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Brexit and Transatlantic Security

Arthur I. Cyr

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ABSTRACT: This article discusses the regional and international security implications of the June 2016 referendum vote that Britain leave the European Union. This essay proposes Brexit creates opportunities for greater cooperation within the NATO alliance and bilaterally with the United States.

The dramatically close vote in the United Kingdom on June 23, 2016, regarding the European Union (EU) referendum continues to reverberate. Referred to as “Brexit,” the narrow decision to withdraw from the organization revealed a nation sharply divided. Public opinion polls and media information mistakenly predicted the vote would support remaining with Europe. Moreover, recent polls wrongly predicting British election outcomes also indicate the public at large remains unsettled. The same uncertainty is true for political leaders. While the bulk of public discussion and political negotiation resulting from the vote focuses on the economic dimensions and the relationships between Britain and the continent of Europe, the new state of affairs is also significant for defense and security concerns, transatlantic relationships, and the existing international system.¹

The failure of Prime Minister David Cameron to secure an affirmative vote on the referendum resulted in his almost immediate resignation and the formation of a new Conservative Party government. Ironically, the 2015 general election had already created a Conservative majority in the House of Commons, ending the need for a coalition with the Liberal Democrats that had governed from 2010 to 2015. Had the Conservatives maintained the coalition, and its associated collegiality, the referendum might have successfully confirmed the pro-Europe stance of the Liberal Democrats and the predecessor Liberal Party. In contrast, Cameron’s successor, Prime Minister Theresa May, a Conservative, has been explicit—indeed emphatic—about withdrawing from the EU, a course with significant political as well as economic dimensions and risks.

The relatively subtle military implications of abrogating Britain’s involvement in the European Union vary. The Union sponsors limited military missions, some of which extend well beyond the geography of Europe. More important to the organization are coordinating efforts and sharing information related to national security, especially in intelligence realms. Britain’s role in this effort arises from its distinctive expertise in military defense and security associated with centuries of policing their

1 “United Kingdom” refers to the entire nation, including Northern Ireland, England, Scotland, and Wales. Geographically, “Britain” normally excludes Northern Ireland; but politically, “Britain” and “Great Britain” refer to the nation’s foreign policy and international relations.

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global empire and managing guerrilla and other unconventional wars currently described as “low-intensity conflicts.”

The *Economist* published an insightful, indeed prescient, analysis of the security concerns involved with the referendum a month before the vote. In it, then-Home Secretary Theresa May noted the European arrest warrant and access to intelligence data are important arguments for remaining within the collaborative. In the same section, Lord Jonathan Evans and Sir John Sawers, former heads of Britain’s domestic and overseas intelligence agencies, expressed the loss of shared data and general collaboration constituted strong arguments against Brexit. Pauline Neville-Jones, a former national security adviser, likewise warned that leaving the European Union would weaken police cooperation and border control.

The future prime minister and former intelligence and security officials were reacting to a controversial statement by Sir Richard Dearlove, another retired foreign intelligence head, who observed, “The truth about Brexit from a national security perspective is that the cost to Britain would be low.”² Others also argue the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Five Eyes intelligence network—comprised of Australia, Britain, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States—provide a durable continuing structure for defense cooperation to overcome the intelligence concerns.

Additionally, Brexit supporters are suspicious of the Union’s relatively open borders, of EU administrators and officials interfering in Britain’s national defense, and of losing national sovereignty to the European Court of Justice. In fact, the fundamental purpose of the region’s supranational economic institutions is to discourage nationalism, and consequent militarism, primarily through indirect commercial means. The goal, though not the means, of European integration, since fully including Germany into the regional economy of Europe after World War II, is to make war less likely. And, thus, the Union’s willingness to undertake limited multilateral military missions as far as Indonesia indicates the fading of nationalism in Europe.

The immediate area of potential challenge for Britain, and danger for Anglo-American relations, arguably lies in and around Protestant-dominated Northern Ireland. Since Ireland’s independence in 1921, peace in the region has been fragile. After the Irish Republican Army renewed violence in the late 1960s, Britain undertook a long, complex process of diplomacy and counterinsurgency that led to the Good Friday Agreement, announced on April 10, 1998. Comprised of two documents, the agreement describes governing arrangements for Northern Ireland to bring Catholic and Protestant elements together and to guarantee the new structure, which collapsed in late 2016 because of a continuing controversy over heating fuel.³

Since Britain and Ireland are members of the European Union, Brexit directly undercuts the broader foundation of political stability as well as economic cooperation governing Northern Ireland even further. Britain will remain a committed member of NATO, maintaining military

2 “Brexit Brief: Security Concerns,” *Economist*, May 14, 2016, 49.

3 Amanda Ferguson, “Cracks Exposed at Heart of Northern Irish Peace by ‘Cash-for-Ash’ Scandal,” Reuters, January 10, 2017.

modernization programs in the face of budget stringencies. And Ireland will sustain its military neutrality, established prior to World War II, as a result of the traditional conflict with Britain. Although reciprocal international investment in this part of the region is possible, Britain's withdrawal from the European Union almost certainly will bring new barriers to such trade.

In contrast to its relationship with Ireland, Britain has had close ties with the United States since America abandoned its traditional isolationism in World War II. Moreover, Brexit allows Britain to cooperate beyond the European Union. This freedom could support more effective collaborative partnerships to prevent controversial outcomes, such as the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, and to safeguard intelligence such as the photographs related to the Manchester Arena attack and classified information.⁴ Yet both countries should also heed President Dwight D. Eisenhower's famous warning about the dangers of a "military-industrial complex."⁵

British Roles

Understanding the consequences of Brexit on NATO, Anglo-Irish relations, and Anglo-American relations in the context of history is particularly important. Britain's traditional posture regarding Europe, in terms of both commerce and military security, involves only partial engagement. A European Union without Britain would naturally divert more attention toward NATO, an established institution for European cooperation. This trend is especially likely given the twin challenges of Islamic terrorism within and beyond Europe and the territorial expansion of Russia into Crimea, Georgia, and Ukraine. Directly across the Mediterranean Sea, the complexity becomes more apparent as the Assad regime in Syria, with vital military support from its ally Russia, has defeated a diverse array of opposing rebel forces, including elements of the Islamic State.

Britain's exceptionally long record of engagement and leadership in international relations—including economic coordination with purely military dimensions and the vexing, and at times violent, history among Britain, Ireland, and Northern Ireland—bears directly on contemporary concerns regarding global terrorism. Britain's roots of flexible internationalism transcend domestic party politics.

Though a diplomatic leader within Europe, Britain did not initially seek entry into the European Economic Community. After two painful vetoes over a decade by nationalist President Charles de Gaulle of France, Britain did achieve membership in 1973; however, it has never adopted the Euro. Thus, Brexit is only the latest development in the nation's long-standing economic ambiguity.

4 Ewan MacAskill, "UK Faces Massive Rise in Costs to Fix Stealth Fighter," *Guardian*, February 4, 2017; Gordon Rayner and Robert Mendick, "Pictures Leaked 'after Being Shared with US Intelligence' Show Bomb Used in Manchester Attack," *Telegraph*, May 24, 2017; and Andrew Rafferty and Ken Dilanian, "Report: President Trump Revealed Classified Information to Russia," NBC News, May 15, 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/report-president-trump-revealed-classified-information-russia-n759846>.

5 Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1960–1961*, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States (Washington, DC: Office of the Federal Register, 1961), 1035–40; and "Eisenhower's Farewell Address, 1961," *American Experience*, accessed April 23, 2018, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americalexperience/features/eisenhower-farewell/>.

Outside Europe, the long history of diplomatic and military cooperation between the United Kingdom and the United States, known as the “Special Relationship,” has both complicated relations between the two nations and provided each ally a relatively strong, though not always obvious, influence with the other. This close relationship, and its emotional component, not only magnify frictions but also make policy agreements and wider approaches relatively durable. Notably, the strength and complexity of each nation’s reliance emerges in the complementary and collaborative realm of intelligence associated with information collection and military action.

The broad compatibility of domestic political institutions and cultural backdrops helps to explain this phenomenon. These dimensions provide a device to transcend particular tensions by drawing attention to the more general accord. The cultural ties between Britain and America were among Winston Churchill’s favorite rhetorical tools. In one important speech, he dramatically described the emerging Cold War and the “iron curtain” descending across Europe, and petitioned the “fraternal association” of English-speaking peoples.⁶ Equally relevant, President Franklin D. Roosevelt handpicked William J. Donovan, a gifted intelligence operative during the 1940s, to serve as a liaison to Britain and shape the Office of Strategic Services, which evolved into today’s Central Intelligence Agency.

Thus, the great ordeal of World War II made possible the vital bilateral partnership, which has proven durable so far. But that seminal experience, like most important understandings, was built on a history of mutual accommodation; the primary features remained largely inexplicit. Historian Herbert G. Nicholas describes “the steady spread of the idea” after World War I that the two nations would avoid armed conflict with one another.⁷ Some contemporary analysts argue this partnership is weak, reflected in tensions on the ground in Afghanistan and Iraq.⁸ The details of collaboration, however, are always difficult, and durable partnerships involve broadly similar worldviews that encourage cooperation. In the trying circumstances of war, therefore, clashes between allies are to be expected.

Transatlantic Trends

While Americans tend to prefer clear conceptual demarcations and sometimes sudden, sharp strategic reversals, the British approach to foreign policy emphasizes evolution and instrumentalism. Throughout the Cold War, American foreign policy planners and decision-makers oscillated between alarm about Soviet bloc military power and a desire to reshape the international environment drastically. By contrast, in defense and strategic policies, as in general diplomacy, the British tried to maintain the traditional approach of working within and adjusting to the global status quo at the margins.

6 Winston S. Churchill, “The Sinews of Peace” (speech, Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri, March 5, 1946), https://www.nato.int/docu/speech/1946/s460305a_e.htm; and Leon D. Epstein, *Britain: Uneasy Ally* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), 13.

7 Herbert G. Nicholas, *Britain and the U.S.A.* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1963), 22.

8 Andrew Mumford, *Counterinsurgency Wars and the Anglo-American Alliance: The Special Relationship on the Rocks* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2017).

In the early 1960s, the new Kennedy administration substantially expanded defense spending across the board and emphasized quantitative analysis. The American fondness for, and emphasis on, technology found expression in technocrats personified by Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara and his associates. By contrast, the previous Eisenhower administration had emphasized practical budget discipline over abstract conceptualization. This approach applied to defense spending, particularly for the Army.

The Nixon, Ford, and Carter administrations emphasized negotiation and détente with the Soviet Union and China. Conversely, President Ronald Reagan's first-term administration substantially expanded military spending and capabilities, including strategic nuclear weapons. This posture, reminiscent of the Kennedy administration, reflected long-term growth of parallel Soviet military power. During his second term, Reagan renewed the emphasis on arms control agreements.⁹

In keeping with established American practices of substantial— at times radical—shifts in military policies, these conceptual and organizational innovations were not always coordinated. In 1986, the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act introduced the greatest military reorganization since the National Security Act of 1947, which unified the services under the Department of Defense. The president and the secretary of defense assumed direct authority over unified military combatant commands, the Joint Chiefs of Staff assumed advisory and training roles, and the chairman became more influential.

The Quadrennial Defense Review, mandated by Congress in 1997, represented a preoccupation with organization and doctrine. The statute, requiring modernization and budgeting through evaluation and planning force structure, was announced as a dramatic departure from the past to cope with the drastically different post-Cold War security environment. In reality, the new reviews confirmed America's propensity for doctrinal redefinition, which have shifted quite abruptly since at least World War I, to respond to funding cuts identified during such reviews and to emphasize conventional or nuclear strategic capabilities.¹⁰

In an unprecedented move to communicate a continuation of American policy, President Barack Obama retained Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates from the administration of President George W. Bush. This decision was an exceptional departure from established American political practice regarding Department of Defense leadership and cabinet-level positions in general. Obama's choice encompassed policy, executive effectiveness, and political calculation.

Gates enjoyed considerable prestige across partisan lines and, over many years at the Pentagon and earlier as head of the Central Intelligence Agency, demonstrated remarkable effectiveness at building support in Congress. Gates's standing was congruent with, and doubtlessly reinforced, public attitudes regarding the stability of America's security.

9 The Committee on the Present Danger gained prominence and influence, and included Paul Nitze and others associated with previous Democratic administrations. They had moved to the right on defense and disarmament matters. See Nicholas Thompson, *The Hawk and the Dove: Paul Nitze, George Kennan, and the History of the Cold War* (New York: Henry Holt, 2009).

10 Andrew J. Bacevich, ed., *The Long War: A New History of National Security Policy since World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 190.

Despite the adroit political navigation Gates displayed, intense economic pressures led to a comprehensive budget accord between Congress and the White House in early August 2011 that drew attention to the large Defense Department budget as a principal target for cuts.¹¹

Based upon previous experience challenging strategic defense planning while cutting specific weapons systems, Gates again shifted the policy helm: he bluntly criticized the Pentagon for preparing for unlikely major wars while ignoring the realistic challenges of unconventional wars. Afghanistan provided exhibit A. Although the retention symbolized continuity, the fundamental shift of actual defense policy demonstrates America's fluctuating attitude toward policy and doctrinal changes that contrasts with Britain's traditional ideas about engaging military forces.¹²

Despite the American preference for conceptual complexity and extremely detailed objectives replete with quantitative analysis and the British predilection toward less conceptual precision and technological capability, the nations have shared some strategic inclinations. Like the democratic administration of President Barack Obama in the United States (2009–17), the Conservative-Liberal Democrat two-party coalition government in the United Kingdom (2010–15) reorganized their nation's defense forces. The successor Conservative Party governments of David Cameron and Theresa May largely continued the defense shifts. These initiatives reflected severe budgetary pressures as well as other considerations. On the early surface, the early British debates regarding economic stringencies that led to "Future Force 2020," appear far more intense and stark than in the United States.¹³

The consequential cuts resulting from the British measures significantly affected all the nation's services. The Royal Navy, for example, lost 5,000 sailors, 10 warships, and the fleet of Harrier jet aircraft. The British government nonetheless planned to continue the construction of 2 new aircraft carriers, reflecting the priority of the maritime dimension to defense policy. Looking to the longer term, Defence Secretary Liam Fox declared spending on military equipment would increase by approximately £3 billion between 2015 and 2020.¹⁴ At the same time, the important Levene Report proposed organizational changes to foster interservice cooperation, similar to the American innovations that granted greater authority to individual service chiefs.¹⁵

Not surprisingly, the impending cuts resulted in intense debate and substantial criticism. The Defence Committee of the House of Commons expressed concern about the levels of force reductions that would result from the coalition government. The opposition Labour

11 Lori Montgomery, "National Debt Ceiling," *Washington Post*, August 2, 2011.

12 Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014); and Robert M. Gates, *From the Shadows* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 143. Regarding defense cuts, see August Cole and Yochi J. Dreazen, "Pentagon Pushes Weapon Cuts," *Wall Street Journal*, April 7, 2009.

13 "Fact Sheet 5: Future Force 2020—Summary of Size, Shape and Structure," United Kingdom, accessed March 21, 2018, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/62487/Factsheet5-Future-Force-2020.pdf.

14 Liam Fox (speech on defense transformation to the House of Commons, July 18, 2011), 531 Parl. Deb. H.C. (6th ser.) (2011), pt. 189, col. 643.

15 Peter Keith Levene, *Defence Reform: An Independent Report into the Structure and Management of the Ministry of Defence* (London: Ministry of Defence, 2011).

Party Shadow Defense Spokesman Jim Murphy declared a “strategic shrinkage by stealth,” combining a pun related to advanced aircraft camouflage technology with the accusation that the government had been less than forthcoming regarding policy intentions.¹⁶

In this context, Prime Minister David Cameron’s visit to the United States in 2012 emphasized the growing importance of these nations’ “unprecedented defense relationship that has helped secure [their] shared interests and values since the World Wars of the last century.” As a direct function of urgent necessity, “military interoperability and interconnectedness” in weapons and equipment, combat operations in Afghanistan, humanitarian relief in Haiti, joint training exercises, and future plans continue to be central to the Anglo-American collaboration. These collaborations, which include cyber and space along with personnel management, training, and more general dimensions, also reach well beyond the Atlantic region.¹⁷ Five Eyes nations significantly benefit from the human intelligence contribution of America’s large-scale resources and personnel as well as Britain’s experience and skill.

On this global scale, the similarities and contrasts between Britain and the United States become more important, and perhaps urgent. The contemporary Special Relationship between the two countries, facilitated at times by good personal rapport between the British and American heads of government, provides a general commitment to defense and intelligence cooperation. This relational flexibility is useful because the apparent features of national security policy and political debates in both countries have often overshadowed long-established, and frequently deceptive, approaches with superficial contrasts. Historically, Britain’s orderly and sustained evolution of policies provides not only essential strategic stability but also greater lasting impact that complements the apparent continuity in US policies over the past two administrations and important long-term shifts.

Ways Ahead for the Special Relationship

If Britain formally withdraws from the European Union, the contemporary terrorist threats to Europe and the intensifying conflict in the Middle East are the most obvious incentives to expand NATO intelligence cooperation and integration. But there are others. As one example, Turkey, which has the second largest land army in NATO, has proven a reliable military ally in Afghanistan, the Persian Gulf War, and other conflicts dating back to the Korean War. Yet that nation’s poor human rights record and its currently confrontational autocratic government have created frictions with both the European Union and the United States. A reenergized NATO could more strongly encourage the Ankara government to emulate the democratic governments and reliable rule of law that characterize most members of the contemporary alliance. Recent developments reconfirm NATO’s role as the principal deterrent to Russian aggression in Europe voiced during the 2016

¹⁶ Jim Murphy, “The Beginning of Labour’s Defence Review,” *Pragmatic Radicalism*, March 14, 2012.

¹⁷ “Joint Fact Sheet: U.S. and UK Defense Cooperation,” White House, March 14, 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/03/14/joint-fact-sheet-us-and-uk-defense-cooperation>.

summit in Warsaw, Poland, and expanded when Montenegro became a new member.¹⁸

Two interrelated arenas that are not limited to the rise of international terrorism also show promise for expanding Anglo-American cooperation: gathering intelligence and fighting low-intensity conflicts. Before the United States became a declared combatant in World War II, military intelligence was at the core of international collaboration. The extensive experience Britain gained while successfully defeating insurgencies during the Malayan Emergency (1948–60), the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya (1952–1960), and the “Troubles” of the Northern Ireland conflict (1968–98) improved British officials’ consciousness of the limitations and the opportunities provided by geography. Thus, they are more ready to negotiate.

Understanding of the use of airpower to support ground combat operations, effective application of special operations forces, and a healthy avoidance of the massive sustained firepower characteristic of American combat, provides Britain with flexibility and restraint. This approach mitigates the basic problem of counterinsurgency that encourages brutality by blending insurgents within the wider population and enables Great Britain to avoid the sizable quagmire the United States experienced in Vietnam.

The value of Britain’s traditional mediating diplomatic role between Europe and North America increases in the context of the current frictions involving President Donald Trump, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and others in Europe. Britain’s influence may also counter the continuing propensity within the US military and civilian defense establishment to undertake doctrinal and organizational shifts, which reflects, in part, the interplay of extremely powerful interest groups. Moreover, the British preference for keeping forces small in counterinsurgency, and turn to diplomacy as difficulties mount, contrasts with the US tendency to escalate firepower and increase the numbers of forces and weapons in response to adversity. Arguably, America’s doctrinal shifts in such situations represent a substitute for the sort of in-depth analysis of actual war experience undertaken by the British and evident when contrasting America’s *Iraq Study Group* with the enormous research and analysis effort reflected in the British government’s *Iraq Inquiry*.¹⁹

Britain has extensive experience maintaining a permanent professional military and reconciling defense policy with interest group politics. British empiricism, pragmatism, and avoidance of conceptual abstraction in defense policies contrast with some American propensities. Great Britain regularly avoids turning to the American default position of increasing firepower and troops in the field. The durable NATO organization further facilitates such collaboration, and may become stronger thanks to Brexit.

18 “Warsaw Summit Communiqué,” North Atlantic Treaty Organization, March 29, 2017, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm.

19 James A. Baker et al., *The Iraq Study Group Report* (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2006); and Sir John Chilcot, *The Chilcot Report: Report of the Iraq Inquiry: Executive Summary* (Kingston upon Thames: Canbury Press, 2016).

By expanding cooperative intelligence efforts, America and Britain can provide an important focus for future cooperation with European nations. In specific terms, the governments of both countries should make the Five Eyes group a higher priority in terms of both direct involvement of senior foreign policy officials of both governments and of the tempo of collaborative activity. Emphasis should also be on informal collaboration among intelligence professionals at all levels, with a focus on practical activity rather than formal organization charts and plans. This approach is more likely to result in tangible results, and less likely to generate media attention in times of public controversy, to provide stronger regional, and global, security despite leaving the European Union.

