

Why Brexit's Impact on EU Foreign Policy Might Remain Limited

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*While last year's Brexit vote marked a watershed moment for the European Union, its impact on EU foreign policy might remain limited, writes **Ragnar Weilandt**. He argues that the UK's dual role as a provider of capabilities and occasional driver of policy on the one hand, and as an obstacle to constructing common institutions and positions on the other, means that these contradictory influences are likely to cancel each other out.*

Brexit means that the European Union loses one of only two Member States with strategic ambition, a capable military, a nuclear deterrent and a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. It also loses a driver of key foreign policies such as enlargement, trade liberalisation and the global fight against climate change. At the same time, Brexit rids the EU of a member which regularly obstructed attempts to create or strengthen common institutions and to speak with one voice on the global stage.

Despite Britain having played both these fundamental and contradictory roles, it seems unlikely that Brexit will have a major impact on the EU's presence in international affairs. British contributions might seem important for the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). However, both France and the UK, which kick-started EU defence with their [Saint-Malo Declaration](#) in 1998, lost interest in the CSDP long before Brexit.

Most ongoing missions are rather unambitious and limited in scope, and British contributions in terms of personnel and equipment have been marginal in recent years. Rather than using the Permanent Structured Cooperation mechanism established by the Lisbon Treaty, the 2011 Franco-British [Lancaster House Treaties](#) established substantial bilateral military cooperation without any formal links to the EU.

Brexit might not affect the EU's foreign policy preferences either. Enlargement, arguably the EU's strongest source of influence beyond its own borders, is on hold for the foreseeable future. With Britain having moved from an enthusiastic supporter to enlargement sceptic in recent years, its views have largely converged with those of the remaining Member States. A victory for Remain in last year's referendum would not have made much of a difference.

Meanwhile trade liberalisation and climate action have become second nature to the Union. Therefore, the loss of British influence is unlikely to have a major impact in these sectors either. Whether ambitious free trade agreements such as the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) are eventually concluded would have depended more

on public discontent in continental Europe than on the British government's stance anyway.

While Brexit will probably not affect the EU's modest role on the global stage, it is also unlikely to enable a rapid progression towards a more integrated and substantial common EU foreign policy.

It is true that the UK has often spearheaded efforts to undermine the creation of a more ambitious EU foreign policy. Having failed to prevent the creation of the European External Action Service (EEAS) in its current form, the UK engaged in political guerrilla warfare against what it saw as 'competence creep'. On various occasions, British ambassadors blocked EEAS officials from speaking at international organisations and from issuing joint statements on behalf of the EU. The UK government even challenged the Commission's exclusive authority over trade negotiations, in spite of this being completely in line with its own approach to international trade.

However, while Brexit removes a key obstacle to further and more substantial common external action, the view that foreign policy should remain the prerogative of the Member States is by no means limited to London. Along with the currently rather Eurosceptic climate in continental Europe, this makes major leaps towards a more integrated EU foreign policy appear rather unlikely in the short term.

Recent initiatives such as the establishment of a Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC) facility or the €5.5 billion European Defence Fund have raised hopes among federalists. The timing of their announcement was indeed quite symbolic. But these initiatives had been in the pipeline for quite a while and are limited in scope and ambition. Rather than a first step towards an integrated EU army, they represent a continuation of the pragmatic but modest efforts that have been made in recent years.

Although no major short-term changes should be expected with regards to institutions and policy preferences, the British decision to leave the Union is likely to affect the EU's standing on the global stage. The Union's international credibility has already suffered due to its inadequate reaction to the Eurozone sovereign debt crisis and the refugee situation in the Mediterranean. Brexit is likely to further undermine its reputation in the international arena. This is not only due to the Union losing a key member state with major strategic, economic and diplomatic capacities. It also relates to the fact that the EU is losing a member at all.

The reality that the EU has ceased to be sufficiently attractive even for one of its own members undermines its ability to promote its model as well as its norms and values towards third states. Hence, Brexit further reduces the EU's soft power, which is arguably one of its greatest sources of international influence.

Whether this trend can be reversed depends on how the EU deals with the challenges that lie ahead. Recent political developments warrant cautious optimism. While Britain is plunging into chaos, the EU looks stronger and more stable than it has in quite a while.

The Union's economic situation is improving, its Member States have shown unprecedented unity on the Brexit talks and there is increasing support for structural reforms. And most crucially, European citizens' support for further European integration is finally on the rise once again.

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