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The UK, the EU and European Security: A German Perspective

Ronja Kempin and Jocelyn Mawdsley

While German commentators and politicians are primarily concerned with the economic impact of a possible ‘Brexit’ and the loss of a partner in EU economic negotiations, Cameron’s speech has also raised questions about the future of European security. For some in Berlin, the CSDP is unworkable without British participation; for others, the removal of the British veto would enable progress on CSDP institutions, long desired by Berlin. Here, Kempin and Mawdsley explore the apparent contradictions in German security policy, and the (possibly unwelcome) opportunities a Brexit might open up for Germany in relation to the CSDP.

David Cameron’s January 2013 speech on the future of Britain’s relationship with the European Union was not well-received in Berlin. Despite comparatively cordial relations between Cameron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, there seems to be a diminishing understanding among the political elites in Berlin and London of each other’s positions on EU politics. The British government has chosen to isolate itself from an economic ally on austerity policies and to cast doubt on Germany’s vision for the future of the European Union at a time when Berlin is highly sensitive to any criticism of its leadership within the EU. Arguably, such misunderstanding is not new: since the Maastricht Treaty was signed in 1992 it is difficult to think of many occasions when Britain and Germany have had shared priorities regarding the EU, with the brief exception of the early years of the Blair and Schröder governments.

The lack of comprehension between the two states is not, however, confined solely to the future of the EU, and is perhaps at its most stark in relation to security and defence policy, where on almost every single regional debate in the last decade, Britain and Germany have found themselves on opposing sides. Examples of such discord have ranged from elements of specific military interventions such as Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya to strategic judgments such as the future of nuclear deterrence, armed forces reform and defence industrial restructuring. Indeed, since the end of the Cold War, what Karl Kaiser and John Roper once characterised as ‘the silent alliance’ (‘die stille Allianz’) in their 1987 book has not just been quiet, but frequently absent.¹

These strategic disagreements are rooted in a continuing dissonance between German security calculations and those of its key allies.

German security policy in the post-Cold War era has been characterised by a near continuous reform programme for its armed forces, culminating in the suspension of conscription in 2011. Despite the reforms, the strategic purpose of the armed forces remains unclear. Although some commentators have viewed the reform process as signalling a ‘normalisation’ of German security policy towards a societal and political acceptance of the need to use military force in some circumstances, increasingly it seems as though the commitment to military intervention overseas expressed by the Schröder-Fischer government was in fact an exception. In 2013, Germany is a state that is still profoundly uneasy about the use of military force, does not feel militarily threatened – even by Russia – and conceives of its national interests in geo-economic rather than geopolitical terms.²

In light of this situation, German commentators and politicians are primarily concerned with the economic impacts of a 'Brexit', and the loss of a partner in EU negotiations with which they share many economic policy positions. However, Cameron's speech has also led to questions about the future of European security. As Miskimmon and Roper argue, the two strategic triangles influencing British-German security relations (Britain, France and Germany, and Britain, the United States and Germany) identified by Kaiser and Roper remain relevant and, indeed, important to an understanding of the situation, but have been complicated further by changing patterns of European security co-operation.³ This article will look briefly at German reactions to Prime Minister Cameron's speech, and then analyse the opportunities and problems that it brings for Germany in terms of bilateral relations with both Britain and France, and with regard to the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and NATO.

German Reaction to Cameron's Speech

Initial German reaction to David Cameron's speech was at once dismissive and angry. The foreign minister, Guido Westerwelle, stated that Britain could not treat Europe as an *à la carte* menu, picking and choosing the policies it liked. Meanwhile, Martin Schulz, the German president of the European Parliament, angrily and rather unfairly claimed that Britain was 'overwhelmingly to blame for all the delays in Europe'.⁴ In general, opinion across the German political parties was that Britain had isolated itself, was unlikely to succeed in its ambitions for treaty renegotiation and that if the state were to leave the EU, it would cause more harm to itself more than to the EU.⁵ Although Angela Merkel's response was more conciliatory, Berlin has since refused to take part in the British review of the balance of competences, suggesting again that the calculation in Berlin is that London is too isolated to be able to push through any treaty renegotiation.⁶

It is true that Euroscepticism is growing among the German population⁷ (especially in relation to the Eurozone bailouts), while March 2013 saw the launch of a new Eurosceptic political party, 'Alternative for Germany'. However, for almost all of Germany's political elite, the cross-party consensus that 'more Europe' is invariably a good thing remains intact. As such, Cameron's intention to seek a renegotiation of British EU membership, and to put such a deal to a UK electorate in a referendum, has been received with both bemusement and indignation.

Nevertheless, the prospect of an EU without Britain is causing some concern among German policy-makers and commentators. Much attention has been paid to the fact that Britain has been a useful ally for Germany on EU budget negotiations, and that both states share a preference for free market economics. Many, such as think-tank expert Almut Möller, however, have also commented ruefully that an EU without the UK would leave the vision of an EU defence community in tatters, as any attempt to establish one would lack credibility.⁸ According to German MEP Alexander Graf Lambsdorff (of the German Free Democratic Party – FDP), for example, 'London has to be a part of any European Common Foreign and Security Policy for it to be taken seriously'.⁹ German defence minister, Thomas de Maizière, also argues that a Brexit would not just damage the UK's military standing but would weaken NATO.¹⁰ In fact, the prospect of a Britain disengaged from the EU or – worse still – a Brexit raises some real security concerns for Germany.

The Broken Triangle: German, French and British Trilateral Relations

The difficulties for Germany really reflect the changing shape of trilateral security relations between the UK, France and Germany. While more generally in EU politics Germany is

dominant, France weakened and Britain isolated, this does not hold in the sphere of European security. While the three countries have rarely acted as a trio on security policy (EU action on Iran being a recent exception), during the Cold War Franco-German and British-German security relations were good. From 1963 onwards, with the signing of the Elysée Treaty, in security and defence policy, Germany's main European ally has always been France, despite a reliable if unspectacular Cold War alliance with Britain, based on joint procurement, agreement on the role of NATO, and army links through the large number of British soldiers stationed in West Germany (all of which are weaker today).¹¹ Although France and Germany have long had very different security cultures – Berlin cultivating its ‘policy of restraint’, while Paris used every occasion to show its military power – both states could agree on projects fostering European integration in security and defence politics, such as the creation of the Franco-German Brigade in 1987 and the decision to found Europe's largest aerospace and defence corporation EADS through the merger of French, German and Spanish aircraft manufacturers.

The last decade, however, has seen the clashes between a reticent German security culture and the more interventionist cultures of the UK and France become more overt. The Berlin-Paris axis began to weaken significantly in 2008. Although France had already begun the process of returning to NATO's integrated military structures (without consulting Germany), Paris used its tenure of the EU Council presidency in the second half of 2008 to advocate its great ambitions for the development of the CSDP – and it expected support from Berlin in this regard. However, President Nicolas Sarkozy's flagship CSDP proposals – a revision of the European Security Strategy and the further development of military capabilities – failed, not least because of Germany's reticence on such matters. In 2010 and 2012, efforts made by the two defence ministries to work more closely on developing military capabilities went nowhere. This, combined with the Germany abstention at the UN on the Libyan intervention and its reluctance to become involved in the French Mali mission in early 2013, have meant that London is increasingly preferred as a partner on defence matters by Paris¹². France and Britain have come to co-operate much more closely, most noticeably in military interventions such as that in Libya, but also on military procurement, research and industrial policy. The 2010 Franco-British Lancaster House Agreements are viewed as the most far-reaching example of pooling and sharing in Europe.¹³ Nevertheless, it is generally assumed that if Britain were to leave the EU, or to disengage from the CSDP, the French would abandon bilateral co-operation in favour of the CSDP,¹⁴ thereby opening up opportunities for Germany. It remains to be seen, however, whether Germany would be both able and willing to return to an exclusive partnership with France.

In some areas, it is clear that Germany would be keen to do so. Like other European defence industrial powers, Germany has viewed the growing Franco-British co-operation on defence research and development with unease.¹⁵ It is generally agreed in Berlin that the German veto of the proposed merger between BAE Systems and EADS was also based on fears of loss of influence and jobs.¹⁶ However, Germany remains uncomfortable with French attitudes towards military intervention, whether under the auspices of the CSDP or NATO. On the other hand, the French feel that Germany's unreliability and unpredictability as a partner in military interventions limits the bilateral potential of pooling and sharing resources. Moreover, France, like the UK, is frustrated by its EU partners with regards to what it sees as a failing CSDP. If Germany were to want to play a leading role in the CSDP, it would need to clarify its stance on the policy and find common ground with France. A possible British disengagement could open a window of opportunity for Berlin to launch a new, integration-oriented CSDP agenda.

Germany: A Leader in a CSDP without Britain?

Britain has, without doubt, been an important player in the establishment and development of the CSDP, frequently in partnership with France. Tony Blair's Labour government supported not just the initial Franco-British St Malo declaration, in 1998, but also a number of initiatives intended to build a common strategic thinking, to improve the military capabilities of the UK's European partners and to increase the number of European troops that can be deployed abroad.¹⁷ In 2003, London actively supported the drafting of the European Security Strategy. One year later, it played a key role in the formation of the European Defence Agency as well as in the creation of the EU Battlegroups. Finally, the UK has actively supported CSDP missions and operations. During the UK's presidency of the European Council in the second half of 2005, more CSDP operations were launched than during any other presidency before or since.¹⁸ However, Britain pursued this European option less out of a desire for EU autonomy, and more in the belief that if Europeans did not contribute more to NATO, then the Alliance would not survive; the UK always saw CSDP as a separate but complementary structure to NATO.¹⁹ In this regard, Britain has been frustrated by its EU partners' refusal to take strategic capability gaps seriously and by their preference for institution-building rather than action, and latterly has exhibited a preference for bilateral co-operation with the French as well as scepticism towards both existing and potential CSDP institutions. This has led to the paradox that the CSDP, as envisaged by its supporters, cannot work with the UK but nor can it work without it.²⁰ Furthermore, the initiatives that the UK has chosen to support were judged on 'their individual merits and potential rewards' but this is not really a viable long-term strategy for a credible CSDP.²¹

In contrast to the UK, Germany's approach to the CSDP has prioritised institution-building. For example, Berlin has consistently supported a permanent operational headquarters with planning capacities, which London has always vetoed. A CSDP without the UK would thus mean that the more institutional agenda promoted by the Weimar Group (the co-operation framework between Germany, Poland and France) could come to fruition. The German project of a common European army might also become more plausible. It would, in short, offer an opportunity for German leadership in the foreign- and security-policy field, just as it currently leads in Eurozone politics, without its preferences being blocked by Britain. However, this assumes that Germany would want such a CSDP leadership role.

In truth, whereas the British vision for the CSDP is clear (encompassing low-level intervention capabilities coupled with the resources that would allow Europeans to shoulder their share of the NATO burden), it is difficult to understand what the Germans really want the CSDP to do. The state remains uncomfortable with external military intervention, putting it increasingly at odds with the French over their more activist interpretation of the CSDP. Some Brussels commentators also point to a German tendency to express strong support for initiatives, but then to be unwilling to implement them in practice, notably with respect to the Ghent Framework on pooling and sharing.²² It is unclear whether this is because of discomfort at the possibility of being tied into commitments where military intervention may occur, or unwillingness to surrender national autonomy. A CSDP without the UK would offer Germany opportunities to lead, but it would also require considerable commitments that the Germans may be unwilling to offer. As a consequence, hopes for closer Franco-German co-operation in security and defence policy might be overly optimistic.

The Impact on NATO

A Brexit would be even more detrimental to the UK's interests and position in NATO. If Britain were to isolate itself further within the EU or to leave it entirely, it is likely to also have an impact on NATO, although it is unclear, at present, how this might be manifested. On the one hand, it may speed up plans on the part of the United States to reorient its security priorities towards the Pacific. Furthermore, the US has made it clear that the 'special relationship' with the UK would be devalued if it were no longer a central power within the EU.²³ Given that the UK is generally viewed as the Americans' most important partner within NATO, this could undermine the Alliance. On the other hand, it could have the reverse effect and reinvigorate the European Security and Defence Identity (ESDI) within NATO, if the other European NATO members, particularly France, were to prioritise maintaining co-operation with the British over developing EU autonomy, in order to maximise operational capability. This might harden the divide between a CSDP for 'soft' security concerns and reliance on NATO in 'hard' security matters. Britain would also likely favour an active ESDI in the event that it leaves the EU.

The question then is what these options would mean for Germany. As Patrick Keller has argued, although Germany was a staunch supporter of NATO during the Cold War and later in its eastward enlargement, it is generally considered to be uncomfortable with the changes in NATO's strategic posture over the last two decades.²⁴ In this case, a devaluation of NATO might remove a security-policy problem for Germany, as its failure to meet the expectations of its allies, particularly in Afghanistan and on military spending, has been politically difficult. Germany is viewed by its NATO allies as militarily weak, and unable to offer the leadership that might have been expected from a state with such significant economic power. It has cut military spending considerably since the end of the Cold War, and although large-scale military reforms have been undertaken, military intervention remains problematic for Germany. Indeed, the Atlantic Council has claimed that Germany's military weakness is NATO's most significant problem.²⁵ Many German commentators agree that Germany is increasingly side-lined within NATO.²⁶ However, while Germany might be uncomfortable with NATO today, it is unlikely to hope for its abolition. In many ways, the existence of a credible NATO permits Germany to continue to avoid the need to take on military leadership within Europe, something that it is not enthusiastic about doing.

A reinvigorated ESDI on the other hand would be a poor fit for Germany's preferences for the institutional development of the CSDP. The checks and balances within the CSDP allow Germany much more room for manoeuvre to avoid military action that it does not want to participate in. As Lothar Rühl argues, Germany learnt a salutary lesson over Libya, namely, that within NATO it can be completely bypassed.²⁷ Germany's opposition to intervention in Libya is also thought to have further undermined its credibility as a NATO member,²⁸ particularly as German policy towards NATO is often unclear and somewhat contradictory, meaning that the state is unlikely to welcome a reactivated ESDI which might see its influence in this regard decline even further.

Conclusions

Although a British disengagement from the EU or even a Brexit offer opportunities for Germany, with respect to leadership on European foreign and security policy, it is not clear that these are opportunities that Germany would want or be able to take up. Germany's continuing reticence regarding out-of-area military intervention puts it at odds with its obvious partner, France, in developing a strategically credible CSDP. In many ways the status quo of Franco-British leadership in European security questions suits the German preference for military inaction, in spite of German concerns about loss of influence. If NATO were to

regain importance through a Brexit, then it is likely that Germany would be further relegated in significance as a security and defence actor. If, as a result of the British actions, the US were to disengage further, then this would force Germany to take action.

German security policy currently lacks clear priorities and preferences and this, coupled with a lack – compared to Britain and France – of operational capability, leaves it ill-suited to exercising the same sort of leadership on European foreign and security policy that it does on regional economic policy. While German politicians are undoubtedly correct to argue that a British withdrawal or a renegotiation of some class of sub-membership of the EU would damage the UK considerably, they are also correct to be concerned about what this would mean for European security. It would almost inevitably require Germany to make some difficult political decisions about whether or not to substitute for Britain in its leadership role in this regard. However, the disruption that may result from British decisions about the EU may also break the stasis that has also prevailed for some time now because of the contradictory British, French and German agendas on European security, thereby allowing progress to be made.

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Jocelyn Mawdsley is a Senior Lecturer in European Politics at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. She has published widely on the political economy of defence and security in Europe, and also on the bilateral and trilateral security relations between Britain, France and Germany.

Notes

¹ Karl Kaiser and John Roper (eds.), *Die Stille Allianz: Deutsch-Britische Sicherheitskooperation* (Bonn: Europa Union Verlag, 1987). Kaiser and Roper described the British-German security relationship as the silent alliance from the 1960s to the end of the Cold War.

² Hans Kundnani, 'Germany as a Geo-economic Power', *Washington Quarterly* (Vol. 34, No. 3, Summer 2011).

³ Alister Miskimmon and John Roper, 'The Stille Allianz Revisited', in Simon Bulmer, Charlie Jeffery and Stephen Padgett (eds.), *Rethinking Germany and Europe: Democracy and Diplomacy in a Semi-Sovereign State* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

⁴ Stephen Brown and Mark John, 'Selfish, Ignorant, Dangerous: Europe's Anger over Cameron Speech', *Reuters*, 23 January 2013.

⁵ Gunther Krichbaum quoted in Stefanie Bolzen and Tina Kaiser, 'Allein auf der Insel - So sähen die Briten ohne EU aus', *Die Welt*, 23 January 2013; Martin Schulz, quoted in *Die Welt*, 'Ohne Reform treibt Großbritannien auf den Ausstieg zu', *welt.de*, 23 January 2013, <<http://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/article113070836/Ohne-Reform-treibt-Grossbritannien-auf-Ausstieg-zu.html>> accessed 8 July 2013; Joschka Fischer 'Europa steht in Flammen' Joschka Fischer, 'Cameron sollte Churchill lesen!', *sueddeutsche.de*, 23 January 2013, <<http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/rede-zur-europaeischen-union-cameron-sollte-churchill-lesen-1.1580707>>, accessed 8 July 2013.

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- ⁹ Stefanie Bolzen and Tina Kaiser, 'Allein auf der Insel - So sähen die Briten ohne EU aus', *Die Welt*, 23 January 2013.
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- ¹³ Ronja Kempin, Jocelyn Mawdsley and Stefan Steinicke, 'Entente Cordiale: Eine erste Bilanz französisch-britischer Zusammenarbeit in der Sicherheits- und Verteidigungspolitik', DGAP-analyse No. 10, August 2012.
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