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Brexit and the Shifting Pillars of NATO

by Julian Lindley-French
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► Executive Summary

Will Britain's departure from the EU lead to the creation of an Anglosphere and a Eurosphere within NATO?

Unfortunately, there are a range of challenges to such a formulation. First, if the EU continues to drive a hard post-Brexit relationship with the British, it may be increasingly difficult for any government in London to convince the British people that other Europeans are worth defending. Second, would the United States, Canada and others entertain such an idea? Third, France is not going to abandon its strategic relationship with Britain – Brexit or no Brexit. Fourth, there will be a Brexit deal and Britain will remain a key factor in European defence. Fifth, “events, dear boy, events!”

However, Brexit or no Brexit, NATO's pillars are shifting. The United States will demand more of its allies if Washington is to maintain a credible security and defence guarantee for Europe. The changing nature of conflict will tend to emphasize intelligence and power projection, both of which play to Britain's residual strengths.

Canada? It is hard for an outsider to discern Canadian defence policy, other than bumbling along in strategic suburbia with the desire to be seen as the good neighbour. This is a mistake. NATO's shifting pillars will have profound implications for Canadian security and defence policy.

A formal Anglosphere and Eurosphere within NATO? Most likely not. A U.S.-sphere and German-sphere? Quite possibly, but don't mention it in polite company. Canada? Who knows?



“If Britain must choose between Europe and the open sea, she must always choose the open sea”¹

-Winston S. Churchill

Anglosphere and Eurosphere? Are these to be the two new post-Brexit pillars of a reformed NATO? Will the geographic pillars upon which the Alliance rests, one in North America, the other in Europe, now be replaced by quasi-ideological pillars – the one decidedly intergovernmental and focused on America, Britain and Canada, while the other is increasingly integrated and organized in and by the EU? What are the implications for Canada?

This is not Britain’s finest hour. Amid the hysteria over Brexit, little has been written about the strategic consequences of Britain’s pending split from the European Union (EU) and even less about the impact Brexit could have upon NATO. In many ways, Canada is the country that helps make the Alliance an alliance, rather than simply a U.S.-European protectorate. Traditionally, it has been Britain that has acted, not so much as a bridge between North America and Europe, as Churchill once envisaged, but certainly as the oft-sticky glue that has worked to keep NATO together during its many crises and seemingly endless turbulence.

The Need for a New NATO

Change is nothing new to NATO. In December 1967, Belgian defence minister Pierre Harmel produced a landmark report entitled “The Future Tasks of the Alliance”, in which he stated: “The Alliance is a dynamic and vigorous organisation which is constantly adapting itself to changing conditions. Given such changes people in NATO societies want action/protection and are not seeing it. It has also shown that its future tasks can be handled within the terms of the Treaty [Washington] by building on the methods and procedures which have proved their value over many years.”² Were Harmel around today he might suggest that Brexit is one of the few challenges that seriously question whether the Alliance can any longer handle “future tasks” within the “terms of the Treaty”.

One problem is that neither NATO nor Britain are what they used to be. The once-predominant United States, while still the only truly global power, is stretched thin the world over with peer and not-so-peer competitors emerging to challenge its writ, at times and in places of their choosing, and possibly in conjunction. Even if America continues to have the will to lead – and there are big questions today about the Trump administration and the Alliance – Washington will still need NATO. Indeed, for Washington to continue to act as the security and defence guarantor, chief balancer and leader of Allied powers in Asia-Pacific, the Americas, the Middle East, Europe, as well as the seas between and the space above, the U.S. will need a new NATO with a committed and powerful Britain at its core. It would necessarily be a NATO that is as much about keeping America strong the world over when and where she needs to be strong, as it is about the effective

¹ <http://eu-rope.ideason europe.eu/2013/11/10/winston-churchill-a-founder-of-the-european-union/>

² http://www.bits.de/NRANEU/nato-strategy/Harmel_Report_complete.pdf



organization of European defence. That new balance between collective defence and collective European support for the U.S. is the essential new transatlantic contract in an age when defence and deterrence have gone global. In practice, that will most likely mean Europeans doing far more for their own defence, with the U.S. increasingly the distant guarantor.

And yet, there seems little evidence any European state is really prepared to face such a new and daunting strategic reality. The EU and its member states remain (as ever) obsessed with the institutional shape of “Europe”. European defence, as ever, has little to do with the effective defence of Europe, but (as ever) rather too much to do with the organization of political power within Europe. PESCO?

Brexit Britain?

Britain? Sadly, since the 2016 EU referendum Britain has become even more of a *Little Britain*, with the high political and bureaucratic establishment now embroiled in a form of political civil war that is in danger of reducing a top-five world economic and military power to little more than a bit-part player in a latter day Shakespearean tragedy. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern really are dead!³ Given Britain’s strategic context, and the emerging threats with which it must contend from Russia and Islamist terrorism, such contention is strategic irresponsibility of the first order. It is irresponsibility that has been reinforced by a post-economic crash, train-crash defence policy that sees massive increases to counterterrorism funding to mask failed domestic policy. Consequently, the conventional defence budget is falling in real terms, partly to pay for a nuclear deterrent the cost of which was in 2010, for the first time, placed within the defence budget. The result is that the British army today is smaller than at any time since before the Napoleonic Wars. Size is not everything in today’s technology age, but it does matter.

By adopting an attitude of “we recognize only as much threat as the short-term balance sheet allows”, London is effectively placing an ideological commitment to sound money above sound defence. By placing an undue emphasis on the nuclear deterrent as the core of national defence – because in spite of two impressive new heavy aircraft carriers (and partly because of them) there is not a lot else – London is opting for a form of isolationism, which in many ways Brexit has come to exemplify. In other words, and on the face of it, for all the rhetoric about an enhanced commitment to the defence of Europe through NATO, Britain has sacrificed much of the strategic and political leverage its hitherto excellent armed forces have afforded London, at a time when the need for such influence tools has never been greater.

³ In Hamlet, Shakespeare used Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to demonstrate the gap between what men aspire to, and the reality.



Post-Brexit EU Defence?

The EU is not much better, and in fact in some respects far worse. There is much talk in Brussels these days of a European defence union. Indeed, the idea is gaining ground in Brussels, as well as certain usual suspect capitals, that now is the moment for the EU to take on more and more responsibility for the bloc's defence – and that such a defence will, must and can only be achieved by deeper defence integration along the lines of something akin to the failed 1952-1954 European Defence Community. To that end, recent European councils have issued a range of defence-integrating communiqués that go from the creation of strategic headquarters to more integrated procurement, and teeter on the edge of force integration.

And yet, the best the EU can hope for is a shadow NATO that will be very expensive to establish. Few EU and NATO members seem willing to properly embrace the 2014 NATO Wales Summit defence investment pledge of spending two per cent of GDP on defence by 2024, of which 20 per cent per annum should be spent on new equipment and defence integration. Instead, (like Canada) they play semantic games with language so as not to be tied down to a commitment they only made to keep the Americans happy. Even those who do nominally qualify to meet the two per cent figure, such as Britain, do so only via some liberal interpretation of NATO guidelines and creative accounting. Sadly, NATO guidelines on defence expenditure permit such sleight-of-hand. However, the strategic and political pressure on armed forces to do more increases daily, not least because of the growing role new technologies, such as artificial intelligence, are having in U.S., Chinese and Russian defence futures.

Anglosphere and Eurosphere?

So, Anglosphere and Eurosphere? Yes, it may be possible to envisage the Alliance adapted into an Anglosphere and a Eurosphere. It would certainly be a neat political solution for a post-Brexit NATO. However, that is not the way the Alliance works and there are a range of challenges to such a formulation.

First, if the EU continues to drive a hard post-Brexit relationship with the British it may be increasingly hard for any government in London to convince the British people that other Europeans are worth defending. As one Yorkshire friend said to your correspondent, “why should we risk our young men and women defending those b*****s when they are trying to screw us for a decision we made democratically?” Outside of the London metropolitan liberal bubble that is a sentiment held widely in a country in which there are few signs that public opinion has shifted on Brexit. If Brexit negotiations really turn toxic, expect such bloody-minded sentiments to increase. Dunkirk spirit? And there can be no question that such political toxicity would impact NATO. Worse, in the event of a Jeremy Corbyn government, Britain's very commitment to the Alliance would be open to question, as would every other British commitment.

Second, it takes more than two to strategically tango. Would the United States, Canada and possibly others such as Australia (and even in time perhaps India) entertain the idea of such a



grouping as the Anglosphere? It certainly has a nostalgic ring to it, possibly reinforced by a shared experience in Afghanistan, where those who took the greatest risk tended to speak English. Elements within the Trump administration are certainly attracted by the idea, not least because the president sees the EU as little more than a fig leaf for an emerging German empire. Still, would the Trudeau administration in Ottawa buy such an idea? The answer is no. A century ago Canada came of age as a nation during the First World War, and my sense is that an Anglosphere is not the direction of travel 21st century Canada sees for itself. That said, a new strategic grouping is emerging organized around the Five Eyes (now Six Eyes) intelligence regime comprising America, Australia, Britain, Canada, New Zealand, and as of 2017, Japan.

Third, France is not going to abandon its strategic relationship with Britain – Brexit or no Brexit. A recent leaked memo from within French President Emmanuel Macron’s inner circle revealed French suspicions about Germany’s commitment to deeper European defence co-operation. One leaked email stated bluntly that Britain will remain France’s “most important” military ally after Brexit.⁴

Fourth, there will be a Brexit deal. The British economy is simply too important to the rest of the EU, and the EU economy simply too important to Britain for there not to be a deal. For all the hysteria in London, and at times misplaced arrogance in Brussels, a Brexit deal will be forthcoming. Moreover, for all the challenges the British armed forces face at present, and given Britain’s immensely powerful intelligence capabilities, the British also remain too important to the security and defence of Europe for Brexit to end or damage the security and defence relationship. Brussels might try and deny it but Britain’s defence weight is also a critical factor for a Europe faced by a quixotic America to its west, a pathologically power-unstable Russia to its east and north, and potentially society-bending unregulated immigration from Europe’s south.

Fifth “events, dear boy, events!” Given the instability around Europe’s borders and the threats and challenges Europeans face in the 21st century, even the most wet-behind-the-ears of strategic analysts would likely conclude that in relatively quick order Brexit will come to be seen as a second-order strategic issue.

The post-Brexit Pillars of NATO

But here’s the twist. Brexit or no Brexit, the pillars of NATO are shifting. The United States will need to demand more of its allies if Washington is to maintain a credible security and defence guarantee for Europe. Indeed, that aim is implicit in current efforts to adapt NATO to meet 21st century challenges, one of which is more equitable burden sharing with the Americans.

Washington will also demand from the more powerful of its NATO allies that at times they show a willingness to fly their respective flags beyond the Euro-Atlantic area. London at least understands this, which is why recently resigned Defence secretary Michael Fallon suggested,

⁴ See “France Prefers Britain as Defence Ally, Leaks Reveal,” *The Times*, Aug. 1, 2017.



somewhat fancifully perhaps, that one of the first missions of the new carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth could be to conduct a freedom-of-navigation mission in the South China Sea.

There will be two ways to organize future security and defence efforts, and Britain will be central to both. The first approach will be via the formation of classical coalitions. The emphasis of such formations on deep joint forces working in tandem with power projection capabilities will enable the British to continue to act as a power projection command hub or framework nation for NATO coalitions, particularly in the increasingly important maritime/amphibious domain. However, such a role could only be carried out in close conjunction with NATO allies such as France, Germany, the Netherlands et al., and of course Canada.

The second way of organizing such an effort would be via the EU. For all the hollowness of the EU defence debate, in time a post-Brexit EU could become a partner/pillar of an alliance organized increasingly along functional lines. Such an approach would again need Britain. Given the world NATO is moving into, the EU will never be strong enough militarily to act alone in very large crises. It will also need the NATO assets that the U.S., and the lesser (but hopefully increasing) capabilities of Canada will bring. And Britain will undoubtedly have a relationship with a hybrid intergovernmental/integrated EU defence structure.

In other words, the coalitions could often take on the appearance of an Anglosphere-plus, while the EU approach would appear to be a Eurosphere-plus.

Implications for Canada

It is hard for an outsider to discern Canadian defence policy, rather than bumbling along in strategic suburbia with the desire to be seen as the good neighbour. The flagship Canadian defence policy paper - *Strong, Secure, Engaged* – is remarkable in that it is almost entirely the product of domestic issues and competing interest groups with little or no sign of either strategic analysis or external planning drivers. There is certainly no evidence Canada is preparing for future war. This is a mistake. NATO's shifting pillars have profound implications for Canadian security and defence policy. With the remilitarization of the Arctic and the northern approaches, Canada will need to take on increased responsibilities in what are fast-emerging theatres of strategic contention. With the U.S. ever more engaged in Asia-Pacific, Washington will also demand of Ottawa some form of presence to buttress growing strategic relations with Australia, Japan, and of course South Korea. With Britain returning to a more maritime-amphibious emphasis, and with the Russian Northern Fleet conducting more aggressive operations in the North Atlantic, as well as Russia's militarization of the Arctic, Canadian forces will once again find themselves patrolling historic sea lanes with their counterparts in the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force. There is little sign Ottawa understands this.

A formal Anglosphere and Eurosphere within NATO? Most likely not. A U.S.-sphere and a German-sphere? Quite possibly, but don't mention it in polite company. Canada? Who knows?

► **About the Author**

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