The UK, the European Union and NATO: Brexit's Unintended Consequences

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Abstract: The result of the UK referendum on membership of the EU has occasioned considerable debate on Britain's international standing. An important (but so far largely overlooked) aspect of this debate is how the possibility of Brexit impacts upon NATO and, specifically, the UK's position within the Atlantic alliance. In this connection, the initial signs are worrying. London may wish to focus on NATO as a way of compensating for a troubled exit from the EU, but its ability to do so is weakened by uncertainties over the UK defence budget (and standing as a nuclear power), a loss of credibility as a global player and the blame that will attach to it for undermining NATO cohesion. The likely upshot of Brexit will be a loss of British influence and a blow to the integrity of the alliance.

Introduction

The UK's vote to leave the EU and so break with a 43 year old process of political and economic integration sent shock waves through the global economy and challenged assumptions of regional and global governance. Not only was the result a snub to the British political establishment, it also demonstrated a desire to reject the advice of the UK's allies and the international institutions of which it is a member, all of whom favoured Remain. In the weeks leading up to the vote, political leaders on both sides of the Atlantic lined up to warn against the consequences of exit. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development warned of the economic consequences, while NATO officials cautioned against the security implications. Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg (cited in *The Guardian*, 22 June 2016) suggested that Brexit would lead to a more 'fragmented Europe' and so would be 'bad for our security and [...] bad for NATO.' Five former Secretaries General cautioned similarly that such a move would 'lead to a loss of British influence, undermine NATO and give succour to the West's enemies' (*Daily Telegraph*, 10 May 2016). The decision of a majority of British voters to ignore this advice demonstrated a willingness to embrace populism with little regard for the wider consequences. Further, the UK government's claim that 'Brexit means Brexit' will ensure that the Leave vote will result in a protracted process with multiple knock-on effects on every aspect of Britain's international engagement.

While direct reference to the impact of EU membership upon NATO figured only sporadically in the referendum campaign, the broader context of European stability was very much in evidence. In May 2016, Prime Minister David Cameron argued that the EU amplified British influence and that the EU had contributed to peace on the continent, a peace which the UK would forsake if it moved into the sort of isolationism implicit in Brexit (Cameron 2016). The Prime Minister was mocked for exaggerating the EU's role and not giving due credit to NATO, both as a counter to the Soviet Union during the Cold War and as conflict-manager in the Balkans after Yugoslavia's collapse. NATO, the Vote Leave campaign argued, was still 'the single key component in Britain – and Europe's – security', with the EU seen as something of a strategic irritant – 'undermining NATO' as it sought to 'duplicate key functions of the alliance' (Vote Leave 2016).

As with much of the referendum campaign, claim and counter-claim obscured a complex reality. The provision of security in Europe has been a consequence of NATO *and* EU actions, just as UK influence has been furthered by British efforts to shape the agendas of *both* organisations. The outcome of the referendum has, however, required a reconsideration of the view that the UK's place in Europe rests on these twin institutional pillars. As the UK seeks to consolidate its position in NATO while it navigates exit from the EU it will of necessity require the establishment of a new role for

Britain and a new accommodation of that role within the alliance. While it is possible to project all manner of calamitous consequences from Brexit - the beginning of 'European unravelling' (Cohen, 2016) or 'the West's formal disintegration' (Jones, 2016, p.216) - these are at present too contingent to act as a reliable indication of what might happen in the medium to long term. The focus of this article, instead, is the more practical and discernible implications of the EU referendum – both for the UK's relationship with NATO and for the alliance's future development.

The Aftermath

The EU referendum result was met with dismay among the UK's allies and partners. The prospect of a UK detached from the EU added to the Union's multiple troubles over the Eurozone and migration. It also threatened to bog down Europe's political leadership in endless negotiations on the terms of exit. The June statement of the EU 27 (the full membership minus the UK) alluded to this in cool language: the referendum had created 'a new situation for the European Union' necessitating a period of 'political reflection' (European Council/Council of the European Union, 2016). Individual European leaders presented the outcome in stronger terms. For Chancellor Angela Merkel (cited in *The Financial Times*, 25-26 June 2016), the result was 'a turning point [...] for the process of European unification.' French Prime Minister Manuel Valls (cited in Reuters 24 June 2016) warned of 'the break-up, pure and simple, of the Union.'

These largely downbeat views soon gave way to more pragmatic assessments. The US backpedalled significantly from earlier warnings of a loss of British influence. The special relationship with the UK would endure, President Obama (2016) declared, and the UK would 'continue to be a major contributor to European security.' Secretary of State John Kerry (cited in Reuters 27 June 2016), for his part, warned against 'revengeful premises' being visited upon the UK in future exit negotiations. And European Council President Donald Tusk (cited in *The Financial Times*, 9-10 July 2016) suggested that Brexit would be 'just an incident, and not the beginning of a process.'

Such, then, was the diplomatic mood as NATO moved toward its summit in Warsaw in early July. The summit's final communiqué, however, made no mention of the EU referendum; neither did the issue intrude upon the summit's other outcomes. Earlier meetings of NATO Foreign and Defence Ministers had already squared away the summit's headline policy on a NATO 'enhanced forward presence' to deter Russia. A joint statement on NATO-EU strategic partnership, similarly, had been worked on for several months owing to shared concerns over Russia, migration in the Mediterranean region, cyber threats and terrorism. A British offer, meanwhile, to lead one of four new NATO battlegroups (and to deploy a company to Poland) was of a piece with existing UK contributions to Baltic air-policing and the NATO Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF). A

summit that was determinedly about business as usual had the ancillary political benefits of a demonstration of Western unity in the face of the EU's troubles and seemed to evidence the UK's claim to ongoing international engagement.

Within just two weeks of the EU referendum the initially harsh assessments of the vote had thus given way to more measured views of its consequences. Yet the prospect of a British exit from the EU, we suggest, presents ongoing challenges to the UK's international standing, as well as to the integrity of NATO itself. Four areas are relevant here, each is considered below.

Defence Spending

Successive British governments have long appreciated the UK's role as one of NATO's leading military powers. The single most important quantitative indicator of this status has been high levels of UK defence spending in comparison with its allies. In 2006, NATO Ministerial Guidance set 2 per cent of GDP as a guideline for national levels of defence spending. At that point, the UK was one of just six allies making the mark. In volume terms, it was ranked second behind the US and, in per capita terms, ranked eighth (Stalenheim, Perdomo and Sköns, 2007, p.**).

The NATO summit in Wales in 2014 reiterated the 2 per cent target. The policy on this occasion took on an added political significance. Announced on UK home soil, it was the product in part of joint UK and American diplomatic efforts aimed at winning round doubters such as Germany and Canada. The UK's own standing was, however, in decline as austerity-driven measures fell heavily upon the UK defence budget. Between 2010/11 and 2014/15, the Ministry of Defence core budget fell by 8 per cent in real terms (Chalmers, 2016a, p.6). Having spent 2.51 per cent of GDP on defence in 2010 this figure dropped to 2.20 per cent in 2014. In 2015, it fell further to 2.09 per cent of GDP. Had the UK government not applied new accounting rules to the figures, it is likely that spending in 2015 would have fallen below the 2 per cent threshold (NATO Public Diplomacy Division, 2016).

Five years of steady decline meant a removal of certain key British capabilities. The 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) had already anticipated this with cuts to personnel across all three services and the cancellation of the plannedNimrod MRA4 maritime patrol aircraft. Criticised roundly at home (House of Commons Defence Committee, 2011), the SDSR also occasioned concerns in the US where it was felt that the military reliability of the UK was being put at risk. These capability and credibility gaps sat alongside a shifting strategic landscape. The UK and its NATO allies withdrew from combat in Afghanistan at the end of 2014 but this commitment was replaced by the requirements of deterrence and reassurance as NATO shifted back toward collective defence in light of Russia's annexation of Crimea. Acting upon these considerations, in 2015 the

newly-elected Conservative government pledged to reverse defence cuts, committing to real-term increases of 0.5 per cent per annum up to 2020/21. The 2015 SDSR which then followed aimed to maintain existing levels of armed personnel, fund major investment projects (for armed drones, aircraft carriers, fighter jets and a new fleet of maritime patrol aircraft) and so restore the UK's military reputation.

The possible economic effects of the EU referendum has put these commitments at risk. During the referendum campaign, Chancellor George Osborne (2016) warned that a post-Brexit recession would require significant defence cuts. The UK would retain its NATO commitment to spend 2 per cent of GDP on defence – but with a shrinking economy the absolute sum available would diminish. By contrast, in a post referendum speech, Defence Secretary Michael Fallon (2016a) kept to the line that the 2015 SDSR would determine defence spending levels, and to prove the point in mid-July the government announced the purchase of nine P-8A maritime surveillance aircraft and 50 Apache attack helicopters. Fallon's optimism could, however, prove misplaced. Projected real-term increases in defence from 2015 were premised on an annual UK growth rate of just under 2.4 per cent between 2015 and 2020 (Chalmers, 2016b, p.5). The IMF forecast in mid July, that the UK economy would grow by 1.7 per cent in 2016 and by just 1.3 per cent in 2017 (International Monetary Fund, 2016). The European Commission (2016, p.9), meanwhile, suggested equivalent figures of 1.6 and 1.1. per cent with the possibility of a shrinkage in the economy of -0.3 per cent under its 'severe' scenario of the EU referendum's impact. While robust economic performance up to the end of 2016 have cast such predictions into doubt, the longer term prospects for the UK economy remain low-key. The government's 2016 Autumn Statement noted that, growth would dip in 2017 and recover in the three years thereafter – but this would be at rates lower than in 2016 and accompanied by rising levels of public debt (HM Treasury, 2016, p.1). The Office for Budget Responsibility (2016, pp.6-7) was even more downbeat, noting in November that the UK's removal from the EU would have a negative impact on inward migration, trade and investment and so lead to 'lower potential output' and with it lower tax receipts and a widening budget deficit in the years up to 2020-21.

These strains have been compounded by the post-referendum fall in the value of sterling. In 2012 (the last date for which figures are available), the UK imported defence equipment worth an estimated $11.8bn from the US. For the period 2008-2011, the equivalent figure sat between $10.1bn and $11.5bn per annum (Taylor, 2016a). Given the scale of these figures, currency fluctuations can add hundreds of millions to the UK defence equipment budget. One report (Taylor 2016b) has estimated that increase at £700m per annum, a figure equivalent to 2 per cent of the defence budget. These purchases, moreover, are not discretionary in that they comprise strategic

commitments such as F-35 and P8 aircraft, as well as components of the UK's nuclear deterrent.

Such economic pressures will continue to bear down upon the defence budget.. In order to maintain its international credibility, post-referendum governments will not wish to fall below NATO's 2 per cent target. Phillip Hammond (2016), the Chancellor of the Exchequer, made clear in his 2016 Autumn Statement that the fiscal constraints of George Osborne his predecessor would be relaxed and that the government would 'protect' the defence budget. This may, however, be a sleight of hand. Hammond gave no commitment to maintain increases in defence spending. Facing profound economic and political pressures, Cameron's successor, Theresa May, has, meanwhile, shown no desire to give preference to defence in view of other budget priorities.

Leadership

Possession of advanced nuclear and conventional forces, closeness to the US and readiness to commit force have marked the UK out as an ally of the first rank – standing alongside the US, France and Germany in the NATO 'quad' of political and military heavyweights (Yost, 2014, p.22). As NATO is formally separate from the EU, it might be thought that changes to the UK-EU relationship will leave the UK's position in the alliance unaltered. There are at least four ways, however, in which British influence in NATO could be undermined by the EU referendum outcome.

The first relates to the institutional arrangements that have grown up since the mid-1990s to facilitate cooperation between the EU and NATO. These have been messy and far from productive, obstructed by the rivalry between Turkey and Cyprus. Yet galvanised by a resurgent Russia, as well as the migration and Syrian crises, the two organisations have made significant progress toward correcting this dysfunctional state of affairs. The EU-NATO Joint Declaration promised 'to give new impetus and new substance to the NATO-EU strategic partnership' through intelligence sharing, maritime cooperation, and coordination of cyber-security (Joint Declaration 2016). A UK absent from the EU would be denied one of two possible institutional footholds in these projects. Its stock would thus be reduced with Turkey and, more importantly, with the US, the two non-EU NATO allies who have looked to London to counter the more enthusiastic calls from France (and occasionally Germany) for EU-framed defence cooperation.

The second detrimental effect is also linked to the US. Historically, American support for the UK's EU membership hasbeen premised on the need to support European integration. An EU already weakened by the Eurozone and migration crises would, it is feared, be damaged still further by a UK withdrawal. And a weakened EU, so the argument runs in Washington, is also bad for NATO as it signals irresolution and division among America's European allies (Rachman, 2016). Under Barack Obama, America's position was also informed by an appreciation of the UK's role as 'the tough guy

in the European Union' on issues such as European sanctions on Russia (former under Secretary of State, Nicholas Burns cited in *International New York Times*, 9-10 July 2016). The election of Donald Trump as US president has clearly upset these considerations. Early signs suggest some sympathy toward a UK that is exiting the EU (contradicting Obama, Ted Malloch, Trump's nominee for US ambassador to the EU, has said the UK would be at no disadvantage in negotiating bilateral trade deals with the US). However, the long-term trend is unlikely to be to the UK's advantage. A Trump administration will still need to maintain a meaningful relationship with the EU but will no longer be able to call upon the UK as its political 'plug-socket' into the organisation. That role, albeit less reliable to Washington, may instead be taken by Germany (Banks and Mahoney 2016).

The dent to UK credibility is, thirdly, compounded by broader trends in UK foreign policy. The EU referendum vote is the most recent in a string of events (cuts to the Foreign Office budget, a reluctance to engage in European diplomacy on Ukraine, a limited role in the anti-ISIS coalition) which have diminished the position of the UK in the world (Menon, 2015). Advocates of Brexit have argued that leaving the EU may liberate the UK from a certain European parochialism and so boost its global ambition. This is not, however, the view of the UK's allies, all of whom had 'wished for a different result' to that of Leave in the EU referendum (Fallon, 2016b).

The fourth trend working against the UK in NATO is the possibility of a deterioration in relations with partners consequent upon the EU exit process. Once begun, formal negotiations on exit under Article 50 of the EU's Lisbon Treaty are meant to conclude within two years. Prime Minister May has made clear that the UK will, subject to Parliamentary approval, trigger that process no later than March 2017 with the logical expectation that the UK will leave the EU soon after March 2019. Agreeing the terms of withdrawal within this period would be a significant feat as it requires the consent (by qualified majority vote) of the remaining 27 members of the EU, the European Parliament and, depending on the terms of withdrawal, the national legislatures of all the Member States. Even assuming this is achieved, several more years would then be needed to flesh out the terms of the new post-Brexit relationship.Scenarios can, in this light, be imagined in which the UK becomes locked into high-stakes talks with its major European allies for several years. It is difficult to imagine that such a fraught process will not transfer across institutional boundaries. Formal linkages are probably ruled out but there is nonetheless likely to be less deference to the UK position in NATO. No longer will the Poles and other new members automatically look to the UK as their champion in the alliance and no longer will France, Germany and Italy feel the need to square their views with the UK in NATO bodies for the sake of preserving harmony in the EU.

Cohesion

Britain's exit from the EU also poses a potential threat to one of NATO's most prized assets – its unity and cohesion. Assessing just how damaging Brexit might be here requires some context. On the upside, as already noted, the timing of the EU referendum was fortuitous, followed as it was by the Warsaw summit at which the alliance was able to put on a show of unity. The contrast between the British position on the EU and its reaffirmed commitment to NATO led some to conclude that the alliance was now likely 'to become more important.' '[A]s the EU weakens', Jakub Grygiel (cited in Lyman 2016) suggested, so NATO would 'continue to serve as a mechanism of coordination and cooperation.' Former Supreme Allied Commander Europe, James Stavridis (2016), noted similarly, that the UK seeking to offset its diminished international influence would be 'a *very* motivated NATO partner', with every incentive to lead from the front and maintain 'good faith' among its allies.

Brexit was also a minor issue compared to NATO's other internal problems at the time: In July Turkey witnessed an unsuccessful coup attempt then followed by a purge of government and the armed forces.   Meanwhile, presidential hopeful Donald Trump's (cited in *International New York Times*, 29 March 2016 and 22 July 2016) characterisation of NATO an 'obsolete' organisation and questioning of the principle of collective defence set alarm bells ringing in NATO capitals.Both these episodes were damaging to NATO although perhaps not as bad as initially thought. Trump would go on to repeat his criticism of NATO after his election but stated simultaneously that the US would maintain its defence guarantee toward its European allies (cited in *The Times*, 16 January 2017). General James Mattis (2017, pp.24-27) Trump's nominee for Secretary of Defence commended the Alliance in his Senate confirmation hearing – in the process re-committing the US to countering Russian aggression. The strong support for NATO in the US military establishment and (albeit with conditions) in the Republican dominated Congress have also seemingly set limits to how far a Trump presidency might disturb America's practical commitments to its European allies (Smith, Rizzo and Twardowski, 2017, p.10).

The damage to NATO of Trump's election may thus prove more rhetorical than real. Instability in Turkey, meanwhile, is nothing new for the Alliance. The EU referendum, by contrast, has posed problems of a potentially more permanent nature. To understand why, two broad considerations are relevant. The first relates to the substantive meaning of alliance cohesion. In common usage, cohesion is seen in behavioural terms – the degree to which allies agree on matters of policy and how they go about the process of implementation (Weitsman, 2004, pp.35-36). Cohesion might thus be measured by how far allies commit to operations or to agreed levels of defence spending. It might also be reflected in NATO's ability to forge a common front on signature political concerns – how to deal with Russia or how to manage enlargement, for example. Such matters have been central to NATO's history and periodically alarms have been raised about 'issues

that have challenged the cohesion of the Alliance' (Andreychuk 2010), usually on the assumption that any problem, however regrettable, will be subject to NATO's time-tested powers of endurance and institutional flexibility. The EU referendum outcome may well fall into this category, giving rise to considerable difficulty for a while, but succumbing ultimately to NATO's institutional modes of alliance compromise. But coherence is a social as well as a behavioural phenomenon and this points to longer-lasting problems. Coherence in its social meaning arises when a group is bound together by a shared sense of belonging, inclusion and identity. In Europe and across the Atlantic such togetherness has taken shape in a political and security community of states nourished by the integrationist effects of both NATO and the EU. Within this community disagreements obviously arise, but these are dealt with through well-established institutional channels giving rise, in turn, to a sense of familiarity and trust (Adler 2008). Brexit upends the assumptions upon which such a community is based. A UK departure from the EU is likely to generate feelings of detachment toward the UK and, if separation goes badly, rancour, ill-feeling and mistrust.

Just how bad this could end up is hard to judge, as there are no direct precedents from the EU upon which to draw. Greenland has been held up as the one case in which EU exit has occurred – although Denmark, the sovereign state of which Greenland is part retained its membership and Greenland by itself is of minor economic and political consequence for the Union's affairs. Two other parallels come from within NATO itself and neither is encouraging. By voting to leave the EU, the UK has taken a deliberate and voluntary step of international disassociation. France did something similar in 1966 by deciding to leave NATO's integrated military structures (although retaining formal alliance membership). Paris soon came to regret the decision and so kept a degree of involvement in NATO military bodies through the later Cold War period and after, in the 1990s, was involved in NATO peacekeeping operations. This 'ersatz integration' (Fortmann, Haglund and von Hlatky, 2010, p.2) was paralleled by a process of political normalisation in NATO that lasted for up to 20 years such that France formally re-joined NATO's military structures under President Nicolas Sarkozy. The other case is Turkey, whose domestic political turn under President Tayyip Erdoğan has demonstrated an apparent abandonment of its one-time EU membership aspirations. This has been of a piece with rising anti-Americanism and a set of niggling disputes with the US and other NATO allies over the war in Syria, relations with Russia and Israel, and the Kurdish issue.

Clearly, both comparisons are open to debate, not least because the UK has every incentive to work harder at maintaining its standing within NATO. Yet the cohesion of the organisation is not something the UK's efforts alone can restore should things turn sour during the exit negotiations. And more substantively the EU referendum has added to uncertainty in international politics by, in effect, reversing the processes of institutional integration and enlargement that has been the norm

– for NATO as well as the EU - in the post-Cold War period. If such a reversal were to result in institutional consolidation it would be no bad thing. It could, however, play out in a quite different direction. Since 2012 NATO has undertaken a major effort to extract itself from Afghanistan and, with Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, to counter Russia in the Black Sea and Baltic regions. The alliance politics responsible for this change of mission are far from complete despite the stated outcomes of the Wales and Warsaw summits. And Brexit could make it even more testing. By positing the possibility of an EU exit, the UK has signalled its readiness to abrogate its treaty commitments to the EU. The margin of tolerance for binding treaties among democracies has thus been decisively lowered. It is not only Donald Trump who has questioned NATO's collective defence commitments under the North Atlantic Treaty; popular majorities in France, Germany and Italy according to a 2015 Pew public opinion survey would rather not use force to defend an ally in a military conflict with Russia (Simons, Stokes and Poushter, 2015). Commitment to the common defence was thus an issue already sapping NATO cohesion before the UK's EU referendum. The UK's own resolve in this area counts for little if its fellow European allies draw the inference that NATO's foundational text as much as the Treaty of European Union is discretionary rather than binding (Bittner, 2016).

Nuclear weapons

In common with the US (but unlike France) Britain's nuclear weapons are assigned to the defence of the alliance even if command and control is retained in London. The status of these weapons is thus of keen strategic interest to all NATO allies, the US in particular. While membership of the EU has no formal bearing on Britain's nuclear weapons, the decision to leave may nevertheless affect the ability of the UK to retain this capability in its present form. The first way in which this might be manifest is the growing cost of nuclear forces as a percentage of the UK defence budget. In straightened times the relative value of these systems might come under renewed scrutiny. More importantly, however, the issue of where Britain's trident submarines are based has been reopened by the Brexit vote. Both Coulport, where nuclear warheads are stored, and Faslane, the headquarters of the submarine fleet, are in Scotland and the Scottish National Party (SNP) has vowed to evict all nuclear weapons should Scotland ever leave the UK. Alternative basing options do exist, such as in Barrow in Furness, Milford Haven and Devonport, but studies suggest these are impractical thus giving rise to the less politically palatable options of shared facilities in the US or France, a switch to air-launched missiles or even nuclear decommissioning (Scotland Institute, 2013, pp.47-50). The 2014 independence referendum seemingly settled this matter when a majority of Scots decided to stay in the UK. The subsequent referendum on EU membership has, however, re-

energised calls for independence and thus re-opened the nuclear question. In that vote, a clear majority of Scots (some 62 percent) voted to remain in the EU and the SNP has argued that this justifies a second independence referendum. The timing and outcome of any such vote are uncertain but given that the political momentum toward Scottish independence is unlikely to recede any time soon and given also that the commissioning, construction and first deployment of the successor Dreadnought-class submarines agreed in 2016 will run until the early 2030s, there is ample time for political circumstances to conspire to rid the UK of its nuclear weapons. While British nuclear disarmament would not be incompatible with NATO membership, it wouldentail a break with decades of British defence policy, be at odds with the official policy of the two main political parties, Labour and Conservative, and contradict the stated position of the US, the UK's most important ally. Washington has traditionallyseen UK nuclear weapons as essential to the 'special relationship' and to 'the deterrent structure of NATO.' Britain's nuclear weapons, former US Secretary of Defence Ash Carter has argued, complicate the calculations of a potential aggressor and avoid the US bearing 'the sole political burden of NATO's nuclear deterrence' (Hersman, 2016). The public position of the Trump administration on UK nuclear weapons has yet to be articulated, but given the incoming president's blunt comments on trans-atlantic burden-sharing it is unlikely his administration would look favourably upon British nuclear disarmament. If of 'marginal importance to world politics', (Walker, 2015, p.24), UK nuclear weapons are – as viewed in London and Washington at least – still of considerable significance to the politics and strategy of NATO.

Conclusion

The EU referendum has injected a degree of uncertainty into UK and international politics the end point of which it is difficult to foresee. This article has steered away from the more exaggerated prognostications of crisis occasioned by the vote but nonetheless views its outcome as detrimental to the UK, to the EU and – the focus of this article - to NATO. Just how damaging is still unclear. Many of the issues explored above are posited as possible (even probable) consequences of the referendum;but how they unfold is hard to predict given the uncertainties which hang over the UK-EU talks expected to commence in March 2017. In January 2017, Theresa May (2017) outlined 12 'objectives for the negotiation ahead' and confirmed that the UK Parliament would have the final say on any agreement reached. May's statement dampened domestic criticism that the government lacked a strategy for Brexit but was not well received by those in the EU tasked with overseeing Brexit talks (Verhofstaft, 2017). While May claimed that the UK was seeking 'a new, positive and constructive partnership' between the UK and the EU, few expected the talks to be anything but difficult. In this context British membership of NATO might be seen as a kind of institutional refuge.

But such a position is also not without its problems. Antipathy towardthe EU undermines British credibility among the vast majority of its European allies and hardly helps NATO maintain a common front in view of its own multiple challenges. Hopes that a reversal of Brexit would forestall these harmful consequences have been dashed by Prime Minister's May determination to formally trigger Article 50. However, once the talks that then follow are concluded a further referendum on EU membership (or even a general election fought on the terms of exit) is not beyond the realms of possibility. The damage an EU exit is likely to inflict upon NATO would by that point be very much apparent thereby adding an important argument, largely missing in the 2016 debates, in favour of Remain.

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