

The UK's Unique Role in Achieving European Security Independence

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Significant doubts have been increasingly raised by senior policymakers and military leaders across Europe concerning the continent's military preparedness should a much larger war erupt in the relatively near future, specifically with Russia. The invasion of Ukraine pushed Sweden and Finland into the arms of NATO, putting an end to the idea that large-scale peace was to be the default for Europe for the entirety of the 21st century. Like the above-mentioned cases of two EU countries discarding decades of neutrality in favour of joining this military alliance, Russian aggression has pushed the post-Brexit UK and EU more closely together than they otherwise would have been. Political actors on both sides of the Channel have acknowledged the UK still has a valuable role to play in ensuring the security of the continent. The post-Brexit UK occupies a unique role in its relationship with allies in North America and Europe, and has the potential to help realize European security independence that both complements and is distinct from, the US-led NATO alliance to meet a variety of potential threats and, quite possibly distinct European priorities, in the coming years.

Since the outset of the Cold War, European countries, particularly Western European nation-states, have relied heavily on the US for their collective security. Despite recent developments, this largely remains the case, but with a growing appetite among key figures across the continent that Europe can and should be capable of pursuing its own security with or without Washington. This is most evident in Finnish presidential frontrunner Alexander Stubb's words this month that it was "very important that we in Europe take care of our own defense," and that, backing the opinion of President Niinistö, that "we need a more European NATO" (Kauranen, 2024).

There was also a recent conference given by two officials from NATO-candidate Sweden, General Micael Byden and Carl-Oskar Bohlin, that their citizens should be prepared for war, which was met by much skepticism and alarm by politicians and members of the public alike (Kirby, 2024). Couple statements like these with the ongoing war in Ukraine two years after the 2022 invasion with further reports that the US is in the process of repositioning nuclear weapons to the UK, it then comes as no surprise that many decisionmakers in Europe, particularly in the EU and UK, are eager to begin putting Brexit behind them upon being confronted with these very real concerns.

Fortunately, the UK remains a significant player in safeguarding Europe's security, and can play to its unique strengths that can bring much to securing European security independence. Concerning North America, the UK enjoys a close relationship with Canada. Both countries remain members of the Commonwealth, and they also both share the same head of state. Historically, the UK also enjoys not just a strong relationship with the US, but is party to their "special relationship." Importantly for security, all three majority English-speaking allies are part of the Five Eyes intelligence sharing alliance, formed in the aftermath of WWII (McCandless Farmer, 2023). Moreover, apart from the US, the UK is one of only a handful of European members of the NATO alliance that commits 2% of its GDP to defense. Attributes such as these allow the UK to be in a good position to convey the security needs of Europe to a North American audience alongside fostering greater transatlantic cooperation that benefits the continent militarily.

Notably, except for Russia, EU member France and the non-EU UK are Europe's only nuclear-armed powers. Should Europe continue to move increasingly towards not only mending the political divisions of Brexit but building new bonds, the UK can act as a central pillar in creating an independent European nuclear umbrella, albeit not on the same scale as the one possessed by the US. The post-Brexit UK and EU member-states increasing security ties has been the trajectory of the relationship on this topic for some time, and it will most likely continue as key actors in London, Brussels, and other European capitals must now contend with the possibility of all-out war with Russia in the coming decades, if not years. With political instability predicted to be bountiful this year, 2024 stands to be the year that both the UK and EU, combined with non-EU NATO allies, should begin a permanent course of security independence that can operate independently of American assistance and un beholden to the potentially disruptive policies of US legislators.

There seems to much broad, albeit not universal, agreement regarding the post-Brexit UK and EU seeking closer defense ties regardless if the UK Government is Conservative or Labour. For example, in 2022, EU High Representative Josep Borrell indicated that the bloc accepted the UK's request to join PESCO despite the UK leaving the EU only two years prior (Antinozzi, 2022). This is a Dutch-led project that improves the military mobility of British troops on the European mainland (Antinozzi, 2022). This happened under a Conservative UK Government, and this line of thinking extends to Labour should it win the general election later this year. The Labour Party's John Healey stated should they win, they would be working on securing "systemic cooperation and a defense and security pact" with Brussels (Posaner, Kayali, and Stone, 2023). Overall, the desire to have the UK act as a foundation for European security by increasingly engaging with the EU has been the path of recent years that will seemingly continue. Provided both major parties in the UK continue to follow this course, it enables the post-Brexit UK to find more of its footing in a mutually beneficial way, allowing the country to maintain its role in NATO and maintaining links with North American allies while also providing greater capabilities to European structures that could allow the continent to act independently in its own interests.