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The consequences of a British exit from the EU and CSDP: An analytical timeline

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Key points:

- *Britain has always acted according to its national interest when dealing with European defence;*
- *Britain has much to lose from leaving the EU—such a move would go against its national interest;*
- *A British exit would have mixed consequences for the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).*

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Analysis

The announcement by British Prime Minister David Cameron that a referendum on Britain's EU membership will be held by 2017, gives rise to questions about the consequences of such a withdrawal for the EU's Common and Security Defence Policy (CSDP). A withdrawal would undoubtedly have important repercussions, as the United Kingdom has very often been at the core of the development of European defence policies, initiatives and capabilities.

Britain's attitude and role in the comparatively recent history of European defence has varied from enthusiastic participation—with US support—to reluctant approval or hostile opposition. A brief timeline of key stages of British and European defence development shows the degree of British involvement in not only the EU's defence dimension, but also in armament and defence industry cooperation.

The timeline of Britain's role in European defence (see Appendix) can be divided into three main periods.

The first period (1947-1969) occurred in the aftermath of World War II and during the early development of the Cold War. This period highlighted the tight bonds that linked the United Kingdom to the United States, as each main decision was adopted with the support of the American ally, which led to certain tensions in Europe, particularly with Gaullist France.

The second period (1970-1990) occurred during the opening of dialogue in the Cold War, and also coincided with De Gaulle's retirement. Britain adopted a series of *ad hoc* pragmatic decisions to join several defence cooperation organisations and groups which either promoted British interests or could lead to potential political or financial advantages for Britain.

The third period (1991-2013) was characterised by either opposition or reluctant acceptance of European integration initiatives, while continuing the aforementioned *ad hoc* initiatives. The collapse of the Berlin Wall and of the Soviet Union led to a period of interrogation; questions were raised about the role the US should play in Europe, the definition of a European defence identity, and the inclusion of defence matters within the mandate of the European Communities/Union. Britain had to tread a narrow line in negotiations, a task made even more complicated by internal political challenges such as the replacement of Margaret Thatcher by John Major in 1990, just as negotiations were beginning on what would become the Maastricht Treaty. Since then, Britain's leaders have been caught between trying to present the benefits of European integration through maximising the returns that EU membership produces, and the pressure of increasingly Europe-phobic public opinion.

The unease with which Britain has reluctantly accepted European defence integration, even opposing further military integration within the EU, especially permanent operational military headquarters, has reached a climax with David Cameron's announcement of a referendum on EU membership. Yet this decision merely follows the established pattern: in the realm of European defence, in particular, Britain has played a singular role, virtually always motivated by national interest.

Consequences for CSDP and European defence

Britain has always adopted a very cautious attitude with regard to European defence integration.

Initiatives were judged on their individual merits and potential rewards. Britain remains a global military and nuclear power, a European permanent member of the UN Security Council, capable of global force projection (albeit on a limited scale). Britain contributes to EU Battlegroups (the next UK Battlegroup contribution will occur in the second half of

2013), and regularly contributes military personnel to most CSDP missions.

A British exit would undoubtedly cause much turmoil, and CSDP will have lost a key contributor and supporter. From a strictly CSDP- and European defence integration- perspective, however, Britain's departure could create opportunities in terms of military cooperation and accelerate the establishment of permanent structured cooperation, because of a more unified approach among the remaining Member States. Britain's participation in non-EU European initiatives such as the Movement Coordination Centre Europe (MCCE) and Organisation for Joint Armament Cooperation (OCCAR), the numerous links between CSDP and NATO and the existence of bilateral defence agreements would also mean that Britain remained a European partner in the areas of the defence industry, military operational aspects, and European mutual defence.

The absence of Britain in CSDP could also contribute to a further ideological separation between the "hard-power" advocate, NATO, and the "soft-power" specialist that is the EU. Britain is often viewed as America's primary ally, demonstrated by the 2003 British support for a US intervention in Iraq; as a regional security and defence actor specialising in the projection of "soft power", often specialising in Security Sector Reform, development and nation-building, the EU and CSDP would be seen as an increasingly separate entity from US-dominated NATO, particularly in regions hostile to America. At the UN Security Council, France would thus be the only veto-holding representative of the EU, which could lead to tensions regarding mandates for CSDP missions in Africa, an area in which France still maintains a strong military presence as well as "special relationships".

Consequences for the United Kingdom

The nature of contemporary crises, whether caused by terrorism, state-failure or ethnic conflict, means that any solution has to be comprehensive in its approach. Purely military interventions are not and cannot be effective, except in very rare cases. The European Union, with its CSDP and development programmes, is one of the rare regional organisations that are in a position to provide long-lasting solutions to conflicts compared to the position of NATO. Peace and stability programmes also provide Member States with possibilities of developing contacts, political and commercial, in post-conflict areas, benefiting all parties involved. Although utilitarian, this approach provides Member States with incentives to take part in programmes and missions promoting regional stability.

Drafting comparable but bilateral agreements with relevant partners would not be cost-effective and would certainly not be efficient; nor would NATO provide any comparable equivalent. The idea of losing all influence within CSDP, within its security partnerships, and—in the same spirit—within the entire dimension of European foreign development aid, could be a strong deterrent that would convince Britain to remain a member of the EU, a position that the US has indicated it favours.

Conclusion

A British exit from the EU would have important consequences for the EU, but the subsequent shift that would occur in the reorganisation of CSDP, and the lack of major opposition towards further permanent structured cooperation and the establishment of operational military headquarters within theEU would mean that the EU would recover and continue to develop CSDP.

Britain would have more to lose: it is unlikely that Britain's partnership with the US and NATO membership would be sufficient for it to remain an important actor in the global security arena. From a security and defence position, by exiting the EU and CSDP, an isolated Britain would lose considerable power and its standing in world politics.

Appendix:

Britain and European Defence Timeline

I. First Period: British support of European initiatives with US backing

In the aftermath of World War II, Britain remained the main American ally and partner in Europe, and all decisions taken were approved, either explicitly or implicitly, by the United States. This led to tensions between Gaullist France and Britain, particularly in the 1960s when the opposition led to France's withdrawal from NATO's military command and the subsequent rejection of British membership in the European Communities

- *1947: Treaty of Dunkirk*

Britain was part of the first post-World War II European defence agreement. Signed on 4 March 1947, the Treaty of Dunkirk was a Treaty of Alliance and Mutual Assistance between France and the United Kingdom, against a possible German attack.

- *1948: Treaty of Brussels*

Britain was also at the core of the first multilateral European defence agreement, the Treaty of Brussels, signed on 17 March 1948 by the United Kingdom, Belgium, France, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands. This led to the founding of the Western Union Defence Organisation, a precursor to both NATO and the WEU. WUDO was disestablished in 1951 and its operational aspects were absorbed into NATO's SHAPE.

- *1949: Treaty of Washington*

Europe's defence dimension was enlarged as a consequence of the rise in tensions between the Eastern and Western blocks; the North Atlantic Treaty, a mutual defence treaty including the United States, was signed in Washington D.C. on 4 April 1949, establishing NATO. The signatories included the United Kingdom and the other signatories of the Treaty of Brussels, as well as 7 other states.

- *1952: Negotiations on the European Defence Community*

Britain did not sign the Treaty establishing a European Defence Community in 1952, but in principle approved of the Pleven Plan. Britain's objections to the degree of supranationalism created tension among the signatories of the Treaty, and Britain's absence in effect contributed to the internal political crisis in France that led to the rejection of the plan by the French parliament and the abandoning of the Pleven Plan and the EDC in general.

- *1954: Modified Brussels Treaty*

The failure of the EDC led to the development of pre-existing defence structures, in order to include West Germany in European mutual defence plans. The 1948 Treaty of Brussels was modified and adapted, creating the Western European Union. The signatories included Britain and the other signatories of the original Treaty of Brussels, as well as West Germany and Italy.

- *1959: British rejection of French NATO modification proposal*

Worried that Britain and the United States had too much power in NATO's leadership, French President Charles de Gaulle proposed to undertake an entire reshaping of NATO; Britain opposed the plans, which led to France officially leaving NATO's military structures in 1966.

- *1963: France rejects Britain's membership to the EEC*

One of the first consequences of Britain's rejection of French plans to reshape NATO was the French refusal to accept Britain's entry into the EEC.

II. Second Period: British approval further integration on an *ad hoc* basis

The *détente* in tensions between the East and the West and the creation of discussion fora meant that Britain's could shift its focus on developing *ad hoc* defence cooperation agreements that also included defence industry cooperation, with the overall approval of the United States. De Gaulle's departure from France's leadership in 1969 also led to a normalisation of relations between Britain and France. Britain then only cautiously proceeded with further European integration.

- *1973: CSCE/OSCE*

Britain was one of the founding members of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, established to allow discussions between the Eastern and Western blocs during the period of détente. The CSCE was renamed Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe in 1995.

- *1973: Britain joins Finabel*

Following Britain's entry into the European Communities in 1973, Britain joined Finabel, an organization established in 1953 to promote interoperability and cooperation between the national armed forces of EC Member States.

- *1976: Independent European Program Group (IEPG)/ Western European Armaments Group (WEAG)*

As a member of the WEU, Britain was one of the original members of the Independent European Program Group, a forum whose tasks included the development of an agency for European armaments cooperation. The IEPG was renamed Western European Armaments Group in 1995.

- *1979: European Combat Fighter/Eurofighter Typhoon*

British Aerospace (BAe) was one of the original members of the European Combat Aircraft programme that led to the development of the Eurofighter Typhoon.

III. Third Period: British reluctance towards further integration, despite increased defence cooperation

Since the 1990s, Britain has demonstrated much reluctance and/or opposition to further European defence integration. Only programmes or initiatives that offer clear benefits—or have the potential to do so—to Britain are enthusiastically supported, on a case-by-case basis, again without any overarching strategy or ideology.

- *1992: Signature of the Maastricht Treaty*

Britain signed in the Maastricht Treaty on 7 February 1992; the Treaty established a "pillar system" within the European Community, the second pillar being Common Foreign and Security Policy. Preparations for the Treaty –that started in 1990—were fraught with difficulties, caused by the turmoil following the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the possibility of developing a European defence identity. Negotiations were particularly difficult when dealing with the issue of the future of the WEU in the framework of NATO and a European defence identity. Finally, reluctant consensus was reached: CFSP would remain a mainly intergovernmental issue, NATO the primary guarantor of security in Europe, and the WEU would become a bridge between NATO and the EC on which European defence policy would be developed.

- *1995: Franco-British European Air Group (FBEAG)/European Air Group (EAG)*

Britain and France were the founders of the FBEAG, a programme established to promote cooperation between the air forces of the Member States.

- *1996: Western European Armaments Organisation (WEAO)*

The result of the discussions of the IEPG/WEAG, the Western European Armaments Organisation was created as a subsidiary body of the WEU. The WEAO was the precursor of the European Defence Agency, created in 2004.

- *1996: Organisation for Joint Armament Cooperation (OCCAR)*

Britain was one of the four founding members of OCCAR, a European organisation established to facilitate cooperation on armament programmes. Among the programmes managed by OCCAR are the Airbus 400M Atlas aircraft and the Eurocopter Tiger helicopter.

- *1998: Saint-Malo Declaration*

Britain is at the origin of the main founding act of contemporary European defence policy. The Declaration marked a shift in British policy from supporting the development of European capabilities within NATO to promoting the establishment of autonomous European defence capabilities within the framework of the EU. Britain was subsequently one of the leading actors in the development of the 1999 Helsinki Headline Goals and of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy in general.

- *1999: Launch of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP)*

The June 1999 launch of ESDP at the Cologne European Council was a key step towards further defence policy cooperation. As permanent members of the UN Security Council, Britain and and France were now two key representatives of ESDP/CSDP in the global arena.

- *2004: European Defence Agency (EDA)*

Inasmuch as a European procurement system within the defence market and defence industry cooperation could promote British interests, Britain was instrumental in the founding of the EDA and provided the Agency with its first Chief Executive, Nick Whitney, who had previously led the project team charged with developing the concept of the Agency.

- *2007: Movement Coordination Centre Europe*

Britain was among the 15 States to sign the MCCE Technical Arrangement that established the MCCE. The Centre's purpose is to coordinate and optimize the use of airlift, sealift and land movement assets owned or leased by the armed forces of the Member States.

- *2010: Defence and Security Co-operation treaty*

Although not within the framework of the EU or the EDA, the 2 November 2010 Defence and Security Co-operation Treaty signed by Britain and France was an important symbol of Britain's willingness to promote international cooperation on a broad spectrum of issues relating to security and defence, including industrial and commercial cooperation and nuclear stockpiles. Furthermore, the Treaty promoted the development of a Combined Joint Expeditionary Force available, inter alia, to the EU, and cooperation in the matter of aircraft carriers interoperability.

- *2013: Announcement of a referendum on EU membership*

On 23 January 2013, British Prime Minister David Cameron announced that a referendum would be held by 2017 on EU membership, raising the possibility of Britain leaving CSDP.