

Consequences of the „Brexit vote“ to EU’s security and defense policy

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BREXIT will have far-reaching impact on foreign and security policy of the European Union and place of the EU in the world. It will lose one of the strongest pillars, on which persistently builded up, yet not effectively born European Common Foreign and Security Policy (CSFP) could stand on. With the United Kingdom out, independent European defense will be nothing but an illusive concept more than ever before.

The UK’s importance for EU’s global weight

European foreign, security and defense policies – despite numerous initiatives and plans to “Europeanize” – are mostly still domain of the EU’s individual member states. From this perspective a close look on potential and position of the United Kingdom is especially important to get a picture what the Union will lose exactly. While analyzing the entire weight of a recent development it is important to concentrate mainly on politico-diplomatic, security- military and economic potential that altogether determine strength of states.

As the United Kingdom is Permanent Member of the UN Security Council which a priori goes hand in hand with certain level of global influence. Regionally, besides Europe, London is an influential regional actor in the Middle East, Mediterranean and in the basin of Indian Ocean and through nowadays symbolical, still formally important, Commonwealth, also global actor. It has also at its disposal one of the widest and most skillful network of diplomatic representations in the world.

British economy is the second strongest in the European Union, it is only 20% smaller than the economy of the strongest one, Germany. While the UK will probably still remain highly economically integrated with the EU in the future, the EU will lose 16-17% of its economic power, trade superpower and the most important financial centre in Europe, London. At first glance it may seem as the economic challenge only, but economic strength is one of the most important pillars of the influence and position – so the European position will suffer accordingly.

In the area of security and defense the United Kingdom is one of „Big Two“ in Europe, together with France. Both states are nuclear powers; British Armed Forces are permanently evaluated as the most capable in Europe. They enjoy extensive experience from high-intensity deployments in conflicts, in the last two decades mainly in Afghanistan and Iraq, in which their contribution was second to the US, but also in the Balkans, Sierra Leone and Libya. Force projection in out-of-Europe operations is absolutely crucial for Europe if it wants to pursue its security interests – and the United Kingdom has the most distinct potential in this domain. Moreover it is enhanced by a solid strategic culture and tradition of deployments outside of Europe. Ability to deploy approximately 30 000 – 35 000 of troops, accompanied by significant air and naval capabilities, in out-of-Europe operations makes the United Kingdom a sine qua non of European security and defense. From 2020, the UK will also have the ability to deploy two new carriers (Queen Elizabeth class, with approximately 40 F-35) that together with the French Charles de Gaulle will create the axis of European force projection capabilities. After BREXIT the real European force projection capabilities will develop even more on a bilateral basis with France, and will even formally lose the “brand” of the EU’s Security and Defense Policy. Of course, the bedrock of the European defense system, NATO, will not be seriously harmed by BREXIT, London will stay via the Alliance tightly bound to European defense.

Consequences for the EU

With BREXIT leaves one quarter of the overall European military potential, and what is even more important, one third of its effectively deployable military potential, which altogether with France accounts for more than half of it. France will represent the only global military and diplomatic power of the European Union and even if we consider Germany on board, it will still be “less” with the United Kingdom out (even if we accept superior economic, commercial and diplomatic weight of Berlin, German military and security capabilities are significantly smaller than British one).

It is by no coincidence that all initiatives that started or strengthened European defense cooperation so far – for example St. Malô in 1998 or Lanchester House Agreements in 2010 – were born as a result of British-French initiative (not always necessarily formally connected with ESDP). At the very outset of European security and defense policy were agreements done by Tony Blair and Jacques Chirac (St. Malô, 1998); before or after no initiative was passed without Franco-British agreement. Within European and Trans-Atlantic security architecture we have formally always discussed EU-US-Canada triangle, now we have to add the United Kingdom as well as a fourth actor independently.

It is very important to mention that the United Kingdom will remain fully-fledged NATO member as one of the most important actors in the area of European and Euro-Atlantic security. BREXIT will not weaken security of Europe, including its „Eastern wing“. The United Kingdom will also stay dedicated to the Alliance’s plans of enhancing security of Central Europe and Baltics. It will also certainly be a leading nation of new multinational battalion that NATO is creating in Baltics and Poland; British will be responsible for a battalion (approx. 800+ troops) in Estonia. On the other hand, BREXIT will definitely bury hope for independent European defense and will weaken global position of Europe as a whole.