

An elephant in the room: Brexit and the UK's Defence Review

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While the EU plays only a small role in traditional defence matters, its central place in the geopolitics of Europe means it plays a central part in the geopolitics that shape Britain's security. [Tim Oliver](#) explains the implications of the upcoming referendum on shaping Britain's defence strategy.



The issue of Britain's relationship with the EU sits like an elephant in the room of UK's ongoing Strategic Defence and Security Review, and review of its National Security Strategy. This is because Britain's future relationship with Europe looks set to be one of the 'unknown knowns' of the review, something to be ignored or worked around because it is too politically contentious.

As a result, the strategies that will define Britain's security and defence will be overshadowed by a debate and referendum that could tear apart the British government, consume the attention of Britain's political elite, strain relations with Britain's closest allies, and – should the British people vote to leave the EU – profoundly change Britain's economy, identity and unity, and the geopolitics of Europe. Britain's 'European Question' will therefore have implications for four of the UK's core assumptions about its place in the world and the security and defence requirements that flow from them.

Great Power Status

While some of the predications about the economic and political costs to Britain from leaving the EU can be overly pessimistic, it is clear that there would be a cost.

First, Britain has long sought to use the EU and its economic might as one of the ways by which it pursues its aim of maintaining great power status. It is not the only way by which it can do this, but being able to draw on the economic power of the EU as a force multiplier has become increasingly central as Britain's own economic and military capabilities have declined. Without the UK, France would become the de facto permanent EU representative on the UN Security Council, bolstering its claim to retain its permanent seat.

Second, other options for Britain to pursue great power status are limited or often overplayed. Talk of rebuilding the Commonwealth, of working more closely with the 'Anglosphere', of joining the USA in NAFTA, or of becoming a 'Switzerland with nukes' lack much credibility. Even if they worked out in the long-run, they would take time to unfold and consume time and effort to create.

Third, the UK's attitude to the EU and now towards a renegotiation has left many of the UK's closest allies in the EU feeling bruised and neglected. Britain has seemed more obsessed with minor issues of EU reform while the rest of the EU have been facing challenges such as the survival of the Eurozone, military tensions in Eastern Europe and a refugee crisis in the Mediterranean. While the rest of the EU has struggled to find unity on these problems, it has not passed unnoticed in EU capitals that the UK has shown little solidarity, preferring instead to isolate itself or offer at best token support. That the 'British question' has become a fourth problem facing the EU passes largely unnoticed in UK politics. Britain's reliability as a partner who can be called upon is being thrown into question.

Fourth, any economic costs from a Brexit or uncertainty that accompany Britain's renegotiation and referendum will add to pressures for further spending cuts across government. Defence – already a budget that has faced severe cuts – would be no exception.



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Atlanticism

While the idea of Britain being some form of 'transatlantic bridge' has been overplayed, especially by British prime ministers, Britain does play a central role in the transatlantic relationship.

First, a British exit from the EU would remove the largest and keenest supporter of Atlanticism from Europe's predominant political and economic organisation. It risks weakening the Atlanticism of the EU by producing shift in the balance of power within the EU, one towards an EU that is more inward looking and protectionist.

Second, the UK's relationship with the USA would be strained by a Brexit. People in Washington D.C. already complain that Britain is spending too much time and effort on a renegotiation that is a side-show from such challenges as the heightened security concerns in Eastern Europe or North Africa. Only a few on the fringe of the political right in Washington D.C. think a Brexit would be a sound idea for the UK, USA, EU and transatlantic relations. The US has been a long-standing supporter of European integration and Britain's involvement in it. A Britain that challenges both of these could find it damages both its relationship with the USA and the USA's commitment to Europe.

Third, EU-NATO relations would be strained with no hope of much change in European defence cooperation or spending. A USA already exasperated by European freeriding on the US security guarantee could be tempted to care even less about the security of a Europe when its closest European allies cannot find the political will to create institutions that allow them to work together on shared economic, political and security challenges.

European Geopolitics

As should be clear, British demands for reform or a possible exit could change the geopolitics of Europe. Such changes are almost entirely overlooked in the UK's debate despite such changes not being in the UK's interests.

First, the area of Britain's core external security concerns has always been and will remain Europe. As HM the Queen warned during a state visit to Germany in June of this year, the division of Europe is in nobodies interests and certainly not that of her own kingdom. While a British exit is not going to lead to war, it would add to strains on an organisation which however imperfect remains with NATO one of the two pillars on which European politics and security have been built since 1945 and 1989.

Second, Britain fails to appreciate how important a role it plays and could increasingly play in future. If projections

are correct then by mid-century the UK could have the largest population in the EU. Such a Britain on the outside of the EU would help create a multi-polar Europe, with Britain, Russia and Turkey surrounding the EU. This raises the possibility of Europe becoming a contested space between the USA and Asian powers.

A United Kingdom

If the foremost concern of any state is its own survival then the European debate and referendum could undermine the unity of the UK.

First, the issue of Europe threatens to reignite the smouldering Scottish independence question. While Scottish pro-Europeanism can be overplayed, a vote by the rest of the UK to leave the EU while Scotland votes to stay would trigger a constitutional crisis that would lead to another independence referendum. The UK's internal intergovernmental relations are already being strained by the prospect of renegotiation. As last year's independence referendum made clear, a Scottish exit from the UK brings with it a host of costs for UK defence and security, most notably over Trident.

Second, the Northern Ireland peace process could be tested to breaking point by a Brexit. The Irish Republic has repeatedly warned that the economic and security implications for it and Northern Ireland mean that unlike over Scotland's referendum it will make clear its position, and that position is a clear desire not to see a British withdrawal from the EU. A descent into violence in the province should not be overlooked.

Third, the European debate could tear apart HM Government. One of the main reasons why the UK is holding a referendum is because of internal tensions within the Conservative Party. It is doubtful that David Cameron can appease hard-core Eurosceptic members of his party while also managing relations with the rest of the EU. Whichever one he gives into first will not be pretty for either the UK's international standing or for the running of a stable government at a time when the UK faces important questions for the future of its defence and security.

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