

The UK's vote against military action in Syria leaves EU foreign policy more divided than ever.

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Last week, the British parliament voted against UK involvement in any military intervention in Syria. [Mark Shaw](#) writes on the impact the vote has had elsewhere in the EU. He notes that with France still firmly committed to taking part, Europe remains deeply divided over the issue. This ensures that while the EU took a leading role in imposing sanctions on Syria, it will be largely powerless in shaping the international response going forward.



In the House of Commons on 29th August, David Cameron commented that one of the key differences between the 2003 Iraq War and the situation in Syria was that 'then, Europe was divided over what should be done; now, Europe is united in the view that we should not let this chemical weapons use stand'. However this statement of common purpose seems to exaggerate the degree of unanimity among EU states. While there is broad agreement that the use of chemical weapons represents a heinous violation of international norms, there is a marked disagreement as to how to respond to the alleged use of chemical weapons by Bashar Assad's regime. This disunity was pointedly underlined by the rejection of military action by the House of Commons, the first time a British Prime Minister has lost such a vote since 1782.

The failure to agree on a course of action among key European countries, and between Europe and the United States, emphasises the degree to which opinion is divided on intervention and poses questions about the potential for future co-operation between European states in this contentious area of foreign and security policy. Indeed, the decision by the House of Commons to keep Britain out of any military action makes the European position on Syria more divided than ever.

The rejection of a rather vague government motion to support 'legal, proportionate' military action 'if necessary' represents a significant moment in both the path of British foreign policy and the development of a consensus between the major European states over what action to take against Syria. The dynamics of the 'special relationship' with the United States has meant the UK has followed closely the foreign policy direction of the US, particularly in the Middle East region. In the post-9/11 era, successive British governments have supported military interventions without UN authorisation, on the basis of 'coalitions of the willing', and often without independently verified evidence from impartial sources, such as UN weapons inspectors. The vote in Parliament has prevented David Cameron from pursuing this lock-step of policy with the US over Syria. Whereas the Prime Minister was careful to *insist* that Syria 'is not like Iraq', MPs were clear in their response that – unlike before the Iraq conflict – clear and sound



François Hollande, Credit: Jean-Marc Ayrault (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

evidence would be required before any intervention could be considered.

In contrast, the view of France, and in particular President Hollande, has been clear. Insisting that the rejection of the UK government's position in Parliament would have no effect on France, the President [stated](#) that 'France will be part of it. France is ready'. This follows a recent pattern of French interventionism, including in Libya and Mali. However, the splintering of a coalescing group of countries willing to support military action seems to have had unexpected consequences on both sides of the Atlantic. In the US, President Obama announced his intent to seek authorisation from Congress to pursue military action, which he [said](#) would make the US 'stronger, and our actions will be even more effective'. Strikingly, Obama directly referenced the House of Commons vote in his justification for seeking congressional support, citing 'what we saw happen in the United Kingdom this week'. In France, pressure for a similar formal authorisation has intensified in reaction to the British and American votes, with Jean-Louis Borloo of the UDI [calling](#) for the President to 'organise, after the debate, a formal vote in parliament'. This may constrain the ability of President Hollande to commit France to any action without observing the precedent set by Britain and the US.

But what of the other states in Europe which might have the capacity to assist in any military action? Here the true scope of European disunity about the way forward becomes clear. In Germany, Chancellor Merkel, facing upcoming elections, has been extremely cautious in expressing any support for action against Syria. The clearest statement of her position came in an interview with the *Augsburger Allgemeine* when she described the use of chemical weapons as breaking 'a taboo... which cannot remain without consequence'. Germany's position is consistent with its post-Kosovo foreign policy approach – no intervention without an international mandate. The German people remain deeply sceptical of intervention in any form, and Germany notably stayed out of the NATO action in Libya. Merkel commented that 'Germany cannot participate' without such a mandate from 'the United Nations, NATO or the EU'. Thus while supporting the position that the use of chemical weapons is unacceptable, Merkel is highly unlikely to commit Germany to any kind of military action.

This view is reflected elsewhere. The Italian foreign minister Emma Bonino took a similar line, [indicating](#) that Italy would only support military action if authorised by the UN Security Council. Therefore among the largest EU states, we see a polarisation between those states which support action without a UN mandate, and those which do not. Thus, while there is broad agreement that the use of chemical weapons is unacceptable, common ground on taking action in Syria is difficult to find. This is reflected in the public position of the EU. In a statement, Catherine Ashton, the EU High Representative, [was able to call](#) only for allegations of the use of chemical weapons to be 'immediately and thoroughly investigated' by UN inspectors. This falls far short of any joint position on collective action, which contrasts sharply, for instance, with the hitherto united front presented by EU states on imposing sanctions against the Syrian regime.

The result of this division is that while it seems likely that President Obama will be able to secure congressional approval for military action, the EU, which has taken a leading role in imposing sanctions on Syria, will be largely powerless in shaping the international response going forward. The US is able to call upon a group of states which have indicated their support for action, including Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Israel, and several of the smaller gulf monarchies. They will, however, proceed with the support of only one major European state. This poses important questions for the EU as it tries to increase co-ordination of member state foreign policies. We are still in a world where, to quote President Hollande, 'each country is sovereign' and a truly 'common' foreign and security policy appears remote.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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