The United Kingdom needs the EU, not NATO, to ensure its security

7 June 2016

In the build-up to the referendum on the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union, some advocates for leaving the EU have argued that Britain's security is better met by its membership of NATO rather than the European Union. Indeed, Vote Leave and Veterans for Britain argue that the EU weakens NATO and undermines the United Kingdom's combat effectiveness. Finally, they argue that it is NATO, not the EU, that has kept the peace in Europe since the Second World War.[1]

Membership of NATO and the EU is not mutually exclusive; the two organisations have 22 members in common. However, if one accepts for a moment the flawed proposition that the United Kingdom must choose between the two, then the United Kingdom's security – in the widest sense – arguably gains far more from its membership of the EU than it does from NATO. As a nuclear-weapon state and major military power in its own right, Britain does not benefit from NATO membership in the same way that some of the smaller alliance members do. Furthermore, far from keeping the peace in Europe since the Second World War, it could be argued that NATO brought us to the brink of nuclear war on several occasions. Indeed, it is our membership of the Cold War remnant that today places us on a potential collision course with Russia.

Claims of NATO superiority also overlook the different approaches the European Union and NATO take to achieving security. NATO is a military alliance underpinned by a nuclear guarantee of members' collective security. It is essentially a hard-security institution. In contrast, the European Union has developed a series of institutions and mechanisms that focus on non-military approaches to security.

[1] http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/senior_military_officers_speak_out_about_the_dangers_of_remaining_in_the_eu

For example, in its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), the EU recognises that it must identify the link between socio-economic and political factors and the challenge of building security. Furthermore, a principal objective for the EU is building security in neighbourhood countries in North Africa, the Caucasus and the Middle East. This sort of broad thinking reflects Britain's own approach to security as set out in successive UK national security strategies and strategic security and defence reviews.

The differing approaches of NATO and the EU can and do complement each other; indeed, both are essential to a safe and secure United Kingdom. Institutionally, NATO allows the EU to focus on the use of soft power, while the EU allows NATO to focus on hard security. As such, the two organisations have worked closely together on security matters in the Western Balkans, Afghanistan, Darfur and off the coast of Somalia.

In 2009, the Lisbon Treaty developed the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy, allowing mutual assistance, defence and support capabilities. The treaty was clear, however, in recognising the role of NATO as the primary defence bloc, stating that 'commitments and cooperation in this area shall be consistent with commitments under the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, which, for those States which are members of it, remains the foundation of their collective defence and the forum for its implementation.'[2] This is why claims that the (unlikely) creation of an EU Army would undermine NATO are wholly inaccurate.

For its part, NATO recognises the EU as an essential strategic partner, particularly in promoting greater European responsibility for defence matters. The 2002 NATO-EU Declaration on a European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) restated the EU's guaranteed access to NATO's planning capabilities for the former's military operations. Then the 'Berlin Plus' agreements in early 2003 laid out the basis for NATO support to EU-led operations in which NATO as a whole is not involved. NATO's 2010 Strategic Concept also describes the EU as 'a unique and essential partner' and argues that 'NATO and the EU can and should play complementary and mutually reinforcing roles in supporting international peace and security.'[3]

The EU would be notably weakened without the United Kingdom, which could have a knock-on effect on NATO, given the close cooperation between the two organisations in Europe. Five former NATO secretary-generals – Lord Carrington, Javier Solana, Lord Robertson, Jaap De Hoop Scheffer and Anders Fogh Rasmussen – with a combined leadership of NATO of over 20 years, have said that NATO would be undermined if Britain leaves the EU.[4] NATO's current secretary-general, Jens Stoltenberg, has indicated that the alliance would prefer a strong Britain within the EU and that a fragmented Europe would be bad for NATO.[5] The commander of the US Army in Europe (USAREUR), Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges, has also suggested that an unravelling EU would have a negative impact on NATO at a time when the EU needs to show solidarity in the face of Russian hostility.[6]

[2] http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A12012M%2FTXT

[3] http://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/pdf/Strat_Concept_web_en.pdf

[4] http://www.telegraph.co.uk/opinion/2016/05/09/letters-at-a-time-of-global-instability-britain-needs-to-stand-u/

[5] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-35461278 and http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_129959.htm

[6] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-35808955

- - -

Not only would the European Union, and potentially NATO, be weaker if the United Kingdom left the EU, but so too would Britain itself, as we would lose access to many of the institutions and mechanisms that have become vital to ensuring our interests are protected at home and abroad. These fall into three broad categories of cooperation: law enforcement, diplomatic and military.

Law enforcement

Perhaps the greatest way in which the EU adds to the United Kingdom's security is in the area of law enforcement, including efforts to counter terrorism and transnational organisation crime – two of the most significant security threats Britain faces.

Much of this work is facilitated through the EU's law enforcement agency, Europol, and its constituent European Counter Terrorism Centre (ECTC), the latter of which was established in January 2016 in the aftermath of the November 2015 attacks in Paris. Europol enables the sharing of intelligence on terrorists and other criminals across jurisdictions and assists in the pan-European investigation and analysis of serious crime. For example, the agency made 60 officers available to investigate the Paris attacks.[7] One of the ECTC's goals is to tackle the related threats of jihadist propaganda and foreign fighters, both of which are major threats to the United Kingdom, as over 800 British citizens have so far travelled to Iraq and Syria to fight for Islamic State and al-Nusra Front.[8]

In the United Kingdom, the UK International Crime Bureau within the National Crime Agency (NCA) provides the UK Europol National Unit and is the UK Central Authority for European Arrest Warrants (EAWs). European Arrest Warrants require another member state to arrest and transfer a criminal suspect to the issuing state. They were used by the NCA and its predecessors 1,424 times between 2010 and 2015, including 10 requests related to terrorism, 11 related to human trafficking and 232 related to drug trafficking.[9] It is possible that the 916 arrests that occurred between 2010 and 2015 in response to British EAW requests would not have happened in a timely manner if the United Kingdom was not in the EU and therefore unable to use the European Arrest Warrant system. For example, the British police were able to extradite the 21/7 suspect Hussain Osman from Italy in only eight weeks using the EAW system as opposed to the average 10 months it takes from non-EU countries.[10] This significantly aided the authorities' investigation into the terrorist threat facing the United Kingdom at that time.

[7] https://www.europol.europa.eu/content/ectc

[8] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-32026985 and https://www.mi5.gov.uk/news/director-general-speaks-on-terrorism-technology-and-oversight

[9] http://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/publications/european-arrest-warrant-statistics/wanted-by-the-uk-european-arrest-warrant-statistics/690-wanted-by-the-uk-european-arrest-warrant-statistics-2009-may-2016-calendar-year

[10] http://infacts.org/briefings/european-arrest-warrant-pros-outweigh-cons/

Membership of the EU also gives the United Kingdom access to data-sharing mechanisms that are of significant assistance to British law enforcement and intelligence agencies. These include the Visa Information System (VIS), which collects information from consulates in non-EU countries and external border crossing points; the Schengen Information System (SIS II), which allows police and border guards to enter and consult alerts on wanted or missing persons (the National Crime Agency is the UK SIRENE Bureau for SIS II); and EURODAC, which is a fingerprint database for identifying asylum seekers and irregular border-crossers. The EU also facilitates the sharing of criminal records across all member states. Lastly, the Prüm Convention, which the United Kingdom has now opted in to, facilitates the exchange of DNA, fingerprint and vehicle registration data of suspects. It takes up to 143 days to gain access to DNA profiles via Interpol; the Prüm Convention grants access within 15 minutes.[11] The convention also contains provisions for the deployment of armed sky marshals on flights between signatory states and other ways in which parties' police forces can cooperate.

The UK Border Force has turned away 6,000 EU citizens since 2010 on the grounds of public policy, public health or public security.[12] Much of the information about their crimes and the threat they posed would have been impossible to access without EU mechanisms like VIS, SIS II and Prüm.

Diplomatic cooperation

The United Kingdom must often act to try and influence another country's policies that impact negatively on British interests. In modern times, this is done through exerting political and economic influence rather than military force. As a single country, the United Kingdom's influence in this regard is limited; but as part of a political and economic bloc that is the largest economy in the world, our influence is greatly magnified.

The EU's diplomatic clout is channelled through the European External Action Service (EEAS), which acts as a foreign ministry and diplomatic corps for the EU and implements the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). The EEAS also manages the EU's crisis response, and its intelligence body, the EU Intelligence and Situation Centre (EU INTCEN), contributes intelligence analysis, early warning and situational awareness.

The EU is also able to use other forms of influence, such as economic sanctions, to promote security. Both diplomacy and economic sanctions are key tools for protecting British interests. The combined force of the EU is paramount in these non-military forms of defence. For example, the EU has applied economic sanctions against individuals that are members of or support Islamic State or al-Qaeda.[13] These sanctions could have been implemented by the United Kingdom alone, but they are far stronger when implemented by the 28 members of the European Union working together as a united front.

The real power of EU membership in this regard comes not from being able to undertake actions that would be impossible outside the EU, but rather from the greatly increased effect of those actions. We are better able to achieve our diplomatic aims within the EU than without.

[11] https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-sets-out-case-for-joining-prum

[12] http://www.conservativehome.com/platform/2016/03/damian-green-our-national-security-is-at-risk-if-we-leave-the-eu.html and http://www.cityam.com/238341/eu-referendum-london-will-be-stronger-if-the-uk-remains-as-a-semi-detached-member-of-the-club

[13] http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32016D0368&from=EN

Military cooperation

The EU plays an important role in the development of European armed forces and the national planning side of defence decisions. One of the key ways in which it does this is through ensuring a strong European defence technology and industrial base (DTIB), which is the economic marketplace used to invest in and stock the armed forces. The United Kingdom has the second largest DTIB market in the world after the United States; however, it cannot provide every item of military technology and equipment our armed forces require. As part of the EU, the United Kingdom can access a larger market that we have partial control over and is made up of countries with which we are politically and economically tied.

This is facilitated by the European Defence Agency (EDA), which is charged with ensuring security of supply for all EU countries. By pooling resources, the EDA also allows governments to create programmes that member states, including the United Kingdom, could not implement working in isolation. For example, the GovSatcom project is designed to build satellite communication infrastructure for EU governments in partnership with the European Space Agency.

Although the EU is not a military alliance per se, the European Union Military Staff (EUMS) does operate European Union Force (EUFOR) rapid reaction forces as part of the Common Security and Defence Policy. EURFOR has supervised operations in Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Chad and the Central African Republic. The United Kingdom has contributed to several of these missions. The United Kingdom has also contributed to the stand-by EU battlegroups, which can be deployed within 10 days to carry out military tasks of a humanitarian, peacekeeping and peacemaking nature for up to 30 days or longer if resupplied. Britain is also party to the European Air Group (EAG), the Movement Coordination Centre Europe (MCCE) and the European Amphibious Initiative (EAI). If it chose to, the United Kingdom could also cooperate as part of the European Corps (Eurocorp), European Gendarmerie Force (EUROGENDFOR), European Maritime Force (EUROMARFOR) and European Air Transport Command (EATC), extending the security benefits of EU membership even further.

This defence cooperation is a far cry from the EU Army that Eurosceptics claim is under development. Pooling assets and undertaking joint operations is not the same thing as creating a unified European armed forces. UK defence policy will unquestionably remain in the hands of the British government, and there are no plans to establish an EU Army in the forthcoming EU Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy.[14]

- - -

The United Kingdom's membership of the EU gives it diplomatic leverage and law enforcement mechanisms that it would not have on it own as well as military cooperation beyond that possible within NATO. While NATO remains somewhat of a 'solution looking for a problem' (though, admittedly, it may have found its foil in a resurgent Russia), the EU takes a broad political, economic and military approach to security that is in keeping with our own approach and is well-suited to the interconnected security threats of the 21st century.

---

[14] http://eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/2016/160527_01_en.htm

More fundamentally, leaving the EU could create serious threats to the foundations of the United Kingdom. It could jeopardise the union between Scotland and England if Scottish voters overwhelmingly vote to remain in the EU but are taken out by the rest of the country, thus provoking a new independence referendum in Scotland. In Northern Ireland, Brexit risks provoking a resurgence of republican violence if the Common Travel Area cannot be reinstated and border checks have to be installed along the land border between Ireland – a member of the EU – and Northern Ireland, which would no longer be an EU member. And it would leave Gibraltar vulnerable, as the border between Gibraltar and Spain would no longer be subject to European Commission oversight and Spain would likely revive its campaign for joint sovereignty of the territory. This is not scaremongering, but a serious examination of the risks Britain will face if it leaves the European Union; risks that are not mitigated by our membership of NATO.

While there may still be a valid debate to be had around some aspects of Britain's membership of the European Union, such as the perceived democratic deficit and issues of immigration, the argument over the security benefits is clear cut, and firmly in favour of the United Kingdom remaining a member of the EU.

Open Briefing is the world's first civil society intelligence agency. We are a unique international team of intelligence, military, law enforcement and government professionals working tirelessly behind the scenes to make a difference.

We provide intelligence, security, training and equipment to organisations striving to make the world a better place. We scrutinise the actions of governments and militaries and generate alternative policies. And we deliver a public intelligence service so that *you* know what is really going on in the world.

Founded in 2011, Open Briefing is a groundbreaking non-profit social enterprise supported by volunteers and funded by charitable grants and public donations.

www.openbriefing.org