



The Brexiteers proclaim that the UK has regained its sovereignty, and is now free to strike trade deals around the world. Meanwhile the European Union promotes the idea of its Strategic Autonomy, not constrained by the policies of other powers. Both are right, and wrong, writes Nick Watts. In a globalised world no country, whatever its size is truly autonomous; apart from maybe North Korea and Myanmar. Similarly, a trading nation such as the UK needs partners to trade with; which will mean reliance on open sea lanes and friendly relations with other countries.

How the UK views itself, in the post Brexit world, can be seen in the language used in prime minister Johnson's unveiling of the Integrated Review of security, defence, development and foreign policy, which was unveiled on 16th March [1]. Johnson repeated some of the lines from his Munich Security Conference speech of 19th February. In this he said: "The starting point of our Integrated Review of foreign, defence and development policy.....is that the success of Global Britain depends on the security of our homeland and the stability of the Euro-Atlantic area." [2] Many commentators have noted that in his remarks, the PM did not specifically refer to the EU, in the context of defence co-operation.

Post – Brexit Britain has branded itself as 'Global Britain' – but it remains a neighbour for continental Europe. It has been said that Geography shapes a country's history, and its history shapes a country's politics. The stretch of water separating continental Europe from the British Isles has been significant in both of these matters. The British 'winner takes all' political culture is at odds with the consensual coalition based approach, which characterises most of continental European politics.

The UK sees NATO as the corner stone of its defence policy. For many Brits this Atlanticism connects them to the 'Special Relationship' with the US. Those in the EU who advocate Strategic Autonomy seek to pull Europe away from an over-reliance on the US. Both approaches have risks. Tony Blair discovered that being too close to the US meant that the UK's views towards the Iraq campaign, and particularly the reconstruction phase, were largely ignored.

Likewise the European ambition for Strategic Autonomy can only be meaningful if it is not reliant

on Russia for energy supplies or on China for strategic supplies, such as the rare earth minerals which power modern IT systems. Unless these matters are addressed, Europe's strategic Autonomy will be meaningless. Europe remains divided in its approach to both China and Russia, enabling ambiguity to flourish.

The NATO Article 5 undertaking (of the founding Washington Treaty of 1949) is often cited as the Gold standard for the Alliance, but it is worth considering carefully [3]. For any action to follow from any aggression there must be consensus. In the 1980s the risk of de-coupling the US from Europe was at the heart of the 'Cruise & Pershing missile' controversy. Is there a similar risk now? Could an enlarged Alliance agree to respond to an incursion by Russia into the Baltics, or the Black Sea region?

The 'Solidarity' clause of the 2012 Lisbon Treaty (Art 222) [4], attempts to replicate the Article 5 guarantee within the scope of EU competences. This largely concerns itself with the consequences of a terrorist attack, or a large scale disaster. Does an increased emphasis on Strategic Autonomy require a strengthened solidarity clause, referring to an armed attack? In the modern era of 'Grey zone' conflict, what now constitutes an armed attack?

Constructive ambiguity allows both diplomats and politicians to negotiate a way through situations which could have severe consequences. It also prevents future options from being closed off. It was, after all the American poet Robert Frost, to whom the saying 'good fences make good neighbours' is attributed. Neither the US, nor Europe, nor the UK should neglect their fences.

Since the end of World War Two Britain has continually juggled its self-identity as a global maritime trading nation, with the fact of its geography and what this has meant for its defence policy. How will this evolve into the 21st century? Can 'Global Britain' re-discover its shared interests with its closest neighbours? Will Europe be willing to co-operate? Part 3 of the political declaration, forming part of the 2019 UK – EU Withdrawal agreement, includes language concerning security [5]. Much of this relates to anti-terrorism and law enforcement co-operation. The political declaration constitutes a wish list for both parties to negotiate together, but at the time of writing, only the data sharing provisions have been agreed. There is at present no language relating to defence co-operation.

The new European Commission announced in 2019 was described as a 'Geopolitical' Commission; suited for a turbulent environment. The idea of European Strategic Autonomy is seen by some commentators as a reaction to the apparent isolationism displayed by the Trump administration. Others may argue that it is more to do with European leaders positioning themselves ahead of legislative elections in the next few years. Can Europe (meaning the EU) achieve true Strategic Autonomy, particularly in the defence and security arena? What are the Geopolitical challenges facing the EU and how can it respond?

The UK has a well-developed bilateral defence co-operation arrangement with France. This dates from the 2010 Lancaster House Treaty, agreed between prime minister Cameron and president Sarkozy, but the origins go back to the 1998 St. Malo declaration signed by prime minister Blair and president Chirac. The Lancaster House Treaty represents the shared interests of the UK and France in the defence arena, particularly their nuclear capabilities. A series of joint exercises has led to the UK providing strategic airlift for French forces in West Africa, as well as the provision of airborne reconnaissance capability.

In many ways the UK – French Combined Joint Expeditionary Force is like the Franco-German Brigade, and the Eurocorps, which are outside of NATO operational command structures. These force elements represent capability that can be drawn on, should circumstances require.

The 1992 Petersberg Declaration, by what was then the West European Union (WEU), was yet another attempt to signal to the US that Europe was capable of looking after its own back yard, subsequently this declaration became part of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), incorporated into the Amsterdam Treaty of 2007.

If history helps to shape the political outlook of a country, it is easy to understand the motivation of continental European countries towards the creation of an arrangement which countered the soviet threat after 1945, what Winston Churchill called a United States of Europe. As we have seen, the economic element of post-war European recovery became just as important as the defence alliance. It was the lure of west European prosperity, as well as democratic freedoms that helped to bring about the downfall of the Warsaw Pact and communism.

British post-war history mirrors European economic recovery, but the emergence of the Cold War coloured its efforts to re-establish itself as a world power. In the 1940s it was the US that called the shots economically, forcing Britain to dismantle much of its previous imperial mercantilism, as well as establishing the primacy of the US dollar. The US and the UK continued the co-operation on signals intelligence into the Cold War era. With its world-wide interests, there was no question of the UK becoming involved in matters European. By the 1970s, however, this picture had changed. With its empire gone, the cost of overseas military garrisons and dockyards became both irrelevant and unaffordable. The British political class saw the future in terms of a Euro-Atlantic area of security built around its membership of NATO and the EEC, which the UK joined in 1973.

The decision of the EU to step into the role as an actor in the arena of defence will need to be tested in a real life situation (or through scenarii) , before it can be accepted as a fact. There is no doubt that the EU has weight as a geopolitical actor, but the way in which it deploys its power will be watched around the world. The aspiration for the EU to achieve 'Strategic Autonomy' needs further definition; if the EU intends to act decisively in international situations, it will need to harmonise the EEAS activity with the CSDP elements of its policy. In times of tension, this will be a challenge.

A new US administration has already stated that 'America is back' – but the challenges facing the US, especially with the rise of China, means that it will expect Europe to continue to increase its own capability. Does this require additional military expenditure, or more 'neighbourhood' agreements to promote democracy and stability? It was the internationalist Obama who spoke about European 'free riders' in his Atlantic Magazine interview in April 2016, not the isolationist Trump. Burden sharing has been a perennial thorn in the relationship between Washington and its European allies. Despite the pledge at the 2014 Cardiff summit by NATO leaders, to increase their level of defence expenditure above the minimum of 2% of GDP, by the time Trump arrived at the Brussels NATO summit in 2017, the matter was still not resolved. The future for NATO depends upon its credibility. The Alliance has begun a widespread consultation exercise on 'NATO 2030' perhaps in an attempt to prove that it is not brain dead as president Macron stated.

Around the world, the growth of Globalisation stalled after the financial crisis of 2008 – 10, but found new life, as economies recovered. The end of the Cold War liberated trade and commerce, but the financial crash of 2008 meant that many felt that the prevailing global order did not work for them. Old enmities were re-kindled by the end of the Cold War, and simmering conflicts burst into life in unexpected places. The rise of Jihadism, the Arab Spring and the conflict in Syria, have all complicated the calculations of policymakers. Into this confusion steps a resurgent Russia and China. Will Europe seek to compete or co-operate with Russia and

China?

Technology has connected the world in a way unseen in human history. This has been a mixed blessing. It has also had a transformative effect in the defence and security arena. Most importantly, it has enabled the transmission of ideas, but it has also produced a range of low tech capabilities such as UAVs that can counter the expensive high tech systems and sensors of western military and security forces. Will Europe seek to develop its own defence industries, rather than buying equipment from the US and others?

The Nuclear genie remains in its bottle – but the potential for proliferation, especially in the Middle East, presents a real challenge. The EU played a major part in negotiating the JCPOA with Iran. Can Iran be relied upon to adhere to the terms of this agreement? Both Russia and China seem to be developing sub-strategic nuclear weapons and delivery systems. How can Europe deter such developments? It is the US and Russia who dominate the nuclear landscape. Matters seem to have deteriorated since the end of the Cold War, with Russia making a lot of noise about its intermediate range nuclear capability.

Margaret Thatcher once commented that nuclear disarmament would make the world safe for conventional war. The UK and France both retain a national nuclear deterrent, while Germany still requires its Tornado jets to be capable of carrying and launching nuclear weapons. The up-grading of the UK's Trident warheads, announced in March, must signal concern about improvements to Russia's ABM capability. Talk of a 'European' deterrent poses the question of who would authorize the launch of a nuclear strike. Both the UK and France retain the sovereign right to launch a strike, which complicates the calculations of a potential adversary. The House of Commons library estimates that the cost of maintaining the UK's nuclear deterrent amounts to £ 35 per person per year.

The nuclear status quo is likely to remain for the foreseeable future. The value that 'Europe' can add is to deter those states that seek to attain nuclear weapons, by denying them the benefits of trade and commerce that would enrich their populations. Iran is a case in point. Unless the regime in Tehran understands that it will be denied access to European markets, or technology, it will continue to edge its way towards attaining a nuclear weapons capability. Europe is divided on its approach. In the meantime Israel is pursuing its own deterrence policy by 'retiring' key personnel in the Iranian nuclear programme.

What do all of these developments mean for the aspiration to achieve Strategic Autonomy, in a world where trade and commerce flow unchecked; where social media can enable alienated youth to pursue a path of self-radicalisation?

Britain and Europe face many of the same problems, there are many areas where interests are shared. Can the relationship between 'Global Britain' and the EU be de-toxified, by working together in the defence and security arena, where they have well established working methods, through NATO and EUROPOL? Can the awkward partners become good neighbours? Politics has been described as 'the art of the possible' by a long dead British politician; it serves as a useful guide to the UK's approach to politics. This is further reinforced in the minds of the British political class by the comments of Prime Minister Palmerstone, speaking in 1848: "We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow."

My prediction is that the neighbours will find many reasons to co-operate across a wide range of policy areas. The present post-Brexit turbulence will pass. The COVID 19 pandemic has shaken up the world of commerce to an unexpected degree. Strategic Autonomy should not translate into a protectionist mind-set among the political classes; nor should Global Britain translate into

an anti-European attitude. This will require statesmanship. But one lesson learnt through the experience of COVID, is that we are better when we share expertise and technology, rather than try to withhold co-operation. It is the job of the politician to deliver both peace and prosperity to their citizens.

Nick Watts is Deputy Director of the U K Defence Forum and Vice President, Eurodefense-UK. This article was first published in Geopolitica magazine in May 2021

Reference

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[3] - https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm

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[5] -

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