

NEXTEUK project, Queen Mary University London – Written Evidence (UKE0004)

Evidence submission to the European Affairs Committee inquiry on “The future UK-EU relationship”

Prepared by Professor Sarah Wolff, Director of the Centre for European Research, Queen Mary University of London and Christian Turner, Research Assistant, Center for European Research, Queen Mary University of London.

Background

1. The United Kingdom’s relationship with the European Union has been in a state of flux since the June 2016 Referendum. The hope that the conclusion of the Brexit negotiations could allow both parties to move forward in a new stage of the relationship has largely failed to materialise to date, in particular with issues in the implementation of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement and the Northern Ireland Protocol, as well as the absence of a close relationship on foreign and security policy cooperation in the TCA. Conversely, joint challenges, such as spiralling energy costs, the Russian invasion in Ukraine and continued migration challenges present an opportunity to rebuild and regrow this critical relationship by reminding both sides of the commonality that they enjoy.
2. The NEXTEUK project is based within the Centre for European Research at Queen Mary University of London. Beginning in September 2019, it has sought to examine the next stage of the UK-EU relationship in the immediate post-Brexit period within the critical fields of Foreign, Security and Defence Policy. The following evidence submission is a reflection of the work carried out during this period, drawing on a range of outputs in the form of policy papers, working papers, blogs and events with a range of diverse and experienced officials from across the UK and Europe. It also draws on the expertise of the in-house research team, honed in from work on this project and beyond.
3. In response to the terms of the Committee’s enquiry, this evidence submission directly responds to questions 2b, 5 and 6c.

The European Political Community

4. On the 9th May 2022 (‘Europe Day’), French President Emmanuel Macron unveiled his vision for a new European Political Community. This new grouping would include the EU and its member states, both long-term candidate countries such as Serbia, Turkey and Albania, as well as more recent candidates in Ukraine and Moldova, European Free Trade Association members such as Switzerland and Iceland, and finally, ‘those who have left the European Union’, like the United Kingdom.

5. President Macron's vision for the Community would be based on allowing 'democratic European nations' that share 'core values' to 'find a new space for political and security cooperation'. It would include cooperation in areas such as energy, transport, investment, and the freedom of movement of people, especially youth. Its desire would be 'to preserve the unity of our continent and [preserve] the strength and ambition of our integration'. In essence, it is a new forum in which cross-continental issues can be raised and addressed, understanding the need to work beyond the EU format, as well as a direct response to the threat posed by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and concerns it may escalate.
6. So far, support has been growingly steadily across Europe. Balkan candidate countries such as Serbia and Albania have expressed interest in joining the proposed Community, although stressed it cannot serve as a 'halfway house' to EU membership. The Czech Republic, currently the holding Presidency of the Council of the European Union, has agreed to take this initiative forward during a summit in October 2022.
7. The United Kingdom's own interests in the forum have been harder to distinguish. In her position as Foreign Secretary Liz Truss downplayed the prospect that the UK would participate in a recent committee appearance, instead doubling-down on Britain's belief in the G7 and NATO. The outgoing Prime Minister Boris Johnson is understood to have been supportive of it, suggesting that the grouping should be extended to Turkey and Northern African countries. This may be reflective of a desire to use the forum to address migration challenges affecting Europe as a whole.
8. The death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, who has played such an important role in European history, but also Russia's war on Ukraine as well as the hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan in September 2022 provide several signals that there is a need to build a political and security community in Europe. The UK should seize the opportunity in order to devise the provision of European security with its European partners not only in the field of defence, but also in the field of energy security, health, economics, migration and to strengthen this community around democratic and rule of law values. This would provide a platform where the EU and the UK are confronted to the same state of permanent emergency, dealing with pandemics, energy crisis and war at a scale that has never been seen since the Second World War.
9. Given current French diplomatic efforts in building the European Political Community, and the direct overtures to the United Kingdom, the consideration of participation needs to be handled with the highest degree of sensitivity and aplomb. It presents an opportunity to improve an ailing Anglo-Franco relationship, as well as serve as the basis for a more positive working relationship at the highest levels of Government in London and Paris respectively.
10. More practically, the Community can begin to address the existing gaps in the UK's engagement at a multilateral level with Europe. The TCA does not currently provide for a relationship in Foreign, Security and Defence policy

following the UK decision to remove this endeavour during the negotiations. This acute issue has been noticed during the sanctioning of Russia, where the UK has had to depend on more informal formats and dialogue to ensure cross-country consensus in applying maximum pressure on Moscow and removing potential gaps.

11. The EPC could provide an alternative to informal venues such as the E3 on Iran, that had initially been thought of as an appropriate format to engage with the EU, France and Germany on issues beyond Iran, but as of yet has been unable to move beyond the Iran Nuclear Accord discussions. Similarly, the informal contact group on sanctions or the Western Balkan group all have very specific objectives and do not act as major diplomatic platforms where the EU and the UK can discuss wider issues of European security provision. The EPC addresses that need whilst addressing prospective concerns that the UK may have in forums seen as akin to EU membership.
12. It is clear that the EPC is not and should not become an alternative to enlargement, nor is it a forum for defence that should be tackled via NATO. Yet it could be a way for the British government to converge towards pragmatic solutions to tackle the energy crisis and looming health or economic crises that are influenced by geopolitics. The return of power politics also means that issues such as migration are being exploited by geopolitical tactics that can destabilise Europe as a whole, seen most recently by the actions of Belarus as it encouraged Middle Eastern refugees towards Europe.
13. The potential for the group to address energy is of interest to the United Kingdom as it battles market pressures relating to high energy costs, as is seen across most of the European Union. Any action that results in reducing these costs will require a multinational response across the short-, medium- and long-term, including reducing the burden on households and business whilst investing in sustainable and less geopolitical-dependent resources.
14. Finally, there is the opportunity for the UK to step forward and shape the proposed forum to its own interests. It has sought to play a leading role at times since the EU Referendum across the G7 and NATO, as well as in issue-specific forums such as COP26. These have been arguably been to mixed results and suggests that the UK's leverage with European nations has been impacted as a result of Brexit. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has also shown that whilst the British Government may pursue a so-called 'Indo-Pacific tilt', its commitments to Europe will always be greater, as shown by its determined support of the Ukrainian cause. It is therefore in the UK's own interests to maximise its leverage, especially in an era of increasing instability in the world.

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