

Brexit and the Anglo-American Security and Defense Partnership

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the impact of the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union on the longstanding special Anglo-American security and defense partnership.

When US President Donald Trump first met British Prime Minister Theresa May in January 2017, he praised the Anglo-American partnership as “one of the great forces in history for justice and for peace.” Prime Minister May was equally effusive speaking of the “bonds of history, of family, [and] kinship.”¹ This exchange is typical of the rhetoric of the so-called special relationship, but sentiment has usually played a minor role when compared to the hardheaded, common strategic interests that are its foundation. The unusual bilateral partnership, established during World War II and sustained throughout the Cold War, has facilitated close cooperation through the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as the fight against Salafi-Jihadism. The idea of a special relationship has had supporters and detractors over the years. But its existence as a political phenomenon is widely recognized by academia, policymakers, and media on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.²

The referendum decision in June 2016 for Britain to leave the European Union (EU) shocked and disappointed political elites on both sides of the Atlantic. “Brexit” is arguably the most dramatic change in UK foreign policy since the Second World War. Such a significant, complex, and controversial event is bound to affect relationships with close allies. After the result, Prime Minister David Cameron resigned and the pound fell to a 30-year low against the dollar. Nevertheless, British officials were quick to downplay the impact of Brexit on the United Kingdom's security commitments. At least publically, American and British officials stressed the Anglo-American bilateral security partnership would not be affected by Brexit.³

Many commentators were not so sanguine. A senior member of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) claimed Brexit would represent

1 “PM Press Conference with US President Trump: 27 January 2017,” Gov.UK, January 27, 2017, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-press-conference-with-us-president-donald-trump-27-january-2017>.

2 For recent analyses of the special relationship, see John Dumbrell, *A Special Relationship: Anglo-American Relations in the Cold War and After* (Houndmills, Hampshire: Macmillan, 2001); Jeffrey D. McCausland and Douglas T. Stuart, eds., *U.S.-UK Relations at the Start of the 21st Century* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2006); Guy Arnold, *America and Britain: Was There Ever A Special Relationship?* (London: Hurst & Company, 2014); and Ruike Xu, *Alliance Persistence within the Anglo-American Special Relationship* (New York: Springer, 2017).

3 Missy Ryan, “U.S. Military Ties with Britain Are Sheltered from Brexit Storm, Officials Say,” *Washington Post*, June 28, 2016; and Spencer Ackerman, “US-UK Security Officials Cement Intelligence Partnership after Leave Vote,” *Guardian*, June 24, 2016.

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the United Kingdom's most profound strategic shift since the country withdrew from a global military role in the early 1970s.⁴ Strobe Talbott, former president of the Brookings Institution, warned, "Brexit could be the worst news yet for the trans-Atlantic community, particularly for Britain and the United States."⁵ As Talbott recognized, Brexit appeared to undermine Western cohesion at a time when liberal democracies faced the greatest range of challenges to their security since the end of the Cold War. The aim of this article is to assess the potential impact of Brexit on the special Anglo-American security and defense partnership.

The Relationship in Context

The special relationship has never been a partnership of equals. From the American perspective, the relationship has been one of choice. For the United Kingdom, American support was essential to counter the existential threat from Nazi Germany and later the Soviet Union. A close relationship with the United States also helped alleviate Britain's decline after World War II. Privileged access to US strategic nuclear weapons and a uniquely close intelligence partnership helped the United Kingdom maintain exceptional influence in security and defense matters.

The benefits were by no means one-sided. The British brought global diplomatic experience, a seat in the United Nations Security Council, highly effective intelligence services, and strategically significant military bases to the relationship. Despite periodic political differences over the decades, the United Kingdom has proved to be America's most reliable global ally and a champion of US leadership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). British historian, Hew Strachan, has argued "Britain's unspoken strategy has been to service its alliance with the United States and to act as the cement between Washington and NATO."⁶

The Anglo-American relationship weathered the end of the Cold War, and Britain's position as America's most important ally was even strengthened during recent conflicts. The United Kingdom contributed the most effective allied force to Kuwait in 1991 and played the leading role supporting US operations in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq between 1999 and 2003.⁷ Prime Minister Tony Blair's staunch support for America after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and his willingness to commit British forces to the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq did much to put the "special" back into the partnership.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan proved a bruising experience for both countries. The relationship came under strain after 2003 when the British, in particular, associated the Iraq War with government dishonesty and strategic incompetence. This perception caused some politicians and commentators to question the value of the close security partnership with the United States as never before. The financial crisis of 2008 created fresh challenges as austerity driven defense cuts by the

4 Malcolm Chalmers, *Would a New SDSR Be Needed after a Brexit Vote?* (London: RUSI, 2016).

5 Strobe Talbott, "Brexit's Threat to the Special Relationship," *New York Times*, April 21, 2016.

6 Hew Strachan, "British National Strategy: Who Does It?," *Parameters* 43, no. 2 (Summer 2013): 51.

7 Laurence Martin and John Garnett, *British Foreign Policy: Challenges and Choices for the 21st Century* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1997), 106.

British government led senior US officials to lament the apparent loss of America's most militarily capable and politically willing partner.⁸

In 2013, the British government lost a vote in parliament to support US military strikes against Syria following the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons. This defeat for a British executive was unprecedented and inevitably led to additional concerns the United Kingdom was finally abdicating its role as principal ally.⁹ An article in *Foreign Affairs* in 2015 further documented Britain's declining diplomatic and military capabilities at a time when the United States looked to its European allies for greater support in areas like the Sahel and Ukraine following its "pivot" to Asia.¹⁰

Britain's *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review* (SDSR) in 2015, was intended to mark an end to the perceived decline in Britain's power and influence.¹¹ An emphasis on global reach and engagement was central to the review, which highlighted the nation's "agile, capable and globally deployable Armed Forces."¹² Economic prospects were much brighter than the dire financial circumstances that had driven prior defense cuts. Threat perception had also increased following Russia's annexation of Crimea and the terrorist attacks inspired by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The 2015 review committed the government to maintain a defense budget of at least two percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) and make significant investments in military equipment. The review acknowledged close security cooperation with states in the European Union, especially France, but the special relationship received notably greater emphasis. The United States was described as Britain's "pre-eminent partner for security, defence, foreign policy and prosperity."¹³

The Military Partnership

The military establishments of both countries have had an easy familiarity since WW II, despite doctrinal, cultural, and occasional linguistic differences. The forces frequently hold joint training exercises, and liaison officers work together at headquarters throughout the world.¹⁴ An analysis on the implications of Brexit outlined the value of the British military's expeditionary outlook, willingness to deploy and

8 Howard LaFranchi, "Big British Defense Cuts Weaken Pentagon's Top Military Partner," *Christian Science Monitor*, October 20, 2010; and Nile Gardiner, "Mind the Gap: Is the Relationship Still Special?" *World Affairs*, March/April 2011.

9 Juliet Kaarbo and Daniel Kenealy, "The House of Commons' Vote on British Intervention in Syria," *Italian Institute for International Political Studies Analysis* 228 (January 2014): 3. The deployment of the armed forces are covered by royal prerogative and there is no legal requirement for a prime minister to seek permission from parliament.

10 Anand Menon, "Littler England: The United Kingdom's Retreat from Global Leadership," *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2015): 93–100.

11 Office of the Prime Minister, *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom* (SDSR), Cm. 9161 (London: HM Government, 2015).

12 Prime Minister, *SDSR*, 11.

13 Prime Minister, *SDSR*, 51.

14 In a recent conversation with the author, a senior US Air Force officer highlighted the particularly close relationship between US exchange officers and their UK counterparts, which even included occasions of USAF pilots flying RAF planes on operations against ISIS.

sustain forces overseas, and its ability to conduct operations across the spectrum of conflict to support American military efforts.¹⁵

The British armed forces maintain a high level of operational readiness. In 2017, 1,350 personnel deployed in operations against ISIS in Iraq and Syria; over 1,000 served as part of NATO's enhanced forward presence (EFP) in Estonia, Poland, and Romania; and 1,200 contributed to operations in the Mediterranean, Africa, and Afghanistan.¹⁶ The United Kingdom provided the largest European contingent to the air campaign against ISIS and trained 60,000 members of the Iraqi security forces.¹⁷ In 2016, the nation's military began a five-year exercise program with the US Army, which includes testing a UK division under a US corps-level command.¹⁸ Counterterrorist operations since 9/11 have also created a particularly close partnership between British and American special operations forces (SOF).¹⁹ Currently Britain is developing a new carrier task force designed to enhance NATO's strike capability and project maritime power alongside US carrier battlegroups. Finally, the strength of defense industrial cooperation is illustrated by the United Kingdom's role in the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter development program: the United Kingdom is the only Level 1 project partner and British industry will build 15 percent of each of the projected 3,000 planned aircraft.²⁰

The future of the special relationship may depend, however, on whether Britain's armed forces continue to play their customary role of capable and dependable military partner after Brexit. Doubts had understandably risen during the last decade as financial austerity drove cuts that significantly weakened British military capabilities. The defense budget decreased 8.5 percent in real terms between 2010 and 2015.²¹ Reductions in front line capabilities included the withdrawal of Harrier attack aircraft and Nimrod reconnaissance aircraft, the early decommissioning of aircraft carriers, and a 30,000-soldier reduction in regular army personnel.

Britain's failings in Iraq and Afghanistan also suggested its defense establishment could no longer provide effective strategic leadership. The United Kingdom failed to adapt its approach after the levels of violence rose in both theaters after 2006. British forces were inadequately manned, resourced, and supported, and operational mistakes were made due to doctrinal complacency and obsolete structures and tactics.²² A revitalized US Army and Marine Corps eventually adapted successfully to the challenges of contemporary small wars, not their British counterparts. The relative failure led one prominent academic

15 Michael Shurkin, "US Perspectives on the Potential Defence and Security Implications of Brexit," in *Defence and Security after Brexit: A Snapshot of International Perspectives on the Implications of the UK's Decision to Leave the EU* (Cambridge: RAND Europe, 2017), 16.

16 See Ministry of Defence, *Annual Report and Accounts 2016–2017*, HC 21 (London: HM Government, 2017), 24.

17 Stuart Peach, "Annual Chief of the Defence Staff Lecture 2017," RUSI, December 14, 2017, https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/20171214-rusi-cds_annual_lecture-acm_peach.pdf.

18 Ministry of Defence, *Annual Report*, 42.

19 Stanley A. McChrystal, *My Share of the Task* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 243–44.

20 George Alison, "How Much of the F-35 is British?," *UK Defence Journal*, November 23, 2017.

21 Malcolm Chalmers, *Decision Time: The National Security Capability Review 2017–2018 and Defence*, Whitehall Report 1-18 (London: RUSI, 2018), 5.

22 Frank Ledwidge, *Losing Small Wars: British Military Failure in Iraq and Afghanistan* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011); and Richard North, *Ministry of Defeat: The British War in Iraq 2003–2009* (London: Continuum, 2009).

to question whether the United Kingdom was still America's "ally of first resort."²³ Hew Strachan viewed the strategic failings as the result of playing the role of junior partner and relying on the United States to provide a strategic lead, which he argued was not necessarily always in Britain's best interest.²⁴

The 2015 SDSR sought to reassure the United States and other allies that the United Kingdom remained a committed and capable military partner. But the ambitious military plans were predicated on continued economic growth and included some optimistic assumptions about defense budget efficiency savings. Much of the anticipated equipment expenditure was for international purchases, including additional F-35s, P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft, and nuclear missiles from the United States. The fall in exchange rates, largely because of Brexit uncertainties, meant a 3.5 percent reduction in purchasing power during 2017 alone.²⁵ Such effects resulted in the costs of new commitments exceeding the net increase in funding, which posed a significant risk to the equipment plan's affordability.²⁶

In July 2017, the British government launched the *National Security Capability Review* (NSCR) to support the implementation of the SDSR.²⁷ The review covered a broad range of emerging security challenges and acknowledged significant problems in the current procurement program.²⁸ The secretive nature of the NSCR process created media speculation that the United Kingdom was again preparing to reduce the strength of its armed forces. The prospect of cuts to Britain's amphibious capabilities prompted particular alarm, not least at senior levels in the United States. Lieutenant General Frederick "Ben" Hodges III, former commander of US Army Europe, warned that Britain's position as a key ally would be at risk if its armed forces shrank even further.²⁹

The NSCR review was completed in March 2018, and the government renewed its commitment to sustaining improvements in defense capabilities, including the £178 billion reequipment program. At the same time, the government launched a Modernising Defence Programme (MDP), which somewhat belied its claims that the defense budget remained secure. The program includes "work streams" that once again focus on efficiencies and "business modernization" despite earlier flawed SDSR assumptions that these could provide further savings.³⁰

Ultimately, much will depend on the strength of the British economy as the March 29, 2019, date for formally leaving the European Union draws near. Most economic analyses of Brexit have been pessimistic,

23 *Who Does UK National Strategy, Oral Evidence Taken Before the Public Administration Committee of the House of Commons* (September 9, 2011) (statement of Dr. Julian Lindley-French, professor of Defence Strategy, Netherlands Defence Academy), Q 17.

24 Strachan, "British National Strategy," 51–52.

25 International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), "Europe," chap. 4 in *The Military Balance 2018* (London: IISS, 2018), 80.

26 National Audit Office (NAO), *The Equipment Plan 2016–2026*, HC 914 (London, NAO, 2017), 9, 31.

27 Cabinet Office, *National Security and Capability Review (NSCR)* (London: HM Government, 2018).

28 Steven Swinford, "Ministers Face £20 Billion Black Hole over 'Unaffordable' New Jets, Warships and Submarines," *Telegraph*, January 31, 2018.

29 Jonathan Beale, "General Ben Hodges Warns Britain over Armed Forces Cuts," BBC News, November 8, 2017.

30 NSCR, 14–15.

although the gloomiest forecasts have so far proved unfounded. A government report leaked in January 2018, however, suggested Britain's economy would grow more slowly outside of the European Union even if a favorable deal were struck with Brussels.³¹ A constrained economy would inevitably impact negatively on Britain's strategic ambitions, as might domestic political changes. May's position is weak and the Brexit process could easily trigger an early election. In principle, another Conservative Party government would back a strong defense policy. But the Labour Party could win the next election, and it is no longer the centrist party of Tony Blair. The current leader, Jeremy Corbyn, is opposed to nuclear weapons and the use of force and has a history of anti-Americanism.³² The destructive impact such an outcome would have on the Anglo-American defense and security partnership, to say nothing of Britain's security, might be hard to exaggerate.

Brexit and the UK-US Intelligence Relationship

During a recent discussion on the special relationship, Heather A. Conley, a director at the Center for International and Strategic Studies praised "the incredibly strong bilateral intelligence cooperation, which remains the key pillar of the relationship."³³ The United Kingdom and United States have developed unique, durable institutional intelligence sharing arrangements and habits that are likely to deepen with the formation of the National Cyber Security Centre and US Cyber Command. Both intelligence communities are intertwined through bureaucracies and personal connections. Since 9/11, the signals intelligence (SIGINT) partnership has been especially close, with National Security Agency (NSA) and Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) teams being collocated at each other's facilities. Close wartime collaboration was followed by the UKUSA Agreement in 1946, which remains the basis of cooperation between the NSA and GCHQ. A later agreement including the intelligence agencies of Australia, Canada, and New Zealand created the Five Eyes alliance.

The practical business of intelligence exchanges relies on bilateral agreements between states. Therefore, within Europe, they do not depend on the European Union and are not subject to the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice (ECJ). Other European countries recognize and value the intelligence capability and reach of the United Kingdom, and Britain could continue to lead intelligence cooperation in Europe.³⁴ Yet it would be a mistake to suggest Brexit will have no impact on this role. A number of former heads of agencies in the United Kingdom have expressed concern publicly about potential problems

31 "EU Exit Analysis—Cross Whitehall Briefing," in *The Progress of the UK's Negotiations on EU Withdrawal: December 2017 to March 2018* (London: House of Commons, January 2018); James Blitz, "Can There Be a Global Role for Britain after Brexit?," *Financial Times*, November 9, 2017; and Pippa Crerar, "Each Brexit Scenario Will Leave Britain Worse Off, Study Finds," *Guardian*, April 18, 2018.

32 "Jeremy Corbyn's Pacifist Illusion," *Economist*, April 19, 2018.

33 *The Indispensable Ally? US, NATO and UK Defence Relations*, HC 387, *Oral Evidence Taken Before the Defence Committee of the House of Commons* (March 5, 2018) (statement of Dr. Heather A. Conley, Senior Vice President for Europe, Eurasia, and the Arctic, Center for Strategic and International Studies), Q 117.

34 Nigel Inkster, "Brexit, Intelligence and Terrorism," *Survival* 58, no. 3 (May 2016): 23–30, doi: 10.1080/00396338.2016.1186974; and Bastian Giegerich and Christian Mölling, *The United Kingdom's Contribution to European Security and Defence* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies / German Council on Foreign Relations, 2018), 6.

in areas within the European Court's competence, which include data sharing and aspects of law enforcement cooperation.³⁵

Britain has played a prime role in counterterrorism intelligence policy in Europe and has benefitted from access to EU databases, such as the Europol and Schengen Information Systems, as well as judicial cooperation through Eurojust and the European Arrest Warrant (EAW).³⁶ During Brexit, the United Kingdom has to negotiate new arrangements for these agencies, possibly through bilateral sharing agreements such as those that already exist for Australia and the United States in the case of Europol. But there is no precedent for a non-EU country to have the same privileged access to the Europol Information System as a member state, and the legislative framework for the EAW exists under ECJ jurisdiction that the United Kingdom will leave. In February 2018, May called for a new security treaty with the European Union and offered concessions on the jurisdiction of the ECJ, but the EU leaders' response was "lukewarm."³⁷

Assessing the effect of these developments on Britain's special intelligence partnership with the US is hard. At the bilateral level, the impact should be minimal. But Britain's loss of influence in Europe will probably force the United States to forge closer intelligence relationships with other European allies, such as Germany.³⁸

Brexit and US Strategic Influence in Europe

President Barack Obama's administration lobbied hard for Britain to remain in the European Union. Previous US governments were equally supportive of Britain's full participation in Europe. From an American perspective, the United Kingdom has represented an Atlanticist voice in the European Union, being an advocate of policies aligned with those of the United States, including free trade, EU enlargement, and cooperation on foreign, security, and defense issues.³⁹ The United Kingdom, for example, worked hard to persuade the European Union to adopt sanctions against Iran, Syria, North Korea, and Russia.

Many analysts believe Brexit threatens US influence in Europe and diminishes Britain's value as a strategic partner.⁴⁰ Ivo H. Daalder, a former US ambassador to NATO, called Brexit a "defining moment for American diplomacy" as the United States would have to work harder

35 Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, *Annual Report 2016–2017*, HC 655 (London: HM Government, 2017), 59–61.

36 David Omand, "Keeping Europe Safe: Counterterrorism for the Continent," *Foreign Affairs* (September/October 2016): 92.

37 David Bond and Guy Chazan, "May Calls for UK-EU Security Treaty," *Financial Times*, February 17, 2018.

38 Calder Walton, "Little Britain: Brexit and the UK-US Special Intelligence Relationship," Belfer Center, August 10, 2016, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/little-britain-brexit-and-uk-us-special-intelligence-relationship>.

39 Tim Oliver and Michael John Williams, "Special Relationships in Flux: Brexit and the Future of the US-EU and US-UK Relationships," *International Affairs* 92, no. 3 (May 2016): 554, doi:10.1111/1468-2346.12606; and Wyn Rees, "America, Brexit and the Security of Europe," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 19, no. 3 (2017): 558–72.

40 Howard LaFranchi, "How Brexit Could Transform America's Special Relationship with Britain," *Christian Science Monitor*, June 22, 2016; and Matt Spetalnick and Yara Bayoumy, "Brexit Threatens to Undermine US-Britain Special Relationship," Reuters, June 24, 2016.

to maintain transatlantic unity.⁴¹ James M. Goldgeier, a former dean of the American University School of International Service, warned that the United States would have to look for a “new best friend.”⁴² But some conservative voices have supported Brexit. John R. Bolton, Trump’s national security advisor, claimed Britain’s participation in the European Union’s security and defense initiatives threatened to undermine NATO.⁴³ Given his opposition to multilateralism, Trump, as a presidential candidate and as president, also expressed support for Brexit.

Bolton’s unease highlights a perennial US security concern. As an EU member, the United Kingdom ensured that European specific defense and security initiatives did not threaten the primacy of NATO. Like the United States, Britain fears EU military integration might divert scarce resources from the alliance, create duplication, and be used as an excuse for further reductions in defense spending. Most recently, at the 2018 Munich Security Conference, the US delegation complained that EU military plans could undermine NATO and potentially shut out American defense firms from the European market.⁴⁴

Brexit removes the main state barrier to closer EU military integration. Already the European Union has agreed to establish a joint command headquarters for military missions and to increase the European Defence Agency budget, both measures that the United Kingdom opposes. In December 2017, the European Union launched the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) initiative to integrate and strengthen further internal defense cooperation.⁴⁵ Although membership is voluntary, the initiative is clearly a first step towards a European defense union.

Despite British and American fears, there is little prospect that EU defense integration poses a threat to NATO primacy in the medium term. The European Union insists PESCO is complimentary to the alliance, and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has welcomed the initiative as a means to strengthen its European pillar.⁴⁶ At the moment, PESCO is an aspiration, and its development will depend on the European Union’s leading powers—France and Germany—which do not share a common strategic goal. Unlike France, Germany views defense integration as a political rather than a military project.⁴⁷

A continued close military relationship will be mutually beneficial for the United Kingdom and the European Union after Brexit.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, the United Kingdom will cease to be a member of

41 Ivo H. Daalder, “America Must Move To Save the European Project,” *Financial Times*, June 27, 2016.

42 “Brexit Vote Looms: What Will It Mean for the EU and US?,” Wilson Center, June 21, 2016.

43 John Bolton, “The UK Must Leave the EU and the U.S. Must Support Exit,” *Tribune-Review* (Pittsburg, PA), June 11, 2016.

44 Steven Erlanger, “U.S. Revives Concerns about European Defense Plans, Rattling NATO Allies,” *New York Times*, February 18, 2018.

45 “Permanent Structured Cooperation—PESCO,” European Union External Action Service, March 9, 2018.

46 “PESCO: EU Paves Way to Defense Union,” *Deutsche Welle*, November 13, 2017.

47 Daniel Keohane, “Constrained Leadership: Germany’s New Defense Policy,” *CSS Analyses in Security Policy* 201 (December 2016).

48 François Heisbourg, “Brexit and European Security,” *Survival* 58, no. 3 (June-July 2016): 13–22, doi:10.1080/00396338.2016.1186973.

the institutions that formulate and implement external EU actions, including the Political and Security Committee, and Britain will have limited influence on EU defense missions and mandates. The Berlin Plus arrangements allow EU military missions access to common NATO assets, including a headquarters detached from NATO's military structure commanded by the Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe (DSACEUR). This leadership position has traditionally been a British appointment, but the EU may be unwilling to accept continued British command of European troops for non-NATO operations. Thus, reduced British influence could potentially lead to EU operations that do not align with America's interests.⁴⁹

Britain's most important bilateral defense relationship in Europe is with France. Brexit does not weaken the case for continuing this close cooperation. Since the Lancaster House Agreement in 2010, both powers have increased nuclear research and testing cooperation, developed a combined joint expeditionary force, and collaborated on equipment projects. Nevertheless, a recent RUSI study, argued the partners may drift apart following Brexit because of France's longstanding ambition to create "European military autonomy" through a common EU intervention force, defense budget, and doctrine, all of which might create future headaches for NATO planners.⁵⁰

The United States has often differed with France on European security issues, but some commentators have suggested that President Emmanuel Macron may seek to capitalize on France's EU membership and military capabilities to become the new "trans-Atlantic bridge" and the leading American ally in Europe if Britain can no longer play this role.⁵¹ Deepening US involvement in the Sahel region has already increased France's importance as a strategic partner.

Brexit and Nuclear Weapons

Anglo-American nuclear collaboration began during WW II, and since the 1950s, Britain has had privileged access to US nuclear weapons technology. Strategic nuclear missiles, including the current Trident system, have been leased from the United States. One of the three US Ballistic Missile Early Warning Systems (BMEWS) is based in England, and British nuclear scientists work with their American counterparts on a range of nuclear research projects. The United States remains a strong supporter of Britain's nuclear deterrent, not least because it shares the nuclear burden in NATO.⁵² In 2016, the British parliament voted to renew the Trident system and approved four British-built *Dreadnought*-class replacement nuclear submarines to be completed by the early 2030s.

Britain's Trident nuclear deterrent is based at Faslane, Scotland, and the missile warheads are stored nearby at Coulport. The Scottish National Party (SNP) opposes nuclear weapons and would likely seek

49 Rees, "America, Brexit," 7.

50 Peter Ricketts, *National Security Relations with France after Brexit* (London: RUSI, 2018), 5–6.

51 Benjamin Martill and Monika Sus, *Known Unknowns: EU Foreign, Security, and Defence Policy after Brexit* (London: Dahrendorf Forum, 2018): 20–21; and David Chazan, "Syrian Strikes Help Emmanuel Macron Cement Position as Key Trump Ally Ahead of Washington Visit," *Telegraph*, April 15, 2018.

52 *Indispensable Ally*, Q 118, Q 119.

their removal in the event of independence. Likewise, a significant majority of Scots voted to remain in the European Union. These factors give the SNP an incentive to call for a second independence referendum, even though current opinion polls suggest that the SNP would still lose.⁵³ Since a significant minority of Scots still supports independence, the number could grow if Brexit creates major economic problems. Such a vote for independence would create a crisis in the United Kingdom, and more broadly Western defense and security policy. Former NATO Secretary General George Robertson described the impact of Scottish independence as “cataclysmic.”⁵⁴

Trident submarines and warheads could be relocated to Devonport and Falmouth in England, but this would add significant costs to Britain’s nuclear program.⁵⁵ Unbudgeted costs are by no means the only problem. The United Kingdom might be unable to maintain a continuous maritime deterrent if it is forced to move from Scottish bases as alternatives to the current bases were described as “highly problematic, very expensive, and fraught with political difficulties.”⁵⁶

An independent Scottish government might allow Britain to continue using nuclear facilities on a temporary basis. But Scottish independence would create a multitude of additional security problems. Relocating and reconstructing nuclear capabilities could take up to 20 years. In the meantime, Britain’s nuclear deterrent would be based in a newly independent foreign country. The associated political and strategic complications might force a future British government to abandon its commitment to retain nuclear weapons. Complex and lengthy negotiations would be required to divide Britain’s fully integrated military defense—military bases, infrastructure, equipment, personnel, and training.⁵⁷ This process would cause an extended period of strategic paralysis until new defense and security arrangements with Scotland could be decided and implemented.

The SNP has claimed that an independent Scotland would be “a non-nuclear member of NATO . . . contributing excellent conventional capabilities.”⁵⁸ But there is no guarantee that Scotland—as a new, small state with significant economic challenges—would be prepared to commit adequate resources to its own defense. Scotland represents less than five percent of Britain’s population but over one third of its territory and occupies a strategic location on NATO’s northern flank. An independent Scotland that did not play its full part in collective defense would pose additional difficulties for Britain’s armed forces and for NATO as a whole. For this reason, Scottish independence would pose a

53 “How Would You Vote in a Scottish Independence Referendum if Held Now? (Asked after the EU Referendum),” What Scotland Thinks, accessed May 21, 2018. The first independence referendum was held in September 2014.

54 Griff Witte, “Britain’s Trident Nuclear Program at Stake in Scottish Independence Vote,” *Washington Post*, August 24, 2014.

55 Hugh Chalmers and Malcolm Chalmers, *Relocation, Relocation, Relocation: Could the UK’s Nuclear Force be Moved after Scottish Independence?* (London: RUSI, 2014), 19.

56 “Trident Is Removed from Scotland, What Next?,” in *The Referendum on Separation for Scotland: Terminating Trident—Days or Decades?* (London: Scottish Affairs Committee, 2012), para. 45.

57 Claire Phipps, “Scottish Independence: How Would Scotland Defend Itself?,” *Guardian*, September 4, 2014; and Peter Dominiczak, “Scottish Independence Would ‘Damage’ Britain’s Defence,” *Telegraph*, April 14, 2014.

58 “Scotland’s Future: Chapter 6 International Relations and Defence,” Scottish Government, November 26, 2013, <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2013/11/9348/10>.

greater risk to the UK-US special defense and security relationship than Britain's exit from the European Union.

Brexit has also exacerbated tensions in Northern Ireland. A clear majority of Irish nationalists, who tend to identify with the republic of Ireland, voted to remain in the European Union. The current open border between the two parts of Ireland is threatened by Brexit as it could become a "hard" boundary if Britain leaves the EU customs union and single market.⁵⁹ Although low-level attacks by nationalist splinter groups have continued since the peace agreement in 2007, there is currently no mainstream support for a return to violence.⁶⁰ Unfortunately, the reestablishment of border installations and controls could provide dissident republican paramilitaries with both renewed support and a focus for attacks. Northern Ireland may, once again, divert UK security assets from international challenges to domestic counterterrorism. As the United States played a valuable mediation role during Britain's peace process with Ireland, a Brexit inspired return to violence would almost certainly create friction in Anglo-American relations.

Conclusions

At a time when the international liberal order is under pressure from autocratic regimes, a strong Anglo-American partnership remains an essential element of Western collective defense and security. Shared history and values, a common language, liberal democracy, legal systems, and commercial networks will ensure continuing close ties between the two countries. Strategic pragmatism, however, is at the heart of the idea of a special relationship, and Brexit could create the biggest challenge to this partnership to date.

The United Kingdom will remain a close security partner of the European Union after the final separation in 2021. But Britain will no longer have a direct influence on the Union's policies or be able to act as America's interlocutor. It remains to be seen whether the rhetoric of "Global Britain" is matched by the reality. Even in a benign post-Brexit environment, it is hard to imagine that the United Kingdom could be more than a nominal global security partner for the United States, as the main threats to British interests will remain in the European theater. At best, Brexit will continue to be a distraction from broader international security challenges.

The Brexit process currently dominates Britain's political and policy agenda and is likely to remain a priority for several years. The current British government seems determined to maintain the special security and defense partnership with the United States. If Brexit is an economic success, or at least not harmful, there is a good prospect that the United Kingdom could remain America's preferred military partner. But further reductions in Britain's military capabilities, following an economically damaging Brexit, would fatally weaken that prospect.

In the worst case, Brexit is a perfect storm of economic, political, and security challenges involving a financial crisis, the breakup of the

⁵⁹ "Twenty Years after a Peace Deal the Mood is Sour in Northern Ireland," *Economist*, March 31, 2018.

⁶⁰ Otso Iho, "Brexit Divisions Elevate Impact and Likelihood of UK Terrorism in the Short Term," *Jane's Terrorism & Insurgency Monitor*, July 6, 2016.

United Kingdom, and a radical left-wing Labour Party government. The military impact alone would include abandoning the nuclear deterrent and cutting conventional forces to the point of military irrelevance. As a result of these factors and pressing domestic challenges in Scotland and Northern Ireland, Britain could experience a long period of strategic introspection during which it would play only a limited role in addressing common Western security threats. In these circumstances, far from being a valued partner, the United Kingdom would become a source of strategic vexation for the United States.