

Britain: Keeping Europe in Balance?

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Abstract:

This chapter argues that the situation of the Anglo-German relationship post-Maastricht and post-Brexit is the result of Britain's attempt to play a balancing role in the face of increasing estrangement from the EU. It engages with the historical precedents and parallels of such situations of disaffection. In September 2022, Britain agreed to increase its commitment to NATO Forward Defence in the Baltic states by expanding its existing battlegroups into brigades. However, much of Britain's contribution to the collective defence of Europe will be in the maritime domain. In response, Britain is investing heavily in the Royal Navy with new heavy aircraft carriers, F-35 carrier-borne strike aircraft, and new classes of nuclear attack and ballistic missile submarines. As a result, the British armed forces are becoming a model for a NATO-focused European Future Force, and the JEF represents the essence of the United Kingdom's future engagement with Europe. The chapter concludes that it is crucial that the United Kingdom, France, and Germany come to an understanding and move beyond post-imperial delusions on one side and *schadenfreude* on the other in order to effectively address the challenges facing Europe and the transatlantic community.

Key words: Anglo-EU relationship, UK foreign policy, Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), NATO

"Whether we like it or not we are considerably bound to Europe".

Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin

Introduction

It is perhaps fitting if sad that I should be writing this paper in the wake of the funeral of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth 2 and the accession of His Majesty King Charles III. The sense of a *fin de siècle* Britain is palpable. Change is in the wind, but what change? On the face of it such a question seems little more than post-Brexit British hubris. The facts suggest otherwise. In 2022 Britain still enjoys the world's fifth or sixth largest economy and in 2022 the world's third largest defence spender (Mercopress 2022). On September 23rd, Ben Wallace, the British defence minister, said that by 2030 the UK would increase its defence expenditure from the current £48 billion per annum (€54 billion) to £100 billion (€112 billion) per annum. In spite of Chancellor (Finance Minister) Hunt's hair-shirt Autumn Statement (budget) that 'aspiration' is still on the table. British *Zeitenwende*? In practice, that means Britain's European lead in supporting Ukraine goes far deeper than simply supplying advanced munitions or training Ukrainian forces.

There were many reasons for Brexit, many of them to do with the utter frustration of the British people with a distinctly mediocre London political class. However, three reasons stood out that have been given insufficient coverage by the Continent's chattering classes which are germane to this paper. First, the sense in Britain that if the Euro was to be made secure as a currency the EU would need to integrate far more deeply. Second, because of its political culture Britain could never agree to such continental supranationalism. The English fought a civil war in the seventeenth century over the absolutism of King Charles I and have always refused to accept what many see as distant unaccountable power being enacted in their name. The American Revolution of the eighteenth century was in many ways an extension of that political culture with the pre-revolutionary 'no taxation without representation' equally at the heart of an internal British debate at the time.

There was also a third element – the perceived shackling of British power by France and Germany. For decades Paris and Berlin had refused to permit the British access to the Franco-German axis within the EU even though Britain's political, economic, and military weight warranted such inclusion. The Germans may have been willing to entertain such a shift from a 'directoire' to a 'triectoire', but Paris was implacably opposed. For Paris, France finally had Britain just where she wanted it – paying without saying. Many Brexiteers believed, rightly or wrongly, that far from magnifying Britain's influence in Europe or the wider world, the EU actively constrained it and

reduced Europe's second largest economy, strongest military power and over 16 percent of the EU budget to little more than an offshore cash cow. Frankly, such concerns were over-stated but not completely without traction, and it is for this reason both Berlin and Paris must also take the blame for Brexit. Their collective refusal to recognise that geopolitics is as much a fact of life within the EU as it is beyond EU borders was a deceit that continues to this day.

A History of Balancing

For centuries England, and then Britain, viewed balancing power in Europe as the central tenet of foreign and security policy. This was to prevent the emergence of a single hegemonic power in Europe and goes back at least as far as Edward III in the fourteenth century and the Hundred Year's War. Even at the height of Nineteenth century Empire Britain did not, and has never had, the power to be THE continental hegemon to which the Holy Roman Empire, imperial Spain, royalist and Napoleonic France, and latterly imperial and Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia have all at times aspired. Now, tragi-comically, Putin again and rather ridiculously aspires to such hegemony over at least part of Europe with his corruption of Peter the Great's and Catherine the Great's eighteenth-century vision of a New Russia (*Novorossiya*). Britain ruled the seas precisely because she could not rule the land.

However, whenever a power or combination of powers threatened to dominate Europe England/Britain moved to block it. In 1588 Elizabeth I used the Royal Navy to defeat the Armada and block the ambitions to stamp out what he saw as the Protestant heresy of His Most Catholic Majesty Philip II of Spain. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Britain blocked the ambitions of France's Louis XIV's culminating in the victory of Winston Churchill's forebear, Sir John Marlborough, at the Battle of Blenheim, and the seizure of Gibraltar in 1704. In the late eighteenth century Britain fought the Seven Years War (1756–1763) to block French ambitions in North America. Using both direct military and indirect financial means Britain also built a coalition of forces that ultimately defeated Napoleon. First, London first prevented Napoleon from invading Britain in 1805 with the crushing victory of the Royal Navy over the combined French and Spanish fleets at the Battle of Trafalgar. Second, London forced Napoleon to split his forces by fighting and defeating the French in the Mediterranean and

the Iberian Peninsula. Finally, a coalition led by the Duke of Wellington defeated Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. Thereafter, Trafalgar and Waterloo afforded Britain over a century of naval supremacy and some fifty years of quasi political supremacy in Europe even if London often chose not to engage, due what was called 'splendid isolation'.¹ In those days of High Victorian power Britain's prestige was deemed enough to ensure balance in Europe without the complications of entangling alliances.

Such policy did not prevent Britain forming crisis-specific coalitions, indeed that was the British strategic method. In the 1850s, Britain joined with France to block Russia's ambitions in the Crimea and over the entire Black Sea as Moscow sought to exploit a failing Ottoman Empire. In the twentieth century, Britain twice formed coalitions with France and the United States to first block the ambitions of Imperial Germany and then Hitlerian Germany, albeit at great cost to itself and the rest of Europe. It was the cost that Germany imposed on Britain following its formation by Bismarck with the proclamation of the German Empire at Versailles in January 1871 that began a century of first slow and then accelerated retreat from empire. In effect, Germany forced Britain to choose between defending the empire and the home base. Germany became simply too powerful to balance alone and the effort it imposed upon Britain between the 1890s and 1945 led ultimately to the demise of both totalitarian Germany and the British Empire. It also led to the eventual decision of the British elite in the 1960s (not the British people) to reverse course and for the first time in centuries implicitly support the creation of a European 'hegemon', what became the European Union.

Splendid Isolation?

In the wake of Brexit, it is fashionable amongst Europe's commentatorial herd to suggest Britain has now lost all influence and that only by being a member-state of the EU could a declining Britain have had any hope of retaining residual influence over Europe. It is a viewpoint that not only reveals a lack of imagination (and courage) amongst many so-called experts, allied to a large dose of Brussels-inspired wishful thinking (s/he who pays the piper buys the tune), it also reveals a failure to understand Britain and

¹ In 1848, the then British Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerston famously said, "We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow". This was a policy endorsed by Prime Minister Lord Salisbury forty years later between 1885 and 1902.

its statecraft. For all its many challenges and failings Britain still retains an ability to build coalitions. Take AUKUS – the Australian, UK, US strategic pact. As an exercise in statecraft, it was brutal. French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian called AUKUS a “stab in the back” because the French conventional submarines the Australians were going to buy as part of the so-called “deal of the century” were dumped unceremoniously in favour of what will almost certainly be a variant of the British nuclear-powered Astute-class (BBC 2021). The latest, *HMS Anson*, was commissioned into the Royal Navy in September.

That is only part of the story. Not only are the British submarines markedly superior to the French submarines the Australians had first bought, the French Naval Group made a mess of the contract, and given the distances over which such submarines must operate in the Pacific nuclear power and the stealth it affords is vital. Crucially, the submarines were only one element in a three-part pact that also includes a strategic partnership with three powers long used to working together, and the sharing of advanced technologies with military applications, such as Artificial Intelligence and machine-learning, which all three are working on.

There is no question that the manner by which AUKUS was rolled out could have been carried out with somewhat more political politesse given that President Macron was only metres away from the discussions and apparently wholly unaware of what the Americans, Australians and British were up to. The AUKUS deal was finalised by Australia, the US, and the UK at the 2021 Carbis Bay G7 Summit in Cornwall. However, given France’s hostile and hard-line post-Brexit posture AUKUS was also a timely reminder that Britain IS a Great Power and must be treated as such. In any case, there was probably no way AUKUS could have been announced without Paris being mightily upset. Still, do unto others... Had the roles been reversed the French would have taken great delight in ‘stealing’ a British defence contract from London, and no doubt would have called it good statecraft.

AUKUS reveals also much more about contemporary British statecraft. Far from once again being not-so-splendidly isolated Britain still has powerful friends attested to by its membership of the Five Eyes Intelligence group, a coalition (that word again) which is increasingly becoming Six Eyes as Japan moves closer in the wake of the new Anglo-Japanese Defence Treaty. Perhaps the most telling question the French need to consider is just how would they expect a power such as Britain to act outside of the EU? With its hard-line on the Northern Ireland Protocol and the inner-British border

Paris continues to give the impression that it seeks to damage the sovereign integrity of the United Kingdom, even if that is not, in fact, the French intention.

Germany's take on Brexit is somewhat different but, in many ways, equally hard-line. Germany's view of European integration is essentially German-centric; the ever deeper organisation of other European states around Germany and its economic and political interests. As such, the EU is a super-*zollverein* (customs union) reinforced by the German-centric Euro. As soon as Britain indicated it would never join the Euro at the 1991 Maastricht Summit Berlin and London became if not estranged secondary to its relationships with France, the United States...and Russia. Berlin's drive was partly mercantilist, partly a consequence of post-war German angst, and partly the price the Germans insisted upon for giving up the mighty Deutschemarek for the Euro. To be fair to the Germans the British also failed to understand that by agreeing to the creation of the Euro Germany also saw it as a price to be paid if the power of a united Germany in and over the rest of Europe was to be embedded in a legitimate pan-European institution.

The real tragedy of the Anglo-German relationship post-Maastricht is that Berlin wanted Britain to play a balancing role but in spite of Tony Blair's Euro-enthusiasm the British people became increasingly estranged from the EU as mass immigration suppressed already low wages. With the British unable or unwilling to become part of a European flagship project Germany saw as vital to its own interests and wider European stability Anglo-German relations ceased to be central to the Germans. That was Britain's choice, partly because London regarded the Euro as a badly designed and dangerous political leap of faith, and partly because, to quote Churchill in 1953, much of the British population still saw itself as being with Europe, but not of Europe.² Many of them still don't.

Balancing Today?

The Joint Expeditionary Force, or JEF, is perhaps the most useful example of Britain's contemporary balancing statecraft and London's continued determination to influence events on the Continent, even if 'balancing' is

² In 1953 at the height of the attempt led by the French to create a European Defence Community that would embed a rearmed Germany in a supranational European body, Prime Minister Winston Churchill said that Britain would not join because "whilst we are with them, we are not of them".

perhaps too strong a word. Created at the NATO Wales Summit the JEF is determinedly collective, rather than common, and Alliance-focused rather than EU-centric. In addition to the UK, which acts as lead 'framework' power of JEF its other members include Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway and Sweden. In February 2022, it was also announced that this high-end strike force would conduct military exercises in light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The JEF also shows the orientation of much of Britain's future European engagement. It is not intended to be anti-French or anti-German and most decidedly not anti-EU. As a sign of good faith in September 2022 Britain opted to join the Dutch-led PESCO military mobility project in spite of concerns about the ability Britain has to exert decision-shaping influence over EU CSDP operations. Britain also seeks closer military ties with France and Germany and there is good reason to believe Berlin and Paris seek the same. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has clearly concentrated minds in Berlin, London and Paris, and rightly so. Whilst Paris has been pushing for deeper European defence integration and Berlin has talked rather vacuously about a future European Defence Union, both remain keen to keep the door open to Britain. President Macron's European Intervention Initiative (EI2) and his idea of a European Political Community is carefully crafted to enable Britain to have a say, be able to play and of course pay. From Paris's perspective this is hardly surprising because France has no more intention of subsuming its armed forces within some supranational EU Army than Britain ever had. Whatever ambitions Macron might have for '*l'Europe*' the French people do not seem to share them, especially where it concerns the descendants of Napoleon's '*Grande Armée*'.

The JEF is also comprised of nations that are by and large Atlanticist and that by and large emphasise NATO for defence, which is not only central to British statecraft but now includes Finland and Sweden which are just in the process of joining the Alliance. Britain also feels a special responsibility towards Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, partly for historical reasons, but also because London is of the firm opinion that credible deterrence and defence can only be afforded by NATO if Allied forces are deployed forward in strength and reinforced by states that can prove they are able to act quickly, capably and decisively.

Britain's challenge is that it is no longer a continental military power. Gone are the Cold War days when the British Army of the Rhine (BAOR) of 55,000 troops was forward deployed on the inner-German border. Although

Britain agreed to increase its commitment to NATO's Forward Defence in the Baltic States at the June 2022 NATO Madrid Summit by expanding its existing battlegroups into brigades, much of London's contribution to the collective defence of Europe and the maintenance of deterrence will be in the maritime amphibious domain. It is an enormous domain that stretches from an increasingly contested Arctic through the North Atlantic to the Tropic of Cancer and into the Mediterranean. There has also been a foray by the UK Carrier Strike Group into the Indo-Pacific to demonstrate freedom of navigation solidarity with the Americans and support for Australia and Japan.

That is why Britain is reinvesting so much in the Royal Navy with new 70,000 ton heavy aircraft carriers, F-35 carrier-borne strike aircraft, new Astute-class nuclear attack submarines (SSN), new Dreadnought-class nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBN), upgraded Type 45 destroyers, new Type 26 destroyers (at 10,000 tons markedly larger than frigates), and new Type-31e frigates. Many of these platforms will in time host a myriad of drone, hypersonic missile and artificially-intelligent capabilities as was demonstrated in September at the RIMPAC 2022 exercise with the Americans and twenty other nations off Hawaii.

Britain's American Paradox

RIMPAC 2022 and AUKUS could suggest a shift towards the creation of a US-led Anglosphere within NATO to balance an emerging Eurosphere. However, the Anglosphere is not actually an Anglosphere at all with many states, such as Poland and those in the JEF suspicious of efforts to pool defence sovereignty within the EU, now siding with the Americans and British. Equally, there is an American paradox that will likely prevent the Anglosphere and the Eurosphere becoming too distant from each other: the rise of military China and the impact it is having on US foreign, security and defence policy, as evident in the new US National Defense Strategy.

In a sense, the post-Brexit 'game' of beggar thy neighbour in Europe was playable (just) prior to the pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Not anymore. Whatever frustrations Europeans may share about each other pales into insignificance compared with the new reality they must now all confront and with which the Baltic States live daily: the need to credibly deter Russia going forward. Frankly, given the pressures European weakness

and Chinese power are exerting on the United States and its armed forces there will soon come a time when the Americans will only be able to guarantee European security and defence going forward if the Europeans themselves do far more for their own defence, and that must include the British.

That message was explicit in the 2022 NATO Strategic Concept and is implicit in the 2022 US National Defense Strategy. The Americans now need allies more, not less, if they are to remain a credible power in the Indo-Pacific, the Middle East, Europe, the Arctic and elsewhere, but those allies will also need to be capable of making the Americans militarily stronger not weaker. They have such allies in Japan and the Republic of Korea in the Indo-Pacific, and in Australia they have an ally that aspires to be capable, which is why they are buying nuclear submarines. However, it is in Europe where the US really needs capable allies and given that Britain, France and Germany account for some 65 percent of all defence-expenditure in Europe and almost 90 percent of all defence research, technology and development such a European-led Allied deterrence and defence posture will only ever be realised if Europe's three leading powers put aside what in global terms are distinctly second-order tensions over Brexit.

Britain's European Future

Stanley Baldwin, a British prime minister in the 1930s, implied that one only has to look at a map to see to where Britain is 'considerably bound'. That bond does not stop Britain having global interests or exploiting its still global ties but post the Suez Crisis in 1956 and even more so the decision to withdraw from beyond Suez in 1967, Britain has long been a powerful European rather than world power. Today, Britain is an important European member of the G7, a permanent member of the UN Security Council (and rightly so because the UNSC is not the executive committee of the UN), and a leading member of NATO. Interestingly, as formal institutions seemingly come to be ever more complicated, and decision-making ever more hidebound, Britain's power, diplomatic agility, and strategic raider military projectability also makes London a vital power in any military coalition of democracies which are increasingly the vogue these days.

Much is made of how much the British armed forces have shrunk over the last decade, but little is made of the flexibility and capability of Britain's contemporary strategic forces. This was the explicit aim of the 2021

Integrated Review of Security, Defence and Development and Foreign Policy (the clue is in the title and the word ‘integrated’) which will now be subject to a further review ordered by Prime Minister Rishi Sunak. By 2030, the British future force will need to be interoperable at the high-end of conflict with the Americans across air, sea, land, cyber, space, information and knowledge. As such, the British armed forces should become the model for a NATO focussed European Future Force. In The Alphen Group’s (TAG) NATO Shadow Strategic Concept, which I had the honour to draft, we called for the setting up of a highly-mobile, heavy first responder, high-end essentially European force, with Britain at its core. This ambition was also reflected in the official 2022 NATO Strategic Concept.

For the British, NATO is and will remain Europe’s principal provider of military security and thus the backbone of deterrence and defence in Europe as it is for many Europeans and it is that commitment more than any other that forges the bond between Britain and its Nordic and Baltic allies and partners. The NATO Readiness Initiative, the new NATO Force Model and the NATO Military Strategy owes much to British thinking, as does the establishment of fully capable European NATO forces and capabilities able to undertake a full spectrum of missions and contingencies. Britain will also be at the core of a pool of forces that Europeans could draw upon for autonomous crisis response missions and operations.

For the British the down-payment on a credible future NATO will thus be the setting up by 2030 of a NATO Allied Command Operations Mobile Heavy Force (AMHF). That is precisely why the British have committed to raising their defence budget from current 2.3% of Britain’s \$3.2 trillion economy. Such a force would need to consolidate all Allied Rapid Response Forces into a single pool of forces supported by the requisite force structures and be sufficiently robust and responsive, and held at a sufficient level of readiness to meet any and all threats to the territory of the Euro-Atlantic area in the first instance, with sufficient capacity to also support those frontline nations facing transnational threats, such as terrorism. The AMHF would, in effect create a high readiness/high-end force that emerges from the enhanced NATO Readiness Initiative agreed at the NATO Madrid Summit.

Britain will also assist NATO to better exploit emerging and disruptive technologies and over time enable the Alliance to act as a vehicle for the introduction into the Allied Order of Battle of artificial intelligence, super/quantum computing, big data, machine learning, drone swarming, and autonomous capabilities (for example, manned-unmanned teaming, decoys, relays, and networked autonomous systems), hypersonic weapon systems to

enable an allied capability to engage in hyper-fast warfare. Capabilities that will be crucial to deterrence in the future.

In other words, Britain is no longer seeking to balance other European democracies but rather enable them. London has no problem, for example, with the NATO Future Force also helping to give further shape and meaning to greater European strategic responsibility. Such responsibility, and the autonomy it fosters, are a function of relative military capability and capacity and must be seen as such. Together with enabling combat support and combat support services, such a force could be deployable in several guises and under more than one flag. These contingences might include a NATO-enabled European coalition (both EU allies and partners) or a framework for coalitions of the willing and able.

There is also a challenge Britain poses to the rest of Europe. If the new NATO agreed at the 2022 Madrid Summit is to be realised in a timely manner, then whatever the post-pandemic, energy-crisis economics European allies, together with Canada, will by 2030 at the very latest need to invest sufficient resources to ensure that they are collectively meeting at least 50 percent of NATO's Minimum Military Requirements identified by the strategic commanders. These will include fully usable forces required for covering the whole spectrum of operations and missions, as well as the strategic enablers required to conduct multiple demanding large- and smaller-scale operations. With France and Germany also to the fore Britain must help lead the way.

Britain: Keeping a Balance

There have been several mountains of excrement (not too strong a word) written about Britain since Brexit. To my mind, Brexit was a mistake because it was bad geopolitics and Britain was in fact winning the argument about collective versus common action. Much of that nonsense has been written by think tanks desperate for the European Commission's approval, or by researchers who lack the courage to tell power what it does not want to hear. The narrative was simple: Britain leaving the EU was bad. Therefore, Britain was wrong and Britain must be punished. Perhaps the worst-example of this nonsense was when I attended a meeting in Brussels to be warned that because of Brexit Britain would be denied intelligence-sharing. Given that Britain supplies some 70 percent of raw intelligence data on a raft

of vital issues I was tempted to quote Clint Eastwood and say “Go ahead. Make my day.” The decision to exclude Britain from Galileo when much of the technology was British was perhaps the worst example of petty punitive politics dressed up as EU legalism.

It is true that Britain could easily retreat into itself. After all, Britain is a nuclear-armed island of some seventy million souls with a major economy, advanced expeditionary armed forces and one of the world’s leading intelligence capabilities. However, that would not be the British way. It is precisely because Britain is a nuclear-armed island of some seventy million souls with an advanced economy, advanced expeditionary armed forces and one of the world’s leading intelligence capabilities that Britain cannot and will not disengage from the security and defence of Europe. It would simply not be in the British interest. Berlin and Paris might have trumpeted their failed leadership of the Normandy Format and the Minsk process, but when it came to the crunch, as so often in the past, it was American and British action in support of Ukrainian courage that blunted Putin’s attack. Deeds not words, Europe!

Therefore, it is time for Berlin, Paris and others to stop insulting Britain for the democratic decision it made back in 2016. It is also time for those Britons with post-Brexit delusions of imperial grandeur to step aside. Britain can have influence in the world with or without the EU, which is hardly a bastion of growth and stability with a Brussels that is hardly greater than the sum of its parts. Equally, Britain will have more influence if it constructively seeks to work with its fellow Europeans, particularly where it concerns security, deterrence and defence. That will not be as easy as it sounds. First, there is still the temptation for the Prime Minister Rishi Sunak to turn inwards with the energy crisis, even though England is believed to be sitting on trillions of cubic metres of shale gas in the Bowland Basin. Second, there are still too many on the Continent in senior positions who want post-Brexit Britain to fail, even if they claim it is ancient history and they have moved on. With due respect to Belgium, Britain is not Belgium with nukes and must be accorded the respect its still considerable power warrants. Third, given the scale and scope of dangerous change afoot in the world, and indeed Europe, only by standing together can Europeans hope to be really secure. Institutions like the EU or NATO are tools, a means to an end, they are not ends in and of themselves.

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