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BREXIT AND SECURITY



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Hitherto AP Insights has, rightly, focussed largely on the economic implications of BREXIT. But broader security considerations will have a role to play in the negotiations too. Here's why.

In terms of broad security provision the UK is one of the strongest members of the EU. At the soft end of the spectrum, its aid programme, political influence and reach are all significant. Its police and intelligence services are more effective than most, and the British have been one of the key drivers of co-operation in EUROPOL.

In terms of hard security, Britain and France are the only two EU members whose military sophistication and capabilities approach those of the US. Together with Greece, Poland and Estonia the UK is one of only four EU countries that meet the NATO 2% target for defence spending. Its contribution to EU maritime operations has been significant; there are bilateral UK/French Defence structures; and the UK is a partner in Eurofighter, Airbus and other significant European Defence industrial cooperation.

In EU terms the UK is therefore a significant nett security provider. A clean break would significantly affect the EU's ability to deliver its broader security objectives, in terms both of resources and effectiveness. Europe has good objective reasons to want the UK to remain part of the game.

This interest is mirrored on the UK side; shared security co-operation is self-evidently more effective than going it alone. But in areas where there is a clear British advantage (defence, intelligence, cyber-security) the case for concessions to the EU is less compelling. Certainly there seems little reason post-BREXIT to allow the impact of the British Aid programme to be blunted by burying it in an EU Aid framework.

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So in this area of the impending BREXIT negotiations more cards than most lie on the UK side. However, in these uncertain times it would be dangerous for either party to lose sight of the overriding need for better security, irrespective of the framework in which it is provided. It would be in no-one's interest to allow a resurgent Russia free reign. As the NATO Secretary General said at last month's Munich Security Conference, 'Deterrence starts with resolve. It's not enough to feel it. You also have to show it.'

One important factor contributing to the current uncertainty has been the foreign and security policy of the Trump Administration, not least in terms of its approach to Russia and attitude to NATO. Like it or not, that will play into the BREXIT negotiations. If the UK is able to fulfil its traditional role as a transatlantic bridge it makes little sense not to use it, even if it might give the May government additional BREXIT negotiating leverage.

President Trump's concern about levels of European defence spending should have come as no surprise. It is an issue that has been festering for years and of concern to successive US (and UK) Administrations. Without a substantial course corrective NATO will simply not have the resources to credibly deter an adventurist Russia or the tackle the other complex problems on its agenda. The Wales NATO Summit made a start on tackling the problem but more clearly remains to be done. Now the Americans are asking, with justification, for firm commitments and threatening to penalise those who do not pay.

This faces Europe with some important, and linked, choices. On one level it is perfectly correct for Chancellor Merkel and Mr. Juncker to say that security policy should not be reduced to the size of defence budgets. But that misses the key – and urgent - point that credible hard security is both a vital necessity and costs money; the US has been contributing more than its share for decades.

Another key European choice concerns the future articulation of defence. It's highly likely that post-BREXIT some will argue for developing enhanced European Defence structures. That is respectable enough, provided it does not detract from NATO efforts. But in the absence of solid links with both the UK and US military establishments new structures will have difficulty in proving themselves effective without enormous effort and expense. That too is an issue that will need to be factored into the overall BREXIT deal.

Security and resources are inextricably linked. It's worth remembering that Article 2 of the NATO Treaty binds Allies to seek to eliminate conflict in their international economic policies and encourage economic collaboration between any or all of them. A recent IISS report on defence spending, while hotly contested by the British government, illustrated the difficulty of maintaining the NATO target in times of austerity. An uncomfortable corollary of BREXIT will be the need for the UK to spend much more on foreign policy, trade promotion, security policy and defence. The sooner this choice can be confirmed the stronger the UK's hand will be in this area of the negotiations.

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