

The European Union, the United Kingdom and defence:

Towards a strategic partnership



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• Summary

- Faced with the combination of long-standing Russian aggressiveness and a US withdrawal that appears inevitable, the need for a strong relationship between the European Union (EU) and the United Kingdom (UK) in the field of defence is clear.
- The EU and the UK signed a Security and Defence Partnership in May 2025, intended to facilitate a reset of the relationship by promoting greater cooperation in the areas of strategic dialogue, the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and the defence industry.
- However, nearly eighteen months after the Partnership was signed, the relationship has not progressed as expected and does not reflect a strategic-level partnership, which does not appear to be a priority for either the EU or the UK.
- A dialogue at various levels has been established and the UK's participation in the Military Mobility project has been revived, but the lack of progress in cooperation on the CSDP or with the European Defence Agency, and the failure of negotiations on the SAFE Programme, are signs of a reset that is struggling to gain traction rather than of a mutually beneficial revival of cooperation.
- The reasons for the deadlocks are known: on the one hand, a United Kingdom that is more interested in defence industry-related projects than in CSDP and which appears to want to take rather than give; on the other hand, an EU keen to adhere to its rules on partnership with third countries, without opening the door to a 'Europe à la carte'.

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- In this context, cooperation must remain a priority for the EU and the UK, which need one another. Both parties must therefore move towards renewed collaboration, the opening of more institutionalised channels of cooperation and a more robust operational partnership – efforts that are essential to their respective growth and credibility in the defence sector, including in the industrial sphere. The UK's participation in the Ukraine Support Loan could offer an opportunity in this regard.
- However, in the current security context, the two sides must above all rethink their relationship within the broader framework of a rapidly evolving European security architecture, in which bilateral relations and *ad hoc* multilateral frameworks remain central in the defence sector. In the medium term, it is the idea of a genuine, 'tailor-made' strategic partnership between the EU and the UK that deserves to be discussed and put in place. Such a partnership would be truly strategic insofar as it would enable a response to the urgent challenges posed by Mr Putin and Mr Trump, and address broader issues beyond those covered by the Security and Defence Partnership, such as, *inter alia*, collective security and defence, the development of NATO's European pillar, the establishment of a European defence industrial base including the United Kingdom, the future of Ukraine, the concept of European preference in the industrial sector, and perhaps even the idea of strategic autonomy within a European framework.
- Establishing this partnership would require the EU to be more open and the UK to be more determined to push for it. A 'tailor-made' partnership and what it would enable in the industrial sphere would mark the European openness that the British have been expecting. Meanwhile, a more determined British commitment – one that moves away from 'cherry-picking' and revisits some of its red lines, and is more firmly rooted in a project to assert an autonomous European defence – would be likely to allay Europeans' reservations.

• Introduction

The need for a relationship between the United Kingdom (UK) and the European Union (EU) in the field of defence is evolving as the European security environment changes, the EU acquires competences in this area, and the British government takes a favourable view of the benefits of closer ties with the EU. For their part, the European Union and its Member States are reasonably open to the idea of renewed cooperation with the United Kingdom, which offers clear military and industrial capabilities. Indeed, the war in Ukraine has provided the framework for successful cooperation between the two parties.

Against this backdrop, on 19 May 2025, the EU and the UK signed a Security and Defence Partnership designed to revitalise their relationship by promoting greater cooperation in the areas of strategic dialogue, the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and the defence industry. From the UK's perspective, this forms part of the 'reset' of relations between the UK and the EU called for by then Prime Minister Keir Starmer shortly after he came to power in the summer of 2024.

However, nearly eighteen months after the Partnership was signed, the relationship between the two sides has not progressed as expected and does not reflect a strategic-level partnership, which does not appear to be a priority for either the EU or the UK.

Dialogue at various levels has been launched and the UK's participation in the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) project on Military Mobility has been

revived but the lack of progress in cooperation on CSDP or with the European Defence Agency, and of course the failure of negotiations on the Security Action for Europe (SAFE) programme, are more indicative of a struggling reset than of a mutually beneficial revival of cooperation.

The reasons for the deadlocks are known: on the one hand, a United Kingdom that is ultimately primarily interested in European projects linked to the defence industry rather than in the CSDP, and which appears to want to take rather than give; and on the other, an EU (and its Member States) that is open to closer ties but keen to adhere to its strict rules on partnership with third countries, and not to open the door to a 'Europe à la carte'.

Against this backdrop, cooperation between the UK and the EU must remain a priority for two players who need one another at a time of Russian aggressiveness and American 'abandonment'.

They must therefore move towards a renewed sense of shared purpose, the establishment of more institutionalised channels of cooperation and a more robust operational partnership – efforts that are essential to their respective growth and credibility in the defence domain, including in the industrial sphere.

Beyond this, the question arises as to whether the Security and Defence Partnership is adequately suited to the current security challenges. Both parties have good reasons to be cautious in their defence relations, and certain European states also have substantial bilateral relations with the United Kingdom. However, the current security environment is unprecedented, and if the prospect of a direct confrontation with Russia is credible, then should one not, in turn, devise a defence partnership between the EU and the UK that is commensurate with this challenge?

In the medium term, it is the idea of a genuine, bespoke strategic partnership between the EU and the UK that deserves to be discussed and put in place. A truly strategic partnership in that it would enable a response to the urgent threat posed both by Mr Putin and Mr Trump, and address broader issues than those covered by the Security and Defence Partnership.

Establishing this partnership would require the EU to be more open and the UK to be more determined to push for it. But above all, it would require both parties to recognise that, alongside their actions at national, bilateral or NATO level, their partnership is also an essential element in responding to contemporary strategic challenges.

I • The need for an EU-UK partnership

Cooperation between the European Union and the United Kingdom in the field of defence is as indispensable as it is limited. It is indispensable for the same reasons that make a more assertive role for the EU in defence a strategic imperative, namely the combination of Russia's aggressiveness and the looming withdrawal of the United States.

And if the prospect of a 'major high-intensity war' taking place in Europe 'by 2030'¹ is a serious possibility, if 'for the first time since the end of the Cold War, the United Kingdom faces multiple, direct threats to its security' which could lead to a high-in-

1 'National Strategic Review 2025', General Secretariat for Defence and National Security, France.

tensity conflict², and if ‘Russia will remain a fundamental threat to Europe’s security for the foreseeable future’³, then strategic-level cooperation between the EU and the United Kingdom is essential for both partners.

For the European Union, the UK’s contribution in the political, capability and industrial spheres would be essential to the development of its own capabilities in these various areas.⁴ The United Kingdom even appears to be the third country with which defence cooperation is most obvious and indispensable, compared with the United States (divergent strategic trajectories), Norway (political and industrial capabilities inferior to those of the UK), Ukraine (a complicated domestic situation) or Turkey (real industrial capabilities but different strategic trajectories).

For the United Kingdom, the ‘reset’ was initially promoted mainly for the purposes of economic recovery.⁵ But an enhanced partnership with an EU that is moving upmarket in the defence industry – including, incidentally, its funding – is just as imperative at a time of existential doubt regarding the nature of the ‘special relationship’ with the United States.⁶ Thus, the creation of the SAFE instrument in 2025, the introduction of the Ukraine Support Loan in 2026, as well as the planned establishment of the European Competitiveness Fund – and its defence component – within the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028–2034, all hold out the prospect of substantial funding that could, indirectly and in part, benefit the British defence industry.⁷ Conversely, the UK’s absence from these programmes would represent a potentially significant loss of revenue and, in the long term, exclusion from a dynamic that would unfold outside a strictly transatlantic framework.

Politically speaking, the wider the gap between the United States and the United Kingdom becomes, the greater the need for the latter to draw closer to the EU (and its Member States) will become, and the more such a rapprochement should, in theory, be facilitated politically and practically on both sides.

Consequently, if properly calibrated and implemented, cooperation between the EU and the UK would strengthen Europe’s security and defence, and is therefore of strategic importance. Conversely, a lack of cooperation would weaken the overall level of their respective defence. The relationship between the EU and the UK is, in theory, a ‘win-win’ situation; the challenge lies in realising this potential when defining and putting the partnership into practice. However, whilst efforts have been made to define the partnership, not only are these limited, but the nature and ambition of the partnership still fall short of a strategic level.

2 *Strategic Defence Review 2025. Making Britain safer: secure at home, strong abroad*, United Kingdom.

3 ‘White Paper on European Defence: Preparing for 2030’, EU, 2025.

4 See Pascal Allizard and Hélène Conway-Mouret, *Parliamentary Report on the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB)*, Senate, 3 December 2025.

5 See Sébastien Maillard, ‘United Kingdom/European Union: the beginnings of a rapprochement’, *Analysis*, Jacques Delors Institute, May 2025.

6 According to *Euronews*, a letter sent in early April 2025 to the British Prime Minister, the President of the European Commission and the President of the European Council by the heads of the UK’s leading aerospace, industrial and technology associations states that the Security Pact (signed in May 2025) between the UK and the EU “would be instrumental in building a strong European industrial and technological base, fostering a pragmatic and inclusive EU defence ecosystem, and enabling the active participation of UK industry in EU-led defence initiatives.” “UK defence industry calls for quick security pact with Brussels to access EU money”, 9 April 2025.

7 The European Commission’s proposal on the creation of a *European Competitiveness Fund* sets out a sum of €125 billion earmarked for the ‘Resilience and Security, Defence industry and Space’ heading for the period 2028–2034.

II • The Reset and defence: a meagre track record

The 2021 EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement contains a number of provisions relating to security (in the fields of cyber security and counter-terrorism, for example), but none on defence or foreign affairs, in line with the wishes of the UK government at the time (led by Boris Johnson).⁸

The signing, on 19 May 2025, during the first summit between the European Union and the UK since Brexit, of the ‘Security and Defence Partnership’⁹ therefore represents a step forward in defence cooperation.¹⁰

The Security and Defence Partnership aims to ‘frame cooperation across a wide range of areas’ such as regional security, peacebuilding and crisis management, maritime security, cyber issues, hybrid threats and non-proliferation.¹¹ Twenty-one areas of cooperation are also listed, including, amongst others, support for Ukraine, the UK’s participation in CSDP operations (including arrangements that would enable such participation), the UK’s participation in the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) Military Mobility project, the exploration of an Administrative Arrangement between the UK and the European Defence Agency (EDA), exercises and training (including at the European Security and Defence College (ESDC)), and EU-NATO cooperation.

All of this is to be monitored by both entities, including through half-yearly meetings between the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP) and the UK Ministers for Foreign Affairs and Defence, possible invitations of the United Kingdom to Council meetings and, reciprocally, invitations of the High Representative to high-level meetings in the United Kingdom, and the establishment of a Security and Defence Dialogue bringing together, on an annual basis, representatives of the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the UK’s Foreign and Defence Ministries. The Joint Declaration adopted at the EU-UK Summit in May 2025 also establishes the principle of annual summits between the two entities.

In accordance with Article 17 of the Regulation establishing SAFE¹², the signing of the Partnership also paves the way for negotiations on the participation of the United Kingdom (and its defence industry) in tenders launched during joint procurements carried out as part of the implementation of the SAFE Programme. This opportunity for British industries to contribute to the SAFE Programme was, in fact, one of the main (if not the only) reasons for the United Kingdom to sign the Partnership.

⁸ In November 2019, however, the EU and the UK had agreed on a ‘[Political Declaration setting out the framework for the future relationship between the European Union and the United Kingdom](#)’, containing a section entitled ‘Foreign, Security and Defence Policy’.

⁹ European Union and the United Kingdom, [Security and Defence Partnership](#), 19 May 2025. A [Joint Declaration](#) and a [Renewed agenda for European Union – United Kingdom cooperation Common Understanding](#) were also signed.

¹⁰ This Partnership was the seventh to be signed between the EU and a third country; by 1 October 2026, 12 had been signed, with Moldova, Norway, Japan, South Korea, North Macedonia, Albania, the United Kingdom, Canada, India, Iceland, Australia and Ghana.

¹¹ European Council, [United Kingdom](#), website.

¹² Article 17(1) of the SAFE Regulation states that ‘The Union may conclude bilateral or multilateral agreements with acceding countries, potential candidate and candidate countries other than Ukraine and other third countries with which the Union has entered into a Security and Defence Partnership (non-binding instrument) in order to open the eligibility conditions referred to in Article 16 to those countries and their territories’: [Council Regulation \(EU\) 2025/1106 of 27 May 2025 establishing the Security Action for Europe \(SAFE\) through the Reinforcement of the European Defence Industry Instrument](#), 19 March 2025.

Be that as it may, the negotiations between the UK and the European Commission on SAFE held in autumn 2025 were unsuccessful. They stalled mainly over the ‘entry fee’ demanded of the UK (initially between €4.5 and €6.5 billion, subsequently reduced to €2 billion according to *Politico*¹³, whilst the UK is reported to have offered £200 million according to the *Financial Times*¹⁴).

The failure of the negotiations has undermined the ‘reset’ and raised questions about the very feasibility of the rapprochement. Many commentaries noted that the negotiations, led by the European Commission (in accordance with a mandate from the Council), largely bypassed the Member States, whilst the ‘entry fee’ – due to its high amount and the lack of transparency regarding the methodology used to determine it¹⁵ – is said to have undermined any possibility of an agreement.¹⁶ The fact that France was pulling the strings, with a view to excluding the United Kingdom and/or protecting its own defence industry, is also mentioned in a number of documents, particularly British ones.¹⁷ The very short negotiation period (between the end of September and the end of November 2025) was also not conducive to reaching an agreement under favourable conditions. In early 2026, then British Prime Minister Keir Starmer stated that the UK was prepared to reconsider participation in the SAFE Programme should a second phase of the Programme be established.

The SAFE episode aside, eighteen months after the signing of the Security and Defence Partnership, dialogue between the UK and the EU (the High Representative/Vice-President and the EEAS in particular) has indeed developed on many of the issues mentioned in the text. Regular contacts have been established and consultations have taken place, notably regarding the exchange of information and best practices, on the topics listed in the partnership, and in particular those relating to the war in Ukraine, the Indo-Pacific, the Western Balkans and hybrid threats.

Operational measures are more difficult to implement. Worth noting, however, is the United Kingdom’s participation in the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) project on Military Mobility, which had been blocked by Spain since November 2022 but was eventually approved following the conclusion in 2025 of an agreement between the EU and the United Kingdom on Gibraltar. The United Kingdom has also shown an interest in the PESCO project ‘Network of Logistic Hubs in Europe and Support to Operations (NetLogHubs)’. In the field of training, the European Security and Defence College (ESDC) has welcomed British officials to its orientation courses. More significantly, the UK has concluded an agreement with the EU (July

¹³ *Politico*, “No deal on UK access to EU’s defence spending plan”, 21 November 2025, and “EU-UK talks on defence deal break down”, 28 November 2025.

¹⁴ “UK to reconsider joining EU defence fund”, *Financial Times*, 1 February 2026.

¹⁵ Beyond the provisions of Article 17(3) of the SAFE Regulation, which state that ‘The bilateral or multilateral agreement shall: (a) ensure a fair balance as regards the contributions and benefits of the third country; (b) lay down the conditions for any financial contribution to be provided by the third country to the Union.’ See on this point “Is the EU charging the UK more than Canada to join its defence loan programme?”, *Euronews*, 20 February 2026; Ester Sabatino and Tim Lawrenson, “The SAFE Regulation and Its Implications for Non-EU Defence Suppliers”, IISS, London, December 2025.

¹⁶ It should be noted that the EU signed an agreement with Canada on the SAFE Programme on 1 December 2025. The amount of the ‘entry fee’ has not been made public. The *Euronews* article cited above mentions a figure of €10 million.

¹⁷ See in particular Charles Grant, “The paradox of French power”, 10 December 2025; see also “France proposes ceiling on value of UK components in €150bn EU defence fund”, *The Guardian*, 17 September 2025; “Security Action for Europe Fund”, Debate, House of Commons, London, 2 February 2026.

2026) on the UK's contribution to the €90 billion Ukraine Support Loan¹⁸, under which it will contribute to the borrowing costs in proportion to the value of contracts awarded to UK companies¹⁹. Finally, the annual EU–UK Summit is due to take place in mid-November 2026, following several postponements, due in particular to the change of Prime Minister in the UK.

What emerges from all this is a *reset* in the defence sector, which has effectively enabled the signing of a framework agreement governing cooperation, as well as UK participation in the Ukraine Support Loan. However, the Partnership falls short of defining priorities and is ultimately unambitious both in its content and in what it has produced so far. The emerging partnership cannot, as a consequence, be described as being of a strategic level (as suggested by the Joint Declaration, adopted alongside the Security and Defence Partnership, which refers to a 'new strategic partnership'), and the likelihood of it becoming one is relatively low. In other words, the Security and Defence Partnership only partially meets the needs for preparedness for future shocks.

III • The constraints of the EU–UK partnership

The limited nature of cooperation between the EU and the UK in the field of defence is due to a clear lack of ambition on both sides. More specifically, the reasons lie as much in the situation in which the UK finds itself six years after Brexit as in the very nature of European integration and the policies of its Member States.

I THE UK: AN UNCERTAIN, SELECTIVE AND WARY PARTNER

Any analysis of the relationship between the EU and the United Kingdom in the field of defence must begin with the observation that, whilst a member, the United Kingdom never showed any particular interest in the idea of the EU as a 'defence actor'. An Atlanticist country by nature, and despite the interlude of the Franco-British Summit in Saint-Malo in 1998²⁰, the UK was undoubtedly the country most committed to ensuring that functions or capabilities already existing within NATO were not duplicated within the EU. The United Kingdom never pushed for the military aspect of CSDP (although it was relatively involved in the civilian aspects of CSDP) and had a difficult relationship with the European Defence Agency (whose budget increases it repeatedly blocked).

¹⁸ The Ukraine Support Loan includes a €60 billion package intended to enable Ukraine to procure defence equipment either from the EU, from EFTA countries that are members of the EEA, or from third countries that have 'concluded an agreement with the Union in accordance with Article 17 of Regulation (EU) 2025/1106' (which is not the case for the UK), or which have 'entered into a Security and Defence Partnership with the Union, are providing significant financial and military support to Ukraine and are providing a fair and proportionate financial contribution, respecting the principle that any agreement with a third country must be based on a balance of rights and obligations and a third country should not have the same rights nor enjoy the same benefits as a Participating Member State'. Recital 31 of ['Regulation \(EU\) 2026/467 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 February 2026 implementing enhanced cooperation on the establishment of the Ukraine Support Loan for 2026 and 2027'](#).

¹⁹ See [Joint Statement of the European Union and the United Kingdom on United Kingdom participation under the Ukraine Support Loan](#), 13 July 2026.

²⁰ During which France (Jacques Chirac) and the United Kingdom (Tony Blair) laid the foundations for the CSDP.

At first glance, this history raises the question of what the UK, six years after Brexit, is seeking to achieve through its rapprochement with the EU. The relative lack of clarity in the UK's agenda extends beyond defence issues to the *reset* as a whole.²¹

Several factors need to be considered in this analysis.²²

Firstly, the *reset* is not limited to defence, and its ambition stems in part from the fact that, for the British, it was intended to cover three pillars: growth and trade, the protection of citizens, and foreign policy, including defence. Of course, the main difficulty lay in aligning this agenda with that put forward by the EU, as well as in the interdependence of the various issues (such as fishing rights or youth mobility, for example). However, on many of these related issues, the *reset* is also struggling.

Secondly, the ambivalence of the British stance has stemmed from the discrepancy between, on the one hand, Prime Minister Starmer's (in office from July 2024 to July 2026) desire to establish an 'ambitious partnership' and, on the other hand, the existence of 'red lines' concerning the UK's refusal to join the customs union or the European single market, or even a strong reluctance towards any form of alignment with European law.²³ These red lines have inevitably limited the scope of possibilities, particularly when discussions turned to alignment with EU policies, especially in the defence industry. Such issues will be central to the follow-up to Prime Minister Andy Burnham's stance on Brexit and his desire to consider a 'substantial rapprochement'²⁴ with the EU, including by revisiting the 'red lines'.²⁵

The existence of these red lines also differ from the situation in Norway, a member of the European Economic Area (EEA) and therefore of the Single Market (but not of the Customs Union). By contrast, the UK's situation is similar to that of Switzerland, which, whilst not part of either the Single Market or the European Customs Union, has nevertheless signed a number of agreements with the EU, including the 'Bilateral Agreements III' in March 2026, as well as a Framework Participation Agreement for CSDP operations (5 March 2026).

Thirdly, regardless of how ambitious the British governments led by Prime Ministers Starmer and Burnham may be regarding the need for a *reset*, the question arises as to how much room for manoeuvre they have on any issue relating to the European Union and a possible rapprochement. The current strength of the *Reform UK* party (confirmed in the May 2026 local elections) and its leader Nigel Farage, and their fierce opposition to any form of rapprochement with the EU (going well beyond the 'red lines'), make any initiative in this area politically difficult, as it risks being immediately portrayed as signalling a desire for 'reintegration by stealth'.²⁶

Moreover, the fear that a hypothetical *Reform UK* victory could scupper a potential agreement on sanitary and phytosanitary issues (the SPS agreement, currently

²¹ In early 2026, a UK parliamentary report lamented this lack of clarity and transparency regarding the UK's strategic objectives for the *'reset'*, and recommended that a 'comprehensive White Paper' be drawn up on the subject. See ["From a Common Understanding to Common Ground: Building a UK-EU Strategic Partnership fit for the future"](#), House of Commons, London, 4 March 2026, § 191.

²² See ["From a Common Understanding to Common Ground: Building a UK-EU Strategic Partnership fit for the future"](#), House of Commons, March 2026; Luigi Scazzieri, ["How the UK and the EU can deepen defence co-operation"](#), CER, London, March 2025; ["Building on the EU-UK Relationship: A Strategic Defence and Security Partnership for a Shared European Continent"](#), European Policy Centre, December 2025.

²³ Interview with Sébastien Maillard, Jacques Delors Institute, 22 May 2026.

²⁴ See ["Burnham opens door to 'Brexit', UK's return to EU"](#), *Le Monde*, 2 October 2026.

²⁵ See ["Andy Burnham: UK could 'go all the way' by rejoining the EU"](#), *The Guardian*, 30 September 2026.

²⁶ In the words of a British official, interview, February 2026.

under negotiation) has led the Europeans to raise the idea of a ‘Farage clause’, whereby the EU would protect itself financially against any challenge to an agreement.²⁷ Such a fear is also likely to impact the *reset* in general and its defence dimension in particular.²⁸

Fourthly, in the field of defence, the UK’s relatively strong position creates an expectation among the British for recognition that the rules governing relations between the EU and third countries cannot necessarily fulfil. Whether the United Kingdom is placed on the same footing as ‘any third country’, or whether Ukraine enjoys preferential treatment in its relationship with the EU, this creates obvious frustration on the British side.²⁹ And the British sense of ‘deserving’ treatment commensurate with their standing in the military sphere is sometimes countered, on the European side, by the view that the British may not be ‘as necessary’ to European defence as they think.³⁰

Finally, the British are aware of the need not to be excluded from European dynamics in the defence sphere, in a situation in which the EU has been taking a number of initiatives over the past four years. In this debate, the United Kingdom is clearly more interested in the industrial aspects highlighted by the European Commission – the SAFE Programme, for example – than in matters falling strictly within the scope of the CSDP. In other words, SAFE contracts rather than an Administrative Arrangement with the EDA or a Framework Participation Agreement in CSDP operations. Against this backdrop, the failure of the SAFE negotiations – and the humiliation this may have represented for the British government – tends to push other areas of EU-UK cooperation even further into the background.

I THE EUROPEAN UNION AND ITS MEMBER STATES: A HALF-HEARTED DESIRE FOR RAPPROCHEMENT

The European Union is not, either in its mandate or in its policies (whether inter-governmental or Community-based), particularly open to states that are neither members, nor members of the European Economic Area (EEA)³¹, nor candidates for accession. There is currently no ‘associated member’ status within the European Union, as the President of the Commission recently alluded to in relation to Canada and the need to ‘reinvent our partnerships’³².

The Union’s primary objective is its own integration, and although its external relations are an important part of its development (in the field of trade, amongst others), it takes a restrictive approach to its ties with third countries.

This is also the case in the field of defence. Whether it be the CSDP, Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the European Defence Fund (EDF) or more recent initiatives (EDIP and SAFE in particular), the underlying idea is the development of the EU’s own capabilities (those of its Member States, in reality), the development of a European defence market (EDTIB), and ultimately (perhaps) emancipation from

²⁷ “EU demands ‘Farage clause’ as part of Brexit reset talks with Britain”, *Financial Times*, 11 January 2026.

²⁸ According to Professor Anand Menon, quoted in a British parliamentary report, “the fact that the British political system is very seriously divided on the European question is a factor that matters for the UK’s ability to secure an ambitious deal with the EU”, House of Commons, “*From a Common Understanding to Common Ground: Building a UK-EU Strategic Partnership fit for the future*”, March 2026, pp. 72–73.

²⁹ Interview with a British official, April 2026.

³⁰ An argument raised in several interviews conducted by the author as part of this study.

³¹ EU Member States plus Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway.

³² See 2026 State of the Union address by President Von der Leyen, 16 September 2026.

third-party powers – the United States in particular. It follows that these various programmes are characterised by a form of exclusivity rather than inclusivity. The cooperation mechanisms are never particularly ambitious, and any relationship with third countries is conducted on a loosely institutionalised basis. This is the case with the Framework Participation Agreement in CSDP operations, or observer status within PESCO projects. And where Community policies (such as the defence industry) are concerned, the provisions relating to the inclusion of third countries are always restrictive, decided on a case-by-case basis, and complex to implement.

Beyond issues relating to the way the EU operates, there is the question of the Member States' stance on the idea of closer ties with the United Kingdom. The majority of Member States are in favour of this, for the reasons set out above regarding its necessity and what the United Kingdom could contribute. However, several obstacles may also emerge when analysing the merits of closer ties, particularly from France's perspective, often isolated on this issue.³³

Firstly, the idea of a 'reset' in the defence sector may be perceived as a British desire to prioritise a limited number of areas – specifically those linked to the defence industry – at the expense of a more comprehensive approach to defence relations. This is illustrated by the UK's desire to be involved in the SAFE programme, and more recently in the Ukraine Support Loan, in both cases due to the industrial benefits that these two partnerships are expected to generate. It is the notion of 'Europe à la carte' or 'cherry-picking' that is being called into question here, whereby the United Kingdom might choose the channels of cooperation that are most favourable to it and disregard those that are not. In other words, a British stance that prioritises gains alone rather than 'give-and-take' negotiations.

Furthermore, whilst the involvement of the British defence industry in the establishment of a European DTIB offers advantages for the EU itself, it also carries the risk of an opening of markets that could be to the detriment of European manufacturers, including, amongst others, French ones. In this regard, industrial considerations are likely to undermine the political dimension of the partnership.

More broadly speaking, whilst the objective of European strategic autonomy cannot be envisaged without a strong bond between Europeans (within the EU) and the British, the United Kingdom's proximity to and dependence on the United States – which the British are determined to preserve at all costs – fuel fears that such proximity could have a negative impact on the project to make Europe's defence sector more autonomous. There is here a central question regarding the nature of the strategic autonomy to be established – with or without the British, but also a more technical question concerning the presence, within British defence industrial groups, of US capital and supply chains, which reinforces the idea of the United Kingdom being a 'Trojan horse' for the United States in Europe.

Ultimately, when taken together, the UK's defence policy whilst it was a member of the EU, its current focus on a narrow aspect of the relationship centred on industrial matters, its heightened Atlanticism and its manifestation within the defence industry, and the competition that the British defence industry might pose to other European industries, are all factors that complicate rapprochement and are only marginally offset by the notion of a strategic imperative for such rapprochement.

In other words, the door to the EU is not particularly wide open, whilst the British have so far shown no obvious desire to push it open.

³³ An isolation of France highlighted by several interviewees in this study.

IV • The EU-UK relationship within the broader context of an evolving security architecture

The relationship between the EU and the UK cannot be assessed in isolation from developments in the European security architecture. Today, this architecture combines several levels of governance frameworks or structures, which are to varying degrees institutionalised.

Alongside security organisations in the strict sense (primarily NATO and the EU), there co-exist bilateral, minilateral or *ad hoc* multilateral agreements which are not underpinned by an administration or pre-established rules, and which therefore, in principle, operate with greater flexibility. The Coalition of the Willing on Ukraine, or the E3 format³⁴, are examples of non-institutionalised frameworks, whilst, for the British, the *Joint Expeditionary Force* (JEF)³⁵ offers an example of a more institutionalised form of multilateral cooperation. Discussions regarding a European Security Council³⁶ or a 'European Defence Mechanism'³⁷, which combine representation from the EU, its Member States and the United Kingdom, are also worth considering.

The choice between these different modes of action depends on an analysis of their comparative advantages in response to a given situation, taking into account considerations of effectiveness and legitimacy as well as time-related imperatives (rapid, one-off action *versus* repeated actions over time).

In other words, for the European states that are members of the European Union and for the United Kingdom, what is the optimal way to cooperate in the field of defence? Is it through a loosely institutionalised *ad hoc* coalition, through bilateral relations (UK–France, UK–Germany, etc.), or through the EU–UK relationship?

These questions are all the more pertinent given that one of the paradoxes of the current situation is the contrast between, on the one hand, a relatively lacklustre EU–UK relationship and, on the other, bilateral relations between the United Kingdom and European countries which are, by comparison, much more developed.³⁸

Two types of conclusions can be drawn from this observation. Firstly, that the UK and/or European states prioritise bilateral and *ad hoc* relations (coalitions of the willing) over the relationship between the EU and the UK, perhaps because the former offer more than the latter in the field of defence. For France in particular, the view that the bilateral relationship with the United Kingdom in the defence sector is more important than the relationship between the European Union and the United Kingdom is fairly widely accepted.

This leads to a second possible conclusion: that the EU–UK relationship must be placed within a broader framework, encompassing the Member States and their

³⁴ The E3 format is an informal diplomatic framework comprising France, the United Kingdom and Germany.

³⁵ Led by the UK, the JEF brings together ten northern European countries (the United Kingdom, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, the Netherlands and Sweden) for rapid-reaction military exercises and operations, in conjunction with NATO.

³⁶ See Andrius Kubilius (European Commissioner for Defence and Space), "On 'Europeanisation' of European conventional defence: the case for a European Security Council", 27 January 2026. The idea of a 'European Security Council' is also mentioned in the *State of the Union Address* by the President of the European Commission, 16 September 2026.

³⁷ See Guntram Wolff *et al.*, "The governance and funding of European rearmament", *Policy Brief* 15, Bruegel Institute, Brussels, 7 April 2025.

³⁸ Argument put forward by Professor Richard Whitman, RUSI and the University of Kent, interview, 15 May 2026.

bilateral relations. Thus, the EU-UK relationship must also be considered within the context of the EU-NATO relationship, that of the Coalition of the Willing for Ukraine, or that of the bilateral relationships between the United Kingdom and France or between the United Kingdom and Germany. In doing so, the EU-UK relationship emerges as one channel of cooperation amongst others – not necessarily the most strategic at present, but one which must nevertheless be developed as the EU assumes a greater role in the field of defence and as the United States distances itself from Europe.

This analysis also helps to explain the UK's rationale regarding the EU, which centres on three key points: moving closer to the EU so as not to be left on the sidelines of a rapidly expanding integration project, particularly in the context of the US withdrawal; securing association agreements with the EU in areas likely to benefit the British defence industry; and prioritising *ad hoc* bilateral or multilateral relations with European states in more operational areas where the EU (and its CSDP) offers less obvious added value.

V • Towards a Strategic Partnership

The strategic environment, characterised by the combination of the Russian threat and US disengagement from Europe, calls for a strategic rapprochement between the EU and the UK, which has not yet materialised.

This does not, however, mean that efforts to bring the two sides closer together should not be pursued. Six years after Brexit, whilst the EU-UK relationship in the field of defence is struggling, certain decisions or actions could also, in the short and medium term, mark a positive development.

But the reality of the strategic environment may also necessitate the consideration of a more ambitious framework for the relationship.

I TOWARDS A GENUINE STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

Firstly, one question that arises is whether there is a need to establish a genuine, 'tailor-made' strategic partnership between the EU and the UK, rather than relying on the general framework governing relations between the EU and third countries, as is the case with the Security and Defence Partnership.

A 'tailor-made' strategic partnership would be justified by: a) the current security environment and the mutual needs it gives rise to; b) the role played by the United Kingdom in the field of defence and, to a certain extent, its status as a former Member State; c) the growing influence of the European Union and its defence requirements.

Such a partnership would be strategic in nature insofar as it would aim to address the strategic challenges facing both the EU and the United Kingdom, and would therefore go beyond the more operational cooperation set out in the Security and Defence Partnership. It would also enable broader issues to be addressed than those covered by the Security and Defence Partnership, such as, *inter alia*:

- collective security and defence, the provisions of Article 42(7) TEU, and the United Kingdom's association with these various issues;
- the development of NATO's European pillar and the EU-NATO relationship;
- the establishment of a EDTIB including to a large degree the United Kingdom, as well as a possible 'European preference' in the industrial sector;

- the establishment of command and control structures aimed at institutionalising the arrangements currently in place within the framework of voluntary coalitions (Ukraine and the Strait of Hormuz);
- cooperation between the EU and the United Kingdom in the reconstruction of Ukraine should the war come to an end, in the defence sphere (security guarantees, the ‘regeneration’ of the Ukrainian armed forces) as well as in the political and economic spheres;
- cooperation between the EU and the UK on issues relating to the management of the Russian threat, in the hybrid, cyber and maritime domains (ghost fleet, etc.), as well as within the broader scope of the CSDP, including in Africa;
- the eventual development of European strategic autonomy, at the heart of which European states, including the United Kingdom, and the Union itself would have their place.

This partnership would also enable the establishment of an institutionalised and permanent framework for negotiations regarding the UK’s contribution to the instruments put in place by the Union, thereby avoiding case-by-case negotiations within limited timeframes, as was the case with the negotiations on SAFE or the Ukraine Support Loan, and, in the future, on the European Competitiveness Fund.

In terms of governance, a dedicated body would bring together the Council of the European Union and the relevant UK minister, in a ‘27+1’ format, with decisions on major cooperation issues taken by consensus. In this context, the idea put forward by the President of the European Commission to create an ‘associate member’ status for Canada is particularly relevant, as it could equally apply to a United Kingdom that is genuinely moving closer to the EU.³⁹

Such a debate also prompts reflection on the European Security Council, which would allow for a more formal link with the United Kingdom whilst involving both the European Union and some of its Member States.

Establishing this partnership would require both the EU to be more open than it is today and the UK to be more determined to push for it. But a strategic partnership also depends on mutual recognition of each other’s contribution to addressing contemporary strategic challenges. In this regard, the European Union’s recognition of the United Kingdom’s potential role seems more evident than the United Kingdom’s recognition of the EU’s added value in the field of defence.

In this context, none of the provisions of a strategic partnership should undermine the centrality of NATO or the United Kingdom’s role within it. It is in this sense that discussions on the EU-UK partnership must take place within the broader framework of the reconfiguration of the European security architecture. The EU-UK partnership would operate alongside other frameworks for cooperation, rather than as a substitute for them.

A ‘tailor-made’ partnership and the opportunities it would offer in the industrial sector would signal the openness towards Europe that the British are expecting. Meanwhile, a more determined British commitment – one that moves away from ‘cherry-picking’ and revisits some of its red lines, whilst being more firmly rooted in a project to assert an autonomous European defence – would be likely to allay European reservations.⁴⁰

³⁹ See Thierry Chopin, ‘Amid the current upheaval in international relations, Canada and the EU need to move closer together’, *Le Monde*, 17 September 2026.

⁴⁰ On these points, see Fabian Zuleeg, Jannike Wachowiak, Daniela Schwarzer and Jake Benford, ‘Reframing the Reset: From Post-Brexit Stabilisation to Strategic Partnership’, Bertelsmann Stiftung and European Policy Centre, May 2026.

Finally, this partnership – which is more ambitious and of genuinely strategic significance – will become all the more necessary in the long term as the United States withdraws from Europe and the Russian threat becomes more pressing, or materialises.

An alternative to this strategically significant partnership would be the establishment of an EU–UK partnership modelled on the Norwegian (rather than the Swiss) model. Like the United Kingdom, Norway is a member of NATO and a third country in relation to the EU, but unlike the United Kingdom, it participates in the European single market. It also has an Administrative Arrangement with the European Defence Agency (EDA), a Framework Participation Agreement for CSDP operations, and is an observer within the PESCO Military Mobility project. Above all, its participation in the single market has opened the door to European initiatives in the field of defence industry.

Thus, were the UK to set aside some of its ‘red lines’ (the single market, alignment with European law, etc.), it could, in return, gain easier access to European projects, particularly in the industrial sector.

In the absence of a more ambitious association of the United Kingdom with European defence, three levels of measures – more in line with the 2025 Security and Defence Partnership – are proposed, relating to engagement between the two entities, measures falling within the institutional framework of the EU–UK relationship, and operational cooperation.

I THE NEED FOR SOCIALISATION

Socialisation is understood as a process of learning about the other (whether an individual or an institution), that is to say, about their practices, norms, rules or values. In the case of the relationship between the EU and the UK, socialisation involves measures that are not particularly ambitious or high-profile, but which enable the two entities (and their representatives) to establish contacts, get to know one another and adapt to each other’s activities. These measures are all the more important given that, at least on the British side, institutional knowledge of the EU is tending to disappear. Certain socialisation measures feature in the Security and Defence Partnership, but have not yet been fully implemented.

Socialisation is achieved first and foremost through the cross-presence of seconded staff within the UK (Ministry of Defence) and European (EEAS, DG DEFIS, EDA) administrations. This measure is mentioned in the Security and Defence Partnership (§51), and could also apply to operations (EU liaison officers seconded to UK operations or UK liaison officers seconded to CSDP operations), subject to the United Kingdom signing a Framework Participation Agreement (see below).

Educational institutions provide an ideal setting for socialisation (see Security and Defence Partnership, §§43–45). The United Kingdom is currently able to take part in courses at the European Security and Defence College (ESDC) that are open to third countries. This has been the case in recent years, with British participation in ESDC orientation courses. Consideration could be given to opening up other courses, such as the High-Level Course, to third countries, in order to allow for a British contribution, amongst others. Similarly, UK training centres could be involved (as is currently the case with Swiss institutions, for example) in organising courses in collaboration with the ESDC, within their areas of expertise (hybrid threats, cyber security, EU–NATO cooperation, etc.). This is recommended by the Security and Defence Partnership (§45), which suggests cooperation within the framework of the ESDC Associated Network Partners (ANP).

The Security and Defence Partnership proposes that the United Kingdom be invited to the Schuman Forum on Security and Defence, organised every two years by the High Representative. In line with this, a forum dedicated to EU-UK defence relations could also be organised, held alternately in London and in the capital of an EU Member State. British universities and research centres could also be encouraged to contribute to projects under the Horizon Europe programme on defence issues (the ‘Global Challenges and European Industrial Competitiveness’ pillar), with which the UK has been associated since 2024.

I OPENING UP CHANNELS OF COOPERATION

The Security and Defence Partnership and the discussions leading up to its signing highlighted the need for the EU and the UK to consider a number of institutional rapprochements. These would not only help to give concrete form to the relationship – thereby demonstrating a mutual and non-selective commitment to closer ties – but also to deepen it by opening up channels of cooperation in the industrial, operational, capability and financial spheres.

Firstly, the signing of an Administrative Arrangement with the European Defence Agency (EDA), as has already been done by Norway, Switzerland, Serbia, Ukraine and the United States, appears to be a ‘low-hanging fruit’⁴¹. This would open up channels of dialogue on issues relating to capability development, whilst also allowing for cooperation on a number of PESCO projects that require an Administrative Arrangement.

Secondly, the United Kingdom’s participation in civilian and military CSDP operations requires the prior signing of a Framework Participation Agreement. Such an agreement has been signed by around twenty third countries, including Norway (2005), Ukraine (2005), Switzerland (2026), and the United States (2011) for civilian personnel only, but not by the United Kingdom. The agreement does not prejudge participation in operations; rather, it provides a framework for such participation where appropriate. For example, cooperation between the Interflex and EUMAM training operations for the Ukrainian armed forces could be usefully strengthened by a cross-contribution of British and European personnel to the partner operation. A possible CSDP operation in Lebanon could also provide a theatre for cooperation with the United Kingdom.

Thirdly, Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and its 74 projects provide a framework that should also facilitate cooperation with the United Kingdom. British participation in Military Mobility can now go ahead following the EU-UK agreement on Gibraltar, whilst participation in the ‘Network of Logistic Hubs in Europe and Support to Operations (NetLogHubs)’ project is being considered. However, the UK and the EU must also consider other projects in the fields of cyber, logistics and training, particularly those where EU rules on intellectual property do not pose an obstacle to closer cooperation. The signing of an Administrative Arrangement with the EDA would also facilitate UK participation in certain PESCO projects.

⁴¹ A measure recommended in several UK parliamentary reports. See “[The impact of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on the UK-EU relationship](#)”, House of Lords, 2024; “[Resetting the UK’s relationship with the European Union](#)”, House of Commons, March 2025. It should be noted, however, that the 2024 Report states (S170) that “The Foreign Secretary indicated that the Government remained reluctant to consider a closer relationship with the EDA. He told us that the UK was ‘not particularly keen on it when we were in the EU, and so I am not fully inclined to fall in love with it after we have left’”.

I OPERATIONAL COOPERATION

Building relationships and establishing channels of cooperation must lay the foundations for operational cooperation. This must be achieved through CSDP military and civilian operations, PESCO projects and, in particular, the relationship with the EDA (see above).

Maritime security could be the area for more institutionalised and operationalised cooperation. Whether it concerns CSDP maritime operations, EU activities to combat the Russian ‘ghost fleet’, or ‘associated support’⁴² for existing operations, formalising EU-UK cooperation would offer clear added value. In the case of ‘associated support’, one option on the European side would be to make this possible without a Framework Participation Agreement, through a more flexible *ad hoc* arrangement.

The United Kingdom could also contribute financially to the European Peace Facility (EPF), as Norway has done on several occasions (in support of Ukraine). Voluntary contributions are targeted at a specific recipient country (in Europe, Africa, Asia, etc.) and enable the contributing country to participate in capacity-building support for the designated third country. This could be relevant in countries of particular interest to the UK (Ukraine, Lebanon, African countries).

Operational aspects must also take account of defence industrial policy and, therefore, first and foremost, the negotiations on the terms of cooperation. Following the failure of the SAFE negotiations, in addition to new negotiations on a hypothetical second phase of the Programme, the UK’s contribution to the Ukraine Support Loan has led to negotiations on, amongst other things, the eligibility criteria for UK industries to participate in Ukrainian tenders. Talks are now underway regarding a possible UK contribution to the future European Competitiveness Fund (ECF) under the 2024–2028 Multiannual Financial Framework, for which the terms of third-country contributions are currently being negotiated (formerly Article 50 (now Article 11) of the proposed ECF Regulation). These various negotiations reveal a case-by-case approach – often carried out in haste – which is not conducive to a mutually beneficial outcome. The EU-UK relationship would benefit here from more comprehensive negotiations (rather than a case-by-case approach) with the United Kingdom on the terms of its participation in European industrial initiatives, focusing on issues relating to eligibility criteria for third-country companies, the determination of the ‘entry fee’, or the concept of European preference. Such negotiations would also be central in the event of a bespoke agreement or the creation of an ‘associate member’ status within the Union.

Finally, the British and Europeans must capitalise on their cooperation in the context of the war in Ukraine (notably within the Ukraine Defence Contact Group (UDCG)/Ramstein/NSATU) to define and implement the European pillar of NATO, within which the British must play a central role. It is the EU Member States that would be on the front line here (rather than the EU itself), but the EU is directly involved in building the European pillar of NATO, and the discussion must therefore be triangular (UK, EU, Member States).

Similarly, the EU’s participation in the Coalition of the Willing for Ukraine (particularly in relation to the ‘regeneration’ pillar of the Ukrainian army) argues in favour of an EU involvement in this governance framework, which must itself be institutionalised to optimise the relationship between the EU, its Member States, Ukraine and the United Kingdom.

⁴² Associated support is a naval doctrine term that “describes an arrangement in which a designated unit operates independently of a specified force or unit but is tasked to provide support to that force”. See NATO Glossary of Terms and Definitions, AAP-06, 2021.

More broadly, the relationship between the EU and the United Kingdom must be conceived, in the long term, with a view to a post-war Ukraine, in which the European Union and the United Kingdom will be two indispensable pillars of reconstruction in the political, economic and security spheres.

In all these areas, institutionalising the relationship will help to address the problems associated with a case-by-case, *ad hoc* approach, which serves no strategic purpose and therefore fails to meet the demands of today's security situation.

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