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Speaking at an AIES defence conference in Vienna on European Security and Defence in November 2021, Rt Hon Geoff Hoon, former UK Secretary of State for Defence acknowledged the many friends and former colleagues in the audience and on the platform, in particular Senator Alain Richard from France.

He said "The two of us worked closely together in excellent Franco-British cooperation to help establish the early stages of ESDP. It does mean however that it is more than a little strange discussing where those initiatives have now reached recognising that it is highly unlikely that the UK will be involved – at least in an institutional sense given the current politics of the UK.

"As someone whose politics are to the left I had always assumed that we had most to fear from the extremism of the ideological left. I had never imagined that a historically pragmatic, business friendly British Conservative Party would abandon the political centre ground for an ideology built around outdated nineteenth century concepts of the nation state and sovereignty. I do not see any prospect of that changing until the Conservative Party itself changes. I have consistently argued that real politics in the UK since 2010 has only been inside the Conservative Party. Unless and until there is a revival in the fortunes of moderate one-nation Conservatives it is difficult to see Britain's attitude to the EU in all its aspects changing any time soon.

"That will apply above all else to defence and security cooperation. If anyone has any doubts about that they should look at British newspapers the day after the European Commission President gave her state of the union address to the European Parliament on 13th September 2021. She relatively briefly mentioned working towards a European Defence Union. That was enough to provoke hysterical British newspaper headlines about "her barmy EU army plan" - even though nowhere in her speech was there any reference to an EU army.

"I find it difficult to believe against this hostile backcloth that the present British government will take any steps that would appear to be involve working more closely with the EU in the areas of defence, security or foreign policy. Although the Withdrawal Agreement makes provision for the early implementation of an agreement on foreign policy and defence, should the UK and the EU so decide, "early" in this context might well be measured in long years. There is also a recognition of the need for close cooperation in external action and the Political Declaration reiterates the need for "close, flexible and scalable cooperation" and "close cooperation in Union-led crisis management missions and operations, both civilian and military". Whether this is ever implemented in practice any time in the near future, frankly seems unlikely.

"Yet we live in times when closer European cooperation is ever more needed. The US is increasingly focussed on the Pacific, and despite the welcome internationalist approach of President Biden is still set on an America first policy with more and more Americans questioning the cost in taxpayers' dollars of overseas operations. Dramatic events in Europe or at its borders might trigger UK involvement in EU led operations - a new Bosnia or a new Kosovo - but even then the default position of the UK will not surprisingly be to argue for NATO leadership.

"Given however that the Berlin-plus arrangements allow for NATO support to EU-led operations, in which NATO itself is not involved, the ideological gap might ultimately prove to be semantic – about no more than the words in the title page. Moreover since Berlin-plus was agreed in 2003 there have been a series of agreements and declarations which have emphasised the need for ever closer cooperation between the EU and NATO. Indeed if the US decided for domestic political reasons not to be formally involved in say a new Kosovo - and I recall how difficult it was to get them involved in the previous one - then it is not difficult to imagine why behind the scenes Washington might be pushing for an EU-led mission and might equally be pushing for the UK to be involved.

"Once again that will turn on British politics and the ideology of the government of the day.

There is however a very practical way in which the EU and its members can influence and affect the UK and its people. It is by the EU being successful in all that it does. Despite some modest extra funding for defence, it is well known that the British MOD's budget is insufficient to carry out the range of tasks anticipated. The UK will argue nevertheless that any collective defence provision should come either bilaterally or through NATO.

"What is required is for the EU to demonstrate that politically it is better placed to avoid unnecessary military duplication, pool resources and plan collectively for future procurements. That must be the real challenge for the EU's "Strategic Compass" review and next March's EU Defence Summit under the French EU Presidency. Such a success will be a massive signal to the UK that it cannot continue to go it alone in the 21st century.

"Moreover I am old enough to remember that a British Conservative government applied to join the EU in the early 1970s because the British economy was falling behind the economies of continental Europe. There is evidence this week to show that might already be happening again with a report suggesting that the effect of Brexit on the British economy is twice that of the Covid pandemic - reducing economic growth by 4% per year at the same time as continental economies are forging ahead. At some stage the British people and its leaders will actually notice that membership of the EU brought benefits to Britain - and can do so again."