Simon Duke: Will Brexit Damage our Security and Defence? The Impact on the UK and EU


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Since the outcome of the referendum on Brexit held in Great Britain in June 2016, academic researchers have paid considerable attention to this issue. Indeed, since the referendum result the EU and the UK have yet to get past Brexit: it should have happened on March, 29th 2019, exactly two years after the United Kingdom invoked article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty, but it has been postponed until at least October, 31st 2019, to give the EU and the UK a last chance to avoid a no-deal scenario and find an agreement fitting both Brussels and London. Meanwhile, the issue continues to divide political elites and citizens alike, as the result of the recent European elections for the European Parliament showed (torn between a high score for the Brexit Party on the one hand and a boost for pro-Europe candidates on the other). As a high-salience issue, Brexit has generated numerous academic publications over the last three and a half years. Moreover, if academic writings on Brexit in general have begun to bloom, many articles and books have been written on the more specific topic of the impact of Brexit on both the UK’s and the EU’s security and defence policy. The essay under review here fits in this growing body of literature.

The author’s legitimacy on the topic under study has been acknowledged for decades. Simon Duke was one of the leading scholars in the field of European security and defence policy from the end of the 1990’s until he unexpectedly passed away in September 2018. Professor at the European Institute of Public Administration (EIPA) in Maastricht, he received a PhD from the University of Oxford. He was the author of twelve monographs and over a hundred other publications on European and transatlantic foreign and security issues. He recently produced many academic


writings on Brexit and its consequences on European security and defence. He also trained an important number of practitioners of EU institutions, including the European External Action Service (EEAS). This shows in the short book (120 pages) under review here which is clearly written and has an easy to read style. The author did not choose any theoretical framework and proposed instead a policy-oriented analysis, a trait which becomes even clearer in the last chapter dedicated to potential future Brexit scenarios. The book aims at bringing a contribution to the study of disintegration processes in European integration in the defence area, one which still remains under-researched. The argument focuses on the effects of Brexit on security issues both for the UK and for the EU. More precisely, the essay in general examines the security and defence consequences of Brexit for the UK and the European Union, considering that both sets of actors share mutual interests that Brexit will affect in the near future. Even though the author clearly explains that he does not see security and defence issues as deal-breakers in the negotiations between the UK and the EU, he interestingly manages to show how these issues are actually closely connected to the fate of other issues at stake in the London-Brussels negotiations, like trade for instance. By reading this work it also becomes clear that at the strategic level, “Global Britain” could not be achieved should a strong disconnection with the EU’s security and defence policy be enacted. As the author puts it: “The UK will remain actively involved in European security. […] What is less obvious is how and in what capacity” (p.88).

The essay is composed of five chapters, each focusing on a topic related to the impact of Brexit on both the UK’s and the EU’s security and defence policy. This enables Duke to embrace security issues both for London and for the EU from an overarching perspective. The first chapter examines the place of security and defence in British debates leading up to the Brexit referendum as well as during its immediate aftermath. This helps understand that these issues, even though not at the centre of the Leave campaign, have been controversial in the UK for many years. As Duke underlines, London shifted from a leader in European defence policy in the late 1990’s (with the St Malo agreement) to a “laggard in recent years” (p.21). Yet defence and security issues are of fundamental importance both for the UK and for the EU in the post-Brexit era, as the next chapters demonstrate.

The second chapter sums up the recent shifts that occurred in CSDP and have moved it forward since the referendum on Brexit in June 2016. Interestingly, security and defence have shown the highest potential to relaunch the integration project and produced many outcomes such as PESCO, the European Defence Fund or the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC). Such issues had been vetoed by the UK and could benefit from London’s withdrawal.

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5 A concept launched in the wake of the Brexit referendum to try to define the UK’s new international strategic status.
The third chapter focuses on a critical analysis of the consequences of Brexit for crisis management, and defence industries in the UK and EU. While Brexit might ease the flexibility of arms exports for the UK, it is also likely to exclude London not only from funding possibilities through the EDA or the European Defence Fund, but also to reduce British industrial cooperation to the benefit of a closer French-German industrial collaboration over military products.

The fourth chapter proposes an interesting analysis of the consequences of Brexit on British internal security by showing how interlocked the issue is with the EU level concerning border issues, information exchange and databases on terrorism, organised crime or cybersecurity for instance. Thus, on this issue, even though the Brexiteers claim legal autonomy from the EU and the end of the European Court of Justice’s jurisdiction, Duke demonstrates that the UK has a clear interest in negotiating cooperation agreements on these issues that will also meet the EU regulation standards.

Finally, the fifth chapter proposes five scenarios and outlines for each specific legal tools available to both the UK and the EU as they design their post-Brexit security and defence relations. The scenarios range from loose association to more inclusive potentialities, such as a shared EU defence and security policy implying closer British involvement or even a common security and defence policy, implying quasi-membership for London. The two remaining scenarios, which are not exclusive of the first three, would entail a revival of the European pillar within NATO and a strengthening of bilateral cooperation on military issues, amongst which France would be the pivotal partner.

The author proposes three conclusions. First, the UK is important for the future of European defence and security policy but should not overestimate its role, as London is likely to become a partner – even a privileged one – among other EU security partners. Second, the EU remains of vital importance for British security, and more precisely for many internal aspects where London needs to safeguard an access to European databases centralised in EU institutions. Third, but not least, the withdrawal of the UK from the EU may not only jeopardise British influence in Europe, but also in NATO, because London will for instance lose the position of the Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe (DSACEUR) and had to hand over the command of the Atalanta operation to Spain in March 2019. Thus the UK should negotiate a Treaty with the EU in order to remain a close partner in security and defence issues.

Yet the main difficulty for such a solution will be for London to accept the European legal obligations associated with such a treaty in internal security aspects. On a more global level, this essay helps understand how disintegration in the EU process is interlocked with EU’s normative and institutional outcomes and cannot happen easily. This is particularly interesting to bear in mind while witnessing a rise of populist movements in the EU who precisely base their electoral discourse on disintegration claims.

If one can regret that this book does not draw on or develop any theoretical framework, it still makes for very stimulating and condensed reading which helps clarify the most important aspects of Brexit consequences on security and defence issues, and this both for London and for the EU. Even though written before the adjournment of a concrete deal on Brexit until, most probably, January 2020 this essay is not outdated. Its clear policy propositions are of great interest for any researcher, university lecturer or practitioner interested in the issue of Brexit and its impact on EU and the UK as regards its security and defence aspects.