

Brexit is likely to hinder Britain's national security strategy

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*The decoupling of the EU from the UK's security and defence strategy is a grave error of judgement. **Madalina Dobrescu** writes that it disregards the value of Britain's EU membership in the context of relations with the US, European states and new powers, and wrongly assumes that Brexit would not undermine the UK's standing in the world. She argues that Brexit is likely to hinder Britain's national security strategy.*



At the heart of Britain's November 2015 National Security Strategy (NSS) and Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) lies the problematic assumption that the European Union is, for all intents and purposes, unnecessary to – and to some extent even constraining of – British security and prosperity. Overshadowed by the prospect of the EU referendum, the NSS and SDSR have all but cast the EU aside as a marginally relevant outlet for British foreign policy. Instead, Britain has recalibrated its global engagement strategy around three sets of relationships: its special relation with the US, its bilateral relations with European partners and the developing relations with emerging powers.

But how plausible is it that the UK would be able to expand its reach and influence in the world and assert itself as a reliable strategic partner – in accordance with the objectives outlined by the NSS and SDSR – in the event of Brexit? Here is how Brexit is likely to hinder Britain's three-pronged strategic orientation:

The special relationship with the US

The UK relies on its privileged status as America's *primus inter pares* in Europe to justify its exceptionality and downplay the EU's strategic relevance. And yet it is naïve to think that a Brexit would leave Britain's special relationship with the US unchanged. The alliance is already suffering, without the potential strain of a *Leave* vote. The 2013 House of Commons vote that rejected British participation in US-led strikes [raised doubts](#) about London's continued commitment to military engagement and even questioned Britain's reliability as a strategic partner. While the December 2015 vote which reversed this decision managed to do some damage control and reassure Washington that the UK was not set on retreating into splendid isolation, the hesitant and rather protracted parliamentary debate that preceded the vote [underlined the challenge](#) which British politicians face in convincing a post-Iraq sceptical public of the necessity to intervene in conflicts abroad.

The US is wary of a UK which is retrenching strategically, a concern highlighted by [President Obama's remark](#) that 'the UK is at its best when it's helping to lead a strong European Union. It leverages UK power to be part of the EU. I don't think the EU moderates British influence in the world, it magnifies it'. The Obama administration may be coming to an end, but it is fair to assume that whoever takes over will either continue the 'pivot to Asia' – mindful of the global gravitational pull eastward – or will minimise US global engagement altogether in a bid to put 'America first'. Either way, there will be little appetite to cater to the needs of a deeply divided, inward-looking Britain arduously attempting to forge a distinct power role for itself apart from the EU.

What the US looks for in Europe is leadership and a willingness to share the burden of global responsibility, both of which have been facilitated by Britain through its ability to shape a common EU foreign policy that is compatible with American objectives. As one [commentator](#) puts it, 'we cut ice in Washington when we are seen to cut ice over here'. The UK is a valuable strategic partner to the US when it is in a position to advocate for free trade, for liberalisation of the single market and EU enlargement from **within the EU**. The US will continue to cooperate closely with the UK on policy issues where they have privileged bilateral relations, such as intelligence-sharing and the interoperability of armed forces, but there should be no illusions regarding the value of the special relationship should the UK choose to place itself **outside the EU**.



Enhanced relations with individual European states

The UK has been known to have a preference for [‘promiscuous bilateralism’](#) within the EU, forging ad hoc coalitions whose composition change depending on the policy issues under negotiation, in opposition to the more stable Franco-German alliance. Last year’s National Security Strategy is striking in its cursory inclusion of the EU amongst Britain’s allies and partners while at the same time referring rather expansively to the UK’s bilateral defence and security cooperation with a number of European partners. France and to a lesser degree Germany are singled out for the breadth of their security and defence relationships with the UK, but other European allies are [also mentioned](#), including Italy for ‘longstanding procurement and operational cooperation’, Spain for its role in the new NATO Very High Readiness Joint Task force and Poland, Sweden and Finland in the context of promoting more effective defence cooperation in northern Europe.

A Brexit would most probably not change the extent of such bilateral operational cooperation. What is likely to change, however, is the scope of strategic cooperation. Perhaps puzzlingly, rather than dilute bilateralism EU membership creates opportunities for more effective cooperation between member states by institutionalising and formalising the diplomatic process. While a great deal of decisions are still arrived at as a result of corridor diplomacy, the ability of the EU’s [‘distinctive ecosystem of decision-making processes’](#) to shape identities and forge loyalties should not be underestimated. Being excluded from these forums will undoubtedly affect the success of the UK’s bilateral diplomacy with its European partners. More worryingly, the negative consequences that a Brexit could potentially unravel on the remaining member states are likely to generate considerable resentment against London, with [reports of Paris](#) and [Berlin](#) bent on inflicting a painful exit emerging over the past weeks.

Stronger relations with growing powers

Britain’s efforts at de-centering the EU in the UK’s foreign policy are squared by its attempts at establishing closer relations with emerging powers. Similarly to the prospect of its special relationship with the US, the UK would be deluded to believe its withdrawal from the EU would not undermine the extent of its cooperation with new powers. By contrast to David Cameron’s portrayal of the UK as ‘China’s best partner in the west’, President Xi’s more nuanced qualification of the UK as ‘China’s strongest advocate in the west’ revealed the extent to which [Beijing values Britain’s ability to lobby](#) on its behalf in Brussels and Washington alike, including for progress in negotiations on a China-EU Free Trade Agreement. Even for India, which has long-established historical, cultural and trade relations with the UK independently of its EU membership, Britain now represents – perhaps not primarily but

significantly – an ‘[entry point to the European Union](#)’. A Brexit would not diminish the strategic relationship between the UK and India, nor would it cancel out the benefits of the UK market for China, but it would forego the opportunity for Britain to enhance its influence and leverage as a uniquely positioned actor to link Asia and the EU. As such, Brexit would not contribute to stronger relations with growing powers.

It is misleading to believe that disentanglement from European affairs would allow Britain to pursue more effectively recalibrated global role focused on its bilateral relations with the US, European states and emerging powers – if anything, being a member of the EU makes the UK a more valuable partner for global powers as diverse as the US and China. The 2015 National Security Strategy betrays a Britain conflicted between a global role which has been etched in its DNA by history, and a tendency to retreat inwardly in the face of domestic normative apathy. The SDSR may envisage an increase in military and diplomatic resources, but that is no substitute for political will.

The UK has placed itself on the fringes of momentous crises which are bound to shape the future of Europe and beyond: the Eurozone crisis, the migration crisis and, not least, the Ukraine crisis. This referendum is a consequence of the British existential ennui. The only way to recapture a sense of purpose that rejects the defeatist logic of a potential Brexit is a *Remain* vote followed by more, not less cooperation with the EU, as the only effective strategy to cope with the myriad security challenges of today.

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Dr [Madalina Dobrescu](#) is Junior Research Fellow in the European Neighbourhood Policy Chair at the College of Europe, Natolin (Warsaw) Campus. Her research interests revolve around the European Union's foreign policy and in particular the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), as well as processes of Europeanisation, external governance, peacebuilding and conflict resolution, all of this with respect to the Eastern dimension of the EU's Neighbourhood Policy.

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