

# Transatlantic security relationship under strain: Opportunities and challenges for the UK

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## Introduction

A key purpose of the transatlantic security relationship is to keep European states and the US together by focusing on collective actions to tackle common threats and achieve shared interests. However, this idea underpinning the transatlantic security relationship have recently been publicly questioned in Europe and the US. This paper first offers a range of driving factors that put the transatlantic security relationship under strain. With a focus on the UK security and defence policy, the paper then takes stock of the growing pressures this trend generates and discusses potential policy challenges and opportunities.

## Drivers of the recent strains in transatlantic security relationship

A first driver that undermines the transatlantic security relationship is the failures in consultation between US and key European states. Recent examples such as NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan as well as the newly formed security partnership between Australia, the UK, and the US (known as AUKUS) represent such consultation failures across the Atlantic, but also among the European allies of the transatlantic security relationship.

NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan made a key function of the transatlantic security relationship questionable for European allies: a framework of consultation and information exchange across the Atlantic. The lack of planning and consultation throughout the withdrawal has raised a point that whether the US is willing to use NATO as a framework of consultation, long-term thinking and scenario planning in crisis management operations, rather than primarily a day-to-day crisis response tool. The withdrawal also raised doubts about the lack of an earlier response in anticipation of a collapse of the Kabul government and the resulting swift control of the country by the Taliban. Already concerned about US decision to withdraw from Afghanistan, many NATO allies made their unease public by lack of collective thinking on viable alternatives to remaining in Afghanistan given the weaknesses of the Kabul government's weaknesses against threats emanating from Taliban.

The creation of the AUKUS reflects a shift of attention to the Indo-Pacific region, which has been a broader trend in the US security posture since the Obama administration. At the same time, and more importantly, it made questionable whether the US seeks partnership with key European partners or its local allies to address emerging threats such as China. Furthermore, AUKUS also showed that key regional countries such as Australia may turn to the US to respond to China, even to the detriment of European countries: the new strategic partnership will also allow Australia to build nuclear-powered submarines using US technology, as opposed to Australia's previous contract with France to build nuclear-powered submarines.

A second driver of the recent strain in transatlantic security relationship is the flurry of calls by EU leaders for European strategic autonomy on security and defence. On the one hand, the election of Biden as the US president has to some extent relieved European states' concerns about previous Washington administration's disinterest in positively engaging with European security. On the other hand, this relief has been somewhat tempered by the uncertainty as to how the new administration would approach transatlantic security relationship. Considering Biden's "we are back" message to NATO Allies and recent examples of dealing with shared threats through regional initiatives that do not take into account major European allies, such as AUKUS, the Biden administration has given mixed signals as to whether the US will support European strategic autonomy and hence a new transatlantic division of labour, or exhibit reservations about European strategic autonomy and even downgrade Europe as a security and defence priority.

Thirdly, the (re)emergence of China as a global economic power and the divergent views about dealing with Beijing propelled the recent strains in transatlantic security relationship. China's investments in major technology innovations with strategic and military implications has shaken the confidence that the US and its European allies would remain the source of these technological innovations. As a result, in their London Summit in December 2019, NATO countries made a historic statement to make deem China as a subject of the Alliance policy by 'recognis[ing] that China's growing influence and international policies present both opportunities and challenges that we need to address as an Alliance'<sup>1</sup>.

At the same time, current Washington administration's strengthened efforts to constrain China in the Indo-Pacific through unilateral and regional alignment that fall short of considering the interests of key European allies are causing anxiety in the EU and some of its member states, as seen in the publicly raised concerns from EU and top French officials about the recently formed AUKUS framework. The

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<sup>1</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (2019). London Declaration. As of 10 November 2021: [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_171584.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_171584.htm)

withdrawal from Afghanistan has already warned many European countries of the unintended consequences of following the US<sup>2</sup>. Exclusive and club-like pacts such as AUKUS could only add to the lack of confidence in Europe to follow a US leadership in countering China.

Furthermore, these factors are accelerated with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. A key implication of the pandemic for the transatlantic security relationship is related to the strains on defence budgets given the challenges of fiscal plans for post-pandemic recovery. Indeed, assessments about the unity and cohesion of the transatlantic community with the emergence of pandemic highlight that the burden-sharing across the Atlantic is suffering from a 'collateral damage of the COVID-19 crisis' as several leaders deciding to cut defence spending<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, on the back of concerns at Washington's handling of the pandemic, the publics in France, Germany and the UK indicated a significant deterioration of trust in American leadership<sup>4</sup>. COVID-19 also accelerated the questions about the role of NATO and the EU as the institutional forms of transatlantic security relationship: The pandemic has reintroduced the debate whether NATO and the EU should create a division of labour around a forward-looking and prominently civilian role on the one hand and focusing on the significance of strategic rivals such as Russia and China on the other<sup>5</sup>.

## Opportunities and challenges for the UK

In the face of these strains in the transatlantic security relationship, a key question for the UK is how it could pursue Britain's interests while at the same time maintaining trust and confidence within the transatlantic security relationship.

### Lack of consultation

NATO offers the UK an access to, and potential leadership of, an integrated military command structure that brings together Allies in important security and defence policy matters, such as the conduct of joint military operations. Therefore, a perceived decrease in the functionality of NATO would make it difficult for London to utilise the Alliance to influence security and defence debates in

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<sup>2</sup> Williams, N. and Lunn, S. (2021). NATO 2030: What price transatlantic unity after Afghanistan and AUKUS?. As of 10 November 2021: <https://ambassadorllp.com/ap-insight-132---2021.html>

<sup>3</sup> Tardy, T. (2020). COVID-19: Shaping Future Threats and Security Policies', in Thierry Tardy (ed.), COVID-19: NATO in the Age of Pandemics, NATO Defence College, Research Paper, No. 9, p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> Barkin, N. (2020). In the Post-Pandemic Cold War, America Is Losing Europe, Foreign Policy, 19 May 2020. As of 10 November 2021: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/19/coronavirus-pandemic-europe-opinion-polls-united-states-china-losing/>.

<sup>5</sup> Shea, J. Missing in Action: US Leadership Is the Biggest Casualty of the Coronavirus Crisis, Europe's World, 22 April 2020. As of 10 November 2021: <https://www.friendsofeurope.org/insights/missing-in-action-us-leadership-is-the-biggest-casualty-of-the-coronavirus-crisis/>

Europe and in the transatlantic context. Furthermore, the US involvement is crucial for the credibility of the Alliance, which means that a key challenge for the UK is to use its defence strategy relationship with the US to keep Washington in transatlantic security, while at the same time maintaining a European leadership in the Alliance.

At the same time, the limited political appetite and investment in NATO presents the UK to utilise its partnerships outside NATO. For instance, the UK can engage with European countries bilaterally<sup>6</sup>. It has long had significant relations and struck important defence agreements with individual European countries such as France and Germany. London can also use minilateral groupings such as the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Forces that involve the Netherlands alongside Baltic and Scandinavian countries and the France-led European Intervention Initiative (EI2)<sup>7</sup>. The AUKUS pact, however, has generated a deep concern in France<sup>8</sup>. Cooperative frameworks that involve France, however, should be read alongside with the deep concerns that the AUKUS pact generated in Paris.

### Calls for increased European strategic autonomy

Throughout its membership to the EU, the UK had mainly been reluctant about supporting the calls for independent EU capabilities that could duplicate the assets possessed by NATO. The UK's exit from the EU means Britain is no longer able to play its role as a bridge between the EU and NATO to the same extent. A key challenge this presents is that the decreased ability of the UK to shape EU's capability development and defence projects in a way that would not undermine NATO prerogatives.

Despite being formally absent from the debates on European strategic autonomy, the UK could expand the discussion beyond the confines of the EU. Given that many member states of the EU are unconvinced of an EU military concept that is separate, autonomous, and independent from NATO, the UK can provide an alternative framework to coordinate security and defence policies with its European partners. For instance, the UK has an opportunity to leverage the capability development undertaken by its European partners by using potential access to its own knowledge and technology<sup>9</sup>. After all, the UK remains key to European security and defence. Its activities, military capabilities, and permanent membership to the UN Security Council could benefit the EU as much as they do NATO.

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<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Defence (2021). *Defence in a Competitive Age*, London: HM Stationary Office.

<sup>7</sup> Hadfield, A. and Turner, C. (2020). Written evidence submitted to the House of Commons Defence Committee

<sup>8</sup> BBC (2021). Aukus: French president says Australian PM lied over submarine deal. As of 10 November 2021: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-59113710>

<sup>9</sup> House of Commons Defence Committee (2021). Written Evidence submitted by Lockheed Martin UK. As of 10 November 2021: <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/39760/html/>

The significance of the UK is also acknowledged in the EU, where Brexit is seen to have 'greatly compromised' the EU's defence capability ambitions<sup>10</sup>.

### China and disagreement about how to deal with it

The Integrated Review committed to deepening and expanding the UK's defence industrial relationships and capability collaboration in the Indo-Pacific where China acts as the UK's 'systemic competitor' yet an 'important partner'<sup>11</sup>. This 'dual characterisation'<sup>12</sup> raises more questions than it answers. First, a challenge for the UK is whether the willingness exists to mobilise a transatlantic support to sponsor policy responses to the growing strength of China. Tackling this challenge also requires for the UK, as an outsider to the Indo-Pacific region, to possess a knowledge base on the concerns of the broader transatlantic community who are developing close ties with China while not sharing the UK's assessment of threats posed by it.

However, the strategic interests across the Atlantic in the Indo-Pacific region tend to align at least at the broadest level. This is in the framing of China as a competitor and rival not only in the Integrated Review, but also in the EU's recently published Indo-Pacific strategy<sup>13</sup>, as well as in the informal meetings within the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, also known as the 'Asian NATO', comprised of the US, Japan, Australia, and India<sup>14</sup>. Although it is difficult to suggest that the perception in Beijing is that the UK acts as an 'honest broker' in its relations with China, the UK can shape important policy developments such as the NATO's strategic concept that is expected to be agreed by Allies in their 2022 Madrid Summit.

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<sup>10</sup> European Parliament (2018). CSDP after Brexit: The Way Forward (EP/EXPO/B/SEDE/FWC/2013-2018/Lot6/20), Brussels: European Union, p. 34.

<sup>11</sup> HM Government (2021). Global Britain in a competitive age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy, London: HM Stationary Office.

<sup>12</sup> House of Lords International Relations and Defence Committee (2021). The UK and China's security and trade relationship: A strategic void, London: HM Stationary Office.

<sup>13</sup> European External Action Service (2021). Joint communication on the Indo-Pacific. As of 10 November 2021: [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/104126/joint-communication-indo-pacific\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/104126/joint-communication-indo-pacific_en)

<sup>14</sup> Philip, Catherine (2021). Boris Johnson considers joining 'Asian Nato' to resist China. As of 10 November 2021: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/boris-johnson-considers-joining-asian-nato-to-resist-china-78s90gr53>