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**THE 'UKRAINE EFFECT': UK
AND EU SECURITY
COOPERATION AFTER THE
UKRAINE INVASION**

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Introduction

Theresa May's gnomonic phrase 'Brexit means Brexit' echoed around British and international media outlets following the 2016 British referendum to withdraw from the European Union (EU). The 'British Exit', or 'Brexit', after a process lasting three years and overseen by various Conservative Party leaders, has indeed been achieved. However, the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine has posed a collective threat to the continent, including the United Kingdom (UK). With a renewed effort to cooperate on security matters, the 'Brexit means Brexit' aphorism has seemingly become tainted. With political analysts declaring that this renewed closeness is imperative both for saving Ukraine (Blewett-Mundy, 2024) and for the freedom and security of the UK and its EU neighbours (Ricketts, 2024), it is no surprise that there is an interest in analysing the increased momentum in EU-UK security cooperation. In this context, exploring how and why the UK and the EU have resumed their security cooperation is topical.

Changes Caused by the Brexit Deal

The 2016 Brexit vote alarmed and concerned European capitals given its ramifications on security and defence matters (Jokela, 2020). The departure of a major security actor from the EU risked fracturing European and Western unity. Thus, EU states prioritised security and defence under the 2016 Global Strategy, aiming for a stronger European defence pillar. Since Brexit, there has been a significant push for greater EU integration in security and defence (Jokela, 2020). From the 2016 Bratislava Meeting, the implications of Brexit were addressed directly. Subsequent discussions and debates regarding the EU's future have consistently focused on strengthening security and defence to enhance EU cohesion post-Brexit (Jokela, 2020).

In military capability terms, the predicted potential loss caused by Brexit was immense. According to Sweeney and Winn (2021), the aspirations of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) were directly undermined by the UK leaving the EU. The UK's military capability as one of the UN Security Council's P5 members, a nuclear power, and constituting approximately 25 per cent of the EU's defence expenditure in 2017 (Stojanovic, 2017), meant its withdrawal from EU security and defence frameworks certainly left a vacuum to fill.

Despite the potential risks and threats caused by Brexit, it was also predicted that Brexit could provide new opportunities for the EU (Sweeney and Winn, 2021). These opportunities included reassessments of the EU Global Strategy (EEAS, 2016), the European Commission's Defence Action Plan (European Commission, 2016), the creation of a Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), and a European Defence Fund (EDF) (Kelly, 2021). Furthermore, security cooperation between the UK and the Netherlands has blossomed as a result of the Brexit deal. According to Smitt & Willemsen (2021), while Brexit 'had a significant impact on international relations in Europe, the bilateral defence relationship between the UK and the Netherlands has seemingly continued to flourish' (Smitt & Willemsen, 2021, p.481). Interestingly, Martill and Sus (2024) predicted that the UK's defence and security cooperation would be conditioned around the CSDP, NATO interoperability, or strengthened bilateral ties with specific EU countries.

Yet, since January 2021, the formal ties between the UK and the EU in foreign policy have been at an all-time low. According to Martill and Sus (2024), 'when Russia invaded Ukraine, policymakers on both sides were still coming to grips with Boris Johnson's decision in early 2020 not to pursue a formal agreement in foreign, security, and defence policy.' Since early 2021, the UK instead fell back on bilateral ties with EU member states and sought to re-establish its credentials as a global rather than European player (Martill & Sus, 2024). It was amidst these weakening relationships across the Channel that President Putin's invasion of Ukraine commenced and necessitated that the UK and the EU rethink and renew their relationship on a larger scale.

The 'Ukraine Effect'

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has created a security vacuum on the European continent. In turn, this security vacuum, the largest for European security since 1945 according to Ricketts (2024), has altered the context of Britain's relationship with the EU. The European Affairs Committee, which was appointed to assess matters regarding the UK's relationship with the EU and the European Economic Area (EEA), has coined this alteration to British-EU relations the 'Ukraine Effect'.

After the invasion, high-level talks took place between British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and EU leaders, including European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and EU High Representative Josep Borrell. Additionally, the UK Foreign Secretary at the time, Liz Truss, attended an EU Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) meeting concerning the situation in Ukraine (Republic of Slovenia Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022).

Despite some positive progress, personal relations between British leaders and those of EU member states seem to pose a barrier to cooperation. Under Boris Johnson, ties between the EU and the UK suffered, as Johnson diminished the importance of the EU 'in order to bolster the Global Britain image' (Martill & Sus, 2024). However, this was overcome by his successor Liz Truss and the incumbent Prime Minister Rishi Sunak. In fact, Sunak's work in the Windsor Framework signed in 2023 empowered officials on both sides of the Channel to intensify cooperative practices (Martill & Sus, 2024). Nevertheless, there is still a call for the UK to make EU cooperation a priority.

Discrepancies in Security and Defence Interoperability

Two months after the Russian invasion on 24 February 2022, the EU imposed sanctions on Belarus (Blewett-Mundy, 2024). The UK, however, only imposed similar sanctions on Belarus in June 2023 (Foy and Fisher, 2023). Thus, despite the UK's indicated intention to 'work closely' with the EU, the UK 'had effectively enabled trade to continue with Russia via Belarus' (Blewett-Mundy, 2024).

Additionally, there was a zero-sum game to be played regarding arms spending for Ukraine. In 2023, the UK's defence industry was blocked from profiting from the EU's increased spending on arms for Ukraine. This spending included ammunition, small arms, and larger 155mm artillery rounds, which the EU and Norwegian manufacturers were able to profit from (Boffey, 2023). Thus, bolstering the European defence industry was at the expense of those outside the EU, namely the UK.

At the time, the Shadow Defence Secretary, John Healey, accused the government of damaging British industry by failing to nurture a positive post-Brexit relationship with the EU (Boffey, 2023). These gaps will likely grow wider if dialogue between the UK and the EU continues to be eschewed (Blockmans, 2022). These discrepancies between the EU and the UK in military aid and imposing sanctions illustrate the inefficacious post-Brexit relationship.

Since the invasion in February 2022, the UK has affirmed that it will unwaveringly support Ukraine. With the most recent update on 12 January 2024, UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy signed a historic UK-Ukraine Security Cooperation Agreement, with Sunak also committing to increase military funding and aid for the following financial year to £2.5 billion (GOV.UK, 2024). With these developments, the UK has provided almost £12 billion to Ukraine, including vital military aid such as the largest commitment of drones, Storm Shadow cruise missiles, a squadron of Challenger 2 tanks (GOV.UK, 2024), and military training programmes such as Operation Interflex (Mills, 2024).

Similarly, the EU, for the first time in its history, is providing lethal weapons to a third country through its European Peace Facility (EPF) (GOV.UK, 2024). Despite ongoing disagreements in the EU regarding funds for Ukraine, at the end of January 2024, the EU committed to spending €6.1 billion on aiding Ukraine – ‘including €3.1 billion for lethal equipment, €380 million for nonlethal supplies, and €2 billion to provide Ukraine with 1 million rounds of ammunition’ (Archick, 2024, p.2). Furthermore, in October 2022, the EU approved the first-ever training mission for the Ukrainian armed forces - under the name EUMAM UA (Shankar, 2022). Overall, as of January 2024, the EU and its member states have mobilised roughly €28 billion in military support for Ukraine and funded a €362 million EUMAM UA (European Commission, 2024a, p.4).

While both the EU and the UK are successfully sending military aid to Ukraine and imposing sanctions on Russia, there is still a so-called ‘missing link’ (Martill, 2023) in cooperation between the UK and the EU. The UK’s Shadow Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, David Lammy, in February 2024, declared ‘we now need an EU-UK security pact,’ elaborating that ‘[i]t’s a pact that is effectively built on the fact that we obviously have war here in Europe ... Russia will continue to be a threat to Europe for months, years, perhaps a generation more’ (Lammy qtd. in Posaner, 2024). Incentivising the EU to make a security deal with the UK, Lammy highlighted that Britain and France represent approximately half of Europe’s military capabilities and that the Five Eyes Alliance would be an asset to the EU’s security intelligence (Lammy qtd. In Posaner, 2024).

The longer the Russian invasion and the ‘Ukraine Effect’ emanating from this continue, the larger the desire for successful military and security interoperability will perhaps become. Accordingly, in both the UK and the EU, towards the end of 2023, there was a greater recognition of coordinated cooperation (Martill, 2023).

The Future of the UK-EU Security and Defence Relationship

Whether a unification in defence and security matters can feasibly overcome the disagreements discussed above is yet to be seen.

However, taking advantage of the 'Ukraine Effect' and developing a new mutually beneficial scheme to foster military interoperability between the EU and the UK would certainly provide security opportunities. In the context of the Russia-Ukraine War, a unified front between the EU and the UK would be an asset to Ukraine. Its benefits would manifest not only in the amalgamated increases in military aid but also in overcoming incompatibilities in imposing sanctions through a security cooperation scheme or framework.

However, importantly, European security does not solely rely on the EU, its institutions, and its bodies. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), remains the paramount security and defence organisation in the European continent (Martill, 2023; European Affairs Committee, 2024; Sweeney & Winn, 2022). Above this, NATO also 'sets the standards to enable military interoperability between European allies' (European Affairs Committee, 2024, p.4), and thus the UK's position 'in NATO remains highly significant' (Sweeney & Winn, 2021, p.243). Any form of cooperation between the UK and the EU, therefore, must be complementary to NATO. Perhaps, in the name of European security and defence, NATO must pave the way for successful military interoperability between post-Brexit Britain and the EU.

While the prospects for defence and security cooperation are high and, according to some political analysts, an imperative (Antinozzi, 2022; Jokela, 2020; Martill, 2023; Ricketts, 2024), there are currently hurdles that must be overcome for successful and sustainable UK-EU defence and security relations. Firstly, the EU framework, which has rules limiting third-country participation in the EDF, acts as a barrier to large-scale UK involvement in EU defence affairs. According to the House of Lords European Affairs Committee, given that the UK and the EU overlap in their strategic interests for the continent, protectionism should be taken out of the equation to foster an efficient and cooperative defence industry (House of Lords European Affairs Committee, 2024). The erasure of such protectionist measures could see the UK's application to participate in an EU Military Mobility project being accepted a year on (Ricketts, 2024). To overcome this hurdle, the UK's expertise in military support should be acknowledged by the EU, as despite the complications caused by Brexit, creating a united front will fortify the EU's borders and safeguard British national security.

EU-UK relations under British Prime Minister Sunak and President of the European Commission von der Leyen foster a shared commitment to EU and UK security. On 18 February 2024, a meeting between the two revealed that the two leaders advocated for new arrangements to be made between British agencies and Frontex, also known as the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (European Commission, 2024a). Additionally, both highlighted the need for a shared commitment to peace, security and the end of the Russia-Ukraine war (ibid). With both parties acknowledging and working towards a new mutually beneficial method of interoperability, the war in the east of the continent seems to provide a propitious moment for resumed security cooperation between the UK and the EU. Thus, while all the prerequisites for resumed security cooperation seem to be present, whether the 'Ukraine Effect' will present a new turn in EU-UK interoperability is yet to be seen.

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