

**North by Northwest:
the European Union and its British question**

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Executive Masters in International Politics – 2022/23

(Exam session – January)

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Executive Summary

- The health of the British body politic at this point in time gives cause for concern. The process of voting for and then implementing withdrawal from the European Union did considerable damage to the workings of the constitution and the functioning of British democracy. In particular the long-standing constitutional norm of parliamentary sovereignty has been routinely undermined and the checks and balances between the branches of government have been severely tested by the executive. Like many European countries, the UK is experiencing economic difficulties and the rise of political populism. In the case of the UK, the latter manifests itself in the party in power, at a time when the constitution has been placed under considerable stress. These trends contributed to Brexit and continue today, in ways which will have repercussions for EU-UK relations.
- The recent (relative) upturn in bilateral EU-UK relations is fragile. The existing Trade and Cooperation Agreement does not incorporate certain issues which could become problematic in the near future and, moreover, the structure of the Agreement is not suitable for managing these problems. In Northern Ireland, despite the successful negotiation of the Windsor Framework, there remain challenges ahead and the EU is now party to the post-conflict setting there, to an extent it has perhaps not realised. However, when EU-UK relations are considered in a multilateral context, notably regarding the war in Ukraine and the overall security of Europe, then it immediately becomes apparent that, despite bilateral tensions, there is much room for cooperation and indeed the necessity for it.
- The solution to the existing bilateral disagreements, as well as the means to build on existing cooperation in foreign and security policy, is to expand the EU-UK relationship. Our proposal is to create a Northwestern Neighbourhood Policy, taking inspiration from existing EU approaches elsewhere in its immediate neighbourhood. This policy would incorporate the existing agreements (to be handled by the Commission), adapt the engagement on Northern Ireland to a multilateral approach more befitting the principles of the Good Friday Agreement (including input on conflict sensitivity from the EEAS) and adding both a political-level structured dialogue and a comprehensive agreement on foreign and security cooperation (to be led by EUCO, with support from the Commission and EEAS). All of these elements have either already been proposed in an EU-UK context and/or exist in other EU relationships with third parties. The current impetus as regards enlargement and institutional reform provides the ideal opportunity and political cover to implement this. This approach to the relationship with the UK is set against the backdrop of the debate on EU strategic autonomy, arguing that the EU can exercise strategic autonomy by first acknowledging strategic interdependencies and then proactively shaping them.

Note on terminology

The glossary below provides definitions and explanations of the terms, institutions and agreements most commonly referred to in this document. When referring to the European Union throughout this dissertation, we will usually be referring to the EU institutions rather than the Member States. When it is necessary to make a distinction between the institutions (notably between the European Council [EUCO] and the Commission) or between the institutions in Brussels and the national governments of Member States, we will do so clearly and in context.

As a matter of personal preference, we will avoid using, as far as possible, most of the jargon and vernacular which has come to define this subject-matter, particularly within the English-speaking media and British political circles. This stems from our own first-hand experience of working within this environment during the time period in question. It is our observation that the quality of debate and policy-making, both already in a parlous state throughout this period, was further diminished by the use of jargon, for example to define political tribes (e.g. Remainers, Leavers and/or Brexiteers) or policy outcomes (e.g. hard vs soft Brexit), without ever reflecting the complexities of any of these.

This approach, aside from being a matter of personal preference drawn from said experience, is derived from George Orwell's rules for political writing in *Politics and the English Language*, which discourage using terms which the writer is "used to seeing in print" on the basis that they are too often repeated without the writer knowing, or at least considering, what is being said. That perfectly summarises our experience of the Brexit debate.

There will be some exceptions to the above. Inevitably the portmanteau of 'Brexit' will feature, since in any case it is widely used in continental Europe, and we will allow ourself the use of other terms – for example 'cakeism' – where these eloquently and accurately define a specific notion. We should add that Orwell applies the same rule for the same reason to words borrowed from a foreign language but we have also made exceptions to this rule where a term - e.g. *realpolitik* or *raison d'être* - has no precise or satisfactory equivalent in English.

These exceptions to Orwell's rules are intended to meet the ethos behind them, namely that a writer should think carefully about everything they write. In any case, they also fall under Orwell's final rule for political writing, namely "break any of these rules rather than say anything outright barbarous."

Glossary of terms, governmental institutions and agreements

'Brexit' – 'British exit' or withdrawal from the European Union.

'Brexit process' – the period from 2016 to 2020, encompassing negotiations both on the British withdrawal from the European Union and the future relationship between them.

'Cakeism' – the term which has come to encapsulate the lack of realism in the British approach to Brexit negotiations, meaning wanting the benefits of the relationship without the downsides and derived from Boris Johnson stating that his "policy on cake is pro having it and pro eating it" (Dallison, 2017).

Conservative Party – the right-wing Conservative and Unionist Party of the United Kingdom, also known as the Tory party, in government since 2010 and currently under the leadership of Prime Minister Rishi Sunak.

Council of Europe – an international organisation intended to uphold human rights, democracy and the rule of law in Europe, distinct from the European Union.

- European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) – an international convention to protect human rights and political freedoms in Europe, in force since 1953, enforced by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), to which Council of Europe members are party.

'deglobalisation' – the process of diminishing interdependence and integration between nation-states and/or economic blocs, which some argue the world is currently going through.

European Political Community (EPC) – an intergovernmental forum for political and strategic discussions about the future of Europe, established in 2022 after the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

European Union (EU)

- the Berlaymont – the building in Brussels which houses the headquarters of the European Commission.
- Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) – the organised, agreed foreign policy of the European Union (EU) for security and defence diplomacy.
- Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) – the EU's course of action in the fields of defence and crisis management and a main component of the CFSP, involving the deployment of military or civilian missions.
- Council of the European Union ('the Council') – one of the two legislative bodies of the EU, along with the European Parliament. Not be confused with the European Council (EUCO).
- Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) – the judicial branch of the EU.
- Customs Union – the arrangement through which no tariffs or non-tariff barriers exist to trade between the members of the EU, while a common external tariff is imposed on all goods entering the union.
- European Commission ('the Commission') – administrative body and part of the executive of the EU, together with the European Council (EUCO). The Commission was tasked by EUCO to lead negotiations with the UK for both the Withdrawal and the Trade and Cooperation Agreements.
- European Council (EUCO) – part of the executive of the EU, alongside the European Commission, EUCO is a strategic and crisis-solving body that provides overall political direction and priorities of the EU and is composed of the heads of state or government of the

EU member states, the President of the European Council and the President of the European Commission.

- European Economic Community (EEC) – the regional organisation of which the EU is the formal successor institution, which the UK joined in 1973, confirmed by a referendum in 1975.
- European External Action Service (EEAS) – the diplomatic service and combined foreign and defence ministry of the European Union.
- European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) – the foreign policy framework aiming at bringing the EU and its Eastern and Southern neighbours closer.
- European Parliament – a supranational, directly-elected assembly and one of the two legislative bodies of the EU, alongside the Council of the European Union [**NB:** *the author was employed here on behalf of the Scottish National Party in 2018-2019*].
- Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) – the framework and process to deepen defence cooperation amongst EU Member States and jointly develop defence capabilities.
- Single Market – the internal market of the EU for the free movement of people, goods, services and money.
- Treaty for the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) – one of two treaties forming the constitutional basis of the EU, the other being the TEU.
- Treaty on European Union (TEU) – one of the primary Treaties of the EU, alongside the TFEU. The TEU forms the basis of EU law, by setting out general principles of the EU's purpose, the governance of its central institutions, as well as the rules on external, foreign and security policy. Article 50 of the Treaty provides a mechanism for voluntary and unilateral withdrawal from the EU, whereby an EU Member State wishing to withdraw must notify the European Council of its intention to do so.

EU membership referendum ('the referendum') – the advisory referendum which took place on 23 June 2016 to decide if the United Kingdom would remain in or leave the European Union.

G7 – the Group of Seven, an intergovernmental political & economic forum consisting of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States, as well as the EU is a 'non-enumerated member'.

'Global Britain' – the loosely-defined slogan used by the British government and supporters of Brexit to describe British foreign policy outside the EU.

'global polycrisis' – the interaction of multiple crises at one time, where disparate shocks interact so that the whole is worse than the sum of the parts, often used to describe the current global situation.

Labour Party – a left-of-centre political party in the United Kingdom, currently the main opposition party but expected to win the next general election (likely in 2024) under the leadership of Keir Starmer.

North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), also referred to as *the Alliance* – an intergovernmental political-military alliance of 31 member States, also known as Allies, in Europe and North America.

- Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty commits each Ally to consider an armed attack against one to be an armed attack against them all. Upon such attack, each Ally is to assist by taking action "including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area." [**NB:** *the author was an employee of NATO from 2008 to 2012.*]

Northern Ireland – the six counties in the northeast of the island of Ireland which remained under British sovereignty when the remainder of Ireland gained independence in 1922.

- the backstop – the proposed protocol to the first withdrawal agreement (2018) between the government of Theresa May and the European Commission, that aimed to prevent customs controls on the Irish border. The backstop was a ‘safety net’ which would have required keeping Northern Ireland in some aspects of the Single Market until an alternative arrangement was agreed (or even if none were agreed) between the EU and the UK. The backstop was the cause of the Conservative Party deposing Theresa May as Prime Minister in favour of Boris Johnson, only for the second withdrawal agreement (2019) between his government and the European Commission to render the temporary arrangement permanent by keeping Northern Ireland within some aspects of the Single Market for goods through the Northern Ireland Protocol.
- the border – the political boundary between the UK and Ireland, established when the majority of the island of Ireland gained independence from the UK in 1922.
- *Good Friday Agreement (GFA), or Belfast Agreement* – the peace accords which ended (most of) the violence of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. These comprised a multilateral treaty between the parties within Northern Ireland and the British and Irish governments and a bilateral one between those two governments. The accord is called the Good Friday Agreement by the nationalist community and the Belfast Agreement by the unionist community.
- Nationalists – the community of people, mostly Catholic, identifying as Irish and seeking the unification of Northern Ireland with the rest of Ireland. See also Republicans, in reference to paramilitaries.
- Northern Ireland Assembly – the devolved (semi-autonomous) legislative branch of government in Northern Ireland.
- Northern Ireland Executive – the devolved (semi-autonomous) executive branch of government in Northern Ireland.
- Paramilitaries – non-State armed groups active during the Troubles and to an extent still today.
- ‘the Troubles’ – the period of civil war from the 1960s to the 1990s.
- Unionists – the community of people, mostly Protestant, identifying as British and seeking that Northern Ireland remain within the United Kingdom. See also Loyalists, in reference to paramilitaries.

Oireachtas – the bicameral parliament of Ireland, consisting of the *Dáil Éireann* (lower house) and *Seanad Éireann* (upper house).

‘red lines’ – the term used to describe the preconditions outlined by Theresa May, in her Lancaster House speech of January 2017, for the negotiations on the future EU-UK relationship. Specifically, she stated that any agreement could not see the UK remain within the Single Market or Customs Union nor under the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice, meaning by extension that the ‘four freedoms’ of goods, capital, services and people would also no longer apply.

Republican Party – one of the two main political parties in the United States, right-wing, also known as the GOP (Grand Old Party).

Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) – the free trade agreement between the EU and the UK, agreed on 30 December 2020 and formally entering into force on 1 May 2021, providing for free trade in goods and limited mutual market access in services, as well as for cooperation in certain policy areas.

United Kingdom (UK) – the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, encompassing the island of Great Britain and the north-eastern part of the island of Ireland, or in other words the constituent countries of England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The terms UK and Britain (and the demonym British) will refer to the whole, while the term Great Britain will refer to the eponymous island only when a distinction with Northern Ireland is necessary in the context of Brexit.

United Kingdom, Government

- constitution – the uncodified set of laws and conventions that make up the UK as a political body, written into thousands of statutes and court cases and found in unwritten political conventions and social consensus. The Supreme Court recognises principles that guide the constitution, including parliamentary sovereignty.
- Downing Street – official residence of the Prime Minister.
- ‘the government’ – the executive branch of the British government, headed by the Prime Minister.
- Parliament – the legislative branch of the British government, referring to the lower, directly-elected House of Commons and the upper, non-elected House of Lords. In the context of this document, Parliament almost always refers to the House of Commons. Also known as Westminster, after the London borough in which it is located [**NB:** *the author was employed here on behalf of the Scottish National Party in 2016-2017*].
- ‘parliamentary sovereignty’ – a principle of the British constitution which makes Parliament the supreme legal authority in the UK which can create or end any law. Generally, the courts cannot overrule its legislation and no Parliament can pass laws that future Parliaments cannot change. Parliamentary sovereignty is the most important part of the British constitution.
- Supreme Court – the final court of appeal in the UK, established in 2009, for all civil cases, and for criminal cases originating in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Given the doctrine of parliamentary sovereignty, the Supreme Court cannot overturn any primary legislation made by Parliament but it can overturn secondary legislation where that is found to exceed the powers in primary legislation allowing it to be made.

Withdrawal Agreement – the terms of the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the EU agreed on 17 October 2019 and entering into force on 1 February 2020.

- Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, or Northern Ireland Protocol – the section of the Agreement aimed at preventing the imposition of a hard border on the island of Ireland.
- Windsor Framework - a political agreement and set of joint solutions aimed at addressing the practical challenges in the implementation of the Protocol.

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[Word Count: 19961]

Introduction

I am but mad north-north-west; when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw.

(Hamlet; Act II, Scene II)

When in 2016 the United Kingdom signalled its intent to leave the European Union (EU), the EU was left with a quandary: how to manage the unprecedented development of a Member State choosing to leave what hitherto had been an ever closer union, in such a way as to limit the negative repercussions. The fact that an important Member State was taking this course, even one behaving as erratically as Hamlet, could not be allowed to present an existential challenge to the European project.

To their credit, the institutions and Member States of the EU responded decisively during the negotiations for the Withdrawal and Trade and Cooperation Agreements respectively. This manifested itself in the clear guidelines and “fundamental principles” presented to Michel Barnier, the EU’s chief negotiator, which he would summarise as follows:

“the maintenance of a balance between rights and obligations, preservation of the integrity of the Single Market, indivisibility of the four freedoms of movement of persons, goods, services and capital, and the decision-making autonomy of the Union. And also the fact that a non-EU country, which does not have to respect the same obligations as a member state, cannot enjoy the same rights and benefits as a member state.” (2021: p45)

However, the unequivocal consensus that the EU would stand by Ireland in order to preserve peace on the island, went further than mere negotiating objectives. Through this remarkable solidarity on the part of the Member States, the EU clearly lived up to its *raison d’être*, its North Star, during that unprecedented and potentially existential challenge to the project.

While today, December 2023, we can state conclusively that the EU achieved its objectives insofar as the British withdrawal was concerned, there remains work to be done. The British question is still a live one and the future relationship with this erratic neighbour to the northwest needs to be defined in such a way as to serve the strategic interests of the EU in a troubled global context. That, essentially, is the premise of this dissertation and our objective here is to study this British question and propose solutions for the EU.

Research Questions and Outline

In order to meet that objective, we pose three research questions which can be described respectively as the who, the what and the how. Firstly, who is the EU dealing with? In what

state is the UK today? Secondly, what issues is the EU dealing with? What particular challenges might arise within the EU-UK relationship? Thirdly, how does the EU handle this? How does it structure its relationship with the UK?

Of course, that leaves the fundamental question of the why. Why should the EU alter its existing relationship with the UK and adopt a different approach to its 'British question'? That question is inherent to all the others and the answer should become apparent in answering them. However, let us state the bottom line up front: aside from the obvious, that Britain is a medium-sized diplomatic, economic and military power within its immediate northwestern neighbourhood, the EU must alter its relationship with the UK because it is in its interests to do so, because it has the means to do so and because world events leave it no option.

In chapter one (the who), we attempt the onerous task of taking the political temperature of the UK, more specifically ascertaining what damage has been done this past decade and how this might affect the foreseeable future. In effect this is an exercise in risk analysis in a national British context, which inevitably involves revisiting some of the Brexit debate.

In chapter two (the what), continuing the exercise in risk analysis but in a broader context, we will identify certain issues which could be the cause of conflict and/or cooperation between the EU and UK. Naturally this will not be an exhaustive list but the issues identified share the particularity of not being catered for within the current structures of the relationship, in ways which we shall explain.

In chapter three (the how), we will compare the existing relationship to other models which the EU can draw from and thus formulate a proposal for the structure of the future strategic relationship. The very premise of this dissertation presupposes that we will conclude that the existing structure is unsuitable and, if so, we will explain why before proposing alternatives.

Sources

One challenge in writing this dissertation has been absorbing the large volume of information and analysis already available. With some exceptions, the majority of written sources used in this study fall into one of three categories: i/ official documents, providing detail on the agreed positions of governments and institutions; ii/ media sources, providing information on developments but also unofficial positions of governments and institutions; iii/ think-tank documents, providing research and analysis by academics and policy experts. In addition, as part of our research we attended numerous conferences, which have provided material across all three of the categories above.

Challenges

A further major challenge in writing this dissertation has been that, from its inception in the spring of 2022 to its completion in late 2023, both British domestic politics and EU-UK relations were in a state of considerable flux. The unprecedented levels of political upheaval in Britain in 2022 made it extremely difficult at times to write anything that did not need to be rewritten shortly after. The agreement of the Windsor Framework in February 2023 allowed for a (relative) degree of confidence that the facts on which our analysis is based would not dramatically change.

From the start, the principal argument of this dissertation has been that the EU needs to take a bigger picture approach to the future of its relations with the UK, above and beyond the implementation of the Withdrawal and Trade and Cooperation Agreements respectively. To be blunt, the EU needs to be less legalistic and technocratic and more geopolitical. It was, admittedly, difficult to make this argument while there was deadlock on the subject of Northern Ireland but the Windsor Framework has removed that impediment (for now) and, we believe, reinforced the principal argument of this study.

The same is also true of the global events beyond the confines of the EU-UK relationship, most notably the war in Ukraine. If this, as is widely agreed, underlines more than ever the need for European strategic autonomy and/or interdependence, then the EU cannot ignore the question of where it wants Britain to fit into that equation and how best to go about it. In short, the ongoing global polycrisis further reinforces the argument that the EU needs to be more geopolitical in its dealings with the UK.

These are points we will address later but, for now, we can simply acknowledge that the constant and fast-moving pace of events over the past eighteen months has presented a challenge in the researching of this dissertation but, in turn, has presented an opportunity to test and even strengthen our analysis and conclusions.

A final acknowledgement is due on the fact that the nature of EU-UK relations since 2016 has had direct personal and professional implications for the author.¹ These experiences will, we hope, contribute to the quality of the research and the analysis but also incur a responsibility to ensure that pre-existing assumptions and conclusions do not go unchallenged. “Making sense of Brexit requires both continuous engagement with what has happened ... and standing back from what has happened.” (Grey, 2021:26) Here also the passage of time has been helpful but,

¹ From 2016 to 2019 the author was employed as a political advisor for the pro-EU and pro-independence Scottish National Party (SNP), in both the Westminster and European parliaments, and deeply engaged in the Brexit debate from a position of firm opposition to it. Furthermore, the author grew up in Scotland as a citizen of another EU Member State (France) and has strong family connections to the north of Ireland, including border communities.

in addition, we have sought to apply the notion of *l'objectivation participante* defined by Pierre Bourdieu (2003):

the objectivation of the subject of objectivation, of the analysing subject – in short, of the researcher herself ... which consists in observing oneself observing, observing the observer in his work of observing.²

The reader may judge as to the success, or otherwise, of this endeavour.

² “Par objectivation participante, j’entends l’objectivation du sujet de l’objectivation, du sujet analysant, bref, du chercheur lui-même ... qui consiste à s’observer observant, à observer l’observateur dans son travail d’observation.”

Chapter One

British democracy is less of a fraud than it sometimes appears. A foreign observer sees only the huge inequality of wealth, the unfair electoral system, the governing-class control over the press, the radio and education, and concludes that democracy is simply a polite name for dictatorship. But this ignores the considerable agreement that does unfortunately exist between the leaders and the led. (George Orwell, 'England, Your England')

Orwell wrote those words in 1941 but there is much within them which describes the constellation of factors that led to the narrow vote to leave the European Union in 2016. If a foreign observer were to assess the state of British democracy today, what would they see? Since our overall objective is to determine how best the EU can manage its future relations with the UK, we must first establish who the EU is dealing with. In this chapter we will attempt to make some sense of the past decade of political turmoil and discern the state of Britain today. In the first section, we will be required to revisit key moments of the Brexit process. We will provide context where possible but we do not intend to rehash every moment of the political theatre in London or every sticking point of the negotiations in Brussels.³ Our hypothesis is that first the referendum and then the attempt to enact the result placed the British constitution and body politic under severe stress, to an extent which has not been fully appreciated. The events which we will recount in this first section will examine this, as well as explain in part how the current terms of EU-UK relations came to be.

In the second section, with that background in mind, we will assess the state of Britain today, facing numerous challenges and one year from an election. The UK, as everybody else, is not short of its problems to seek but our hypothesis is that leaving the EU – both the act of departure and the manner it came about – has left Britain in a more vulnerable position to deal with the global polycrisis than most. In this section we will examine this hypothesis and prepare the ground for our subsequent discussion on the future of EU-UK relations.

³ If the reader wishes to reacquaint themselves with the details and chronology of events they may consult the timelines available on either the European Council or the Centre for European Reform (CER) websites, which are included in the bibliography.

The 2016 referendum is of great political significance. However, its legal significance is determined by what Parliament included in the statute authorising it, and that statute simply provided for the referendum to be held without specifying the consequences. (Supreme Court of the United Kingdom, 2017)

The soundness of the 2016 referendum as a basis for the monumental changes which followed deserves greater scrutiny than it has received. As the Supreme Court ruling implied, and as subsequent developments would demonstrate, it was no basis for responsible policy-making on the part either of the public or their elected representatives. Moreover, the politics surrounding the referendum give rise to serious concern as to the health of British democracy.

The United Kingdom is a State which functions as an indirect democracy and where “parliamentary sovereignty was long seen by the majority of observers as the most important, if not the defining, characteristic of the British constitution.” (Peele, 2004:48) In January 2013, then British Prime Minister David Cameron announced that he intended to hold a referendum on British membership of the EU. Subsequently, parliament passed the legislation necessary (European Union Referendum Act 2015) to confer constitutional legitimacy on said referendum but the democratic legitimacy was another matter. Constitutionally, the mandate of the referendum could only be advisory in nature but, from the start, Cameron had characterised it as a straight in/out referendum with a definitive result.⁴ This would subsequently prove to be highly problematic in the interpretation of the result by the winning side. In the meantime, Cameron had placed the United Kingdom in uncharted territory between direct and indirect democracy before asking the British electorate to choose between the status quo and the unknown.⁵

Nor was that the only flaw inherent to the referendum. At odds with Theresa May’s later depiction of it as “the biggest democratic exercise” in British history,⁶ the choice of franchise was essentially that of a general election and therefore excluded nationals of other EU Member States residing in the UK (2.15 million people) and British nationals elsewhere in the EU (1.3

⁴ “It will be an in-out referendum [...] It is time for the British people to have their say. It is time to settle this European question in British politics.” (Cameron, 2013) Incidentally, the fact that it was advisory also implied that only “a simple majority of anything over fifty per cent, rather than a super majority of some higher percentage, was required for a vote to leave;” (Grey, 2021:11)

⁵ In 2016, the question on the ballot paper (“Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?”) was similar to that of the 1975 European Communities Membership referendum (“Do you think the United Kingdom should stay in the European Community [the Common Market]?”), where 67.23% voted in favour of doing so from a turnout of 64.62%. The difference, clearly, was that in 1975 the terms of membership were known whereas in 2016 the terms of potential withdrawal were not.

⁶ Although previously used elsewhere, the wording first came to prominence in the opening lines of the ‘Chequers Plan’, a white paper presented by Theresa May’s government in July 2018 on the future relationship between the UK and the EU (DexEU, 2019).

million), if not registered as overseas voters.⁷ In effect, millions of people with a direct stake in the outcome were excluded from voting on the grounds that it was only an advisory referendum.⁸ The 52%-48% vote in favour of withdrawal equated to a margin of only 1.3 million votes so the participation of the disenfranchised groups would, without question, have altered the result. It is not without cause that the likes of A.C. Grayling (2017) have argued that the referendum was gerrymandered.

Sandra Kröger (2019:294) finds that the referendum process fell short of democratic legitimacy in two regards, namely the franchise and the clarity of both the question being asked and the repercussions of the outcome.⁹ Nonetheless, not these concerns nor the narrow winning margin nor the fact that two out of the four constituent nations of the UK voted to remain in the EU would prevent the result from being immediately cast as definitive and rapidly used to validate outcomes very different to those which most of the electorate might have envisaged.

Having failed in his gambit, David Cameron stepped down as Prime Minister and was succeeded by Theresa May in July 2016. During the referendum campaign May had “paid lip service to Remain, while leaving room for ambiguity” (Barnier, 2021:15) but she would subsequently portray the vote to leave as a vote to restore parliamentary sovereignty.¹⁰ Indeed, this was a fundamental tenet of the pro-Brexit argument, somewhat inconsistent with the fact that the instrument for its realisation was an advisory referendum which effectively bypassed Parliament and whose outcome would bind the hands of its successors.¹¹ Moreover, the need to ‘get Brexit done’ soon became the pretext for a series of attempts to expand the power of the executive at the expense of the legislative.

Theresa May herself would prove to be rather selective in her respect for parliamentary sovereignty. For months, she argued that the government could give notice to withdraw through Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) by using the royal prerogative and without having to consult Parliament, which she stated would have been a subversion of democracy.¹²

⁷ Citizens of Ireland, Malta and Cyprus, as well as those of Commonwealth nations, were able to vote (UK Parliament, Background to the UK’s EU Referendum 2016). Kröger (2019:289) points out that that may well have breached article 18 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) which stipulates that “any discrimination on grounds of nationality shall be prohibited.”

⁸ “In a situation, where Prime Minister Cameron sought to appease the Eurosceptic part of his own party, did not think he would lose the referendum (see Shipman 2016) and where the referendum result was only going to be advisory, Cameron thought it acceptable to let the Eurosceptics in his party define the franchise and exclude important parts of the citizenry who would probably have overwhelmingly voted ‘remain’.” (Kröger, 2019, p.289)

⁹ She also finds that it could have done better on two further criteria, namely the amount and quality of information and the quality of public debate. Suffice to say, very few observers would disagree with Kröger on those points.

¹⁰ “the principle of Parliamentary Sovereignty is the basis of our unwritten constitutional settlement ... [it] was a vote to restore, as we see it, our parliamentary democracy [and] national self-determination.” (May, 2017)

¹¹ Parliamentary sovereignty is defined as the right to make or unmake any law whatsoever, which in turn implies a parliament cannot bind the hands of its successors. It was argued that EU membership was incompatible with parliamentary sovereignty on both counts, since it invariably entails enacting legislation from elsewhere. (Peele, 2004:48-51)

¹² “It is not up to the House of Commons to invoke Article Fifty, and it is not up to the House of Lords. It is up to the Government to trigger Article Fifty and the Government alone ... Because those people who argue that Article Fifty can only be triggered after agreement in both Houses of Parliament are not standing up for democracy, they’re trying to subvert it.” (May, 2016)

However, the Supreme Court would disagree with her, ruling in January 2017 that the government would indeed require parliamentary authority before initiating withdrawal from the EU treaties, given the inevitable legislative changes that would ensue.¹³

In March, May's government obtained the necessary parliamentary authority (European Union [Notification of Withdrawal] Act 2017) and in short order gave formal notice to the European Council of the United Kingdom's intent to leave the European Union. In the meantime, May had given an undertaking one week prior to the Supreme Court ruling, that "the Government will put the final deal that is agreed between the UK and the EU to a vote in both Houses of Parliament, before it comes into force." (May, 2017) That belated affirmation of parliamentary sovereignty was tempered by the fact that she did not specify if Parliament would be able to vote in the event that no deal was reached. The gradual breakdown in May's relations with Parliament, to which that omission contributed, would eventually cause insurmountable obstacles for her when she asked MPs to approve the Withdrawal Agreement she reached with the EU in November 2018. (DexEU, 2018)

In parallel, May had created another serious problem for herself at Lancaster House by setting out her negotiating objectives in their entirety. These 'red lines' were categorical rejections of freedom of movement, membership of the Single Market and Customs Union and the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice (CJEU). May had endorsed almost the most extreme interpretation of Brexit and, effectively, ruled out almost every existing model of cooperation with the EU before negotiations had even begun.¹⁴

That decision continues to define EU-UK relations today; the future Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) would have to rebuild the relationship almost from scratch but, moreover, the red lines implied the reintroduction of a physical border on the island of Ireland, contrary to the terms of the Good Friday (or Belfast) Agreement (GFA), which was the peace treaty of 1998 which brought about an end to the civil war – 'the Troubles' – in Northern Ireland.¹⁵ Without a border, the Agreement allowed people in Northern Ireland to identify as British or Irish or both; with a border, the toxic questions and conflicts of identity would be revived.

¹³ "It is common ground that UK domestic law will change as a result of the UK ceasing to be party to the EU treaties ... The fact that withdrawal from the EU would remove some existing domestic rights of UK residents also renders it impermissible for the Government to withdraw from the EU Treaties without prior Parliamentary authority." (Supreme Court of the United Kingdom, 2017)

¹⁴ Michel Barnier (2021:34-35) would describe his reaction as follows: "Mrs May is about to do nothing less than set out her red lines in their entirety, even though we have not yet opened negotiations ... I am astounded by the sheer number of doors she is closing here ... Does she realise that, in doing this, she is excluding almost all the models of cooperation we have managed to construct up until now with our partners, even the closest among them? Can we be sure that the referendum vote gave the British government *carte blanche* for such a total break? ... I am astonished at the way the Prime Minister has just put all her cards on the table."

¹⁵ Removing the border had been possible due to the context created by the European Single Market and Customs Union. As US Senator George Mitchell, who chaired the negotiations for the Agreement, later said: "I don't think the European Union was essential in the talks themselves, but I believe the talks would never have occurred had there not been a European Union." (BBC Talkback, 2017) Therefore, this red line version of Brexit was incompatible with the Good Friday Agreement to which the UK was and remains a party.

As such, May's red lines could apply to Great Britain but not Northern Ireland, hence the need for the so-called Northern Ireland 'backstop' within the terms of withdrawal May would eventually agree with the EU.¹⁶ This however would fall foul of many within her party, on the grounds that it divided the UK and was not the complete break from the EU which she had promised at Lancaster House. By now, since Parliament would neither approve May's deal nor approve leaving the EU without one, proponents of the latter began to agitate for prorogation – meaning the suspension – of Parliament altogether.

In July 2019, Theresa May had run out of options and was forced to resign as Prime Minister by her party colleagues. On 9 September the new Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, buried the fallacy that the Brexit project was intended to uphold parliamentary sovereignty by following through on the threat to prorogue Parliament. Johnson had intended for Parliament to be suspended until 14 October but, once again, the Supreme Court decreed otherwise. On 24 September, the Court ruled that, because Parliament was sovereign, its prorogation was unlawful.

Parliament can make laws which everyone must obey: this would be undermined if the executive could, through the use of the prerogative, prevent Parliament from exercising its power to make laws for as long as it pleased ... This prolonged suspension of parliamentary democracy took place in quite exceptional circumstances ... The effect upon the fundamentals of our democracy was extreme. No justification for taking action with such an extreme effect has been put before the court. (Supreme Court, 2019)

The prorogation order was declared void and the 2017–19 session of Parliament resumed the following day but, for the second time, it had required a ruling from the highest judicial body, on a case brought by private citizens, to prevent the executive from bypassing the legislature, all on the pretext of implementing their extremist interpretation of the result of an advisory referendum, which supposedly was intended to restore parliamentary sovereignty.

As regards delivering Brexit, Johnson had intended to use the suspension to force both Parliament and the EU to accept a Withdrawal Agreement revised to his liking or failing that for the UK to leave without an agreement, so long as either scenario took place before the then deadline of 31 October. When Brussels, the Supreme Court and Parliament all stood their ground, he was left with no option but to sign up to an Agreement which was remarkably

¹⁶ The backstop was "a solution of last resort negotiated with Theresa May's government ... aiming to ensure that there will be no physical border between Ireland and Northern Ireland. The Protocol also commits the UK not to regress on the rights set out in the 1998 Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement, and to protect North-South cooperation." (Barnier, p. 409)

similar to that negotiated by his predecessor, which he had decreed to be unacceptable. In the 2018 (May) version, the alleged bone of contention, the Northern Ireland backstop, was only intended to apply in the event that the EU and UK could not reach an agreement on the future partnership. In the 2019 (Johnson) version, the updated Northern Ireland Protocol would exist alongside any agreement on future partnership. In effect, the temporary backstop became a permanent arrangement and continues to shape EU-UK relations today.

That revised Agreement would take effect on 31 January 2020 when the UK would leave the EU by means of a transition period until December 2020 (the Trade and Cooperation Agreement would be concluded that same month). In the meantime, Johnson's claim to have 'delivered' Brexit was central to his general election campaign and, in a further demonstration of what Orwell described as "the considerable agreement that does unfortunately exist between the leaders and the led," the Prime Minister who had unlawfully suspended Parliament in September was comfortably returned to office in December 2019.¹⁷

Die Bananen-Insel

('Banana Island', cover of *Der Spiegel* 22 October 2022)

I promise if you look at it from the outside, I don't think other people in the world would share the view that there is mounting chaos. (BBC)

James Callaghan, then British Prime Minister, spoke those words in January 1979 at the height of what became known as the 'Winter of Discontent,' to which post-Brexit Britain is often compared. "In the 1970s, the UK was known as the 'sick man of Europe.' Today it seems to be the sick man of the developed world." (FT, 2023) It is not clear that the full extent of Britain's "escalating multiyear political crisis ... a kind of anti-politics auction" (Naím, 2022:149) has been fully understood, let alone addressed.

The comparison with the 1970s is most useful as a means of providing granularity to what appears to be a general economic malaise. Indeed, there are similarities (e.g. high inflation, energy price surges and industrial unrest) but also differences, most notably Brexit through the uncertainty and consequent shortfall in business investment it has caused, not to mention labour shortages, food price rises (Shrimpsley, 2022) and the creation of "frictions in a previously

¹⁷ The Conservatives won 365 seats (out of 650) which represented a majority of 80 in the House of Commons; that also represented their highest number and proportion of seats since 1987 and their highest share of the popular vote since 1979.

frictionless trade border, weakening productivity and economic growth over the long run and adding to price pressures.” (Weldon, 2023)

Indeed, growth – or lack thereof – is a fundamental concern, especially when taxes are at a seventy year high while almost eight million people are on hospital waiting lists. “Unless Britain can boost its growth rate, the country looks consigned to high taxes and poor public services for the foreseeable future.” (Fleming and Parker, 2023) That indeed appears likely as, in November, the growth outlook was reduced from 1.8% to 0.7% in 2024 and from 2.5% to 1.4% in 2025, meaning that living standards are not expected to return to pre-pandemic levels until 2027-28. (Thomas, BBC, 2023)

Brexit may not in itself be the cause of slow growth – France and Germany are also experiencing very low growth rates for example (Thomas, Reuters, 2023) – but nor will it help matters. “Since Brexit, Britain has begun a slow, mournful slide down the OECD rankings for foreign direct investment: from 12th place in 2015 to 20th in 2022,” a development which Cavendish (2023) attributes to “the havoc wreaked by leaving the single market and customs union.” In that regard, Brexit is proving to be the “slow puncture” (Bevington and Menon, 2018) on the British economy that was predicted, one whose impact will be real but not necessarily immediately identifiable.¹⁸ That poses a problem for risk analysis but moreover this is where Weldon (2023) argues the comparison with the 1970s is most accurate: “then, as now, the government was forced to deal with concurrent crises that called for different, and often incompatible, policy responses.”

The long-term thinking required in this situation may be beyond the capacities of the current British government. Since the referendum, the “increasingly frenetic merry-go-round of the great offices of state” (Gross et al, 2023) has created a turnover three times as high as the period from 1979 to 2016. Not counting incumbents on the day of the referendum, there have been four prime ministers, six chancellors, six foreign secretaries, seven home secretaries and the next general election will be the fourth in ten years.

In this context, a functioning and effective legislature should be regarded as essential but, as we have seen and contrary to the ostensible *raison d'être* of the Brexit project, that democratic assumption has been severely tested also.

Repeatedly during 2016-19, governments sought to circumvent parliamentary resistance in order to deliver the ‘will of the people’. Ministers proposed to sidestep traditional parliamentary

¹⁸ For example, there is disagreement as to the cost of Brexit, with estimates ranging from 1% to 5% in terms of lost GDP. (Springford, 2023)

sovereignty in the name of respecting popular sovereignty, using this to argue for stronger executive powers. (Russell, 2020:5)

We can nonetheless acknowledge that Parliament did, despite everything, largely fulfil its functions from 2016 to 2019, not least in (twice) preventing the executive from withdrawing from the EU without an agreement. However, from 2020 onwards, the implementation of both the Withdrawal Agreement and now the TCA entails a legislative burden which continues to place Parliament under considerable strain.

As Switzerland and Norway can testify, a close relationship with the EU entails constant negotiation and, in the case of the UK, will require a substantial amount of primary and secondary domestic legislation. A significant example is the Retained EU Law Bill, alternatively known as the ‘bonfire’ of EU laws or the ‘Brexit freedoms’ bill, whose objective is to review and revoke up to 800 statutes and regulations (pared down from the original 3700). This body of EU-derived law forms the basis for the economy and national life and, under Rishi Sunak, the British government has apparently accepted that diverging too fast too soon would be unwise in the current economic climate.¹⁹ Yet for many Brexit zealots this bill encapsulates the whole point of the project: large-scale deregulation by means of divergence from the EU, allied to an expansion of executive power at the expense of parliamentary sovereignty.²⁰ The Bill remains on the statute books, ready to be enacted when the timing is more propitious. All of this means the institution of Parliament must function correctly with, crucially, a certain degree of public respect and democratic legitimacy which currently are sorely lacking.

Therein lies the damage of the 2016 referendum, which placed Britain in limbo between parliamentary and popular sovereignty, between indirect and direct democracy. As a matter of risk analysis, that is a dangerous state of affairs at a time when, across the world, the fundamentals of free societies are being challenged. Moisés Naím warns of a malignant new form of power which he characterises as the 3Ps: populism, polarisation and post-truth (2022:xiv). He identifies certain themes common in populist discourses and bids for power (2022:xvi-xvii) and many of these have defined British politics over this past decade:

¹⁹ UK in a Changing Europe monitors these very issues on a quarterly basis through reports entitled UK-EU Relations Tracker, Regulatory Divergence Tracker and Trade Tracker respectively.

²⁰ Labour MP Stella Creasy: “all those wanting to defend parliamentary sovereignty should be wary of the government using the promise not to delete vital rights now as a Trojan horse to get this legislation through Parliament and then use the powers in it to destroy legislation later ... The retained EU law bill in its current form still seeks to use Brexit as an excuse for a ministerial power grab.” (O’Carroll, April 2023)

crumbling national borders;²¹ denigrating experts;²² attacking media;²³ undermining checks and balances;²⁴ and using external threats.²⁵

The UK clearly merits its place among Naím's case studies but, in contrast to Trump's America, Erdoğan's Turkey, Orbán's Hungary and Bolsonaro's Brazil, he highlights an aspect of what he calls Britain's "traumatic experience with Brexit" which sets it apart from most other manifestations of the 3P playbook.

It's a peculiar case because in Britain, the tools picked from the menu of options offered by populism, polarisation and post-truth were applied by committee, as it were – without having any single recognisable leader at the front of the charge. It was a diffuse, leaderless sort of new power. (2022:75)

In other words, the danger to British democracy did not begin and end with Brexit and the situation remains troubling. According to the Democracy Index produced by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), in 2021 Britain showed signs of edging closer to the status of 'flawed democracy.' In context, the UK still ranked 18th in the world and 11th in western Europe but, according to the EIU, "it's the direction of travel, the decline, which is the concern." (Forrest, 2022) That conclusion still held true in 2022 and, moreover, the EIU's overall summary of the situation provided little reassurance.

This party and governmental crisis did not affect the overall index score because the UK's scores for many indicators that measure things such as confidence in government and political parties, citizens' control, voter turnout and social cohesion were already low and either could not go lower or did not merit being downgraded further. The UK has always been positioned towards the bottom of the "full democracy" category ranking, precisely because of certain negative features of the British democratic system. (EIU, 2022:40)

²¹ The centrality to the Brexit debate of borders and immigration – "taking back control" – needs no elaboration.

²² Naím himself provides a definitive example of this (2022:75). "The seminal moment in the referendum came when one of the highest-ranking cabinet secretaries, Michael Gove, confronted with a long list of august organisations that had rejected Brexit, stunned his Sky interviewer with a simple answer: "the people of this country have had enough of experts."

²³ For example, the NGO OpenDemocracy expressed deep concerns as to the Johnson government's response to media coverage of its handling of the pandemic and warned that press freedom in the UK was being eroded. (Geoghegan, 2022)

²⁴ In addition to undermining Parliament, criticism of the civil service is now commonplace. To quote former Justice Secretary Dominic Raab upon his resignation, "if you've got particularly activist civil servants ... [and] they block reforms or changes through a rather passive aggressive approach, we can't deliver for the British people." (Mason and Morton, 2023)

²⁵ For example, Boris Johnson comparing the EU, in its apparent desire to create a superstate, to Napoleon and Hitler and Jacob Rees-Mogg comparing Brexit to the battles of Waterloo, Agincourt, Crécy and Trafalgar. (Walker, 2019)

The crisis in question was the events of September to October of 2022 when Boris Johnson resigned as Prime Minister to be replaced, fleetingly, by Liz Truss who in turn was succeeded by Rishi Sunak. Of the indicators referred to, public confidence and social cohesion have undeniably been damaged by both Brexit and the ensuing crises from 2020 onwards, which in the British context are all related. Although neither Johnson nor Truss – both belated but ardent converts to the Brexit cause – were forced to resign on matters of European policy,²⁶ Brexit was nonetheless a contributing factor to their failures:

The populist explosion of this decade, of which Brexit was a prime example, has bequeathed a way of governing which is impervious to reason, and incapable of engaging with complexity ... all the things which secured the vote for Brexit ... are without exception precisely the opposite of what is needed for effective governance in general, and crisis management in particular. (Grey, 2020)

This was in reference to the unfolding coronavirus pandemic but Grey's observations still ring true in 2023. A global polycrisis is a highly inopportune time for Britain to be undergoing a democratic and constitutional crisis, of which Brexit has been both cause and consequence, while "the British economy is exhibiting the comorbidities of a badly botched Brexit that weakened its resistance to shocks." (Shrimpsley, 2022)

Regardless, there is little prospect of the UK reversing course and applying to rejoin the EU for the foreseeable future. While a majority of the British public appear to regret the decision to leave the EU,²⁷ this does not necessarily equate to a desire to rejoin.

Views on Brexit are tied to views of a struggling economy, the cost-of-living and the (unpopular) government of the day, suggesting that opinions on Brexit are not that deeply held. Given that fewer than 10% of people rank it as an important issue, it does not shape the public debate in the same way it did in 2019. (Usherwood, 2023)

As such the relationship with the EU will not feature prominently during the next general election campaign (scheduled for no later than January 2025 but likely to be held sooner) but it will be an issue of major importance for the next British government and for the EU itself.

²⁶ Johnson was deposed because of his mishandling of the coronavirus pandemic, his personal mendacity regarding flouting of the lockdown rules his government had imposed and numerous scandals within the Conservative Party. Truss resigned because her plan to boost economic growth involved a £45b package of unfunded tax cuts which sent the pound to historic lows, drew warnings from the IMF and forced evasive action from the Bank of England. (Hickey, 2022)

²⁷ Some 62% regard Brexit as a failure, according to YouGov figures. (Murray, 2023)

If Rishi Sunak were returned to office then the EU should retain some wariness, even though he initially appeared to be someone they could do business with, relative to his predecessors. He leads a Conservative party which, for ten years, has tacked to the right for fear of being outflanked by some populist movement, of which there have been different guises both separate to and within the party itself. That dynamic was evident in both David Cameron's decision to call the referendum and Theresa May's adoption of her red lines. Both however only further contributed to the evolution of the Conservative party into "an ersatz populist radical right party". (Bale, 2023) That is manifesting itself on the subject of migration, as we shall see further on, but Sunak (who unlike all his predecessors was always an advocate of Brexit) has also signalled his intention to pursue a policy of divergence from the EU, notably through the afore-mentioned Retained EU Law Bill. Sunak may have been a constructive partner in establishing the Windsor Framework but that would not necessarily continue should he be returned with a fresh mandate

Alternatively, should current polling prove accurate then Labour will comfortably win the election and form a government under Keir Starmer.²⁸ One of the few policy areas where Starmer has provided some clarity, if not detail, as to his future plans is on relations with the EU. In a speech at the Centre for European Reform (CER) in July 2022, Starmer stated explicitly that "under Labour, Britain will not go back into the EU. We will not be joining the Single Market. We will not be joining a customs union." In effect, his position reflects no fundamental change to Theresa May's red lines. In a context of risk analysis, this should theoretically allow the EU to plan for the short- to medium-term with relative stability but in reality there is potential for political disagreement ahead of the scheduled TCA review in 2026, as we will explore in the next chapter. Whatever the outcome of the next British general election, the EU should not hope that the outbreak of (relative) pragmatism and cooperation in 2023 will last. The British question has not gone away.

Summary

Returning to Orwell's critique of English democracy in 1941, there are many damaging aspects of today's British body politic that he would recognise, as we have said, but he made one observation which draws attention for the opposite reason: "in any calculation about [England] one has got to take into account its emotional unity, the tendency of nearly all its inhabitants to

²⁸ As of mid-November, voting intentions stood at 44% for Labour and 21% for the Conservatives, with 10% each for the nominally pro-EU Liberal Democrats and the anti-EU Reform Party. (YouGov, 2023)

feel alike and act together in moments of supreme crisis.” That is in stark contrast to Naím’s analysis (2022:149) of the past decade of British politics.

Brexit will be remembered as the distillation of the anti-politics spirit in an advanced Western country. The storm of exaggerations, distortions, untruths and lies at the core of the Leave campaign left a permanent imprint in British politics, creating a poisonous climate of distrust between partisans and alienating the broad middle of a British electorate racked by ‘Brexit fatigue’.

That, in effect, summarises the questions we posed at the outset of this chapter. Our tasks were to consider, firstly, the effects of this past decade on the health of the British body politic and, secondly, to assess the state of Britain today with a view to ascertaining, in the next chapter, what the EU might need to prepare for.

It is not that Britain is the only European State currently facing considerable economic difficulties; nor is it that Britain is the only European State where populism has become a serious political force (although we note Naím’s observation as regards the singularly diffuse nature of British populism). It is that, in the UK, constitutional norms and fundamental principles of British democracy were placed – and remain – under severe stress. It is that, in the UK, the confluence of all of these led the country (or one of the countries) to take a monumental decision which cannot be undone simply with a change of government and which has left it vulnerable at a dangerous moment in the global context.

What we have established in this chapter is that Brexit is cause, consequence and aggravator of “a multitude of interrelated crises playing out at the same time” (Weldon, 2023) while destroying the emotional unity needed to overcome them. That is what the EU must see when it looks northwest. That is the crux of the EU’s ‘British question,’ namely how best to deal with the sick man of Europe. We will address the ‘how’ in chapter three but, prior to doing so, we must identify what issues are likely to present themselves as sources of either conflict or cooperation between the EU and UK.

Chapter Two

“In the wake of the United Kingdom’s vote to ‘Brexit’ the EU, we Europeans will indeed have to rethink how our Union works; but we know very well what we need to work for. We know what our principles, interests and priorities are.” (Mogherini, 2016)

For a time, Federica Mogherini’s assertion of confidence in the EU seemed justified: the bloc maintained a unified front throughout the Brexit negotiations and then responded assertively to the challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic, the ensuing financial crisis and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. At the time of writing however, questions are emerging as to how the EU must position itself in a deglobalising world and the near consensus of recent times is no longer assured. In addition, the 2024 European elections are fast approaching which presents a risk of drift in the months until then, as well as potential change ensuing from the results.²⁹ Ideally, this chapter would address two overlapping questions: what should the EU want from its relationship with the UK and where will the UK align or conflict with the EU’s goals? However, the first question rests on the assumption that the unity and purpose which the EU demonstrated throughout the Brexit process will continue, whereas in fact the EU as a whole and the Member States individually have their own economic difficulties and populist movements to manage. The second question supposes that the direction of the UK is reasonably predictable, which as we have just seen is not the case.

Therefore, in this chapter we must reframe our two questions into a single one: what should the EU be prepared for in its relationship with the UK? Continuing with our risk

| <u>Significant dates</u> | |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Northern Ireland Assembly Elections | <i>TBD</i> |
| European Parliament Elections | <i>June 2024</i> |
| US Presidential Election | <i>November 2024</i> |
| Northern Ireland Assembly vote on NIP | <i>December 2024 (TBC)</i> |
| UK General Election | <i>No later January 2025</i> |
| Irish General Election | <i>No later March 2025</i> |
| Review of EU-UK TCA | <i>May 2026 (TBC)</i> |
| US Presidential Election | <i>November 2028</i> |

analysis, this chapter will identify a number of sources of potential conflict or cooperation within the EU-UK relationship. Firstly, we will consider the state of the bilateral relationship and risks to it, including those inherent to the structure of the TCA itself. Secondly, we will address issues which are multilateral in nature such as Northern Ireland and EU-UK cooperation on foreign policy matters, most especially Ukraine and the future of NATO.

²⁹ As of October 2023, polls predict the EPP and S&D to be returned as the two largest parties with potentially 173 and 139 MEPS respectively, followed by RE, ECR and ID with around 90, 80 and 75 respectively. Although sustaining losses from 2019 that would allow the EPP, S&D and RE to maintain a grand coalition with some 400 MEPS. (Europe Elects, 2023)

Bilateral relations

Obstacles ahead

The Trade and Cooperation Agreement, as wide-reaching as it is, will “by no means match the level of economic integration that existed while the UK was an EU Member State,” as the Commission pointedly states in the introduction. Since this new relationship entails putting up barriers where none existed before, it requires constant negotiation and monitoring and the new structure therefore carries the inherent risk that any number of individual issues have the potential to degrade the overall relationship to an extent greater than the intrinsic importance of the individual issue itself. To cite one senior EU official, tonality in one area can have an impact on the whole relationship, including external cooperation (EU-UK Forum, June 2023). The impasse over the UK rejoining the Horizon Europe programme, which will only take effect this coming January, is a case in point. Having left Horizon at the time of leaving the EU, the UK’s rejoining of that programme was blocked by the EU until the stand-off regarding the Northern Ireland Protocol was resolved. The agreement of the Windsor Framework cleared the way for Britain to negotiate re-entry into Horizon, only for Rishi Sunak to prevaricate on the grounds of cost before ultimately reaching agreement with the Commission in September.

Aside from the obvious, substantial and mutual scientific benefits that British participation in Horizon Europe will bring, if handled cleverly it could also have served as a confidence building measure from London, building on the (relative) normalisation of relations this past year. However, Sunak instead took a strictly transactional view of the matter and held out for five months in an attempt to secure rebates through the ‘underperformance clause’ and extra discounts to take into account British non-participation over the past three years. (O’Carroll, September 2023)

As such, even though a positive outcome was eventually reached, Horizon demonstrates the problems that could beset every point of potential EU-UK cooperation for the foreseeable future. The outcome of negotiations was affected, in turn, by a matter of greater existential importance within the relationship (Northern Ireland), then by internal British politics (ever wary of the anti-EU right wing of his party, Sunak could not afford for Britain to be seen domestically as a net contributor to an EU programme) and subsequently went under review by EU Member States, all of whom needed to agree that British participation in Horizon will fall within the terms of the TCA and will bring no special favours. Ultimately it took three years to resolve an issue which should have been a win-win.

The sometimes fraught nature of cooperation is hardly atypical of relationships between the EU and third countries (Switzerland was associated to Horizon 2020 but is not currently associated to Horizon Europe, for example) but the British relationship has certain particularities. Firstly, as we have noted, the TCA only partially covers the spectrum of issues which used to be governed by British membership of the EU and which must now be revisited and, secondly, many within British politics and government still perceive the relationship as a transactional one between equals. Moreover, in addition to the structural complications of EU-UK cooperation, there remain substantive points of potentially serious disagreement.

In reference to the scheduled review of the TCA in 2026, Keir Starmer has repeatedly stated that he would seek a “major rewrite” of the deal, which he describes as “far too thin,” in order to achieve a closer trading relationship. (Parker, 2023) Given that Starmer also categorically ruled out rejoining the Single Market or Customs Union, there is little indication as to what he has to offer that would constitute a major rewrite. In his CER speech, he cited some specific additions such as a veterinary agreement (designed to eliminate border checks on agri-food products) and mutual recognition of professional qualifications, as well as some less specific additions such as “new security arrangements to defend our borders.” On security at least, the Labour Shadow Foreign Secretary David Lammy has been more constructive and proposed a comprehensive agreement, which we will discuss in chapter three.

The EU, for its part, “has a clear minimalist position: a short, technical review of the treaty’s implementation in 2026” (Reland and Wachowiak, 2023:3) and will require some convincing as to the value of engaging in larger negotiations. The continued febrility of British politics we saw in chapter one also raises the possibility that further agreements could be undone later by a populist, hard right government in London. (EU-UK Forum, March 2023) In contrast, Starmer will feel a political need to achieve his “major rewrite” and demonstrate that he succeeded where the Conservatives did not. That disconnect could cause problems in the scheduled TCA review (or prior if Starmer presses the matter earlier) and in the EU-UK relationship more generally.

If Prime Minister Starmer (and this same dynamic could also apply if Rishi Sunak is re-elected, unless he goes in the other direction and pursues greater divergence) approached the negotiations from a political perspective, only to be met with the minimalist and technocratic stance of the Commission, then the likely result would be deadlock and/or the politicisation of specific, technical points. As things stand, that appears to be a likely outcome but it could be avoided with some movement on both sides, beginning in London.

Once in office Keir Starmer would do well to review his current position, which looks much like the ‘cakeism’ of the Conservatives. His description of the TCA as “far too thin” or “half-baked” is at odds with (and politically insensitive to) the EU’s position that it goes beyond traditional free trade agreements. To a Brussels audience, his desire to remain outside the Single Market or Customs Union, while simultaneously expecting to add elements to the TCA, makes it appear that he has not understood the fundamental principle that rights and benefits come with obligations, as succinctly expressed by Michel Barnier.

If Starmer wishes to persuade the EU to acquiesce to revising the TCA then he will need to demonstrate good faith and one way of doing so would be to broaden the relationship beyond the TCA, for example by pursuing Lammy’s proposal for a comprehensive EU-UK security pact. That would also serve as recognition that the EU has devoted great time and energy to the British question this past ten years and will no longer do so to the detriment of the many other competing priorities currently on its agenda. As described by Stefan Fuehring, the Commission official responsible for overseeing the TCA, “we have really moved on now with this debate and I think the next decade is one where we’ll deal with future member states rather than a past member state.” (Foster, 2023)

Indeed, in that context the EU’s current minimalist stance on the TCA review is understandable but it would nonetheless be regrettable not to exploit a mutually beneficial opportunity to add, for example, a veterinary agreement. Moreover, it would be in the EU’s own benefit to recognise that some form of political dialogue will be inevitable and to be proactive about how and when this takes place. Nobody wants to revisit the bruising negotiations from 2016 to 2020 precisely because these clearly demonstrated the problems that arise when technical matters are politicised, yet the current framework is conducive to doing just this in 2026. With that in mind, a change to the framework – specifically the creation of a forum dedicated to political-level dialogue, above the TCA Working Groups – would be highly desirable and we will return to this in the next chapter.

Migration and the ECHR

The possibility that the United Kingdom will withdraw from the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) is another matter which may soon require the urgent attention of the EU. This notion has become something of a shibboleth in the Conservative party in recent years, most vocally but not exclusively in its ersatz populist form, in the apparent belief that the Convention prevents Britain from controlling its migration policy and, furthermore, is

incompatible with the sovereignty of its courts.³⁰ As such, although the Convention is lodged with the Council of Europe (of which the UK remains a member) and not the EU, leaving the ECHR subscribes to the Brexit narrative of ‘taking back control’ and potentially forms “an obvious arena for a new and worse ‘Brexit 2.0’” (Grey, 2021:274)

The matter gained renewed relevance in November when the UK Supreme Court ruled that the ‘asylum partnership agreement’ between the UK and Rwanda is unlawful in that “asylum seekers would face a real risk of ill-treatment by reason of refoulement to their country of origin if they were removed to Rwanda.” (Supreme Court, 2023) This would constitute a breach of obligations under the ECHR (NB: the European Court of Human Rights [ECtHR] blocked the first deportations to Rwanda in June 2022), as well as other international and domestic law.³¹

The immediate response of the Sunak government has been to announce emergency legislation to effectively bypass the ruling domestically by simply declaring Rwanda to be ‘safe’ (contrary to the Court ruling), by disapplying parts of the UK Human Rights Act, by granting Ministers the option to disregard temporary injunctions of the ECtHR and by preventing application of (but not denouncing) the ECHR in domestic law. The exact legal ramifications (including the reaction of the ECtHR and indeed of the EU) remain unclear but, politically, the executive is once again seeking to force divisive legislation through Parliament, while pitting itself in opposition to the judiciary and invoking the will of the British people to do so. Once again, Parliament’s scrutiny procedures will be tested to their limits.

Sunak is under mounting pressure from the right of his party, both as regards this legislation – which many regard as insufficiently robust – and the recent announcement that net migration to Britain was far higher than realised. (Gross and Strauss, 2023) Potentially the passage of that legislation could be stymied in both the Commons and the Lords for up to a year, in which case Sunak will fail to enact it before the election. However, that may increase the pressure on him to formally denounce (meaning withdraw from) the ECHR, which in procedural terms only requires provision of six months’ notice. (Jones, 2023) That would allow Sunak to claim one victory against ‘foreign courts’ while making the ongoing battle against domestic courts and political opposition a central plank of the Conservative re-election campaign.³²

³⁰ In June 2015 then Prime Minister David Cameron refused to rule out leaving the ECHR (Watt, 2015) and, in April 2016, then Home Secretary Theresa May stated that the UK should leave the Convention regardless of the result in the upcoming referendum (Athana, 2016).

³¹ The ruling cites article 33(1) of the United Nations 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, as well as article 3 of the ECHR, noting that “Parliament has given effect to both the Refugee Convention and the ECHR in our domestic law.” It further refers to the UK Human Rights Act 1998, the Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act 1993, the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 and the Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants etc) Act 2004.

³² Here we take note of a section in the 2019 Conservative manifesto (p.48), published shortly after the prorogation crisis described in chapter one: “*After Brexit we also need to look at the broader aspects of our constitution: the relationship between the Government, Parliament and the courts; the functioning of the Royal Prerogative; the role of the House of Lords.*”

This would have direct and serious repercussions for EU-UK relations. Firstly, it would represent a violation of the Good Friday Agreement, which explicitly states that the British government must ensure the effective operation of the ECHR in Northern Ireland in order to safeguard the democratic institutions there.³³ Secondly, it would result in automatic termination of Part Three of the TCA on law enforcement and judicial cooperation in criminal matters.³⁴ In the former case, the EU response would clearly need to be guided by the Irish government, in its capacity as one of the other parties to the GFA. However, we can safely assume that a violation on the part of the UK would inflame political debate and public opinion in Northern Ireland. There would be little chance of reviving the democratic institutions (the Assembly and Executive respectively) which are currently suspended. The ongoing implementation – and the democratic legitimacy – of the Northern Ireland Protocol will soon depend on the institutions functioning; indeed the Assembly is supposed to vote on continuing the Protocol (or not) no later than December 2024.

In the latter case, the TCA (article 692) stipulates that the Specialised Committee on Law Enforcement and Judicial Cooperation would have to “decide what measures are needed to ensure that any cooperation initiated under this Part is concluded in an appropriate manner.” That EU-UK cooperation would cease in this sector is, to say the least, highly undesirable but, it appears quite possible on the current course. A committee would not be equipped to handle such a fraught situation, which would require high-level engagement between the Commission and the British government which is not foreseen in the existing governance structures.

In short, if Rishi Sunak (or a future Conservative Prime Minister, should Sunak be deposed over this issue) were to withdraw the UK from the ECHR – or if the ECtHR were forced to conclude that his current legislation breaches the Convention – then it would present the EU with two considerable difficulties. A Labour victory in the next general election would avert both specific scenarios (although illegal migration would remain an issue of disagreement) but that may be one year away and their victory is not yet certain. Either way the Commission would do well to have contingency plans in place and, moreover, reconsider if the existing structures of the EU-UK relationship are really suitable when faced with risks such as these.

³³ Strand One section 5 on democratic institutions states that “there will be safeguards to ensure that all sections of the community can participate and work together successfully in the operation of these institutions and that all sections of the community are protected, including: ... (b) the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and any Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland supplementing it, which neither the Assembly nor public bodies can infringe...”

³⁴ Part Three covers, *inter alia*, cooperation on operational information, cooperation with EUROPOL and EUROJUST, exchange of criminal record information and protection of personal data. Article 692 of the TCA states that “if this Part is terminated on account of the United Kingdom or a Member State having denounced the European Convention on Human Rights or Protocols 1, 6 or 13 thereto, this Part shall cease to be in force.”

Multilateral relations

Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland is included here among multilateral issues because that is the very nature of the dynamic encompassing Belfast, Dublin, London and Brussels. The Good Friday Agreement was in fact two agreements, a multilateral one between the parties within Northern Ireland and the British and Irish governments and a bilateral one between those two governments. The Agreement established interlocking political institutions to reflect the “totality of relationships” on the islands of Great Britain and Ireland and was composed of three strands: i/ cross-community within Northern Ireland; ii/ North-South between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland; and iii/ East-West between Ireland and Great Britain.

The EU is now part of this dynamic and must keep Northern Ireland among its priorities – as it did so commendably during the withdrawal negotiations – but simply implementing the practical measures of the Protocol and the Windsor Framework will not be enough. Those accords are creative means of reconciling the seemingly irreconcilable, namely the Good Friday Agreement and the red line version of Brexit imposed by Theresa May. However, they have not undone the fundamental damage of Brexit to both the provisions and the ethos of that peace accord, as described by Jonathan Powell, one of the British government’s lead negotiators for the GFA:

What the agreements did was to take the poison out of the issue of identity ... The GFA was in the end an agreement to disagree. ... It also meant that people in Northern Ireland could feel Irish, British or both. This happy compromise has been upended by the impact of Brexit. (Oireachtas, 2022)

Nowhere is the poison more evident however than in the continued threat posed by paramilitary groups, both loyalist and republican, so much so that since March the terrorism threat level has been set to severe, indicating that an attack is considered likely.³⁵ Moreover, the nexus between political violence and organised crime in Northern Ireland is something which demands serious attention in the context of EU-UK relations. This nexus existed during the Troubles, when

³⁵ This followed the attempted murder of an off-duty policeman in February and preceded clashes between police and dissident republicans in April, as well as a data breach in August which saw dissident republicans gain possession of personal details of thousands of members of the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

cross-border smuggling was commonplace and highly profitable to paramilitary groups,³⁶ but now Northern Ireland has a unique position within both the United Kingdom and the EU's Single Market for goods. The EU had previously warned (ITV, 2022) that counterfeit goods had entered its Single Market through Northern Ireland but with the modified provisions of the Windsor Framework the opportunity for criminal exploitation seems even greater now.³⁷ Northern Ireland's particular circumstances must not directly benefit armed groups who today pose a greater threat to peace than they have done in a generation.

In this, the EU and the UK have a shared responsibility. Furthermore, as well as revising questions of identity and the border, Brexit means that the application of EU law in Northern Ireland is now a source of grievance to one community just as the possibility of the imposition of a hard border on the island is a source of grievance to another. The EU is now effectively party to the post-conflict context of Northern Ireland and must factor that into its behaviour. For example, there can be no repeat of the events of January 2021 when the European Commission imposed, however briefly, a hard border on the island on the grounds of controlling vaccine exports in a manner which breached the provisions of the Protocol by failing to inform London (nor Dublin) before taking unilateral action.³⁸ Just as the EU purports to do across its external action, conflict sensitivity and analysis will be required in all engagement related to Northern Ireland and the (discreet) application of tools such as the Early Warning System and Horizon Scanning would be desirable.

As regards implementation of the Protocol, an incontrovertible lesson of the Good Friday Agreement is that, in Northern Ireland, the work does not end when an agreement is reached.³⁹ A further negotiation of the Windsor Framework may prove unavoidable (the EU should take note) but, at a minimum, successful enactment of its provisions will require improved engagement with Northern Ireland stakeholders, especially when (as now) the Assembly is not functioning. As we have noted, the Assembly is supposed to vote on providing or refusing consent for the continuation of the Protocol by December 2024 but, until then, the EU and UK will need to make full use of the mechanisms they have created and assume shared

³⁶ For example, what began as cross-border smuggling of goods (primarily diesel oil) to fund the operations of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) later metastasised into a people smuggling network into England and involving collusion between former IRA members and their erstwhile enemies in the loyalist paramilitary groups. (Carroll and McDonald, 2020)

³⁷ These include a 'Trusted Trader' and 'Authorised Carrier' schemes and separate green and red lanes respectively for goods remaining in Northern Ireland or continuing on into Ireland and therefore the EU. Use of the green lane by trusted companies is to be monitored by risk-based tracking methods, as opposed to regular checks and paperwork, as well as real-time access by the EU to UK customs information technology systems and databases. (Gallardo, 2023)

³⁸ The decision may have been quickly reversed but the fact it happened at all and the apparent refusal to learn lessons suggest that the Commission at least has not fully understood the reality that it is now party to the situation in Northern Ireland. (Pogatchnik, 2021)

³⁹ The Good Friday Agreement, which had been preceded by the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 and the Downing Street Declaration of 1993, was followed by the St Andrews Agreement of 2006 and the Hillsborough Castle Agreement of 2010.

responsibility for ensuring that political, business and civic stakeholders in Northern Ireland are engaged in resolving problems and delivering outcomes.⁴⁰

Looking further ahead, the possibility of a ‘border poll’, a referendum on Irish unity, needs to be considered.

“Since [Brexit] has created an economic border between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, that makes a political border between them a logical outcome in due course. Conversely, it will strengthen economic ties between Ireland and Northern Ireland, making a political border between them less logical.” (Grey, 2021:265)

Although for now a referendum is not imminent and indeed would be unwelcome in both London and also Dublin for reasons of internal politics (which could change after the Irish elections of 2025), the unique post-Brexit status of Northern Ireland means that this question will never disappear. Brussels would do well to plan for this because the EU would be required to take a stance ahead of any referendum, notably by confirming (or not) that Northern Ireland would automatically become part of the EU, as per the precedent of German reunification. If so, Ireland would need substantial EU support, for example through the European Structural and Investment Funds, to manage the economic integration of Northern Ireland (which despite Grey’s observation will not be straightforward) and Brussels would need to give some advance indications as to the plans for this, effectively making it a persuader in the political debate.

Foreign policy and Ukraine

Throughout the travails of the Brexit process, one element which remained stable was that the UK and the EU Member States shared largely similar views on foreign and security policy, certainly as regards their analysis of the security situation in their immediate neighbourhood and, above all, the destabilising threat posed by Russia.⁴¹ The cooperation this should have created was proposed in the Political Declaration but never materialised.

However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 changed Europe overnight. The EU and UK found themselves in lockstep on a matter which made the details of the Brexit negotiations seem comparatively trivial. Based on a shared interpretation of events and the necessary responses, the UK and the institutions and Member States of the EU have been able

⁴⁰ As of November 2023, polling indicates mixed levels of trust and distrust in political actors and institutions to manage Northern Ireland’s interests with respect to the Protocol/Windsor Framework: the European Commission/EU scores 46% trust to 43% distrust, in comparison to the UK government which scores 77% distrust to 7% trust. (Hayward, Phinnemore and Whitten, 2023)

⁴¹ On this point, Stefan Lehne (2021) draws attention to the similarities of the 2016 EU Global Strategy and the 2021 UK Integrated Review.

to cooperate rather effectively in their support for Ukraine, despite the outstanding disagreements and mistrust of the Brexit process.

Much of the cooperation between the UK and EU Member States has of course taken place through NATO, an example being the multiyear assistance programme agreed at the 2023 Summit in Vilnius, as well as ongoing efforts for equipping and training Ukrainian forces. On sanctions, much is made of the EU-UK (and G7) coordination but perhaps that is over-stated. While successive British Prime Ministers have certainly made great show of their “regained ability to adopt sanctions on a national basis,” it is also true that “few governments want to be on their own in adopting tough economic measures, as this means being exposed to countermeasures and losing business to competitors.” (Lehne, 2021)

On that note, the EU has been relatively relaxed about British attempts to portray themselves as being in the vanguard in the support to Ukraine; as one senior official observed, beauty contests are part of politics and the priority is to help Ukraine. (EU-UK Forum, June 2023) In contrast, one development which has been under-stated is the quiet (and ironic) support of the UK, along with the US, for Ukraine’s accession to the EU. (Barnes, 2023) While this is primarily in order to secure greater financial support for Kyiv, it arguably also amounts to an implicit recognition of the normative power of the EU, even as its limits are exposed by Russian aggression in the eastern neighbourhood.

These different forms of EU-UK cooperation on Ukraine have all taken place without a dedicated EU-UK forum or agreement for foreign and security policy. However, it would be premature to conclude that an agreement is not required because the particularities of the situation as regards Ukraine are unlikely to be replicated elsewhere. Firstly, as noted above, the EU and UK were of similar minds in their stance on Russia before the invasion and, with minor exceptions, of one mind in their response to it. That may not be true in every crisis and it may not last as regards Ukraine either, as fatigue grows and governments change (the UK is something of an outlier in Europe in that cross-party support for Ukraine is assured). Secondly, when it comes to cooperation within NATO and the G7, it helps that the UK, EU and EU Member States are in alignment with the United States. Again, going into an election year, that may not last.

The future of NATO

On that note, there remains a real prospect that Donald Trump will be returned to the office of President of the United States in November 2024.⁴² If so, he will likely be difficult, if not outright hostile, towards the Alliance.⁴³ A formal US withdrawal from NATO is uncertain but a practical withdrawal of American support is a more probable and equally serious prospect, beginning with Trump cutting American financial and material aid to Ukraine.

While Europe does not have the means to make up the shortfall in military hardware, it could potentially do so financially. Joseph de Weck (2023) argues that European nations should engage with Trump in transactional terms by offering to purchase American weapons in a multiyear package, to the tune of some €45 billion a year, which equates to “0.3 percent of the European Union’s GDP, or roughly the difference between the 2% NATO target and what Germany actually spent on defence in the last two years.” This would be a short-term solution but Ukraine has short-term needs, which would be met while binding US Republicans into supporting Ukraine.

In that regard the proposal adds up but, on the other hand, it would be a considerable political and financial blow to the EU’s plans for development of its own defence industry (not to mention strategic autonomy). An important objective of European defence industrial strategy is to create synergies to support economic growth, for example through innovation in dual-use technologies and the consequent creation of jobs and investment. It is impossible to make these arguments if European money is spent purchasing American arms and such a scenario would only aggravate the ‘Ukraine fatigue’ that appears to be creeping into political and public discourse across Europe.

Even if Trump is defeated in 2024 and the US continues its support to Ukraine for now, the underlying problem remains and may present itself once again in 2028. The emergence in recent years of a populist, alt-right movement within the Republican party means that their candidate in 2028 could well share Trump’s views on NATO so European nations need to seriously plan for the possibility that, at some point in the not-so-distant future, the Alliance will be effectively paralysed by an American President. The specific scenario described above is troubling in that it would simultaneously require European nations to redouble their rearmament efforts while undermining their existing plans to do just that and thus represent a major blow to European strategic decision-making autonomy. Other alarming scenarios might

⁴² As of November 2023, Trump was projected to beat incumbent President Biden in a majority of key states. (Schwartz, 2023)

⁴³ Senior officials managed to dissuade Trump from enacting formal withdrawal during his first term but, reportedly, he is already discussing how he could follow through with this – or at least place NATO on “standby” – during his prospective second term, should Allies not meet his demands on spending. (Rawnsley and Suebsaeng, 2023)

be Trump publicly reneging on the American commitment to upholding NATO's Article V or negotiating directly with Vladimir Putin on the future of Ukraine, over the head of Volodymyr Zelenskyy, just as he excluded the government of Afghanistan from his negotiations with the Taliban (with the results we know).

These observations demonstrate the importance of keeping the UK within the EU's strategic orbit. For example, managing relations with an unfriendly American President would demand a level of diplomatic coordination (and public unity) best achieved through a structured dialogue, which does not yet exist. Furthermore, European rearmament will need the EU to make good on its long-held ambitions of creating a genuinely European defence industrial base which will need to incorporate British industry and capabilities. That will also require the implementation of a dedicated structure and we will return to both of these points in chapter three.

A final observation here is that the British commitment to European security should not be underestimated on account of Brexit. It is true that the UK was historically nonplussed as regards the EU's defence ambitions, in contrast to the long-standing British position that NATO is "the bedrock of our national defence, and of stability in the Euro-Atlantic area." (NSS/SDSR, 2015) It is also true that since Brexit there has been a lot of (somewhat competitive) rhetoric about 'Global Britain' and even the diplomatic disagreement of the AUKUS deal (where Australia broke its commitments to buy nuclear-powered submarines from France so as to sign an agreement with the UK and US). However, the UK makes significant contributions to the defence of eastern Europe on land through the NATO Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) and to northern Europe at sea through the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), in addition to its network of bilateral relations. On defence matters, the UK remains "a quiet European" (Keohane, 2021).

That being the case, if NATO is compromised and the UK seeks other channels to fulfil its commitments to European security, then the EU would do well to proactively engage with London and build the structures necessary to maximise cooperation, as we shall discuss shortly.

Summary

In this chapter we have covered numerous issues and scenarios, some conflictual and some cooperative, none of which are properly accounted for within the existing EU-UK relationship. The bilateral issues are essentially part of the fall-out from the febrile domestic politics of the UK we studied in chapter one. Migration, for example, is at the top of the political agenda

across Europe but in the UK it has the added toxic element of being part of the pro-Brexit narrative on ‘taking back control’, including from European courts, for an increasingly populist government seeking, once again, to wield the nebulous will of the people against the supposedly sovereign parliament.

Should the Conservatives lose the next general election, as expected, the threat to withdraw from the ECHR will dissipate. However, the questions of Northern Ireland and of the TCA review will remain, regardless of who wins the election next year. For the TCA, the onus is on London to demonstrate that it has something new and constructive to propose but the EU could help itself by channelling political discussions away from the TCA proper. For Northern Ireland, for all the priority accorded to preserving the gains of the peace process during the Brexit negotiations, the EU appears not to have realised just how large a role it now plays. It is now party to the fragile post-conflict environment and must act accordingly.

In the second part of the chapter, as we considered a bigger picture beyond existing disagreements, the nature of EU-UK relations began to look markedly different – and there is a lesson there to be retained throughout the rest of this study. The cooperation in support of Ukraine’s fight against Russian invasion demonstrates that the EU and UK can work together constructively and indeed effectively. That in itself is not a revelation as foreign and security policy writ large was always considered a domain where the case for cooperation was clear and obvious. However, given the drastic change of circumstances in February 2022, it is still noteworthy. The problem is that the unanimity which marked European and British – and indeed American – responses to the Russian invasion of Ukraine will not be replicated every time. NATO and the G7 may not be friendly environments in the near future and all European nations need to consider how to organise themselves in that eventuality.

So the paradox for the EU is how to manage a relationship with an unreliable and potentially conflictual neighbour which must by necessity also be an ally. Meeting the requirements of that dilemma will require the EU to equip itself with a far greater range of instruments than it currently has within the TCA. This is why the EU needs a relationship with the UK that is not only more strategic but broader in scope as regards both geography and substance. In chapter three we will explore what this should consist of.

Chapter Three

“The EU isn’t going away, and the UK sits adjacent to it, and is going to have an evolving relationship with it.” (Grey, 2021:272)

Grey’s statement is also applicable in reverse. Having identified a series of risks, challenges and opportunities for EU-UK cooperation, in this final chapter we can begin to propose how the EU might go about managing its British question. By now we have established that the question remains a live one, to an extent perhaps not appreciated in Brussels, and it is becoming a recurring theme in this study that the EU could gain from being more proactive in recognising and preparing for this reality.

At this point, we must reiterate an observation we have made previously, that we cannot assume that the EU will itself know what it wants nor act in unison. Indeed, in chapter three we will begin to discern differences between the European Council (EUCO) and the Commission, as well as the particular interests of northern and northwestern Member States as regards the British question. The policy proposal we will make will take those dynamics into account.

Above all, this uncertainty is evident in the ongoing debate regarding European strategic autonomy and/or interdependence, which is the subtext to this entire dissertation but most especially this final chapter. Here we must define our terms. By autonomy, we simply mean freedom to act, as opposed to freedom from dependencies. (Fiott, 2018) By strategy, we simply mean the “classic Clausewitzian ... relation between ends and means.” (Council/ART, 2021) By strategic autonomy, we mean “the ability to set one’s own priorities and make one’s own decisions in matters of foreign policy and security, together with the institutional, political and material wherewithal to carry these through.” (Lippert, von Ondarza and Perthes, 2019:5) Autonomy therefore implies acknowledging interdependencies and acting in a proactive and strategic manner to shape these in one’s own interests. That is what we mean when argue that the EU should adopt a more geopolitical approach to its relations with the UK.

So, in practical terms, what must this look like? How must the EU structure its engagement with the UK? To answer these questions, we will compare the existing structure against the EU’s other relationships with third parties, notably in the context of neighbourhood policy. Since the entire premise of this study is that the EU must adopt a more geopolitical and less technocratic approach to its relationship with the UK, and given the challenges we have previously identified, it is reasonable to assume that we will propose substantial changes. We will group these together in what we will call a Northwestern Neighbourhood Policy and the final part of this chapter will describe what that might look like and in what circumstances this

might be implemented. We will discover that the EU may well have greater scope for action that it appears to realise.

The Neighbourhood

The context for the current state of EU-UK relations is that, as described in chapter one, the UK not only chose to leave the EU but then, through Theresa May's red lines, to refuse all existing options for a future relationship and effectively rebuild from scratch. The TCA has done this to an extent which, in hindsight, seems remarkable given the scale of the task, the short timeframe and above all the febrile political atmosphere in which this all unfolded. Nonetheless, as the EU pointedly states, the TCA can never recreate what existed before and in many sectors a no-deal scenario effectively applies, notably in foreign and security policy where cooperation has been good but ad hoc.

The stated position of the Commission is that the current governance structure of the TCA is sufficiently comprehensive and that "the EU has committed to using this structure to its full potential." (Bounds, Foster and Parker, 2023) In reality that potential is limited by the fact that "committee meetings are highly technical, and not a place for deeper political conversations," not to mention the insufficient regularity with which they meet. (Davies and Wachowiak, 2023) The governance structure – or more accurately the absence of a political, or more strategic, level above it – thus does not support development of the EU-UK relationship beyond the TCA, in addition to causing problems within the accord itself.

As noted in chapter two, it appears highly likely that Brussels and London will approach the 2026 review with incompatible mindsets and objectives but that need not result in blockage or even conflict. The EU could help the UK but especially itself by creating the space for political dialogue outwith the technical-level confines of the TCA. This would protect the TCA, pre-empt the breakdown in relations which is liable to occur on the current course and, additionally, allow the EU to take the initiative with regard to the considerable opportunities which are beginning to open up. By taking inspiration from its relationships with other external parties, the EU already has the means to achieve all this.

In contrast to the Commission's apparently limited ambitions for the relationship with the UK, the stated objectives of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) include "avoiding the emergence of new dividing lines between the enlarged EU and its neighbours and instead strengthening the prosperity, stability and security of all." This would be consistent with the EU-UK Political Declaration which "establishes the parameters of an ambitious, broad, deep

and flexible partnership” and which “will be rooted in the values and interests that the Union and the United Kingdom share [which] arise from their geography, history and ideals anchored in their common European heritage.”

That description of the ENP hints at an assumption that the EU still exercises normative power in its neighbourhood; if so, that assumption likely needs adjusting – although not abandoning – to the reality today, as we shall see shortly. In the meantime, while we can argue that an ENP-like approach would be preferable for the EU-UK relationship in comparison to the existing arrangements, we must first recognise that the UK does not fit neatly into either existing version of the ENP.

A distinction has emerged within the ENP between the ‘European neighbours’ to the east and the ‘neighbours of Europe’ to the south; the former ... hope to benefit from a prospect of membership which could never be offered to the latter.⁴⁴ (Rupnik, 2014:33)

In geographical terms, the UK clearly belongs to the first category but, as mentioned earlier, is unlikely for the foreseeable future to seek to rejoin the EU. The EU cannot therefore use the prospect of future membership as leverage towards London in the way it might with its eastern neighbours, or indeed as it did with the UK prior to 1973. However, neighbourhood policy retains a certain ambiguity as to the destination of travel; Rupnik (2014:33-34) cites then EU High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana, who stated in 2005 that “the European Neighbourhood Policy is not aimed at the enlargement of the EU, it neither foresees it nor forbids it.”⁴⁵

That would be the appropriate tone for the northwestern neighbourhood (distinct from the eastern neighbourhood, where the next round of enlargement is indeed foreseen, especially since the Russian invasion of Ukraine), provided that the UK commits to the principle of ‘dynamic alignment’. This is the notion that parties to a trade agreement maintain equivalent regulatory standards to each other, as opposed to the divergence which, as stated earlier, is essentially the *raison d’être* of Brexit as far as the true believers are concerned.

Politically therefore, the UK does not resemble the EU’s eastern neighbours in terms of the direction of travel in its relations with the EU but nor does it resemble its southern neighbours either, in that none of them share a land border with the EU, the management of which is crucial

⁴⁴ « Une différenciation dans la PEV s’est ainsi esquissée entre les « voisins européens » à l’est et les « voisins de l’Europe » au sud ; les premiers ... souhaitent bénéficier d’une perspective d’adhésion qui ne pouvait être offerte aux seconds. »

⁴⁵ « la politique européenne de voisinage n’est pas destinée à l’élargissement de l’UE ; elle ne le prévoit ni l’interdit. »

to the continued existence of a peace process of which the EU and UK are now joint custodians. A further key characteristic of the EU-UK relationship, from a geopolitical perspective, is the fact that (noting the absence of any Irish contribution whatsoever to collective European security and defence) Member States with an interest in the Atlantic and High North will continue to require cooperation with Britain to protect the shipping lanes and critical infrastructure of Europe's northwestern flank.

Taking all these points into consideration, the existing bilateral, regulatory and Commission-led structures seem insufficient in comparison to a more geopolitical, ENP-like framework. However, since neither existing version of the ENP is adequate, the EU must develop what is in effect a bespoke Northwestern Neighbourhood Policy designed to harness the strategic interdependencies with the UK in support of strategic autonomy. That encapsulates the basic premise of this study but it also reflects the broader reality that the EU is discovering the limits of its normative power and its regulations-based relationships.

This in fact is not new. As far back as 2014, then Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski said:

We have greatly overestimated the power of attraction of the EU ... We were living naively in a post-modernist system in thinking that, as we were all partners, we only needed to regulate our relationships ... That is no longer true!⁴⁶ Mirel (2014:103)

Quite apart from the bigger global picture which includes the war in Ukraine and overall deglobalisation, the British decision to withdraw from the EU, however misguided or mishandled, supports Sikorski's observation. In that context, it follows that restricting the future EU-UK relationship to the regulatory confines of the TCA is insufficient, even more so when considering the problems inherent to the TCA explored in chapter two. Fortunately, there is reason to believe that the necessary instruments – and circumstances – already exist for an expanded, truly geopolitical approach to the relationship with the UK.

Looking northwest

We are formulating a proposal that the EU adopt a Northwestern Neighbourhood Policy encompassing the bilateral elements of its trade and economic relationship with the UK alongside broader regional concerns, concerning Ireland but also matters of collective

⁴⁶ « Nous avons grandement surestimé le pouvoir d'attraction de l'UE ... Nous vivions naïvement dans un système post-moderniste en pensant qu'étant tous partenaires il suffisait de réguler les relations ... Ce n'est plus vrai ! »

European security and defence, as we will see below. This proposal for an upgraded, regionalised and multifaceted framework for the EU-UK relationship comes at a time when EU enlargement and institutional reform are topics of serious discussion in Brussels and in capitals. A striking example is the Franco-German report *Sailing on High Seas* (2023:5) which, among many substantial recommendations, proposes four concentric circles, or tiers, of European integration: i/ the inner circle, ii/ the EU, iii/ associate members, iv/ the EPC.

While from an EU perspective an NWNP might previously have proven politically impossible lest it resemble a form of special status for the UK, under a concentric circles model it would fit into the third tier. From a British perspective, the term ‘associated member’ would, for now, appear politically difficult. Certainly no Conservative government would accept that and Labour in election mode are clearly risk-averse on EU matters. However, we recall the ongoing shift in British public opinion, if not explicitly in favour of rejoining the EU then at least desirous of undoing some of the damage of leaving it. That, in addition to the wider debate in Europe on neighbourhood and enlargement matters means that, at some point in the near future, there will be space for fresh thinking on the geopolitical nature of the future EU-UK relationship, finally unconstrained by the zero-sum, conflictual dynamic of 2016 to 2020.

The coming reforms to the structures and institutions of the EU could, with sufficient vision and courage all round, provide both the necessary political cover and the practical solutions for the future relationship. In order to truly serve its purpose as we have defined it, the NWNP would need to include certain elements, some of which already exist at the technical level and some which must be created at a higher level. The technical level would comprise the existing Withdrawal and Trade and Cooperation Agreements respectively and of course the Northern Ireland Protocol, all of which would continue to be the responsibility of the Commission with additional support from the European External Action Service (EEAS) on matters of conflict sensitivity, early warning and horizon scanning as regards Northern Ireland. The political level would comprise two elements which have been proposed but remain to be created: i/ a structured dialogue and ii/ a comprehensive security and defence agreement. This level would be led by EUCO but with substantial involvement from across the institutions, for example also including the legislative branch through the UK Contact Group of the European Parliament.

An advantage of structuring the relationship into two distinct levels is that, should disagreement arise on one then dialogue and cooperation can continue on the other. If managed constructively by all sides then the dual-level structure could help avoid the recurring situation where the entire EU-UK relationship is so vulnerable to deadlock on specific issues. This further allows the EU to act in a more deliberately geopolitical manner, as opposed to simply hoping

normative power will take its course. We have already noted the limits of normative power and, in any case, neither the British political class nor the public ever did understand the EU as a normative or values-based actor. (EU-UK Forum, March 2023) A political-level channel of engagement would allow the EU to be proactive rather than reactive in its relations with future British governments but also in its strategic communications with the British public, which would be highly desirable in the event of ongoing political turmoil in the UK, as discussed in chapter one.

There is an interesting parallel to be drawn here at the opposite geographical end of Europe, namely as regards EU relations with Turkey. In this context of renewed impetus to the overall enlargement process, Sinan Ulgen argues that the EU must redefine its long-term relationship with Turkey and his proposals include elements equally applicable to the British question. Firstly, Ulgen (2023) argues for the creation of a European framework for relations with Turkey, the absence of which has, from a Turkish perspective, rendered the EU “unable to provide a channel of positive engagement with Turkey at this time of geopolitical upheaval.” This has also hindered the efforts of those within Turkey who seek to promote a domestic narrative to counter the strong scepticism towards the west which exists there. On the EU side, “this lack of engagement has resulted in a total loss of leverage over Turkish policy, domestic or foreign.” (ibid)

Each of these points is equally relevant – and equally unsatisfactory – to the British case. Taking the example of respective EU and British policies towards the war in Ukraine, for the most part these have been in alignment, as previously discussed, but there have been exceptions. In the early days of the war, Boris Johnson sought to use the situation to establish what essentially would have amounted to a rival British-led structure of alliances in Europe, encompassing “States jealous of their national sovereignty, economic liberals and [those] determined to be extremely intransigent in the face the military threat from Moscow,” or in other words all those not inclined to follow the Franco-German line.⁴⁷ (Fubini, 2022) As is often true with Johnson there was rather more bluster than substance but it demonstrates that for the EU “a total loss of leverage” (Ulgen, 2023) over British policy is undesirable.

A further argument which Ulgen makes is that the new framework for relations with Turkey should aim to improve Turkish governance, as opposed to the focus on political rights which is a feature of the accession track. The examples he gives are specific to the EU-Turkey relationship (which unlike the British case includes a customs union) but the overall point he

⁴⁷ « di Stati gelosi della propria sovranità nazionale, liberisti in economia e decisi alla massima intransigenza contro la minaccia militare di Mosca. »

makes is that “broadening this arrangement ... would lead to Turkey’s policies converging with those of the EU.” (ibid)

This would appear to be a means for the EU to limit divergence on the part of the UK that would be more effective than, or at least complimentary to, the provisions and structures of the TCA, without risking a disagreement over the politically sensitive term of ‘dynamic alignment’ (which failed to make the final draft of the TCA for that very reason). Moreover, given the current problems to which we referred in chapter one, it would be beneficial, perhaps even necessary, for the EU to create mechanisms to improve governance in the UK, or help the British to do so. Both of these points, which support the objective of increasing leverage, would be in the EU’s interests and, again, be consistent with the purported goal of being a deliberately geopolitical actor and not merely a normative one. In fact, in both the Turkish and British cases such an approach would support the original objective of the ENP, at least as described by Javier Solana, which was to create “a ring of well governed countries” (Lehne, 2014:4) and, as such, create strategic autonomy by shaping interdependencies.

On that note, Ulgen’s final point is that the EU-Turkey relationship “must recognise today’s global landscape” in that, regardless of any future Turkish accession (or not) to the EU, “neither entity would be well served by a future of rivalry and antagonism.” (Ulgen, 2023) In the British case that is entirely coherent with the lofty ideals described in the Political Declaration but, recognising today’s global landscape, both the EU and the UK would be well served in redoubling their efforts to see them realised. There is therefore nothing in the above that does not, or that should not, apply to the EU’s approach to its relations with the UK. Indeed, EUCO President Charles Michel already proposed such a formal collaboration, or structured dialogue, in July, in effect reviving the possibility of deeper partnership referred to in the Political Declaration but vetoed by Boris Johnson. (Bounds, Foster and Parker, 2023)

The EU already has comparable dialogues with third parties, notably the US with whom it maintains subject-specific dialogues on issues including security and defence, space, China and the Indo-Pacific, in addition to regular summits. The EU also has annual summits with Canada and Mexico built in to the respective Free Trade Agreements with those countries. (Davies and Wachowiak, 2023) In contrast, the TCA does not provide for EU-UK summits but the need for such a forum, either annual or indeed biannual, is just as pressing, given the numerous subjects where the EU and UK should have an interest in cooperating and which are not sufficiently covered by the existing agreements.

Michel’s proposal was declined by London but also, regrettably, by the Commission. The apparent belief of the current Commission is that these subjects can be properly addressed

within the existing governance structures of the TCA, or within the G7 if necessary. (Bounds, Foster and Parker, 2023) However, the G7 is not suitable in that bilateral discussions in the margins of a multilateral forum, where certain EU Member States are full members alongside the UK while the EU itself is a non-enumerated member, do not constitute an EU-UK structured dialogue, certainly not one which is fully inclusive as regards EU Member States not present in their own right.

Moreover, while using the G7 might be sufficient when the EU and UK are aligned, that would not remain true in cases where they are not, such when Johnson believed he could use the war in Ukraine to fragment the coordinated EU response. The EPC is not suitable either as “the substance of [its] discussions is intentionally flexible and depends on the *préférences du jour* of the many actors involved.” (EPC Observatory) As such it is an ideal outer tier of the concentric circle model but does not meet the requirements of a geopolitical, future-oriented EU-UK relationship.

So we are left with the need to create a dedicated structured dialogue of a kind that exists within the ENP, including high-level summits and, if necessary, Joint Documents such as Partnership Priorities or Association Agreements. In the case of the UK, aside from creating a political level to complement the working groups of the TCA as discussed, the dialogue would also serve to address matters of mutual interest which fall outside the scope of TCA (and indeed often outside the exclusive competence of the EU), ranging from migration to artificial intelligence to energy security.

As things stand, regrettably neither the ostensibly ‘geopolitical’ Commission nor the current British government have acknowledged the need for a structured dialogue, which could have built on the momentum of good relations created by the Windsor Framework. However, the original proposal emanated from EUCO and indeed they and not the Commission would be the appropriate institution to lead a structured, political-level dialogue with the UK. Once the respective European and British elections have taken place in 2024, EUCO should make an early priority of reviving Michel’s proposal and, hopefully, finding more constructive partners in both the Berlaymont and Downing Street.

The need for a dual-level approach is nowhere more evident than in Northern Ireland, where the politicisation of technical issues has been highly detrimental to both the peace process and the entire EU-UK relationship. The unique position of Northern Ireland in and between both internal markets, not to mention the still fragile post-conflict context, once again shows that solely technocratic governance structures simply will not do. A political-level and future-oriented dialogue, if used adroitly in complementarity to the specialised working groups, could

provide the meaningful inclusion of Northern Irish stakeholders – political, civic and business alike – which is currently missing and which they have been calling for. (Hayward and Phinnemore, 2023) In tandem with the application of the conflict prevention and early warning capabilities of the EEAS referred to previously, this approach could allow the EU to manage future disagreements with the UK over Northern Ireland, as per its responsibilities there and to the benefit of its interests and those of the population.

Here we must reiterate that the EU is now part of the body politic of Northern Ireland and of the “totality of relationships” which underpin the Good Friday Agreement. The current bilateral relationship between the European Commission and the British government, limited solely to technical-level implementation of the Northern Ireland Protocol, is not consistent with that fundamental premise of the peace process and does not fulfil the EU’s responsibilities in Northern Ireland. If Brexit threatened to break the totality of relationships on which the Good Friday Agreement was built, then the EU’s response must be a Northwestern Neighbourhood Policy to protect them.

In conjunction with a structured, political-level dialogue would be a comprehensive EU-UK security partnership, of the kind which featured heavily in the Political Declaration but which the government of Boris Johnson chose not to pursue at time and which neither of his predecessors have revisited. In the Strategic Compass of 2022 however, the EU reaffirmed that it remained “open to a broad and ambitious security and defence engagement with the United Kingdom.” Additionally, and encouragingly, the subject is a key policy proposal on the part of David Lammy, the British Shadow Foreign Secretary, who has categorically declared Labour’s intention to seek an EU-UK security pact if elected.

Lammy’s proposal (2023:19-20) includes numerous examples of areas where there is “room for more collaboration.” These include coordination of sanctions policy (e.g. exchanging intelligence on persons and entities), cooperation between European and British industries on hybrid threats and new technologies, cooperation on energy security and intelligence and database sharing for counter-terrorist activity as well as tackling international criminal networks responsible for illegal migration.

The benefits to all concerned for enhanced cooperation in all those areas, and many more besides, appear self-evident. However, if an EU-UK partnership is to be in any way meaningful, it must be greater than what already exists in the form of standard framework cooperation agreements (FPA) for third-country CSDP participation. It cannot merely be an invitation for British participation in CSDP missions or PESCO projects as the means for these already exist

and are in use.⁴⁸ In short, this should resemble the “more tailored bilateral partnerships with like-minded countries and strategic partners” to which the EU commits in the Strategic Compass.

In the British case, the tailored partnership should include their substantive participation in the burgeoning EU Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS). This is an admittedly complex issue for, if this latest European attempt at building a cohesive defence industrial base is to truly succeed where previous initiatives failed,⁴⁹ it will have to create something akin to a single market for the defence industry – or at least “a single market for defence supplies and the harmonisation of equipment standards” – despite the existence of exemptions for defence contracts within EU public procurement. (Lannoo, 2023) The objective is to encourage ‘Europeanisation’ of the defence industry, meaning cooperation between companies in different countries in order to develop joint programmes, as opposed to ‘fragmentation’, where companies operate primarily in their respective national frameworks, in duplication or even competition to each other. (Béraud-Sudreau and Scarazzato, 2023:5)

This is no small challenge in itself but including the British defence industry will present further difficulties, given the considerable unlikelihood of the UK rejoining the Single Market or the EU allowing access only in one sector, especially one designed to hinder participation by third parties.⁵⁰ However, there would be little British interest in “late-stage involvement in collaborations chosen, designed, and maybe already apportioned by insiders” (Witney, 2023) and, in that regard, the UK would be no different from many EU Member States who currently feel the same; the EDIS must remedy that situation with or without British participation.⁵¹

It must also be acknowledged that the British public and political class alike will feel that the UK offers more to European defence than other third countries. (EU-UK Forum, March 2023) By way of example, the 2021 Integrated Review describes the UK as “the leading European Ally within NATO.” That may be debatable but the UK does remain a preferred partner on defence for many EU Member States, such as the seven northern countries who participate in

48 For example, in 2022 the UK was admitted to the PESCO project Military Mobility, which aims to simplify and standardise national cross-border military transport procedures.

49 A striking example was the Letter of Intent (LoI) Framework Agreement (FA) Treaty, which was signed in July 2000 by the defence ministers of France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Sweden and the UK, intended to facilitate industrial restructuring and promote a more competitive European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB).

50 In comparison, the Council decision formalising British participation in the PESCO project Military Mobility specifies that it is “not a capability-orientated project” and as such certain conditions do not apply, notably “the contribution of the UK’s participation to fulfilling priorities derived from the Capability Development Plan and the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence, or having a positive impact on the European Defence Technological Industrial Base.” These however would clearly apply to the EDIS, with ensuing complications.

51 A current example is the PESCO project for a European Patrol Corvette, sardonically rechristened the Mediterranean Corvette by some northern European observers, on account of French and Italian control of the design phase. It is due to cases like this, as well as obvious geographical reasons, that certain northern EU Member States would likely encourage incorporating the UK into common EU defence projects.

the UK-led maritime Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF).⁵² In addition, there is a considerable presence of subsidiaries of British defence companies in northern Europe, which explains why those countries are keen to see rules of procurement, for example within the European Defence Fund, remain open for non-EU allies. (Béraud-Sudreau and Scarazzato 2023:16) It is becoming apparent that EU-UK relations need to take on the properties required by the EU's northern and northwestern Member States, rather than those determined in Brussels alone.

The JEF is a relevant example because the ambitions presented in the Strategic Compass include strengthening the EU's role as a maritime security actor and, for obvious reasons of both geography and capability, that implies cooperation with the UK. Indeed, on the operational side more generally, reinforced British participation in CSDP missions and in regular live exercises on land and sea would be desirable. Participation in the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity, which also features in the Strategic Compass, would likely be too politically sensitive in the UK as things stand but, in the event that NATO is paralysed or undermined by a Republican administration in Washington D.C., even that might have to be revisited.

If that time comes then all European nations will need to collaborate to revise the *de facto* division of labour where "NATO is the pre-eminent security and defence provider, with the CSDP focusing on low-intensity civilian and policing missions in Europe's near abroad." (Martill and Sus, 2021) In that scenario, a comprehensive EU-UK security partnership would be required to serve as a contingency for maintaining the capabilities and assets necessary for the defence of Europe.

We must note that in addition to the complex issue of involving a non-EU State in defence industrial strategy, it would be politically difficult – if not impossible – for the EU to grant decision-making status within the CSDP to a third country, yet the British sensitivity to status on defence matters is such that it would be politically difficult – if not impossible – for them to not be regarded as an equal at the very least. However, the CSDP is inherently more flexible than the Single Market in that its "intergovernmental decision-making structure means that elements of coordination can easily be replicated outside of the Union, through bilateral and mini-lateral initiatives." (Martill and Sus, 2021) That being the case, 'status' need not be an insurmountable issue and especially if the security pact were incorporated into a wider

⁵² These are Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Sweden as well as Norway. Of course the UK and France also have their own Combined Joint Expeditionary Force (CJEF), stemming from the Lancaster House Treaty of 2010 and sitting outside PESCO and the EDF. France can pursue its defence objectives both through the influence it exerts within the EU and through bilateral cooperation with the UK. In contrast, many of the smaller, northern EU Member States who do not feel their defence needs are fully met within the EU framework will still look to the UK as something of an alternative.

Northwestern Neighbourhood Policy, thus properly incorporating the particular interests of the northern and northwestern Member States in ensuring defence cooperation with the UK.

So, all things considered, since the EU has raised expectations of a bespoke security partnership in both the Political Declaration and the Strategic Compass, it would do well to make good on these declarations. Once again, many of the necessary components already exist but, given the challenges we have highlighted, Witney (2023) is correct to suppose that “any effective restoration of defence industrial relations between British and EU partners has to start ‘upstream’, at the political and strategic level.” These may well have to go through Paris, Berlin and other capitals (notably of the northern and northwestern countries), rather than Brussels and this corresponds with our proposal that higher-level aspects of the EU-UK relationship be handled through a EUCO-led security partnership, in parallel with the structured dialogue on wider strategic issues.

Summary

Returning to the debate on strategic autonomy versus strategic interdependence, we reiterate our earlier definition of strategic autonomy as acknowledging the existence of certain interdependencies and being proactive about shaping them. In effect, the EU should anchor its foreign policy strategy in “an understanding of where it needs partnerships – and the potential power it wields within them.” (Various/ECFR, 2023) For now, the EU exists in an international rules-based order, which allows it to operate its own rules-based system, and its approach to defining which partnerships it chooses to build must both support the continued existence and recognise the current limits of said rules-based order. In short, it should “privilege relationships with partners that share its values [but] the EU will need to coexist, and sometimes work, with other countries too.” (ibid.)

That is an important point in the context of our study. Before the EU can function as a geopolitical actor in relation to those who do not subscribe to the same rules-based order (and/or who are not susceptible to the EU’s normative power), it must first do so with those who do and who live in its neighbourhood. For all its complications, the relationship with the UK, could provide an excellent starting point – proof of concept, even – for this endeavour and could succeed where the ENP has perhaps fallen short.

We have acknowledged that the necessary changes to the existing EU-UK relationship are substantial. Most notably the reinforced cooperation on security and defence writ large, and in defence industrial strategy in particular, will require perhaps unprecedented movement from both parties. Furthermore, on the British side, this renewed relationship with the EU will

require re-learning the lesson of the period between losing the Empire and joining the then European Economic Community (EEC), that “having a regional role is the necessary basis for Britain to have a global role.” (Grey, 2021:235) That may be beyond the imagination of a Conservative Party wedded to the vacuous notion of ‘Global Britain’ but for the Labour Party it would allow them to make a clean break from the Conservatives while still fulfilling Keir Starmer’s stated goal of ‘making Brexit work’. Political courage, self-awareness and frank communication will be required on both sides but the necessary conditions are emerging.

The EU is already looking to reform its institutions and relations with its neighbours but the component parts of the future relationship either already exist or have already been proposed so a Northwestern Neighbourhood Policy is essentially a matter of structuring these in a manner supportive to the EU’s strategic objectives. This could finally achieve the EU’s stated aim of being a geopolitical actor and provide tangible evidence that it can bring together both normative power and *realpolitik*, both strategic interdependence and autonomy.

In a context of polycrisis and deglobalisation, neither the EU nor the UK can afford to neglect such an opportunity. We recall Grey’s observation at the opening of this chapter that the EU and UK will have to have an evolving relationship; supporters of Brexit have failed to understand this but the EU need not make the same mistake.

Conclusions

In chapter one we assessed the current state of the UK and found a country deeply divided, highly vulnerable to populism, where the different branches of government are pitted against each other and where the political and constitutional conventions which used to govern the country are now under severe stress. In chapter two we identified numerous issues which could pose multiple, serious risks to the EU-UK relationship, often on account of unreasonable behaviour from the current British government. In chapter three we argued that the EU needs to reinforce and expand the structure of its relationship with the UK, to build even closer links which, in the case of security and defence, are almost unprecedented in nature.

How do we explain this apparent contradiction? Firstly because, as described in chapter two, world events leave it no option. Strategic autonomy demands recognition of interdependencies and proactivity in shaping them. Secondly, the UK might be an unreliable neighbour but it is still a neighbour. The UK will have to resolve its internal issues itself but there is in fact much the EU can do to exert influence for its own ends. Ulgen argues that the EU needs to provide itself with leverage over Turkish policy, foreign and domestic, and that is indeed what the EU should do with regard to the UK also, if it really is serious about being a geopolitical actor.

While the EU's approach thus far has been successful in achieving its clear and tangible objectives for the Withdrawal and Trade and Cooperation Agreements, it is not suitable for what must happen next. The relationship with the UK will continue to suffer from stoppages and even conflict on specific issues while it remains in this limited form. The solution is application of a principle attributed to former President of the United States Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Whenever I run into a problem I can't solve, I always make it bigger. I can never solve it by trying to make it smaller but if I make it big enough, I can begin to see the outlines of a solution.

In terms of its application to the EU's British question, this principle has manifested itself in multiple ways throughout our study. It underpins Ulgen's argument that the EU should seek to broaden the arrangement of its relations with Turkey, so as to improve governance within an important neighbouring State and increase leverage over its policy direction. It also reveals to us that the ongoing rethinking of EU neighbourhood and enlargement policy may help the EU to reconfigure its bilateral relations with the UK within a broader, more productive framework such as the concentric circles model.

A highly successful example of the Eisenhower principle is the Good Friday Agreement. Conflict resolution in Northern Ireland could never have worked when focused solely on the

zero-sum dynamic between the communities there; it only worked when expanded to encompass the ‘totality of relationships’ within Northern Ireland, from north to south across the island of Ireland and from west to east between Ireland and Britain. The same principle applies to the EU’s British question, to which the answer is a comprehensive geopolitical approach to Europe’s entire northwestern neighbourhood.

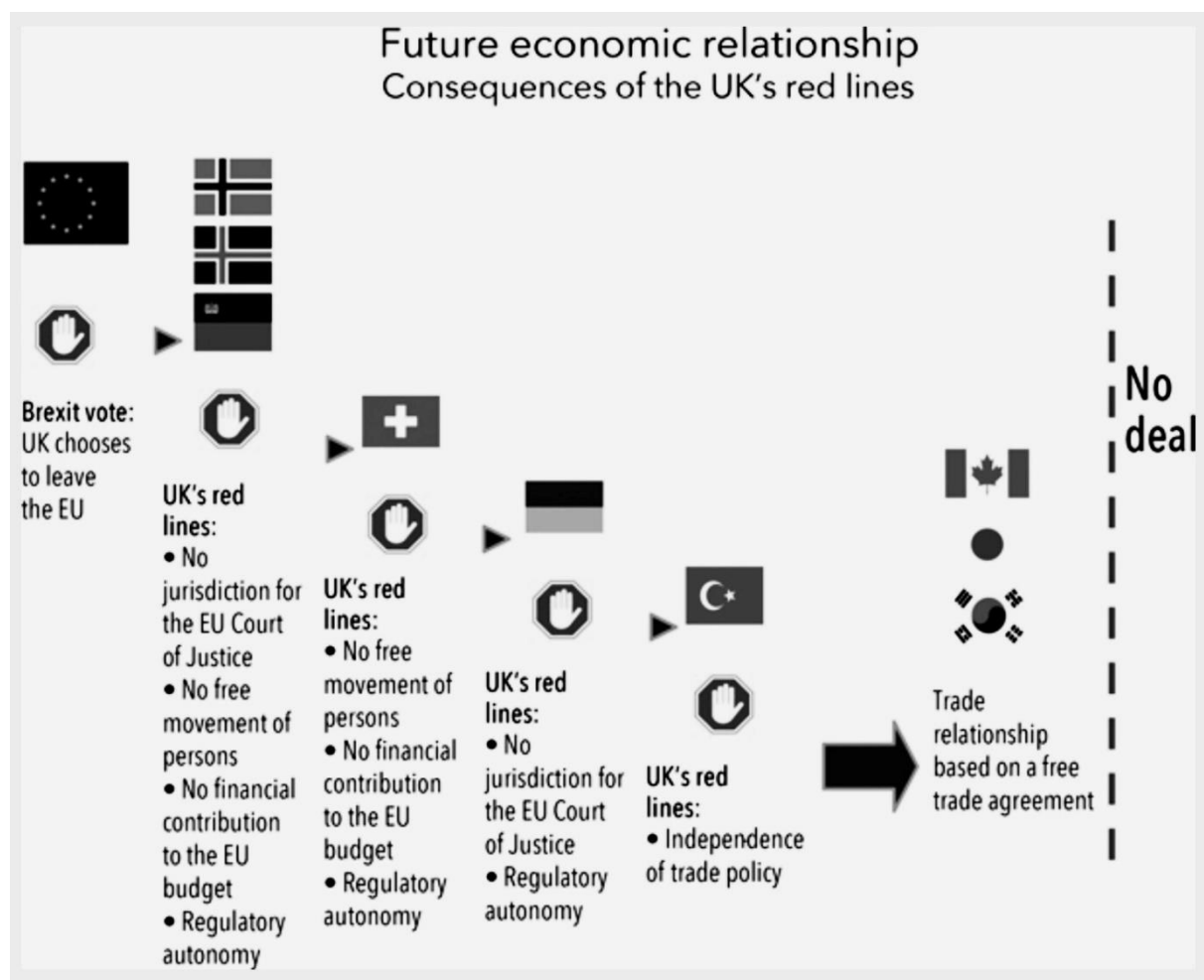
We will close with a final thought on the metaphor which opened this study. Hamlet claims that he is only mad when the wind blows from the north or northwest; when the wind blows from the south, he is lucid enough to recognise friend from foe, to distinguish a hawk from a handsaw. The United Kingdom cannot claim to have demonstrated such lucidity when dealing with its southern neighbours but it does share one similarity with Hamlet as regards its relationship with the rest of Europe.

The 1948 film version of Hamlet begins with Laurence Olivier describing the story as “the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind.” That encapsulates the British position on Europe: “to be [European] or not to be [European].” That indecision was precisely the pretext invoked by David Cameron in 2013 when he announced an in-out referendum: “it is time for the British people to have their say. It is time to settle this European question in British politics.” Clearly, Cameron’s gambit failed. Fortunately, the EU need not allow British indecision to divert its own strategic course, nor resign itself to having an often eccentric, unreliable and potentially unfriendly neighbour. On the contrary, the EU has the means available to manage its British question to its own ends.

Annex I – the ladder of relationships

The following text is Michel Barnier's diary entry from 15 December 2017 and is a further response to Theresa May's red lines and their implications.

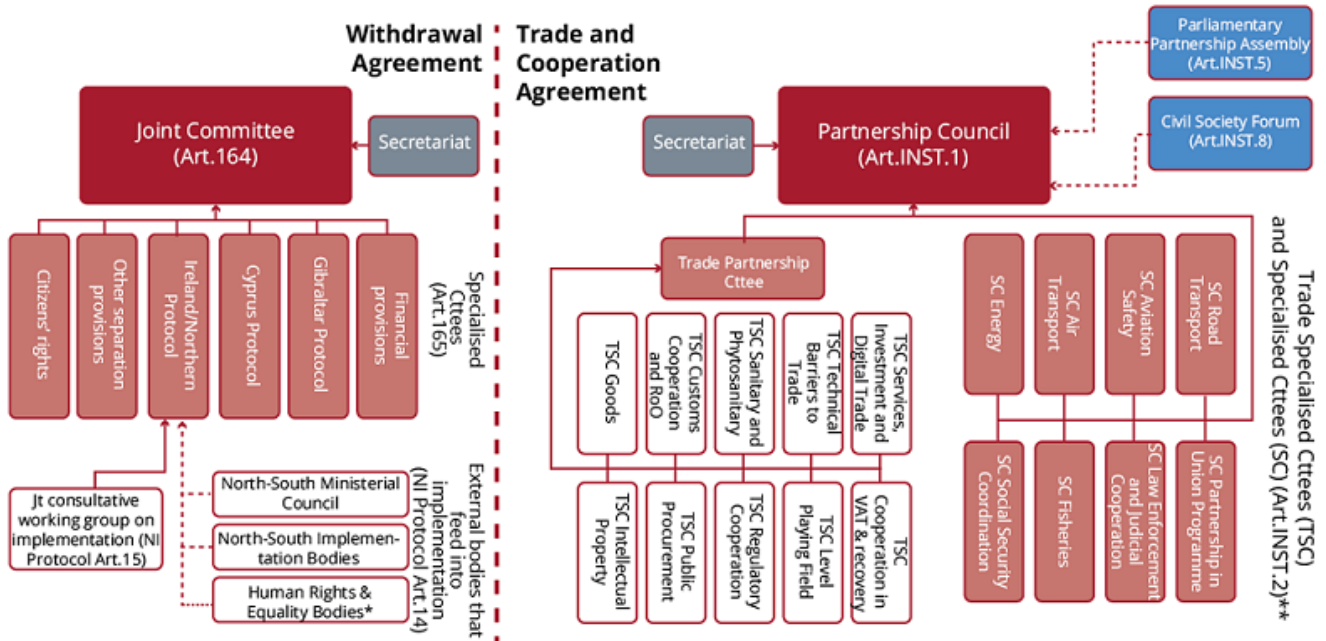
“This slide shows that the UK, with its red lines, does not want to remain in the Single Market like Norway, or in a customs union like Turkey, or even in a deep and comprehensive free trade agreement like Ukraine. It finds itself at the bottom of the ladder, with a classic free trade agreement, of the type we have today with Canada or South Korea. Each step involves taking on rights and obligations. It is up to the United Kingdom to make its choice.” (Barnier, 2021:100)



Annex II – the governance architecture of the EU-UK relationship

Source: UK Parliament, House of Lords, European Union Select Committee, 'Beyond Brexit: The Institutional Framework'. March 2021. Available at <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld5801/ldselect/ldeucom/246/24602.htm>

Accessed 3 December 2023



* Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission; Equality Commission for Northern Ireland; Joint Committee of representatives of the Human Rights Commissions of Northern Ireland and Ireland

** Not included: Working Groups under TSSC or SCs (Art.INST.3)

Annex III – the Windsor Framework

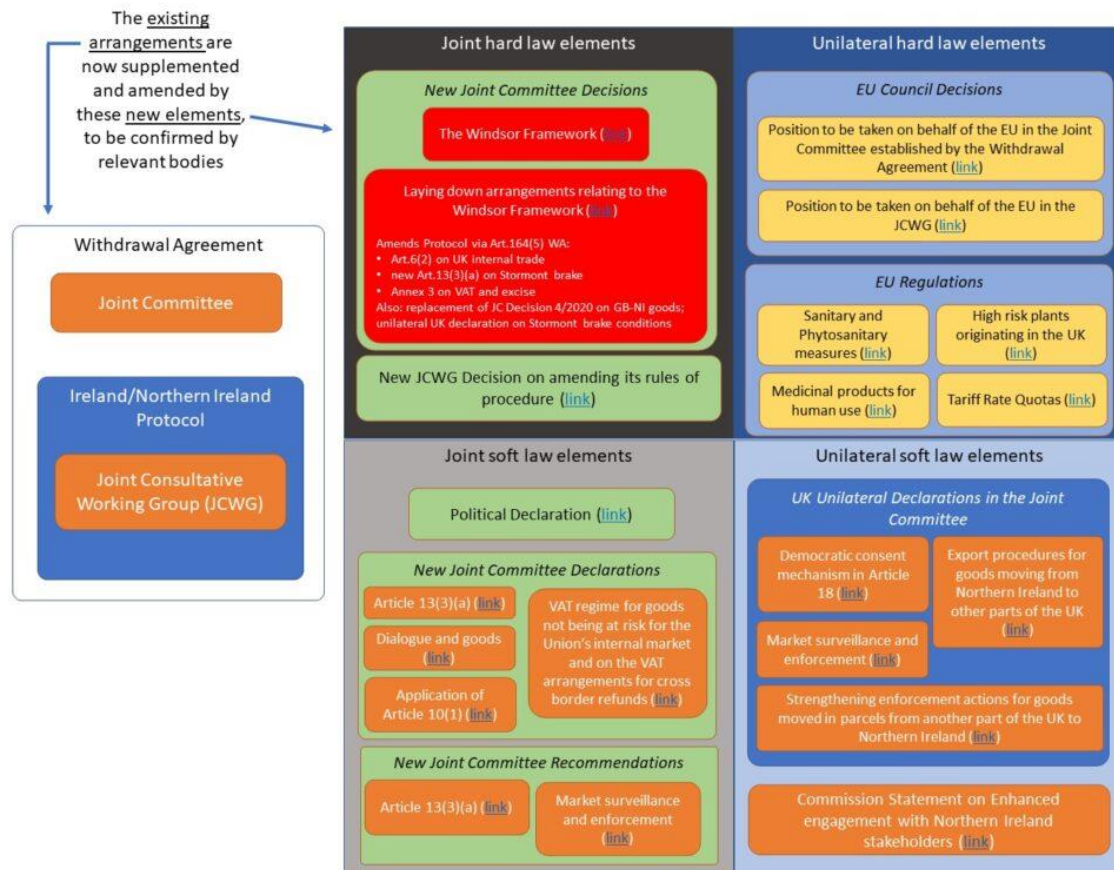
Source: Admin (2023) Starting to unpack the Windsor Framework | The European Union and the UK. <https://www.open.ac.uk/blogs/EUatOU/index.php/2023/03/02/starting-to-unpack-the-windsor-framework/>. Accessed 3 December 2023.

V1: 2 March 2023

The Windsor Framework

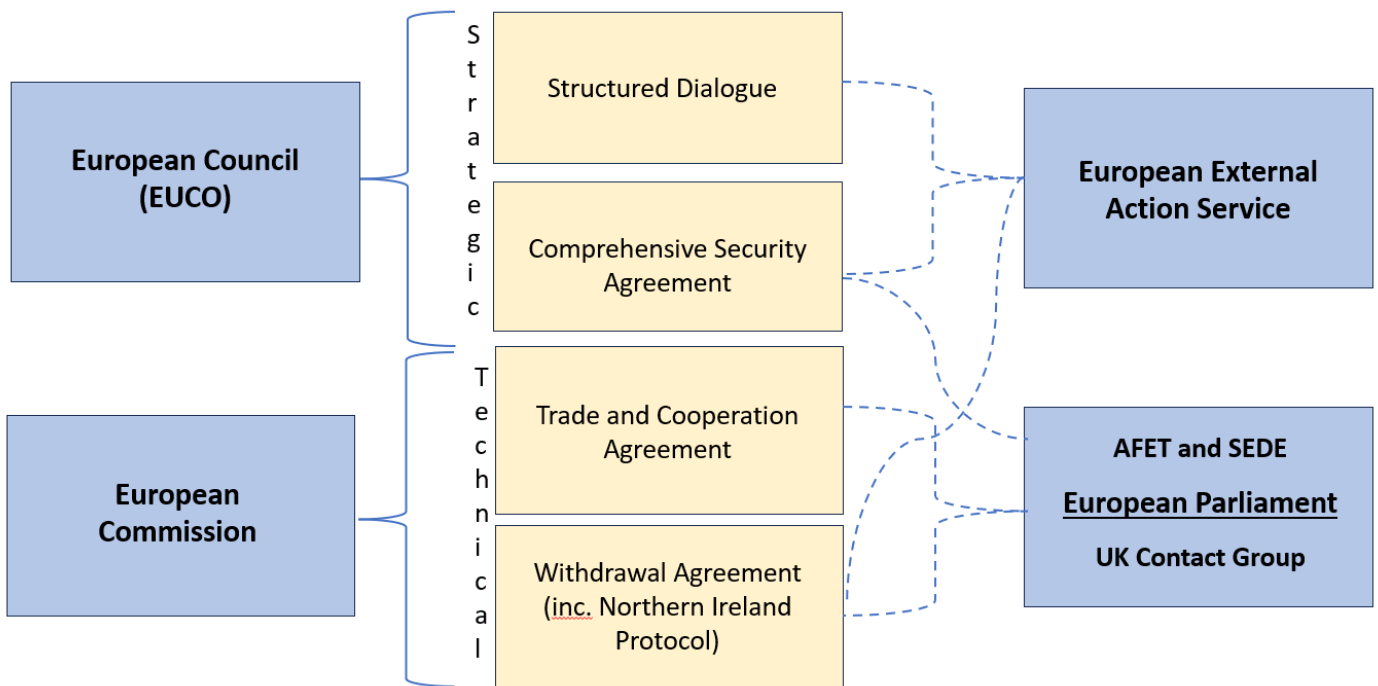
Simon Usherwood (@Usherwood)

The newly-announced Windsor Framework reworks the Withdrawal Agreement's Ireland/Northern Protocol. Here we map out how the various involved in the deal.



Annex IV – proposed structures for future EU-UK and regional relationship

Source: author



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Moisés Naím is a Venezuelan journalist and academic. He is a Distinguished Fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He is the former Minister of Trade and Industry for Venezuela, Director of its Central bank, and Executive Director of the World Bank.

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Nick Witney is a senior policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations, former British diplomat and former chief executive of the European Defence Agency (EDA).

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