



© VanderWolf Images / Shutterstock.com

| BREXIT - The impact on defense, in the context of the launch of a new EU Global Strategy.

BREXIT AND EUROPEAN DEFENCE: BETWEEN UNCERTAINTY AND COOPERATION

by Alessandro Marrone

The negotiations on Brexit are likely to have a dual effect on European security and defence, bringing more uncertainty at industrial level in the coming years and triggering more cooperation within the European Union.

The outcome of the UK election has weakened the Conservative party, which no longer holds a majority of seats in Westminster. The current hung Parliament is forcing the Tories to try a minority

government, and Theresa May's leadership within the Conservative camp is being challenged. That situation does not reverse the Brexit process, since a large majority of British lawmakers have pledged to implement the 2016 referendum.

However, it may question the option proposed by the prime minister to the electorate: a "hard Brexit" - seeing the country out of the single market and the EU legal jurisdiction, but willing to have a comprehensive free trade agreement with

the Union. As a result, the status of EU-UK relations will remain in flux at least for the next couple of years, with different options on the table. No deal, and an automatic exit of the UK from the EU, a postponing of a negotiations deadline or even

new political elections which will test the electorate's willingness to continue such an uncertain path to exit the Union.

Such overall uncertainty is already having an impact on the security and defence sector at the industrial level. The British military and industry are deeply interconnected in a number of ways with the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB). There are important joint procurement programmes, such as the Eurofighter combat aircraft with Germany, Italy and Spain. Mainland Europe defence companies have a substantial footprint in the UK, i.e. French company Thales and Italian company Leonardo. A two-way interconnection of supply chains does link small and medium sized enterprises and industrial giants across the Channel. A number of scientific and technological networks bring together institutions, private sector and academia working on security and defence issues. The weakening of those linkages is a possibility, because they depend on the continuation of the UK access to the EU single market. And this risk may hamper or at least slow down European cooperation with British actors even before London leaves the Union. This is particularly important because the EDTIB is crucial when it comes to the European strategic autonomy to act in the defence field: only by mastering the necessary capabilities will the Europeans be enabled to act militarily if, when and where needed.

At a political level, the path to Brexit is stimulating intra-EU cooperation. The institutions

have taken significant steps in the defence field, from the European Global Strategy presented by the High Representative/Vice President to the European Commission's European Defence Fund. France, Germany, Italy and Spain have put forward unprecedented statements to launch the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PeSCO) envisaged by the Lisbon Treaty. The Brexit negotiations will continue to stimulate intra-EU cooperation in three ways. Firstly, by directly removing the British veto to it. This may have a positive effect on PeSCO, on the establishment of a proper European military headquarters, on the Union's funding of defence research and procurement, on the empowerment of the European Defence Agency, etc.

A second positive - albeit indirect - effect is that as British politics are weakened and destabilised

while the EU's political core is enhanced by the Emmanuel Macron victory and German government stability, the pros of working to improve the Union's framework and policies - including on security and defence - become more evident. Third, there are still a number of public misconceptions about the advantages of leaving the Union and renationalising certain policies: the Brexit negotiations will clarify the costs and disadvantages of such a choice and what will be lost in economic, political and security terms. This will be a reality check for those who are against defence cooperation and integration, and particularly for certain unrealistic assessments of what can be achieved by a single European country in terms of national security.

At this stage, it is not worth considering whether Brexit will mean the launch of a European

“

AT THIS STAGE,
IT IS NOT WORTH
CONSIDERING WHETHER
BREXIT WILL MEAN THE LAUNCH
OF A EUROPEAN ARMY.

”

army. First, because it is extremely uncertain how and when Brexit will concretely happen. Second, because this army is not an issue on the European table for the next few years. What is on the table in Brussels, Berlin, Paris or Rome, is how to develop military capabilities together in the Union framework in a more effective way. It is about how to operationally command these capabilities via a functioning European headquarters to ensure swift military action if necessary. It is about the political leadership to decide and guide this action, as well as the development of the capabilities needed.

All of this requires a permanent and structured cooperation among EU institutions and the member states willing and able to move forward in the defence field. The Brexit process allows the launch of such cooperation, but only political will in European capitals will make it happen.



> **AUTHOR**

Alessandro Marrone is a Senior Fellow in the Security and Defence Programme at the Institute of International Affairs (IAI)