



Royal United Services Institute
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Workshop Report

RUSI–FES British–German Dialogue on Defence and Security 2019

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RUSI Workshop Report, July 2019



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RUSI–FES British–German Dialogue on Defence and Security 2019

ON 7 MARCH 2019, RUSI and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) hosted a half-day workshop. This brought together leading UK and German parliamentarians, and leading security and defence experts from both countries to discuss the most salient threats to European security. The workshop was divided into two sessions:

- Home Alone? Organising Security in Europe in Times of Insecure Alliances.
- How to Deal with Russia?

Two subject specialists, one from the UK and the other from Germany, delivered opening remarks at the start of each session. This was followed by political remarks from a member of the House of Commons and a member of the Bundestag. Each session then moved into unattributable group discussion.

Home Alone? Organising Security in Europe in Times of Insecure Alliances

The purpose of this session was to examine the future of European defence alliances and the role of the US within those structures. US President Donald Trump has chastised NATO members repeatedly since entering the White House for not meeting defence spending commitments and failing to take defence seriously enough; on 17 January 2019 the president stated, ‘as I told the countries, “You have to step up and you have to pay”’.¹

There was also a broader question as to whether existing European defence structures are sufficiently robust to meet the range of threats that the continent now faces. Updating these structures would also alter the way European countries think about major challenges so that they can meet the evolving threats posed by international terrorism, returning foreign fighters from Syria and Iraq, and new challenges in cyberspace.

A UK Perspective

UK representatives maintained that, currently, predictability is at its lowest levels since the end of the Cold War. Not only has it become increasingly difficult to predict where the next threat will come from, it has also become harder to predict how countries – and particularly

1. Rebecca Morin, ‘Trump: We Will be With NATO “100 Percent”’, *Politico*, 17 January 2019.

the UK following its departure from the EU – will respond to them. The UK government’s white paper, *The Future Relationship Between the United Kingdom and the European Union*, notes that ‘cooperation is likely to require a combination of formal agreements enabling coordination on a case-by-case basis’.² This approach risks increasing uncertainty around securing a swift, collective response to new and existing threats.

It was suggested that historical comparisons are now of little value. The range of non-territorial threats that Europe has faced in the past three years, including terrorism in London and Paris and cyber attacks on critical infrastructure such as those on the UK’s National Health Service and on French television station TV5, demonstrate this.

A German Perspective

The German participants stated that over the past decade, there have been significant changes to the international system in both economic and geopolitical terms that have shifted the global power centres. These changes risk the fragmentation of existing alliances.

Within the continent, they noted that, for instance, the EU’s failure to offer a collective response to political events in Poland or Hungary has undermined the institution and halted the drive for further integration: a fundamental challenge to the concept of Europe. A consequence of this weakened European approach is that countries are likely to lose confidence in established institutions and might instead look to brokering bilateral agreements as a way of ensuring security. This could result in the already-entrenched divides on the continent forming distinct blocs and in turn exacerbating political tensions.

German participants argued that it is essential that Europe reminds itself of its common values and interests and then identifies the tools required to defend them. To uphold the rule of law, for example, an effective, well-resourced diplomatic network is required with a capacity to mediate between actors when necessary. Europe needs a defence policy, not simply defence.

A European Army?

The subject of a European army dominated much of the open discussion. While it is a topic that received passing mentions in previous RUSI–FES engagements,³ the concept received greater explanation from Bundestag members present, and scrutiny both from UK MPs and subject experts.

With the goal of achieving ‘strategic autonomy’ for Europe, some participants suggested that European states should look to form a joint command structure that would allow the EU to

2. HM Government, *The Future Relationship Between the United Kingdom and the European Union*, Cm 9593 (London: The Stationery Office, 2018), p. 64.

3. Sarah Lain, ‘RUSI–FES British–German Dialogue’, Workshop Report, RUSI and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2015.

deploy forces both within and beyond Europe's borders. It was strongly suggested that the US can no longer be regarded as a 'reliable partner' and that Europe ought to take responsibility for its own defence mechanisms. Additionally, at present European states do not believe that there are any democratic means to hold NATO accountable. Any actions taken by a European army would be subject to the checks and balances of the European Parliament and thus under the scrutiny of elected representatives.

The success of NATO over the past 70 years was presented as the counter-argument to a European army. NATO provides all the necessary means and processes to ensure that the security needs of member states are met. The lesson from NATO has been that Europe needs to bind the US to its strategic defence arrangements, a state which has been key to NATO's success. Should the US withdraw from the continent, there are few European powers that have both the political will and military capability to take the lead and push for integration.

There was much criticism directed at NATO's 'arbitrary' spending target of 2% of GDP on defence. The definition of 'defence' does not take into account mechanisms that could be used in conflict de-escalation, such as mediators. This refers to the question of what entails spending for defence, is it only weapons and soldiers, or the broader toolbox of security policy and international cooperation? One UK expert noted that as long as defence spending remains low in so many member states, there can be very little serious discussion of strategic autonomy. Should the US choose to withdraw from Europe, defence spending would necessarily have to increase from 2% to as much as 4% to meet the conventional and non-conventional threats the continent faces. The responsibility is on Europe to demonstrate to the US that it takes its security seriously, as much as it is for the US to do the same.

How to Deal with Russia?

Following Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election, countries across Europe expressed concerns about Russian meddling in their own democratic processes. NATO has deployed troops along its eastern border in the Baltic states, and there are growing concerns over Russian influence and interests in the Balkans. This takes place against the backdrop of the EU's introduction of economic and political sanctions against Russia in 2014 following the annexation of Crimea, its subsequent military intervention in eastern Ukraine, and further European responses to the attack on Sergei Skripal in Salisbury in March 2018. The responses of the UK and the EU to the Skripal incident – to expel a significant number of Russian diplomats – has raised questions about how Europe and the UK should attempt to navigate their present and future relationship with Russia. Notwithstanding the extremely difficult diplomatic relationship between the UK and Russia, London has remained a prime destination for private Russian wealth, and Germany is continuing its construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which aims to transfer Russian gas into Europe via the Black Sea. This is despite the US's condemnation of the pipeline, as identified by another participant, as another level of Russian political influence which would increase Europe's reliance on Russian gas.

UK Perspective

Before discussing Europe's response to Russia's actions, a UK perspective suggested that Europe, including the UK, ought to reassess how Russia's actions and behaviours can be understood and framed.

There is increasingly a danger of placing far too much emphasis on the individual role of Russian President Vladimir Putin, and especially of his personal and professional life, particularly his time within the KGB. This then erroneously forms the basis and explanation for any analysis of Russian foreign policy. The UK speaker noted that, as a result, Russian policy is then regarded simply as an expression of Putin's personality. An over-focus on Putin tends to ignore other powerful institutions and individuals in Russia.

It was also noted that many of Russia's major policy decisions are often discussed in the Russian media, or publicly in the Russian parliament, well ahead of time. This occurred before the annexation of Crimea, which was debated months in advance, but still took the West by surprise. To avoid being caught unawares, Western observers ought to more closely examine official statements in both the Russian press and other government structures, instead of dismissing them as propaganda.

German Perspective

German participants noted that one part of reassessing how Russia is understood involves challenging some of the perceptions on which much of the current discussion on Russia is based. Economically, the country has not made substantive progress in terms of diversification, but Russia's national debt is no worse than the debt in much of Europe. In addition, the central bank has managed to effectively control interest rates. Domestically, despite the large-scale protests that took place across Russia in summer 2018 over the government's intention to increase the retirement age, numerous opinion polls suggest that citizens still prefer the current administration to a possible alternative. Europe should not fall into a trap of regarding Russia as economically backward. Russia is still fully integrated into global financial and economic systems.

To Engage or not to Engage?

The discussion then turned to the idea that the West must accept that present levels of tension are unsustainable, and that seeking re-engagement with Russia – at least to that which existed prior to the poisoning of the Skripals – is both inevitable and desirable. The majority of those present agreed that despite Russia's behaviour over the past three years, Western countries must at some point seek Russia's cooperation, either bilaterally or multilaterally, to address mutual security and economic challenges. The West must accept that on many issues it is essential to continue to seek dialogue with Russia in some format. Such efforts could take place within existing forums, including the NATO–Russia Council. Should Russia be excluded from Western multilateral frameworks – such as the Council of Europe and the Organization for

Security and Co-operation in Europe – then it will prove more difficult to re-engage with Russia at a later date.

This recognition, though, should not be seen as contradicting the need for NATO to demonstrate solidarity with those members who genuinely feel threatened by Russia's increased military activity along Europe's eastern border. In the words of one participant, NATO must be an 'appetite suppressant' to Russia across areas previously regarded as vulnerable.

It is important to note the dissenting view on this point. UK participants responded by saying that Russia's strength as a conventional military force or economic power should not be overstated. Europe's attempts at reconciliation should also not be seen as rewarding Russia's blatant breaches of international law and its attacks on the rules-based international system.

Conclusion

It is absolutely right that Europe discusses seriously its territorial security and defence capabilities. The range of conventional and non-conventional threats the continent faces will require an ever greater range of resources provided by the broadest number of actors. The majority view in the discussion, however, argued that Europe should not believe that the necessary security frameworks on the continent can function with complete autonomy without the full integration of the US. Which European country has, at present, the sufficient political will and military capability to drive this initiative forward? Where are the common structures and interfaces to make Europe an independent actor? Any talk about 'strategic autonomy' while these elements are missing seems premature. Additionally, as one UK participant put it, the idea of strategic autonomy is at the present level of defence spending 'for the birds'. It is important to note the dissenting view on this point. German participants stressed the necessity to define Europe's security policy in broader terms, avoiding the sole focus on defence spending. The ability of the EU to apply a wider range of tools to crises needed to be seen as a strength, not a weakness.

As one UK participant at the workshop noted, the discussion of European security comes down fundamentally to the question: 'how do we make our people feel safe?'. A first step here is for European states to make a concerted effort to communicate with their respective populations what the threat picture, both conventional and non-conventional, really looks like. The purpose being to make it easier to explain the significant efforts that are required by all states, whether by NATO targets or non-NATO initiatives.

Recommendations from the 2015 RUSI–FES report called for 'greater clarity with regards to the security mechanisms and capabilities that the EU can offer'.⁴ Since then, in November 2017 the Permanent Structured Cooperation on Defence (PESCO) was launched, aiming to 'jointly develop defence capabilities and make them available for EU military operations' from the

4. Lain, 'RUSI–FES British–German Dialogue', p. 4.

25 EU member states who signed up to it.⁵ While not receiving much attention during the workshop discussion, one participant did note that PESCO should be regarded as something to complement rather than compete with NATO.

Post-Brexit, further discussion should be had to establish how non-EU states can be integrated into PESCO-led projects. There is provision within the EU proposing cooperation ‘on a case-by-case basis’,⁶ but, as the workshop concluded, such an approach can lead to significant uncertainty and delay when the continent must react when facing a mutual threat. Germany and the UK should examine whether on key challenges, particularly non-conventional threats such as cyber security, there can be greater cooperation and longer-term integration.

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5. European Union External Action, ‘Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) – Factsheet’, 10 May 2019, <[https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/34226/Permanent%20Structured%20Cooperation%20\(PESCO\)%20-%20Factsheet](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/34226/Permanent%20Structured%20Cooperation%20(PESCO)%20-%20Factsheet)>, accessed 1 August 2019.
 6. Jacopo Barigazzi, ‘UK and US Will be Allowed to Join Some EU Military Projects’, *Politico*, 1 October 2018.