



Taking Back Control? The UK, Europe and NATO

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Introduction

Recent high-level discussions concerning both the European Union (EU) and NATO suggest that they are, like the UK following the EU referendum, experiencing existential crises. EU leaders are fearful of Brexit contagion whilst NATO, despite the revival of Russian recalcitrance, continues to struggle to legitimise its existence and expanded, expeditionary role in a post-Cold War world. NATO is also likely to face increasing challenges from renewed efforts to create parallel EU defence structures, waning US interest in European security, and tensions between member states and Turkey. Moreover, the US is gearing up for a presidential election in November, the results of which will clearly have wide repercussions for the UK and the world. Despite these developments, the overall political direction of the US, EU and NATO remains largely the same, meaning that several aspects of the UK's international policy are likely to remain characterised by continuity, albeit under greater stress.

To what extent, then, can or will the unsettled state of European, US and NATO politics provide openings for new thinking, particularly in the UK government's approach to defence and foreign affairs? In order to consider this question, better understand the UK's strategic position and develop alternative policy recommendations, this briefing reviews recent and ongoing political shifts involving Euro-Atlantic actors of relevance to the UK, as well as considering their historic roots.

The briefing argues that Britain's future international policy should correspond both with the interests and values of the majority and be based on principles

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such as democracy, human rights and social justice. With a declining US debating how to manage and prioritise its relationships with Europe, the Middle East and a rising China, and NATO stuck in a potentially cataclysmic confrontation with Russia, now is a crucial time to rethink Europe's key security relationships.

The UK in NATO: European leadership under US command

Beginning with NATO, it is worth recalling the famous remark made by the alliance's first Secretary General Lord Ismay, that NATO was set up to 'keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down'. This succinctly captured the goals of an organization established after World War 2 as the military counterpart to the Marshall Plan- which bound Europe's major economies to the US whilst *forestalling* the emergence of left-wing governments.

After the war, Britain gradually retreated from its global empire to adopt the role of loyal lieutenant to Washington, which partly explains Whitehall's enthusiasm for and position in the alliance. To perform this role *effectively* today, Britain's military, it is argued, must be qualitatively and quantitatively superior to those of other European countries. The UK thus maintains a 'full-spectrum' military force, which, whilst much smaller than the US, is more broadly capable, and far more capable of projecting power at distance, than those of the US's other allies.

By sustaining far higher military spending levels than most other European NATO member states the UK is able to play a leading role in NATO as it has assets and equipment (including aircraft carriers, nuclear weapons, special forces and submarines) that other countries do not. Importantly, the UK also

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has a political class that is one of, if not the, most willing proponents of using force and supporting the US in its overseas interventions at the UN Security Council. This willingness to 'step up' reflects Whitehall planner's fear that if the UK (and other NATO members) do not make valuable and leading contributions, Washington may look elsewhere in order to form a coalition ready and willing to deliver its strategic goals. For example, as the Commons Defence Select Committee found in its 2008 report entitled *The Future of NATO and European Defence*, the US wants the alliance to act beyond the Euro-Atlantic region and be a 'global organisation'. If NATO fails to do this, the Committee continued, the US would be 'likely to place less emphasis on NATO and, instead, favour "coalitions of the willing"'.

In addition to the US's needs today, as the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Phillip Jones, explained in a speech in July to the City of London, Britain's maritime power has historically been deployed to protect 'commercial interests', not least big business. The Armilla Patrols and successor operations mounted by the Royal Navy in the Persian Gulf since 1980 being a prominent example of this protection of global sea lines of communication. Yet, as Thomas Raines points out in his study of British attitudes to international policy, the UK's focus on commerce in its foreign affairs 'reflects the systemic importance of a relatively small number of multinational companies to the UK's economic health'. Such economic and political elites naturally want business and trade to be at the centre of the UK's foreign policy. For such actors, the ability of the UK and European states (via NATO) to join the US in projecting power well beyond Europe or the North Atlantic and into more volatile regions crucial to the world economy, not least the Gulf and Asia, is extremely valuable.

Raines also notes that the British public (who do not control investment decisions and may well not benefit from them) are more focused on security questions closer to home, such as ‘border protection and counterterrorism’. This raises the problem of how to persuade a sceptical British public and European governments of the need for NATO to maintain a global, expeditionary role. Addressing this point, Lieutenant General Sir Rob Fry, former Director of Operations at the Ministry of Defence, has [observed](#) that ‘the greatest method of getting greater cohesion of thought across NATO members is to convince them of a shared danger and a shared requirement to respond’.

This need to find a common danger around which NATO can cohere and thus justify its existence and expanded role is well served by the UK and US’s recent focus on Russia and terrorist groups such as al-Qaida or the so-called Islamic State (IS). Such a ‘useful enemy’ as jihadi terrorism is unlikely to be defeated or disappear in the near-term, such that unending conflict—a ‘permanent emergency’ as David Keen [describes](#) it— becomes the new norm, justifying high levels of defence spending and global military operations in pursuit of elite economic and strategic goals.

The Future of NATO and European Defence directly acknowledged the problem of legitimacy for the alliance, discussing how the demise of the Soviet Union removed the ‘glue’ binding the allies together so that NATO was left ‘without a single, unifying military threat to confront and without a compelling strategic agenda around which its members could rally’. NATO’s interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo in the 1990s were thus important because they helped to pave the way for a new mission, setting a military and political precedent for the alliance to intervene outside of a self-defence role. This occurred despite the fact that the Foreign Affairs Select Committee [concluded](#) in 2000 that Operation Allied

Force (NATO's 1999 air strikes against Yugoslavia) was 'contrary to the specific terms of what might be termed the basic law of the international community—the UN Charter'.

The alliance's new out-of-area role was then extended with an 'expeditionary, operationally-focused Alliance' fighting in Afghanistan under the auspices of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) but, again, the 2001 invasion occurred *without* a UN mandate. More recently, as Mark Curtis notes, NATO operations against Gaddafi's regime in Libya in 2011, *exceeded* the UN's mandate to protect civilians, whilst again bolstering the alliance's out-of-area role.

In terms of NATO's future, it remains to be seen whether the alliance's post-ISAF focus on the perceived threat from Russia to Eastern European member states presages a rebalancing towards collective European defence and a scepticism over distant interventions, or whether this is just a pause in a further expansion of NATO's role. As for the UK's position in the alliance, since the possibility of greater political integration with Europe has disappeared for the foreseeable future, London is now probably more likely than ever to follow Washington's lead. Following the traumas of Afghanistan and Iraq, the opportunity for the UK to develop a more critical and selective relationship with the US should thus not be lost.

US grand strategy and 'full spectrum dominance'

In order to rethink the future of UK-US relations, we need to examine further the main strategic goals of the world's most powerful actor. This is also necessary if we want to properly appreciate the US, NATO and the UK's recent actions, what might be coming next and the likely responses of other powers,

both in Europe and beyond. Key aspects of US grand strategy include **preventing** the emergence of a rival global power, promoting open markets, and controlling key energy supplies and strategic resources. The military strategy the US has **created** to achieve these goals has been termed 'full spectrum dominance', which entails 'the ability of U.S. forces, operating alone or with allies, to defeat any adversary and control any situation across the range of military operations'.

As Daniel Fiott **notes**, in order to maintain its military-technological dominance the US government has, in recent years, pursued a 'third offset strategy', investing in 'innovative technologies that will "sustain and advance America's military dominance for the 21st century"'. Noam Chomsky has dubbed such public support for high-tech industry as the 'Pentagon System', developed to support the interests of corporate America after World War 2. Whether or not the resultant military technologies actually provide an advantage over real world adversaries, they are likely to deepen the capability gap between the US and its NATO allies, whose military research and development budgets are **fragmented and shrinking**.

With regard to both Europe and Asia, as Ronald O'Rourke **observes** in a report for the US Congress, a key goal of US grand strategy in recent decades has been to prevent 'the emergence of a regional hegemon' because 'such a hegemon could represent a concentration of power strong enough to threaten core US interests' for example, by preventing the US from accessing 'some of the other hemisphere's resources and economic activity'. Thus, the Obama administration's 'pivot to Asia' since 2011 has aimed to contain China's expansion as a regional military power with commensurate control of vital sea lanes.

In Europe, US strategy since World War 2 has ostensibly been to prevent the expansion of Russian and communist influence into Western Europe. Under the surface however, Washington strove to restrict Germany's ability to become the dominant regional power, alone or in partnership with Russia. In order to achieve this, as Peter Gowan theorised in the 1990s, 'US political ascendancy in the territory between Germany and Russia becomes pivotal'. For Gowan, the end of the Cold War presented an opportunity for Washington to build a 'Polish-Ukrainian corridor under US leadership' to split Europe from Russia. Securing dominance over the Balkans and Black Sea and linking this up with Turkey would thus provide a strong base for accessing 'the energy and mineral resources of the Caspian and the Asian Republics of the former USSR'.

Some see similar motivations in the US and NATO's post-2001 projection of power into Afghanistan via Pakistan. Comments made by senior American and British officials underline these state's interest in using Afghanistan to secure their position in the Middle East and Central Asia. For example in 2007, Richard Boucher, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, stated that 'One of our goals is to stabilize Afghanistan so it can become a conduit and hub between South and Central Asia so that energy can flow to the south...and so that the countries of Central Asia are no longer bottled up between the two enormous powers of China and Russia, but rather that they have outlets to the south as well as to the north and the east and the west'. Moreover, in 2009 then UK Defence Secretary Bob Ainsworth stated that 'The entire region in which Afghanistan sits is of vital strategic importance to the United Kingdom'.

According to these long-term strategic aims, it may thus not be surprising to see President Obama reverse his previous goal of withdrawing all US troops

from Afghanistan before he leaves the White House. Instead the US will **maintain** 8,400 troops there to prolong a war, which, according to the New York Times, 'now seems likely to grind on indefinitely'. The UK will also be doing its bit, committing **additional** forces to both Afghanistan (so that a total of 500 troops will be deployed until at least 2017 under the NATO-led Operation Resolute Support) and **Iraq** (now totaling 550 troops) within US-led coalitions. David Cameron's decision to up these commitments in the fortnight after the Brexit referendum may be seen as a clear attempt to signal the UK's ongoing importance to its key strategic partner.

A false consensus on NATO?

The UK's recent actions show how it remains one of, if not the, most ardent promoters of NATO as an essential pillar of security for Euro-Atlantic nations. Domestically, whilst vocal critics of the alliance exist within the Labour and Scottish National parties, for the most part it retains strong parliamentary support. This is despite evidence showing considerable public disquiet with the status quo, including a 2015 YouGov poll which **found** that a majority of swing Labour voters want the party to be 'less subservient to the USA', not 'get involved in American wars' and instead be 'more positive about Britain's role in Europe'.

However, another 2014 YouGov poll for Chatham House **found** that a majority of the wider public thinks that the UK should aspire to be a 'great power' rather than accept that it is in decline. 61% of respondents thought that NATO is either 'vital' or 'important' to UK security. However, a larger number of respondents also thought that the UK should have closest ties with the EU (30%) rather than the US (25%), suggesting the European dimension of the alliance may be more important to the public. Overall, such findings suggest

that the first job for those seeking to develop an alternative to Britain's current position is that they lead a public debate about what type of international behaviour and relationships would align best with the values and goals that voters most care about.

The current lack of public awareness and debate about defence and security issues, for example regarding what NATO is and does, may also have led to a 'false consensus' and a degree of unreality concerning the UK's ability to 'punch above its weight' at a time of austerity. Just as the lack of an open and informed debate about the UK's relationship with Europe culminated in the British public's decision to leave the EU, so the lack of understanding around NATO is a real problem in a democracy, for supporters of the alliance as much as for its critics. On the one hand, military alliances—which are by their nature secretive and inward-looking—benefit from opacity. Yet, on the other hand, history shows that even the most undemocratic political organisations need the moral authority that comes from public support for their goals.

The UK and NATO: ever closer union?

Despite rising concerns with the direction the alliance has taken since the 1990s (including in [France](#) and [Germany](#), which are more wary of a confrontation with Russia) as we have previously [noted](#), the Brexit process will likely push the UK closer to the US and NATO. The UK government previously [announced](#), following the NATO summit in Wales in September 2014, that it would provide a battlegroup and a brigade headquarters to the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force for rapid deployment 'particularly at the periphery of NATO's territory' and an agreement with Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Norway to establish a high readiness Joint Expeditionary Force for rapid-response 'anywhere in the world'. These moves

were framed, in part, as a response to Russian aggression in Crimea and the potential for further interference in the Baltics. Thus, as Lawrence Freedman [noted](#), 'If nothing else' dealing with Russia gave NATO an answer 'to the question of what it needs to worry about as it leaves Afghanistan'.

The July 2016 NATO [summit](#) at Warsaw saw the UK commit even more troops to the military alliance's operations in Eastern Europe. Subsequently, incoming Prime Minister Theresa May and Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson [spoke](#) with their Russia counterparts in order to 'normalise' relations. The Commons Defence Committee, meanwhile, [acknowledged](#) that Western sanctions 'are felt most keenly' by Russian citizens, but still recommended that they continue. As for the US, while the Pentagon publicly presented Russia as the number one security threat to the nation, the State Department agreed to cooperate with Moscow on counter-terror operations in Syria. Such events show the complex nature of a state's international actions, which, with different departments and sectors trying to meet the expectations of various actors, whether foreign allies or public opinion, can appear confused and contradictory.

For the UK, presenting itself as a leading military force in NATO allows its senior politicians to present Britain as a world power, with the UK once again able to be the good guy and justify its nuclear-armed status, as its statesmen and women stand up to recalcitrants. At the same time that Russian and Western leaders use nationalistic appeals for domestic political purposes, there is also a tacit understanding on both sides that tensions needs to be managed so that they don't spill over into armed conflict, despite the risks brinkmanship brings. Given the otherwise dire state of relations between the nuclear powers, in the short-term, political dialogue on strategic issues between Russia and the West, as [proposed](#) by the Defence Select Committee (highlighting in its July 2016

report how UK-Russia relations had gone into ‘deep freeze’), should therefore be encouraged.

These developments should lead us to consider what sort of Russia the UK and the West wants to see in future. Several observers have noted that Putin’s approval ratings, which had fallen to an unprecedented low in 2011, received a substantial boost following his invasion of Crimea. As with other Western sanctions, including against Iraq and Iran, the effect is often that the citizenry draws closer to the nation’s leadership. The UK government may thus end up helping to strengthen Putin, but accept this consequence since it has few other visible tools which it can use to punish him and thus look tough.

Rather than playing games to preserve the appearance of political control and credibility, serious energy should be invested in negotiating a new political settlement between the West and Russia, pushing the possibility of nuclear war to the margins and promoting peaceful co-existence. This will mean resolving key issues including ballistic missile defence deployments in Eastern Europe and NATO expansion, at a time when Georgia and Ukraine are still bidding for membership. For, as the Defence Committee also pointed out in a recent report, Russia would view ‘any further enlargement of NATO’ as a ‘breach of the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act’.

In the medium term, one important change Russia could make in order to improve the chances for peaceful co-existence with the West would be to rethink its national self-image in line with its reduced resources. Thus rather than seeking equal status with the US as a global military power with a right to significant influence in Europe, Asia and the Middle East, Moscow could commit to non-intervention and focus on domestic economic and social development.

Whilst such a shift in priorities may seem distant, requiring the emergence of a stronger civil society within Russia and a more settled global political situation where Moscow's core strategic needs are met, such alternative political visions need to be countenanced now, especially given the [increasing economic and military ties](#) between Moscow and Beijing, which could lead to a deeper strategic alliance focused on opposing the West.

Reasserting US 'credibility': implications for NATO and the UK

Given the magnetism of US power for British policymakers, we can get a sense of NATO's likely trajectory into the 2020s by studying the track record and pronouncements of the 2016 US presidential candidates. For example, if they were in the White House, would they provide continuity or change in relation to the Obama administration? How might they respond to significant events? How would they, more broadly, wield the immense power they have at their disposal?

Beginning with Hillary Clinton, many observers, [including](#) former Defense Secretary Robert Gates, have noted that she is likely to pursue a more hawkish path than Barack Obama. [According](#) to Mark Landler and Amy Chozick of the New York Times, 'two dozen current and former administration officials, foreign diplomats, friends and outside analysts described Mrs. Clinton as almost always the advocate of the most aggressive actions considered by Mr. Obama's national security team'. This and [evidence](#) drawn from her leaked emails, suggests Clinton is likely to favour [continuing](#) and extending Obama's drone strikes—which have killed [hundreds](#) of civilians—and other covert actions across the Middle East and North Africa.

The list of targeted countries includes Libya, which Clinton **pushed** Obama to bomb—with disastrous results—in 2011. In addition, when Secretary of State, Clinton is **reported** to have been keen to intervene in Syria against President Assad. Republicans have **presented** Obama's subsequent choice (in August 2013, months after Clinton had left office) not to enforce the 'red-line' against the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons as a sign of weakness that Putin would exploit to annex Crimea seven months later. A key test of a Clinton presidency would thus be whether and how she focuses on re-establishing US 'credibility' in the world at a time when the **majority** of the US public are wary about foreign entanglements.

Donald Trump's approach to international affairs is often derided by mainstream commentators and the US defense establishment—including members of his own party—as **irresponsible**. Trump has previously embraced the use of **torture**, **proposed** that Muslims be banned from entering the US, **denied** the existence of manmade climate change, **suggested** using nuclear weapons against IS, **called** NATO 'obsolete' and **praised** Vladimir Putin. Yet not all of these positions set him apart from recent US administrations. The 'national security community's' objection to Trump is thus, arguably, that he does not seek their council and show sufficient respect for their views, instead preferring to define himself in opposition to elites and their worldviews in a particularly abrasive manner.

Overall then, a major difference between a Clinton and Trump presidency would be that the former would be more likely than the latter to conduct the US's international affairs according to a more traditional, and thus predictable, playbook, which both the Democrat and Republican establishments—and close allies such as the UK—would be more comfortable with. Yet whilst their

priorities and management styles may diverge, both Clinton and Trump will likely want to re-establish the US's 'credibility', exercising force to establish and enforce 'red-lines', against those actors perceived to be challenging US interests and goals. Thus whichever candidate secures the Presidency, it seems likely that the UK—now even more tightly within the US orbit, keen to remain a leading force in NATO and for the alliance to be the US's partner of choice—will be drawn into further overseas interventions.

To proceed in this fashion, the UK government will need to contend with public opinion, which remains *war weary*. The language used by Defence Secretary Michael Fallon in a speech given in Washington earlier this year was thus notable because of how he described parliament's decision in 2015 to extend British airstrikes from Iraq to Syria. Fallon *said* that the vote had 'erased the stain of its previous Syria vote in Parliament in 2013.' Yet, as Mark Curtis *points out*, 'British aircraft were already secretly striking IS targets in Syria' before the vote, with UK pilots embedded with US forces flying strike missions. Given the unpopularity of visible deployments of troops on the ground, future British contributions to US wars are thus likely to include covert operations, whether by land, air or sea, involving intelligence gathering and special forces, as part of the UK's military *strategy* of remote control warfare.

Conclusion

Each of the major powers—including the US as the world's only superpower—and the NATO military alliance which the US leads, has an Achilles heel. The UK's main weakness is its governing elite's obsession, driven on by commercial interests, with remaining a global power. This has led to overdependence on maintaining the special relationship with the US, even at the cost of becoming subservient. The acceptance of a junior role has been fatal for the UK in terms

of its decision-maker's ability to act independently, prudently and in line with the nation's real interests.

When the political winds over the Atlantic change direction the UK is thus liable to be drawn into whatever escapade the US President deems necessary. Without the emergence of a strong democratic movement capable of holding the government to account—alongside a cohesive and effective parliamentary opposition—this tendency is likely to be exacerbated following the vote to leave the EU. At present, this movement still needs to build up its strength if it is to achieve more fundamental change. Yet, post-Chilcot, the government's room for manoeuvre will continue to be limited by civil society pressure aimed at restraining Britain's engagement in overseas conflict.

A major weakness of Russia is its dysfunctional economic and political model, including its overdependence on fossil fuel revenues, its technological focus on military industries, and its disregard for human rights. Despite Russia's much-diminished position and limited reach, its President is often presented in the Western media as some sort of neo-imperialist. Amongst those who benefit from such demonisation are powerful interests who, in reality, understand Russia's decline and would seek to exacerbate and accelerate it.

As for the US, as seen with the success of militant terrorist groups, Washington's pursuit of full-spectrum dominance means that even relatively small and loose groupings, such as al-Qaida, can mire the US in conflicts which have no end in sight as new players, such as IS, join the fray. Thus, as former Defense Secretary William Cohen *noted* in 2001, the US's 'unrivaled supremacy in the conventional military arena' prompts adversaries to 'seek unconventional, asymmetric means' to 'inflict mass casualties and destruction' against Washington and its allies. As seen more recently, cyber attacks or other

deniable measures may also become weapons of choice for the weak against the supremely powerful.

NATO, meanwhile, has morphed into an alliance with global pretensions, but, oddly, one unable to clearly agree and articulate what its goals are, not least because of its member's differing capabilities, needs and threat perceptions.

Disagreement between member states and public ignorance over what the alliance's aims are and should be naturally causes confusion over how the alliance should function and who should pay the price for its operations.

Meanwhile, the strategic interests of Washington and its supporting elites, such as *securing* 'our critical energy infrastructures', including sea lanes and pipelines, 'to maintain the flow of vital resources' and ensuring US hegemony in Eurasia persist, but increasingly raise the possibility of conflict with China and Russia.

Without reconciliation between Russia and the West, based around strategic dialogue and progressive demilitarization—including on conventional and nuclear arms control, non-proliferation and disarmament—the result can only be a drawn-out stalemate. Meanwhile, tensions, distrust and the potential for miscalculation are rising, with the continual danger of a crisis escalating to war and an unintentional escalation to nuclear catastrophe. Tragically, the present situation strongly benefits the hawks on each side. They are quite happy to secure influence and funding for their favoured institutions absent a substantial political breakthrough between governments at the highest level.

Recommendations

Future efforts to clarify, democratise and rationalise the UK's security relationship with its Euro-Atlantic partners should involve:

- Public and parliamentary inquiry and debate into the nature of the UK's security relationships, the future role of NATO, and the UK's 'special relationship' with the US.

Action here should be part of a wider effort to scrutinise and hold NATO and the British defence establishment—meaning government, parliament, Whitehall and industry—to account and ensure democracy, human rights and social justice are at the heart of UK international policy.

- Pursuing serious dialogue on de-escalation and reconciliation between NATO, the EU and Russia.

This cannot be easy while Russia illegally occupies Crimea, but the logic of a policy of escalation-based deterrence and 'trip-wires' crosses too easily into miscalculation and nuclear-armed confrontation. The consequences of conflict between East and West are potentially terminal for Europe and the world so that strategic stability needs to be recognized as a top priority.

- Rethinking the long-term basis of European security and the role of NATO as a constructive security actor.

Vladimir Putin may not be the partner that many in the West desire but it is clear that Moscow consistently articulates a narrative of NATO encirclement and aggression that needs to be engaged with constructively. NATO members in particular need to engage with Russia's hopes and fears with the intention of finding mutually acceptable outcomes, rather than pursuing a strategy of provocative containment. This will likely require making progress on such fundamental issues as NATO expansion, ballistic missile defence and

restraining military spending as well as arms control and non-proliferation initiatives.

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