



| CSDP - Soldier on top of the mountain with a flag of the European Union.

## BREXIT: A PARADOXICAL EFFECT ON THE EU'S DEFENCE POLICY?

by Nicolas Gros-Verheyde

Britain's decision on 23 June 2016 to leave the European Union is a serious blow to Europe's framework. Will it, however, have a negative impact on the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) ? Not necessarily.

## The strategic consequences

Concerning Britain's departure, the result seems catastrophic at first glance. The EU will "lose" one of its three major powers, one of its two permanent seats on the United Nations Security Council, unrivalled diplomatic expertise and one of the foremost networks of embassies in the world, as well as a privileged link with the United States, and an English-speaking part of the world. In military terms, the United Kingdom, alongside France, is the only country to have such wide-ranging means of high intensity warfare, from the special forces and navy through to military aircraft and nuclear weapons.

## The consequences for the CSDP

However, in terms of Europe's Common Security and Defence Policy, Brexit's consequences will not necessarily be overly negative. This paradox is due to several factors. Firstly, Britain's commitment to the CSDP has been quite limited over the years. Secondly, Brexit does not mean the end of Britain's commitment to NATO, which remains the world's foremost military alliance. On the contrary, London will be inclined to demonstrate its capacities and influence within the Alliance even more than it did in the past. Likewise, Brexit will not bring an

end to the various bilateral cooperation arrangements entered into with France (the Lancaster House Agreement), the Netherlands or northern European countries. The loss of Britain is more on an intellectual level. With its formidable and well-qualified negotiators, Britain has often provided the EU with a more realistic and robust perspective on international relations, by being proactive in several major international crises: terrorism, Ukraine, Iran, Ebola, Syria, Iraq, Sudan, etc.

## A moment of truth for the CSDP

For proponents of a European defence policy (the CSDP), Brexit might seem to be "good news", in some ways. Certain previously "blocked" subjects could safely be put back on the table. This unblocking has already begun, with the establishment of a mini military HQ, and a commitment by the 28 in the last EU summit to jointly finance the deployment of "battlegroups". The final outcome will depend on the willingness of the remaining member states, particularly states in the "heart" of Europe (France, Germany, Italy, Benelux, Spain, etc.) to continue. This is, in a sense, a "moment of truth" for the European defence policy. Countries that have taken shelter behind Britain to hide their scepticism – such as Sweden, Poland, Lithuania, even Ireland or Austria – will have to reveal themselves.

## What does the future hold for Britain in the CSDP?

Britain's departure from the EU does not also mean the end of all collaboration with Europe. Far from it! The Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), as well as the fight against crime and terrorism, are the only areas where Theresa May's Conservative government has expressed its willingness to "cooperate" with the European Union. This political statement has been confirmed by British diplomats. Their hope seems to be to continue to participate in almost all activities. It's possible. There is nothing to stop Britain from signing a framework agreement with the EU, allowing it to participate in civilian and military missions that concern it. There is also nothing to stop the United Kingdom from signing an arrangement with the European Defence Agency, as Norway and Switzerland have already done, with a supporting financial contribution. If Permanent Structured Cooperation is normally reserved for member states only, there is nothing to prevent passerelles with the United Kingdom being considered. But London must accept the decisions imposed upon it by the 27, once they are made.

The UK's wish, not explicitly stated, to continue to be involved as closely as possible in CSDP decisions could, then, be quashed. Or, at least, it will depend strongly on

their willingness and on progress in the UK's future relationships with the continent regarding traditional Community policies. The United Kingdom could thus find itself as a strong advocate for strengthening EU-NATO relations, which would allow it, in an official and practical capacity, to continue to be closely associated with certain EU decisions or policies in the external field. Quite a paradox!



### > AUTHOR

**Nicolas Gros-Verheyde** is editor-in-chief of Bruxelles2, author of the handbook on Europe's Common Security and Defence Policy, published by Editions du Villard.