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FORUM: EUROPEAN SECURITY AND DEFENCE IN THE SHADOW OF BREXIT

“Brexit means Brexit” turned into the mantra of Theresa May’s government, when she became the UK’s new Prime Minister in the wake of the outcome of the referendum on 23 June 2016 on British membership in the European Union (EU) (Cowburn, 2016). She wanted to make clear that the referendum result was final and that there was no backdoor option for the UK to remain in the EU. However, even months after the referendum, it has not become clear how the process of leaving the EU will be implemented in practice and what the likely implications will be – in the UK, in the EU and in the wider world. In other words, what Brexit actually means has remained unanswered. This uncertainty has remained the dominant feature of the Brexit process. It is particularly pronounced in areas that are not at the heart of the public debate, even though they are traditionally a major concern of nation states. Security and defence is the prime example in this regard. Whereas the twin topics of British access to the EU’s single market and the free movement of persons between the UK and the EU have seen a myriad of publications, security and defence has been largely confined to the analyses by issue experts (Dijkstra, 2016).

The overall objective of this forum is to shed light on the possible implications of Brexit in the under-researched area of security and defence. This is clearly a challenging task. A brief survey of the publications on this topic before and after the referendum shows that expert opinions are still far away from any kind of consensus. On one end of the spectrum, a few experts have raised alarmist voices. For instance, Hugh Gusterson (2016) has argued in the prestigious *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* that “Those who voted for a ‘Brexit,’ with the avowed goal of ‘making Britain great again,’ may have set in motion a course of events that will result in

Britain's unilateral nuclear disarmament." Spyros Economides and Julia Himmrich (2016) have foreseen "disastrous" consequences for the transatlantic alliance and Western cohesion. On the other end of the spectrum, several authors are much less concerned about the implications of Brexit on security and defence, even though they might not see any security gains due to Brexit either (Inkster, 2016; Menon, 2016). In the words of Richard Whitman (2016b), "security and defence is an area in which the impact of a vote to leave the EU would be relatively marginal" (p. 254). Along this spectrum other opinions and analyses exist, many of which emphasize broader Brexit implications in terms of security and defence. This includes the consequences of Brexit for the UK's strategy as an international actor (Niblett, 2015; Whitman, 2016a), Europe's geostrategic weight (Simón, 2015) and European stability (Heisbourg, 2016). More recently, a few experts have also come up with pragmatic proposals to maintain the cooperation between the UK and the EU after Brexit (Dijkstra, 2016; Witney, 2016), though their implementation is far from assured. In sum, this wide variety of opinions and analyses shows that uncertainty about the implications of Brexit on security and defence has not vanished. As Lawrence Freedman (2016) wrote in an article shortly before the referendum, "With so little clarity on what Brexit is intended to achieve, it is hard to think of a greater test of the law of unintended consequences" (p. 11).

From a methodological perspective, the uncertainty is hardly surprising. Most notably, there is virtually no event to which Brexit could be compared to. Another important methodological limitation is the complexity of the multilevel negotiations that Brexit entails. Especially an area such as security and defence remains contingent upon the developments in many other areas, not least the single market and the free movement of persons. The limited access to primary sources in the form of written documents such as negotiation briefings and of elite interviews with key policy-makers in what is at the end of the day a highly political issue is yet another

limitation. Consequently, the articles in this forum do not intend to “predict” any concrete developments or outcomes in the area of security and defence. They steer away from unfounded speculations and adopt a more modest, though arguably equally important approach. Drawing on the expertise of each of the issue specialists who writes the individual forum articles, they offer judgements and observations grounded in deep understanding of pre-Brexit trends and dynamics in European foreign, security and defence affairs. They look specifically at the two major security and defence actors in the EU, namely France and Germany, and their cooperation in the area of defence procurement. Moreover, they also examine Brexit from the perspective of Europe’s main partners (and rivals) in the wider world, in particular Russia and the United States in the context of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In this way, the forum maintains a decidedly global outlook and addresses the main concerns raised in the EU’s new Global Strategy. The Strategy states specifically that “We live in times of existential crisis, within and beyond the European Union.” (European Union, 2016). Increasing our understanding of major underlying foreign, security and defence developments in the light of Brexit will help tackle this “existential crisis” more effectively.

Although each forum article examines a different aspect of European security and defence, a number of broad themes can be identified running through the forum. First, and as already alluded to, is a high degree of uncertainty over the future shape of European security and defence in the absence of the UK from the EU. As Mark Webber and David Dunn note, while Britain will remain a key member of NATO, uncertainty over the UK’s economic growth post-Brexit casts a shadow over whether the UK will be able to keep to its current commitment to spend 2% of GDP on defence. There is also a high degree of uncertainty over what future path Scotland will choose. Matthew Uttley and Ben Wilkinson argue that the future of defence procurement policies in Europe is contingent upon the UK’s access to the EU’s single market.

Uncertainty also permeates the analysis of Anglo-French relations in the context of Brexit. Alice Pannier observes that although the UK has strong incentives to invest more heavily in Anglo-French defence cooperation, it is less likely that France will do so, whose interests may lie in investing in a renewed Paris-Berlin axis at the heart of the EU. However, uncertainty features less prominently as a theme in the articles by Tracey German on UK-Russian relations and Inez von Weitershausen's article on Germany, both of whom predict, by and large, a continuation of pre-existing trends.

Second, a number of authors foresee a reasonable risk that Britain will be marginalised within Europe – and potentially, international politics more widely. As noted by Mark Webber and David Dunn, even if the UK retains its nuclear status and maintains the NATO benchmark of 2% GDP in defence spending, by taking itself out of the European Union it risks imposing a self-inflicted isolation within the context of growing EU-NATO cooperation; this in turn is likely to have a negative impact on its relationship with Washington which has valued the UK's role as the “tough guy in the EU.” NATO is also part of a wider transatlantic community, and in removing itself from the EU, the UK risks undermining not only NATO's internal cohesion but the spirit of “togetherness” which has sustained the transatlantic community. In the area of defence procurement, Matthew Uttley and Ben Wilkinson highlight important post-Brexit trade-offs that leave the UK in a potentially more precarious situation: either being without a strong voice in EU defence procurement policies if it stays in the single market or being excluded from the European defence market if it stays out of the single market. Should Paris and Berlin, as Alice Pannier and Inez von Weitershausen suggest, seek to consolidate and enhance France and Germany's positions as Europe's leading powers, the UK will find itself further marginalised, with less leverage to influence the shape of European security and defence. In addition, Russia, as Tracey German observes, is only likely to seek to exploit a lack

of unity within Europe for its own gain, and has seized on Brexit as an opportunity to further disparage both the EU and UK.

Third, and notwithstanding the previous points, although Brexit may have very real implications in the realm of European security and defence, it is likely to reinforce existing trends and dynamics rather than leading to their reversal. The renewed emphasis on NATO only reinforces existing defence assumptions which envisage NATO at the heart of UK defence; the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy, Mark Webber and David Dunn observe, was always largely inconsequential to UK defence policy. For Matthew Uttley and Ben Wilkinson the post-Brexit debate on defence procurement in Europe is still largely a reflection of the "age-old tensions between sovereignty and integration" and is, thus, "old wine in new bottles." Further, UK-Russian relations are driven by a long-standing and complex dynamic of competition and cooperation. As Tracey German argues even with the UK set to depart the EU, Russia's long-standing suspicion that the West is seeking to constrain Russia will not be affected by the UK's decision, the relationship likely to be one characterised by high levels of mistrust particularly at the political and diplomatic level. One issue where we may see a reversal of existing dynamics is in the Anglo-French defence partnership. Alice Pannier suggests that where previously France has been the more "pro-active" partner in the relationship, Brexit may reverse this; France may well, as noted earlier, increasingly look towards cementing relations with Berlin while it is left to the UK to seek to elevate the partnership as it looks towards enhancing bilateral relations with key powers. Still, in the months following Brexit both the UK and France have insisted the partnership will be preserved suggesting that here, as elsewhere, the fundamentals will not change. As far as Germany, Europe's leading power, is concerned, Inez von Weitershausen foresees that trends already discernible pre-Brexit, notably Germany's move away from a "culture of restraint" in

in its foreign and defence policy, and towards greater self-confidence and military engagement, will likely continue.

Indeed, it is by setting Brexit within a wider context, one that establishes pre-existing trends and dynamics, that each of the authors is able to make reasoned judgements about what the future may hold, without recourse to the kinds of hyperbole and speculation that has prevailed in some parts of the media and wider commentary on Brexit. As a result, and despite the uncertainty that prevails – and which will no doubt continue for some time – there is much that will remain familiar and unchanging. In the words of Aldous Huxley (1952/2005), “The charm of history and its enigmatic lesson consist in the fact that, from age to age, nothing changes and yet everything is completely different” (p. 300).

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