the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), the European Union (EU), and bilateral and minilateral defence arrangements all play some – but not all – parts in promoting cooperation and interoperability between individual countries and their respective militaries.

In recent years, this complex security landscape underwent major shocks, most recently with the invasion of Ukraine by Russia on 24 February 2022. Indeed, while Ukraine is not a member of either the EU or NATO, it has long aspired to join both communities, being today the Alliance's leading third-party partner and receiving in June 2022 the official status of EU candidate country.

The role and stance of the United Kingdom (UK) in this context are particularly relevant to address. Indeed, not only does the UK represent NATO's second most developed and most robust military and Europe's first (on par with France), the country was, until January 2020, a member of the European Union and its security mechanisms, the main one being the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Therefore, although the UK has sought to bolster ties with its European partners through ad-hoc bilateral and minilateral agreements, Brexit was a step backwards in terms of European defence cooperation.

This paper undertakes to analyse and review this broad European defence apparatus and make sense of it by offering concrete, tangible, and credible options to improve cooperation and interoperability between the UK and its continental partners. The review and its findings will thus revolve around military cooperation within NATO, bilateral and minilateral arrangements, and EU structures. This study's conclusion will then underline the importance of seizing the political momentum provided by the Ukrainian crisis to launch a new era of cooperation in Europe that is more ambitious, open to informal practices, and based on strategic reasoning than in the last decade.



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ABSTRACT

Increased cooperation in the security and defence in Europe in 2022 is an objective simultaneously imperative for all protagonists and severely undermined by the tendencies for countries to keep defence initiatives at the national level. The February 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Russia marked what was called a “wake-up” call for European countries – Germany at the top of the list – to rebuild competent, modern and equipped militaries and, of great significance, further advance the integration process in the realm of defence at the EU level. In this

context, the stance of the United Kingdom and its interests in strengthening its ties with its Western and European partners are clear. This paper undertakes to analyse the impact of Brexit and the Ukrainian crisis on European military cooperation and demonstrate how both sides have everything to gain by cooperating more closely in the defence field. Finally, it exposes paths by which the UK and continental Europe can achieve greater interoperability and cooperation when armed forces are deployed on the ground in the current international context.

INTRODUCTION

The security environment in Europe has and is still experiencing significant changes in its configuration. If the 2016 referendum and the United Kingdom’s exit from the European Union – the so-called Brexit – significantly altered the nature and level of defence cooperation on the continent. Seemingly in the long term, the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine reminded all Europeans how not cooperating with countries sharing the same values and principles was not a strategically sensible approach and even created unnecessary risks for the concerned nations.

In this context, it appeared highly relevant to tackle the issue of military cooperation and interoperability between the British armed forces and their European counterparts as things stand. In particular, the paradox be-

tween the low level of cooperation between EU members and Great Britain in the defence field and the strategic need for deeper interoperability between Western forces in the wake of Russia’s belligerent behaviour was worth analysing. The first purpose of this research paper is to offer a complete review of the current European security apparatus related to military cooperation in all its forms, meaning within NATO, bilateral and unilateral arrangements and EU structures. The second objective of this paper is to offer tracks for greater interoperability between the UK and continental Europe, once again, through all possible forms of cooperation.

To that end, this paper will be divided into three parts, without including the methodology section. The first part will constitute a

review of the state of military cooperation in Europe as of March 2022. It will study how Brexit simultaneously led the EU and Great Britain to lose advantages, and the Union to move forwards in defence cooperation. This section will also establish the impact of the Ukrainian crisis in terms of incentives for rearmament and cooperation in Europe. The second part will present the main challenges that need to be overcome to reach greater interoperability between British and other European armed forces and how the issue of military and defence cooperation is currently being addressed in Europe. It will thus be

seen how NATO, bilateral and multilateral, and EU frameworks are each characterised by opportunities and limitations in terms of potential for better interoperability. Finally, the third section of this paper will discuss how, in this given context, the UK and other European nations could achieve a satisfying level of interoperability in the short, medium and long terms. The conclusion will underline the importance of seizing the political momentum provided by the Ukrainian crisis to launch a new era of cooperation, more open to informal practices and more based on strategic reasoning than in the last few years.



METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This section briefly highlights the methodology used for achieving this research paper and its scope in terms of timeline and substance. Regarding the methodology employed, this paper was researched and completed based on open and accessible sources. The two main types of sources used were, on the one hand, academic and studies, reports and articles, and on the other hand, governmental and institutional publications. Academic sources mainly included works by scholars between 2017 and 2021, of which publications by Martill and Sus, those by Johnson and Matlary and those by Besch, Bond, and Mortera-Martinez were crucial. As for publications emanating from governmental bodies, these were mainly stemming from the British government, NATO or one of the EU institutions.

Concerning the scope of this paper, it sets out to base its analysis on the state of defence cooperation in Europe as it was in March 2022. That being, and while future events might change the picture to a significant extent, this research intended to address the question of how the European security apparatus – understood in terms of military cooperation – evolved between the 2016 referendum and the outbreak of war on the continent, and what the latter event meant for the future. Finally, regarding this paper's research design, the central place of the concept of interoperability needs to be underlined here. In the military domain, interoperability designates the “ability of different military organisations to conduct joint operations” (NATO, 2006:

p. 1). Concretely, this concept thus refers to the ability of military organisations of different nationalities and potentially of armed services (ground, naval and air forces) to operate together efficiently. Of importance, while this definition of interoperability can be seen as narrow in its scope, the concept itself is pretty broad and comprises many distinct dimensions (Codner, 2003). It puts under the exact roof dimensions of cooperation related to doctrines and procedures, infrastructures, communications, training, material, strategies and tactics, among others.

Therefore, because interoperability as a concept is relatively broad and encompasses many aspects of military cooperation, one last precision concerning this paper's scope needs to be made. Thus, this research will focus on military cooperation in the strategic and tactical senses of the term. This means that the concept of interoperability will be employed in the sense of interoperability between armed forces on the field when carrying out a military operation mobilising actual forces. In other words, only pathways offering the possibility of deeper military strategic and tactical cooperation at a deployment stage will be explored. This precision is necessary to the extent that interoperability can also be pursued at a pre-deployment stage, namely the joint industrial policy and collaborative armament and procurement programmes. These aspects of interoperability that are outside this paper's scope will not be addressed in it.

LITERATURE REVIEW: MILITARY COOPERATION IN EUROPE IN 2022

Part 1: The Significance of Brexit

a) Both Sides Lost Advantages...

Certainly, Brexit has led to a loss of assets in the defence sector for both the EU and the UK. The EU indeed lost one of its only two countries able to deploy close to full-spectrum military capabilities, representing one-quarter of the Union's total defence capabilities (Black et al., 2017). That was the fourth-largest contributor to the EU budget. It also lost one of its two-member states with permanent seats on the UN Security Council and the benefits of the UK's many diplomatic networks. As for the UK, the nation lost access to crucial decision-making forums and institutional structures that bolstered and encouraged cooperation, such as the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC), the Political and Security Committee (PSC), the European Defence Agency (EDA), and Europol (Martill and Sus, 2018: p. 848). In that, the UK lost a vital platform to exercise influence and promote cooperation (Hadfield and Wright, 2021).

Today, the UK is still blocked from benefiting from these fora since it has so far refused to enter any formal security and foreign policy structures with the EU (Gallardo, 2022). In the end, as Sweeney and Winn (2021) put it, "in all aspects of security [...] both parties suffer from less intensive cooperation, but the risks for the UK seem greater."

b) ...But the EU Advanced in Defence Cooperation

On the other hand, since Brexit, the EU has made significant progress in establishing defence cooperation structures. A few days after the referendum, the Union released the EU Global Security Strategy as a symbolic and political statement calling on Europeans to take greater responsibility for their security (Council of the European Union, 2016). Several experts perceived this document as a good starting point to make the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) more effective. Indeed, it contains more than sufficient elements to be translated "into a revised military level of ambition [into] a white paper. In other words, that should kick-start more cooperation and even integration in defence [and] offers guidelines on how to do that" (Biscop, 2016: p. 3).

As it happened, Brexit was a "trigger event" (Sweeney and Winn, 2020: p. 229) of some other and more structured EU initiatives. The EU Global Security Strategy was their launching point: between 2017 and 2021, the EU Military Headquarters (Military Planning and Conduct Capability) assumed command of EU non-executive military missions; the European Council established the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) to allow groups of like-minded and capable member states to take European defence to the next

level and put forward more advanced projects; the European Commission set up the European Defence Fund (EDF) to allocate money for technological innovation, defence research and technology; the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) was created to “monitor national defence spending and to identify possibilities for pooling resources and to deliver joint capabilities” (Martill and Sus, 2018: p. 851-852). If some of these efforts constitute developments in security cooperation at the intergovernmental level, some are also of a supranational nature (Turpin, 2019: p. 21).

This trend is still very much dominant in the European environment, as the recent EU Strategic Compass and the “EU Rapid Deployment Capacity” (EU RDC) it established – the first force of this kind at the EU level – reflected. This new strategy explicitly aims at bolstering the Union’s defence and security policy to become a “more assertive and decisive security provider” by 2030 (Council of the European Union, 2022: p. 47). Bolstering interoperability between European armed forces is at the core of this ambition. The EU RDC embodies this objective: being composed of 5,000 troops from the national armies of the Union’s member states that will constitute EU Battlegroups, this new force intends to increase interoperability to a whole new level, including through joint military exercises (Council of the European Union, 2022: p. 14; EEAS, 2022).

Overall, “the years since Brexit have [...] seen a more aggressive use of the provisions of the Lisbon Treaty to engage in common defence

activity” through initiatives that, for the time being, remain inaccessible to the UK (Walshe, 2022).

Part 2: The Impact of the Ukrainian Crisis

a) Europe Rearms Itself

The second event since 2016 that had substantial consequences for European defence cooperation besides Brexit is the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which began on 24 February 2022 and is still taking place at the time of writing this research paper. Indeed, by comparison, until January 2022, the crisis increased the stimulus for European nations to rearm themselves and bolstered their incentive to seek deeper military cooperation with their counterparts, including Great Britain.

The most significant change in terms of military armament and preparation has come from Germany, with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz announcing on 27 February the appropriation of a special fund of €100 billion for the Bundeswehr and annual military expenditures exceeding the 2% of GDP from now on. All other European countries announced similar turns, with Sweden, Romania, Latvia, Finland, the Netherlands and Belgium raising their defence expenditure for 2022 (Banerjee, 2022). France has also hiked defence budgets for 2022 by €1.7 billion compared to 2021, while foreign secretary for the United Kingdom Liz Truss and Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi have also called for their countries to increase defence spending (Suchet Vir Singh, 2022; Lanzavecchia, 2022). The Ukrainian crisis marked the

return of Europeans to the realm of defence and military preparation in all its aspects.

b) A “Wake-Up Call” for Greater Solidarity Between Europeans in Defence

However, beyond leading governments to dedicate more resources to defence, the crisis signalled a wake-up call for a renewed focus on increasing cooperation and interoperability between European forces. This was seen within EU Member States, with Denmark deciding to put its opt-out on EU security mechanisms to a referendum. However, it has also been the case regarding EU-UK cooperation, as was noticeable in appeals from defence and security experts and statements from political representatives from the EU and – of significance – the UK.

An overwhelming majority of **European defence experts** reacted to the Russian invasion by pushing for deeper coordination between national efforts. Ten experts called for a “reconsidered strategy that combines reconsidered spending commitments, the right capabilities and far-reaching coordination” (my emphasis) (Delorme et al., 2022). De Hoop Scheffer and Weber (2022) underlined the perennial nature of the Russian threat and the need for Europe to strengthen its ability to cooperate in the long term: “Even when the imminent threat from Russia decreases, Europeans are aware that they cannot afford a lack of coordination, and even countries that are traditionally wary of defence cooperation through the EU might review their stance. [...] It hence appears likely that Europeans will coordinate their efforts on capability development and mutualisation through the EU

while ensuring compatibility with NATO.” Worth highlighting, even Dr. Robin Niblett, the director of Britain’s leading foreign policy think-tank Chatham House, declared that the UK must “strengthen European security both via NATO and rapidly evolving EU defence plans” (Wintour, 2022).

European political representatives aligned themselves with these declarations. Many Members of the European Parliament similarly highlighted the “wake-up call” nature of the crisis and the need to “further develop its force of power to handle external pressure and ensure a strong response to outside threats” (European Parliament, 2022). The most noteworthy statement came from Mr. Vale de Almeida, the European Union’s ambassador to Britain, that emphasised in March 2022 how the crisis displayed the need for the UK and EU to cooperate. Moreover, a major part of his argument was the necessity “for cooperation to work better [to have] some structure and some sort of permanent mechanism of cooperation,” therefore opening the door to some institutionalised format of cooperation with the UK (Castle, 2022). While Britain rejected the idea of some security pact with the European Union during the Brexit negotiations, such a path no longer seems so unlikely by the very admission of notable British protagonists.

Indeed, the shock produced by Russia’s invasion made **British defence protagonists** contemplate the possibility of an institutionalised partnership with the EU, as “even the most hardened Brexit supporter [realised] that Moscow [was] a bigger threat than Brussels”

(Castle, 2022). Of significance, the Conservative European Forum (CEF) – co-founded by current British MP Stephen Hammond – explicitly called in a report for Britain to sign a Framework Participation Agreement (FPA) with the Union to participate in EU-led military operations. A substantial change since 2016, the CEF underlined the need to “effectively respond to existential threats” and dismissed any fears that integration will “infringe UK sovereignty” (Walshe, 2022). The report’s author, Dr. Walshe, a former security policy adviser to the Conservative Party, said it was time to grasp “previously missed opportunities,” adding that “the recent invasion of Ukraine ha[d] demonstrated the importance of logistical coordination and military mobility between allies” (Merrick, 2022). Finally, the British government itself has changed its

posture since the outbreak of the war, indeed being much more receptive to the idea of an EU-UK cooperation structure in the security and defence realm than ever since Brexit. This was symbolised by the attendance of British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss at the 4 March 2022 EU Foreign Affairs Council, the first time both parties met in the CSPD framework since Brexit (Gallardo, 2022).

Overall, these recent developments reflect a collective awareness of the need to deepen interoperability between all European forces and, above all, a shared desire to establish a long-term cooperation mechanism between the UK and EU countries. Still, it remains that significant challenges still exist in establishing such structures.

ANALYSIS: CHALLENGES TO OVERCOME AND HOW TO OVERCOME THEM

Part 1: Limits and Challenges to UK-EU Cooperation in Defence

Some long-lasting historical challenges and facts have long hindered military cooperation between European nations. Some of these are of an intra-EU nature and well preceded Brexit, while others pertain to the nature of the relationship between the European Union as an organisation and the UK as a non-member.

a) Historical Intra-EU Limits to Military Cooperation

Regarding military cooperation and interoperability between EU Member States, these objectives have always been faced with numerous intra-European divisions, some of which – but not all – were partially resolved with the Ukrainian crisis. The first of these is what some authors refer to as the **fetish of sovereignty**, meaning the substantial concerns member states often have “about national sovereignty and autonomy in the defence sec-

tor” (Hyde-Price, 2018: p. 403). This fetish of sovereignty constitutes one side of a coin whose other facet is the weakness of the EU in terms of political cohesion. This first obstacle is linked to a second, namely the **lack of clear political leadership within the EU, which is** seen today as being overly bureaucratic and technocratic and as missing a strategic direction. The third limit to increased military interoperability between EU countries pertains to how the “EU Member States are **divided by their strategic culture** and their ability to think more broadly in strategic terms [with] those with a more robust approach to the use of coercive military power (the United Kingdom and France), and those with a clear aversion to using military capabilities for much more than peacekeeping and international social work (epitomized by Austria)” (Hyde-Price, 2018: p. 402). The scale and strength of these three challenges have been reduced by the Ukrainian crisis, but they remain natural obstacles to more interoperable European armed forces.

Other less cumbersome barriers to defence integration include “challenges to defence budgets in a time of austerity,” the “sheer scale of the challenges facing Europe in its Eastern” neighbourhood and “the absence of public awareness of and/or support for a more muscular or assertive Europe” (Howorth, 2017: p. 193). It is appreciable that the Ukrainian situation significantly resolved all these three issues. EU countries indeed have dedicated substantial funds to defence and civil society, while the broader public in Europe has called for a stronger, more unified and more determined Europe on the defence front since the outbreak of the crisis.

However, the omnipresent fetish of sovereignty and strategic culture divisions between EU nations have meant that “the member states have always sought to ring-fence security and defence cooperation from other, more supra-national, policy areas,” thus giving “a merely coordinating role for the community institutions” (Sus and Martill, 2019a: p. 34).



b) Challenges to UK-EU Defence Collaboration After Brexit

Of course, Brexit, as an act of separation from European institutions, significantly increased the level of difficulty and challenges of having deep defence cooperation between British and European armed forces. Indeed, by leading to the UK's exit from the CSDP, Brexit created new obstacles to UK-EU interoperability on both the strategic and tactical levels, obstacles originating from both sides.

On the EU side, Brexit generated a sense that the EU needed to protect its decision-making autonomy and mitigate the potentially disintegrative effects of the UK leaving the Union. During the Brexit negotiations, Michel Barnier, EU Chief Negotiator, made this very clear in several instances in 2017 (Besch, Bond, and Mortera-Martinez, 2018: p. 20), for example, in a speech in front of the European Commission (Barnier, 2017). Thus, Brexit generated a new and unprecedented sense of unity within the EU as to the need to defend its decision-making autonomy, which hinders the possibilities for deep EU-UK defence cooperation. More broadly, the main challenge to EU-UK defence cooperation in the post-Brexit years has been the EU's tendency to seek deeper defence cooperation through institutionalised mechanisms instead of bilaterally, which the UK always favoured.

On the British side, the main challenge in terms of close cooperation with the EU in defence is the political impact of Brexit, namely the fact that the British government wants to avoid at all costs appearing as ceding to the European Union UK sovereignty as "it is in-

evitable that the current UK government's political Europe policy is dominated by the consequences of Brexit" (Walshe, 2022: p. 2). Martill and Sus (2021) named this phenomenon the **politics of withdrawal**, namely the fact that "the politics of institutional withdrawal have undermined the likelihood of an agreement in security and defence, despite the a priori strategic interest in cooperation" (p. 5). Their main argument is that "problems of institutional complexity, including the incompatibility of mutual demands for institutional autonomy, [...] the negotiation process [which pushed] both sides toward a harder position [and that] the UK and EU [set] out highly political (and stylised) narratives of autonomy" all made agreement and cooperation less likely (p. 11). Such a stance from the British government was conveyed not but a year ago by the UK's post-Brexit foreign policy and defence plan, the 2021 Integrated Review, which barely mentioned the partnership with the Europeans, except for cooperation within NATO.

However, the Ukrainian crisis could be a decisive factor in overcoming this challenge. Indeed, the February 2022 Russian invasion has been such a shock for millions of European citizens – including the British – that cooperating with the EU in defence and security could no longer be seen with such a bad eye as before by the British public. In a way, the crisis has offered the UK government a window of opportunity to actively cooperate with the EU and once again focus on its strategic interests more than on the leftovers from post-Brexit politics. This will not automatically be the case, as Balfour (2020) underlined

when stressing that not only did “the politics of Brexit and the affirmation of British sovereignty [include] a deliberate detachment from any appearance of cooperation with Brussels on foreign and security policy; also for public consumption” but that “the signs that Britain’s foreign policy of the next four years will be driven by ideology are strong.” This demonstrates how crucial it will be that both the UK and the EU put things back in their rightful place and come back to the basics: the decision to cooperate or not to cooperate, in a sector as essential as defence is, must be based on strategic considerations, not on political tendencies.

c) Positive Signs Exist

Notwithstanding these limits and obstacles, what we have seen in the last two months allows for optimism, as the UK and Europe have already initiated a rapprochement. The latest sign of these was the invitation by the EU of British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss to attend its March 4 Foreign Affairs Council meeting for the first time since Brexit (Gallardo, 2022). Given how this decision was taken in apparent opposition to what was proclaimed just a few years ago, further similar cooperative trends are credible and foreseeable.

This change might have answered what Adrian Hyde-Price (2018) designated as an essential factor in explaining both cooperative and non-cooperative trends in EU-UK relations in the defence realm. Hyde-Price focused on the occurrence of a “major external shock” that would close the gap in “political will and coherence” that hampered military cooperation in Europe (p. 406). As he claimed, if political

unity were ever to emerge on the continent, it would be “most likely to emerge in the context of a major external shock,” a “critical juncture [that] might provide the necessary catalyst for cohesive and resolute collective action” (p. 406). The Ukrainian crisis could very well be that critical juncture.

Part 2: Paths for Greater Cooperation between Great Britain and Europe

Having overviewed the limits to cooperation that need to be taken into account, this section intends to present the pathways that could, in theory, promote interoperability between British and European armed forces. Its organisation will stick to the following two-part structure: each type of path (NATO, bilateral/minilateral, EU) will be presented through the lenses of how it already can bolster cooperation between the UK and its partners, after what the possible limitations of each particular framework will be highlighted. The purpose is to offer a qualified picture of the opportunities and challenges linked to each “path.” The next part will give out the synthesis and the lessons of the analysis, namely the discussion and conclusion of this paper.

Worth mentioning at this point is how, since Brexit, the UK has essentially been facing a dilemma, as Johnson and Matlary (2019) explained, between building close bilateral or minilateral ties with individual European countries – in line with the “Global Britain” motto (Major and von Oндарза 2018) and involvement with EU-wide defence policy-making, the direction favoured by the EU

since 2016. The UK has yet to take a clear, unambiguous path in this dilemma. While in the past, it has often expressed that it would not accept being considered and treated as an average “third-country” by the European Union when joining EU mechanisms (Sweeney and Winn, 2021: p. 4), the Ukrainian crisis and the absence of a clear framework for UK-EU defence and security cooperation have once more reminded everyone involved that this field was of utter importance for all parties, and needed to be managed as such. The following lines examine potential avenues to address this need for greater defence cooperation.

a) The Easiest Route: Through NATO

i. NATO: the Obvious Path for Cooperation

As the title of this section suggests, acting through NATO would constitute the easiest option for the UK to enhance cooperation and interoperability with European countries in the post-Brexit context.

This is explained simply by the fact that Brexit did not impact British membership in NATO and is likely to increase participation from the UK in the organisation to compensate for the loss of EU ties. Paul Cornish referred to this when he affirmed that the UK was now “more willing to see NATO as something of a holding company” (Norwegian Atlantic Committee, 2017: p. 2), thus pointing to its “platform” character (Johnson and Matlary, 2019: p. 161). Major and Mölling (2017) emphasised the same when they wrote that NATO could benefit from a potentially stron-

ger UK commitment, given how “the Alliance could gain in importance as a platform for debates, policy, and capability development among Europeans” (p. 10). This priority given to NATO in the aftermath of Brexit was also conveyed by the British Government 2021 Integration Review, which stressed that the “‘bulk of the UK’s security focus’ will remain on the Euro-Atlantic region” (Mills and Brooke-Holland, 2021: p. 3).

ii. NATO Structures for Enhancing Interoperability

NATO offers three features to increase interoperability between its members: joint exercises, training programmes, and forums for discussions.

Joint Exercises: NATO affirms that the Alliance and partner nations “conduct missions and exercises 24 hours per day, 7 days per week, 365 days per year” (SHAPE, 2022). The Alliance regularly organises joint exercises to improve cooperation and interoperability between its national forces. The cadence of these exercises is generally around 80 or 90 a year, in addition to national and multinational exercises. These military exercises make it possible to identify interoperability gaps early on and implement fixes, thus increasing tactical interoperability. The benefits and usefulness of planning and executing joint exercises were confirmed by Lieutenant-Colonel Walther (2021) when he reiterated that “interoperability is [...] improved through NATO’s intensified exercise schedule” and that overall, “interoperability on the tactical level moves in the right direction” (p. 47-48).



Education and Training Programmes and Facilities: Beyond exercises, the objective to enhance interoperability between Allies is pursued through training programmes and facilities. Seven of these facilities are currently in place on NATO territory. The most relevant two when addressing the topic of interoperability are the Joint Warfare Centre (JWC) in Stavanger, Norway and the Joint Force Training Centre (JFTC) in Bydgoszcz, Poland. The most significant joint training programme is the Connected Forces Initiative (CFI), which aims to maintain in the long term the high level of interoperability Allied forces gained and witnessed during their operational experience in Afghanistan, Libya, the Horn of Africa and the Balkans, was maintained (NATO, 2022a).

Concretely, the practical programme established to implement the CFI was the “Combined Training Initiative” (CTI), which aimed

at improving interoperability between Allied forces by focusing on NATO’s three components of interoperability: technical, procedural, and human (Derleth, 2015). The CTI is carried out through joint planning and exercises with enhanced technology that mobilises the Joint Multinational Training Command (JMTC, localised in Grafenwoehr, Germany) and its Joint Multinational Simulations Centre (JMSC). Through the dissemination by NATO Centres of Excellence (COE) and training facilities of tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs), which mitigate doctrinal diversity by focusing on functional interoperability; and through programmes bolstering education, training, and the adoption of common terminology (such as the JMTC-initiated Joint Common Academic Program, JCAP) (Derleth, 2015). In short, the CTI intends to mitigate technological disparities, command and control disparities, doctrinal differences, and resource gaps.

Of importance in the discussion about improving interoperability, the CFI and military exercises more generally address only the tactical challenges to interoperability in opposition to strategic challenges. This is logical given how overcoming strategic challenges requires political decisions while overcoming them at the tactical level can be accomplished by establishing common tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs).

Forums for discussion: Finally, NATO offers several platforms where interoperability issues can be discussed at a strategic level. The three main ones are the **Allied Command Transformation (ACT)**, the Committee for Standardization (CS), and the North Atlantic Council (NAC).

The Allied Command Transformation (ACT) is one of NATO's two Strategic Commands with Allied Command Operations (ACO). This entity manages the education, training, exercise and evaluation process" and, as such, is responsible for organising exercises and training sessions at the JWC in Stavanger and the JFTC in Bydgoszcz, for instance. As an entity that mobilises personnel from all NATO members, that "contributes to the development of NATO doctrine, concepts and interoperability standards" (NATO, 2021c) and whose main responsibilities include "promoting interoperability throughout the Alliance" (NATO, 2018a), the ACT constitutes a forum to discuss issues of interoperability, mostly at the tactical level but also regarding the harmonisation of national doctrines.

The **Committee for Standardisation (CS)** is the senior NATO committee for Alliance standardization, composed of delegates from all NATO countries and more than 30 partner countries that meet at least twice a year. Operating under the **North Atlantic Council (NAC)**, it issues policy and guidance for all NATO standardisation activities. It contributes to the development of interoperable military forces and capabilities (NATO, 2017b). Given the CS' format, one applicable and gainful way for the post-Brexit UK to enhance interoperability with their European partners would be to organise dedicated discussion forums and table-top interoperability exercises between national representatives. On top of intensifying cooperation, such exercises would, above all, allow protagonists "to see the benefits of interoperability and the consequences of failure" (Binnendijk and Braw, 2017).

The third structure within NATO relevant in the context of this paper is the North Atlantic Council (NAC), NATO's principal political decision-making body. The NAC has two notable features that make it a significant forum to discuss issues of military cooperation and interoperability. First, it consists of Permanent Representatives from its 30 member countries. They meet several times per week, in addition to bi-annual meetings gathering all ministers of foreign affairs and tri-annual meetings with the ministers of defence, in addition to occasional summits with the heads of state and government. Second, the NAC is the ultimate authority at the head of a network of committees, including the CS. Given how NAC discussions and decisions are of-

ten based on reports and recommendations prepared by subordinate committees, the NAC represents a platform where issues of interoperability at a tactical but above all political – and thus, strategic – level are tackled. Therefore, and similarly to the CS, organising table-top interoperability exercises with European allies at the NAC would prove highly beneficial to bolstering cooperation. Such drills would be even more valuable given how involving Defence ministers is possible in the NAC.

iii. Limits to Cooperation

Notwithstanding these advantages offered by NATO to promote interoperability, only acting through the Alliance would not be enough to cover all aspects of defence and security cooperation in Europe. Three limits, a major one and two relative others, emerge regarding NATO's ability to address and solve interoperability challenges fully.

The most significant of these limits behaves NATO's decision-making process. Indeed, all three structures presented previously – the ACT, the CS, and the NAC – operate based on consensus. In practice, this means it can take a long time to adopt decisions and sometimes be half-measures resulting from a compromise, thus not necessarily or entirely addressing the issue at hand. For this reason, NATO structures do not seem to offer solutions to strategic challenges to interoperability. Indeed, these challenges require political decisions to be overcome, and NATO works more efficiently to bolster cooperation at the tactical level than on a political one.

Two other, less prominent limitations to the Alliance's concrete ability to bolster cooperation between British armed forces and their European counterparts (and all Allied forces more generally) concern the nature of NATO's operations. On the one hand, NATO operations can appear overly narrow and limited in their scope (for example, compared to CSDP missions). Indeed, missions of conflict prevention, peacekeeping and policing, for example, are not adapted to NATO structures (Martill and Sus, 2019a: p. 37). On the other hand, because of the current dispute between NATO as an Alliance and Russia, depending on where they take place, NATO operations could be controversial and act more as a promoter of instability than stability. Again, non-NATO missions such as CSDP's might be "more suited to deployment in areas where NATO activity would be contentious" (Martill and Sus, 2019a: p. 37). These two points mean that if NATO is overall efficient in tackling tactical challenges to interoperability, certain types of missions – mainly non-combat ones such as conflict prevention or peacekeeping – are not subject to regular cooperation-enhancing exercises. In contrast, some geographical regions do not easily lend themselves to such exercises for political reasons.

b) The Most Probable Choice: Through Bilateral and Minilateral Relationships

A second way the UK can work towards more interoperability with European partners is through bilateral and so-called bilateral frameworks. These formats have been historically and are still the most privileged by the British government and remain the crucial operational mechanisms to address European

security challenges. They “can complement the EU’s approach through an operational component, particularly when neither the EU nor NATO can agree on a strategy” (De Hoop Scheffer and Weber, 2022).

i. Bilateral Frameworks

Surely, the most significant of the UK’s bilateral defence arrangements is the 2010 Lancaster House agreement signed with France, which established the Combined Joint Expeditionary Force (CJEF) to increase the interoperability of both countries’ militaries. In 2020, the CJEF was fully operational and was able to rapidly deploy over 10,000 personnel in response to a crisis to fulfil a broad range of tasks (UK Ministry of Defence, 2020b). The level of interoperability attained since the 2010 agreements is significant, as confirmed by the French Institute of International Relations (IFRI). An IFRI’s report indeed highlighted how, in the years since the establishment of the CJEF, France and the UK managed to agree on procedures, reached a level of standardisation, improved responsiveness during exercises and deployments, and “moved from a general objective of interoperability to a more concrete project to achieve it” (Pannier, 2021: p. 25). However, the same report also underlined how increasing interoperability through this bilateral framework alone presented its limits, given how France prioritised cooperation through EU structures. The CSIS similarly affirmed that the level of cooperation attained and attainable through the CJEF was not sufficient to face the current security climate in Europe (Monaghan, 2021).

Likewise, the UK has a bilateral agreement with Germany to increase military interoperability, which since Brexit is dominated by the so-called Joint Vision Statement (JVS), signed in October 2018. However, the extent of British-German military cooperation remains limited and indisputably insufficient, given the current European security environment. Here again, the main reason for this is the two countries’ different views and approaches to European defence cooperation, with Germany following a “strategic vision of deepening the European defence integration to strengthen the European integration project – an approach that has never been shared by the UK” (Urbanovská, 2021: p. 45). Germany never considered prioritising defence cooperation with the UK over defence cooperation inside and within the EU. Indeed, when the JVS was signed, the German government “explicitly rejected that the Joint Vision Statement should substitute any cooperation within the EU or bypass the EU-UK arrangements (Urbanovská, 2021: p. 46). In a nutshell, ever since Brexit, “Berlin’s first priority [has been] to protect the cohesion of the EU while building a privileged trading and security partnership with a post-Brexit UK [came] second” (Johnson and Matlary, 2019: p. 128). This factor, coupled with the deeply rooted differences in the strategic cultures of both countries, has had negative impacts on cooperation. A RAND study from 2017 affirmed that the German and British Armies “would be at pains to put together a single armoured brigade within 30 days for a collective defence mission in the Baltic States” (Johnson and Matlary, 2019: p. 138). Recent years have not seen an improvement in the

situation. No new agendas have been introduced since 2018, and Germany scaled back existing bilateral cooperation with the UK out of cautiousness “not to present the JVS and bilateral ties as any substitute for EU-UK arrangements” (Urbanovská, 2021: p. 52).

Besides France and Germany, the UK has concluded several defence agreements bilaterally with European countries since 2016. The most significant is probably the treaty signed with Poland in December 2017 that sought to “build upon the effectiveness and interoperability of [each country’s] armed forces” (UK Government, 2018: p. 4). Other bilateral treaties were signed with Italy, Sweden, Cyprus, Romania, Hungary, Croatia, and the Netherlands. There were also discussions between the UK and Spain over a defence and security agreement in the last two years (González and Cañas, 2021). However, none of these treaties represents substantial advances in defence cooperation or military interoperability. Indeed, these agreements being bilateral and so by nature concluded between two states – therefore excluding all the others – all lack a more encompassing strategy, harmonised with the postures taken by the other European armed forces. Coupled with the fact that prominent EU Member States – France and Germany at the top of the list – appear increasingly inclined to favour defence arrangements concluded within the EU framework, bilateral treaties alone do not seem to measure up to the current and future challenges existing at Europe’s doorstep.

ii. *Minilateral Relationships*

Next to these bilateral agreements, the UK is part of several minilateral frameworks that offer good opportunities to increase interoperability with European allies. The most promising are the **Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) and the European Intervention Initiative (EII)**.¹

The JEF: The JEF is a multinational framework established in 2014 by some European countries, including non-NATO partners, willing to develop a multinational military force that could be flexibly used in Northern Europe, with a lead nation providing a command-and-control framework. Monaghan (2022) summarised that its purpose is for “existing groups of nations that already cooperate with each other — perhaps because they are neighbours or share close historical military ties — to develop military capabilities, doctrine, interoperability, training, and exercising” to improve “their ability to operate together and helps solve burden sharing through bottom-up collaboration between like-minded allies.” The Force, which today comprises ten northern European nations, became fully operational in 2018. It has since conducted a series of joint exercises, most recently in March 2021 with a maritime deployment in the Baltic Sea and in September 2021 with the so-called Exercise Joint Protector in Sweden.

The JEF offers three significant advantages as far as military cooperation goes:

- First, it includes members outside NATO (Finland and Sweden) and existing EU defence structures (the United Kingdom,

1. The E3 Format and the Northern Group could also be mentioned, many factors make these two frameworks completely unsuited to tackle the challenges addressed in this paper. See Annex A for more details on this topic.

Denmark, Norway, Iceland). It allows to cooperate pragmatically depending on a particular situation's characteristics (geographic and otherwise) and requirements instead of strict institutional considerations (i.e., whether a country is an EU or NATO member).

- Second, the JEF is only focused on northern Europe, creating specific expertise in this region, unlike the structures of NATO and the EU that are diffused throughout the European continent. The fact that the JEF is focused on defending Northern Europe makes the force significantly relevant, given how "there is no denying that for Northern Europe Russia is the defining parameter for the JEF" (Johnson and Matlary, 2019: p. 192).
- Third, and most substantially in the context of this paper, the JEF offers an exceptionally flexible framework for cooperation. It does not require consensus to conduct operations, unlike NATO or the EU. Indeed, "JEF Participants are not obliged to contribute forces to any given JEF activity or deployment; instead, it remains a sovereign national decision for Participants to contribute, within their respective legal frameworks" (UK Ministry of Defence, 2021b). This "coalition of the willing" approach makes the JEF a particularly responsive force able to play a viable "first responder" role in crises. As said bluntly by Royal Marines Brigadier Matt Jackson, head of the land forces in the JEF Baltic Protector Deployment of 2019, "the JEF can act while NATO is thinking" (Eckstein, 2019). Still, in line with the idea of flexibility, the JEF was

constituted to complement other international frameworks and mainly NATO. For this reason, the JEF uses NATO standards and doctrine as its baseline, making JEF units interoperable with NATO's (UK Ministry of Defence, 2021b).

Notwithstanding, this minilateral format presents an explicit limitation concerning the possibility for the UK to cooperate with fellow European allies through it, namely the absence of Europe's two giants, France and Germany. Given that these nations do not plan to join it, the JEF does not allow the UK to increase interoperability with the two major EU countries, making this force and format insufficient to attain the level of cooperation required to face current and future security challenges.

The EII: It was established in 2017 at French President Macron's initiative. Its purpose was to allow European countries, **whether EU Member States or not**, or signatories to CSDP or not (Denmark is not), to contribute to armed intervention and stabilisation initiatives in "a flexible and non-bureaucratic way" (Martill and Sus, 2018: p. 858). While members are not bound to participate in any operations, "the format is designed to help prepare them to work together in potential future missions as part of NATO, the EU, UN, or other ad hoc groupings" (Keil and Arts, 2021: p. 7). The great advantage offered by this initiative is that it indeed goes "around the slow and cumbersome EU processes, institutional complexities, and inter-state wrangling." In the context of this paper, the EII is immensely important as it constitutes a platform for on-

going dialogue on integrated ways to collaborate in defence and offers defence cooperation that the UK can still use after Brexit.

However, the EII does not constitute a long-term solution for the UK's challenge of increasing interoperability with its European counterparts. Indeed, although it was at its initiative, France and many other European states still largely favour working on cooperating mechanisms at the EU level and are not willing to let the EII or security relationship with the UK override these. Even if the EII constitutes a good option for the UK to bolster cooperation and interoperability with its European counterparts in the short and medium terms, the UK could not rely on Macron's initiative to promote cooperation forever because many EU countries still see their long-term interests within the EU framework.

The overall conclusion on bilateral and mini-lateral initiatives is summarised in the words of Hyde-Price (2018): "Although they are contributing to Europe's military capabilities, [these initiatives are] regionally fragmented and functionally uneven: in the absence of an overarching strategic vision for European security, a patchwork of capabilities and military cooperation is emerging. The risk is that the whole will be less than the sum of the parts" (p. 405).

c) The Most Ambitious Path: Through Institutional Mechanisms at the EU Level

i. CSDP: The One EU Initiative Bolstering Interoperability in Deployment Contexts

The EU has several structures promoting cooperation between its member states and with third partners. Three of these key initiatives are the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the European Defence Fund (EDF) and the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD). However, these frameworks all focus on cooperation at pre-deployment stages and are thus outside the scope of this paper. Consequently, in promoting interoperability in actual deployments, the only relevant EU initiative is the CSDP.

ii. Role, Decision-Making Process, and Impact of the CSDP

Role: The CSDP is the part of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) related to defence and crisis management. Its purpose "is to provide the Union with an operational capacity to conduct missions outside the Union for peace-keeping, conflict prevention and strengthening international security. [...] These missions include joint disarmament operations, humanitarian and rescue tasks, military advice and assistance tasks, conflict prevention and peace-keeping tasks, and the tasks of combat forces in crisis management, including peace-making and post-conflict stabilisation" (Rehrl, 2022: p. 80). The CSDP framework has a centralised centre of command for all operations, which constitutes a tool for participating countries to improve their tactical interoperability on the ground and align at the strategic level.

Decision-Making Process: CSDP missions reflect the EU's core objective to protect the decision-making autonomy of the Union. This means that non-EU countries such as

the UK do not have a say in the strategic direction of any given operation. In practice, CSDP operations are planned in the following manner: the Political and Security Committee (PSC, composed of ambassador-level officials from the member states and does not include representatives from third countries) makes recommendations to the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC, formed in this case of EU defence ministers) on whether, why and how to intervene in a specific area. The FAC unanimously decides on whether to launch a mission, its aims and objectives. From there, either a framework nation provides operational headquarters or the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC, the EU's own permanent operational headquarters) acts as the mission's headquarters. "The formal force generation process begins, in which member states volunteer the assets and personnel required for the operation" (Besch, Bond, and Mortera-Martinez, 2018: p. 46).

The essential feature of this procedure is the total control exercised by EU Member States over the politico-strategic part of the process. Indeed, when the strategic direction of the operation is being shaped and when political ambition and needs are translated into clear CSDP options for engagement, even third countries that would logically greatly take part in said operation do not have a seat at the table. It also needs to be underlined that even if meetings between the PSC and third countries sometimes occur, "the latter do not get to influence the agenda, and the discussions are often more cordial than substantial" (Besch, Bond, and Mortera-Martinez, 2018: p. 46). Thus, "only once the operational plan-

ning has been completed does the Council decide whether it will invite particular third countries to join" (Besch, Bond, and Mortera-Martinez, 2018: p. 46). The process is entirely "designed to ensure that any CSDP activity is conceived, planned, launched, conducted and closed with direct political control and strategic direction being exercised by the PSC," meaning by EU Member States (Rehrl, 2022: p. 81).

Impact: CSDP does not organise joint military exercises or training programmes as NATO does. Given its civilian dimension and the fact that member states remain the key actors in both civilian and military operations, it only sets out guiding principles that member states need to consider when organising their training programmes in support of CSDP missions. These principles, listed and presented in the "EU Policy on Training for CSDP" document, seek to make member states incorporate into their national training programmes requirements from operational activities, identify and convey lessons, and share best practices among other national training providers. The European External Action Service organises an annual Exercise named EU integrated Resolve, designed to improve crisis management. However, this exercise only carries out the politico-military strategic planning necessary for a military operation and does not mobilise physical assets on the ground (EEAS, 2021). Its tangible impact on interoperability is, therefore, limited. As for joint military operations, since 2003, the EU has run 37 CSDP missions on three continents, of which seven military are still ongoing (EEAS, 2022a). These missions have

helped foster interoperability by mobilising forces from different European countries, including non-EU Member States, given that EU battlegroups may include non-EU countries (as is the case in the Nordic Battlegroup, which brings together six member states and Norway).

When assessing its impact, the CSDP has a mixed record in terms of interoperability promotion. It is true that several military operations have been overall successes and have made “CSDP capabilities [...] evolve and expand over time” (Krotz and Wright, 2018: p. 881). However, military operations remain limited in size, bound to politically and militarily constrained ambitions and often hindered by “political disagreements among EU Member States and cumbersome and time-consuming decision-making procedures” (Krotz and Wright, 2018: p. 882). The main obstacle to any substantial improvement of interoperability in CSDP missions resides in their scarce number and the even lower number of forces mobilised per operation (L-Gen. Rittimann, 2021), both of which are mainly the result of political disagreements between EU countries. Because of these factors, and although EU-led military operations are generally successful, the CSDP only slightly advances the purpose of interoperability.

iii. *Opportunities and Limits to UK-EU Military Cooperation Through CSDP*

Opportunities: Third-country participation in CSDP operations is organised through Framework Participation Agreements (FPAs),

which can be signed to facilitate these countries’ participation in CSDP missions broadly or for a specific operation, in which case the parties conclude a Participation Agreement (PA). The initiative to conclude this agreement belongs exclusively to the EU, through the PSC and the Council, following recommendations made by the EEAS (Rehr, 2020: p. 84). And as highlighted above, when such a proposal is made to a third country, the latter is “expected to accept the EU’s schedule procedures, practices and a degree of subordination” (Szép et al., 2021: p. 15).

One way by which the UK might be able to take part in CSDP missions without being excluded from the operational planning processes is through the 2003 Berlin Plus arrangements, which makes it possible for non-EU NATO member states to participate in CSDP missions. However, the political liabilities characterising Berlin Plus greatly limit the potential for the UK to resort to this means to improve interoperability with EU partners.² Whether Berlin Plus plays a role or not, the UK could therefore receive and accept an invitation by the Council to take part in CSDP operations, in which case British armed forces will be able to cooperate, on the field and in a variety of environments, with their European counterparts. Moreover, the UK could seek ongoing permanent participation in an EU Battlegroup to maintain close military cooperation on the field, as is currently the case with Norway.

Limits: Notwithstanding the potential for cooperation through FPAs, bolstering interoperability

² See Annex B for more details regarding the limitations characterizing Berlin Plus.

erability between British and continental European armed forces through the CSDP presents severe political and strategic limitations.

The limited influence granted to third countries over the planning of CSDP operations sometimes makes some of these countries refuse to participate even when invited. This has been and will likely continue to be the case with the UK if the EU is unwilling to offer a deeper relationship than the one provided by an FPA. To put it bluntly, the framework and conditions provided by the FPA are not politically acceptable for the UK, as the country refuses any scenario in which it would not have a say in the direction of the policies to which its resources would be committed. This was made clear even in a 2017 government white paper calling for a “special partnership” with the EU, “deeper” than any such relationship in existence and “unprecedented” in cooperation (UK Government, 2017: p. 18). In particular, the British government asked that the EU and Britain “have regular close consultations on foreign and security policy issues” (p. 18) and to work with the EU “during mandate development and detailed operational planning” (p. 19). On this point, history does not make one

optimistic, as the EU has indeed never been willing to offer what one could see as a special FPA to any third country.

Strategically, the lack of cooperation in mission planning established by FPAs is not sensible given the current European security environment. Indeed, with the framework provided by FPAs, “third countries do not provide operational headquarters, and they cannot be a lead nation, or take on the post of the operation commander, or any other senior positions” (Besch, Bond, and Mortera-Martinez, 2018: p. 47). To prevent the UK from leading certain operations would not make sense given that the UK military is among the two most significant in Europe and has an extensive diplomatic range.

For these two reasons, cooperation through the CSDP under the current formats for third-country participation cannot bring interoperability between the UK and EU countries to a satisfactory level. Overall, this focus on the CSDP showed that because of its institutional rigidity, or as Besch, Bond, and Mortera-Martinez put it, “institutional red lines and political pitfalls,” the EU often “fails to make good use of third-country cooperation” (2018: p. 49).

DISCUSSION: BUILDING A SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP THROUGH FORMAL AND INFORMAL PRACTICES

Having reviewed how the UK could improve interoperability with European nations

through NATO, bilateral/minilateral or EU frameworks, this part will now address how

better cooperation can be achieved in practice, given Europe's current political realities and security imperatives. The answer will be divided according to a timeline depending on whether specific initiatives are doable in the short, medium or long term or a combination of several. "Short" term will be considered as less than a year, "medium" term as one to five years and "long" term as more than five years.

a) In the Short Term: Increase Cooperation through NATO

In the short run, Europe and the UK can achieve greater interoperability partly through existing bilateral and minilateral ties but mainly through NATO structures. Tactical interoperability can be reinforced through intensified joint exercises and training programmes. Strategic interoperability can also be strengthened through the Alliance's three

main discussion forums: the NAC, the ACT and the CS. Table-top interoperability exercises between national representatives in the CS and potentially NAC would allow for greater harmonised and aligned national doctrines.

To be clear, NATO is listed as the best path to increase cooperation in the short term because initiatives through other structures would not be feasible in a year. NATO will also be a sure framework to strengthen interoperability in the longer run.

b) In the Medium Term: Work on Minilateral and Bilateral Ties and Maintain Permanent Contact with the EU

In the next five years, in addition to working through NATO, Europe and Britain could increase defence cooperation by working on bilateral and minilateral ties to deepen interoperability and maintain communication



between the UK and the European Union. Indeed, what emerged from the previous reviews is that bilateral and minilateral frameworks will probably not be enough in the future to attain a satisfactory level of interoperability. This research assessment is going through more institutionalised and EU-wide channels, which will be imperative for all parties in the long term. Until then, however, improving defence cooperation and making sure that UK-EU contacts are preserved will be achieved through bilateral and minilateral agreements.

i. Bilateral Frameworks

Bilaterally, the UK should keep the cooperative course set with France. Given how the CJEF made it possible for both countries to make concrete advances on procedures, doctrines, and deployments, the bilateral framework should be preserved and serve as a model for similar agreements, for instance, with Germany.

Indeed, the current context provides an opportunity for deeper bilateral defence cooperation between the two countries. While the two main factors that historically prevented bilateral defence cooperation on a substantial level were the differences in approaches to European defence cooperation and strategic cultures, the Ukrainian crisis has simultaneously made the UK more open to direct cooperation with the EU and Germany more willing to use force to defend Europe's interests and to militarily prepare accordingly. Still, purely bilateral ties will likely have immediate limits, as "Germany shows all indications of having abandoned even initiated bilateralism in lieu

of a purely minilateral and multilateral approach within the EU" (Urbanovská, 2021: p. 52). For this reason, while bilateral steps might be undertaken in the future, "their absolute growth would be outmatched by the greater relative growth of multilateral and intra-EU defence cooperation" (Urbanovská, 2021: p. 53).

Bilaterally, increasing defence cooperation with the EU's two most significant powers should be a priority for the UK. The country could also work on reinforcing bilateral ties with other European partners, mainly Poland, Italy, Sweden and the Netherlands. However, limits to the effectiveness of such courses of action are significant because achieving interoperability with some of the less prepared militaries will be challenging and given how many European states appear to have passed bilateralism in defence cooperation and prioritise EU-wide initiatives now.

ii. Minilateral Frameworks

As for minilateral frameworks, the JEF and EII offer promising prospects to improve (mainly tactical) interoperability between Britain's armed forces and those of the participating countries. However, not only these formats do not allow for increased cooperation with many European nations that do not participate, but their range finds itself limited by the political inclination of several EU states to privilege EU's initiatives.

Thus, bilateral and minilateral frameworks have limited potential for deeper interoperability due to current political tendencies in many EU Member States. Suppose the EU

keeps privileging supranational cooperation mechanisms in defence instead of more classical intergovernmental ties. In that case, this way of proceeding might become more and more inefficient and unsuited to cooperation requirements.

Given the still ambivalent position of numerous EU member states on this topic, and the uncertainty surrounding the future leadership in the states that today lead the race for more integration, this might not be the case and, therefore, not an issue for the UK. However, the mere prospect that the European Union could go further in this direction demands that the UK maintain some permanent relationship with the EU as a whole, above and beyond bilateral ties.

iii. *Beyond Bilateralism and Minimalism*

For this reason, the UK could seek to maintain close contacts in the EU institutions framework, for instance, through regular Foreign Affairs Council meetings such as the one that the British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss attended on 4 March 2022. Such an opening from the EU would even carry the prospect of British participation in CSDP missions. This would require an FPA to be signed between both parties. However, there again, the UK could “negotiate an agreement whereby a substantial commitment of troops or assets would guarantee close consultation as well as information sharing in the early stages of CSDP operational planning. It could ask for a right to have informal meetings with EU ambassadors on the same day as PSC and EU

Military Committee meetings” (Besch, Bond, and Mortera-Martinez, 2018: p. 53-54).

For initiatives to concretise, both parties must take a step towards each other, not out of sheer altruism but out of strategic reasoning. Therefore, on the one hand, it is essential for EU Member States to be flexible and open to informal practices of differentiated cooperation, and thus qualify the rigid remarks made by Michel Barnier in 2017 (Barnier, 2017).³ On the other hand, the British government must recognise the impossibility for the UK to not consider Europe as its leading partner and turn its back on the strategically inept “politics of withdrawal.” And even in the eventuality that London would still prefer to “evade any appearance of institutionalised cooperation with Brussels, dialogue can restart at the operational level to share information and exchange views of emerging challenges and approaches to solve them” (Balfour, 2020). Such dialogue could occur through EU Delegations working in third countries and international institutions and thus engage systematically with British representatives alongside the EU-27. Another possibility would be to give back to the Committee of Contributors its original role, which gave third countries contributing troops the opportunity to provide guidance on how operations should be conducted. Today’s tendency for member states not to send senior officials to meetings with third countries could and should also be reversed.

Preserving such regular contacts, even if informal, will allow both sides to sustain a close relationship in the defence domain and create

3. In a speech in front of the European Commission, Barnier indeed reiterated that, regarding participation in CSDP, the UK would not be given a seat at the table during the FAC and the PSC meetings and that there would be no possibility for London to take command of EU-led operations or lead EU battlegroups.

room for discussing the possibility of imagining another configuration allowing for greater British participation in CSDP operations.

c) In the Long Term: Establish a Permanent Institutionalised Structure of Cooperation Between the EU and the UK

The EU representatives have repeatedly presented this as a primary objective for better cooperation in the past few months and even more since the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis. Indeed, if the last five years seemingly made highly unlikely the reaching of a defence cooperation agreement, the war in Ukraine and its ramifications have put this outcome back into the realm of possibilities and – most importantly – have made it a politically viable one for political leaders. This point cannot be stressed enough: the current momentum provided by the Ukrainian crisis offers an exceptional window of opportunity to correct the strategic mistakes made during the Brexit negotiations.

Even around 2017, when the atmosphere between the EU and UK was most tense, some authors imagined ways by which new institutional structures or consultation arrangements could be built to allow the UK to deepen military cooperation and increase interoperability with EU partners. The one framework that would be the most promising is an “EU27+1” for-

mat for the Foreign Affairs Council, namely a FAC widened to include a more formal mechanism for input from Great Britain. Such a format would allow for much deeper cooperation between UK and EU protagonists on the strategic dimension of interoperability.

This set of options located in time follows a decisively progressive dimension. Indeed, when addressing cooperation between the UK and Europe, the issue of trust is central to the discussion. In this case, trust needs to be built back. Thus, by progressing in small steps, by walking at a peaceful pace towards ever more cooperation, it will be possible for the UK and Europe to regain mutual trust and (re)become aware of the extent to which not cooperating is not an option. These two elements – trust and a common desire to cooperate more – are essential to establish more permanent and institutional mechanisms for cooperation between the UK and the EU in the longer term.



CONCLUSION: BOTH THE UK AND THE EU MUST LEARN THEIR LESSONS FROM BREXIT AND UKRAINE

This paper aimed to achieve two objectives. First, it undertook to complete a broad and detailed review of the consequences of Brexit and the Ukrainian crisis for the UK and Europe concerning their security. In a nutshell, the first event weakened the potential for defence cooperation, while the second made that clear for everyone to see. Above all, the Russian invasion of Ukraine made all actors realise that achieving ways to deepen military cooperation and interoperability was essential irrespective of political considerations. Second, this paper aims to identify concrete means through which to achieve stronger cooperation and interoperability, while illustrating each path's practical and political limitations.

It must be recalled that the objective of this paper is not to defend a *political* conception of what the EU-UK relationship should be, either pro or anti-integration. Its purpose is to identify the most *pragmatic, credible and objectively desirable* ways the UK and continental Europe could efficiently cooperate in the military domain a few years after Brexit and in the wake of the Ukrainian crisis. The starting point of this paper is not that cooperation should be the motto guiding every step of Great Britain and other European countries. It is that greater and stronger cooperation is objectively and strategically the best way to ensure the safety of the whole continent, regardless of EU membership status of each state. The opportunities for deeper coopera-

tion pushed forward in the previous section answer this rationale.

This combination of possible ways to promote cooperation also highlights the need for the EU to be open to informal practices of cooperation with the UK, in opposition to the Union's preference for process and institutionalisation. As put by Balfour (2020), "the EU too needs to learn its lessons from Brexit." Indeed, the EU's tendency to seek cooperation through institutionalised structures has its downsides when third parties reject such structures. Therefore, when it comes to bolstering military cooperation with the UK, the EU needs to be flexible in how it presents itself and facilitates engagement in various forms. And, as Balfour hopes, "Once trust is rebuilt, the time will have come to make sure those new relations between the EU and the UK are anchored to a firmer ground."

Fortunately, the EU appears to be going in the right direction, as Liz Truss' invitation to attend the FAC meeting on 4 March showed. Moreover, beyond this relatively recent opening towards the British, mainly imputable to the Ukrainian crisis, EU institutions such as the European Parliament have for a while now recognised the need to be "creative" regarding EU-UK cooperation on CFSP and CSDP (European Parliament, 2020: "European Parliament resolution of 15 January 2020").

All these points underline that time will need to play its part in this discussion. Indeed, trust requires time to be acquired. Defence practitioners and politicians might take it upon themselves to return to institutionalised forms of cooperation when they realise that collaboration through NATO and bilateral and mini-lateral relationships does not allow for a satisfactory level of cooperation to face their shared challenges. As Jokela wrote, “A deeper and more institutionalised relationship might return to EU-UK agenda should

the post-Brexit environment expose the limits of case-by-case coordination” (2020: p. 118).

Finally, Finabel proves that intense post-Brexit cooperation is possible. After Brexit, the UK stayed on board as a member state of Finabel. This shows that in the context of consultation and cooperation at the COS level to realise the Finabel values and objectives, a ground for intense cooperation does exist and is already being realised.

ANNEXES

Annex A: The E3 Format and the Northern Group: Two Clearly Unsuitable Frameworks

Besides the JEF and the EII, two other mini-lateral frameworks could be mentioned in the discussion. The first is the E3 Format reuniting the UK, France and Germany. However, this framework does not seem to tackle the issue of defence cooperation, as “France and Germany are more comfortable using the format to cooperate with the UK on issues where EU policy is either absent or fragmentary” (Billon-Galland and Whitman, 2021). The other is the Northern Group, an informal cooperation format established in 2010 at the initiative of the UK and encompassing today the Nordic and Baltic states, in addition to Germany and Poland. At its creation, the NG was intended to promote discussion around regional defence matters and issues such as military mobility. If the format does seem to have potential, indeed bringing together

NATO and EU members and having a wider geographical reach than the JEF, the reality is that since its creation, activity has been sparse, and there is nothing pointing to a revitalisation of the format in the months and years to come (Fägersten, 2017; Black et al., 2021).

Annex B: Berlin Plus, its Characteristics and Limits

This agreement makes it possible for non-EU NATO Member States to participate in CSDP missions and guarantees EU access to NATO planning and collective assets and capabilities (Publications Office of the European Union, 2007). Through this means, Turkey had access to the operational planning processes in Operation Althea, because the operation was commanded at a strategic level from NATO’s headquarters (Besch, Bond, and Mortera-Martinez, 2018: p. 47). The UK could theoretically benefit from similar arrangements.

However, Berlin Plus is vulnerable to political tensions. Examples of such include the conflict between Cyprus and Turkey but also the case of the UK since Brexit. Since the 2016 referendum, the post of Deputy to the NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) for Operation Althea was passed from a British to a French officer, and this even though his predecessor had command-

ed this EU-led operation for the last 15 years (L-Gen. Rittimann, 2021: p. 1). Thus, Berlin Plus and its political liabilities greatly limit the potential for the UK to resort to this means to improve interoperability with EU partners. In the end, FPAs remain the one avenue through which third countries, NATO member states or not, can take part in CSDP operations.

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Created in 1953, the Finabel committee is the oldest military organisation for cooperation between European Armies: it was conceived as a forum for reflections, exchange studies, and proposals on common interest topics for the future of its members. Finabel, the only organisation at this level, strives at:

- Promoting interoperability and cooperation of armies, while seeking to bring together concepts, doctrines and procedures;
- Contributing to a common European understanding of land defence issues. Finabel focuses on doctrines, trainings, and the joint environment.

Finabel aims to be a multinational-, independent-, and apolitical actor for the European Armies of the EU Member States. The Finabel informal forum is based on consensus and equality of member states. Finabel favours fruitful contact among member states' officers and Chiefs of Staff in a spirit of open and mutual understanding via annual meetings.

Finabel contributes to reinforce interoperability among its member states in the framework of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), the EU, and *ad hoc* coalition; Finabel neither competes nor duplicates NATO or EU military structures but contributes to these organisations in its unique way. Initially focused on cooperation in armament's programmes, Finabel quickly shifted to the harmonisation of land doctrines. Consequently, before hoping to reach a shared capability approach and common equipment, a shared vision of force-engagement on the terrain should be obtained.

In the current setting, Finabel allows its member states to form Expert Task Groups for situations that require short-term solutions. In addition, Finabel is also a think tank that elaborates on current events concerning the operations of the land forces and provides comments by creating "Food for Thought papers" to address the topics. Finabel studies and Food for Thoughts are recommendations freely applied by its member, whose aim is to facilitate interoperability and improve the daily tasks of preparation, training, exercises, and engagement.



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