

THE EU AND BRITAIN: A NEW ALLIANCE FOR EUROPE'S FUTURE

JIM CLOOS
TEPSA

EDITORIAL



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Brexit was a warning, not a solution. It shows us the dangers of division. Now, as new threats rise across the globe, the United Kingdom (UK) and the European Union (EU) must move beyond old resentments and build a fresh alliance - on security, prosperity, and shared values. The UK-EU summit of 19 May will be a major stepping stone towards a new alliance.

Brexit was more than a rupture - it was a warning. Like a canary in the coal mine, it signalled broader political tremors: the rise of populism, the exploitation of globalisation's flaws, and the growing disillusionment with liberal democratic institutions. Brexit was soon followed by Trump's first election in the United States (US) and the rising assertions of nationalist movements worldwide. It previewed the instability which now spreads across the globe, fuelled by the erratic behaviour of the new US administration.

Populist movements did not invent the deficiencies they rail against. They point to real grievances - economic inequality, the cultural dislocations of globalisation, the failures of Western military interventions abroad, including in Iraq and Afghanistan. But the populists use them to declare the entire global system corrupt. They weaponise the excesses of free-market liberalism and "wokeism," and use the failures of imperial ambition, from Afghanistan to Iraq and Libya, as a pretext to attack the core values of liberal democracy itself.

The damage done by Brexit is now better understood in Britain: a weakened economy, diminished global influence, and societal fragmentation. But, across the Atlantic, we are only at the beginning of a movement that erodes institutions and destabilises the global world order.

In the face of these threats, Europe must adapt, strengthening its strategic autonomy and refining its governance. This is the time to rethink the EU-UK relationship. "Make Brexit Work," should give way to "Make EU-UK Relations Work." Britain is and remains a European country - geographically, culturally, and strategically. The war in Ukraine has made that even more self-evident. It has also exposed Europe's vulnerabilities. And the Trump administration cosying up to Vladimir Putin has shattered the assumption that Europe can blindly rely on Washington and NATO to safeguard European security.[1]

The upcoming EU-UK summit on 19 May presents a unique opportunity to reset relations. It is the moment to move beyond grudging pragmatism and build genuine, future-facing cooperation. It can build on the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) and the Northern Ireland Protocol that come up for review in 2025. Yet more is needed, and it is possible, provided the two sides show leadership and political will. The EU must get over any lingering resentment about Britain leaving. The British side must recognise the EU for what it is, warts and all: a political project born from the ashes of conflict, evolving through compromise and consensus. Understanding its nature is essential for constructive engagement.

A natural place to deepen cooperation is in security and defence. Ironically, the EU's lack

[1] What we are seeing is a **non-negotiation between Americans and Russians followed by a joint diktat to Ukraine**. Plus, a cynical grab of Ukrainian minerals.

of an integrated defence policy offers maximum flexibility for British participation. Flexible 'coalitions of the willing' including with non-EU European partners are not only possible, but vital. The key European leaders understand this. Europe can defend itself; it simply needs the political will to do so. As Donald Tusk [aptly put it](#): "Right now, 500 million Europeans are begging 300 million Americans for protection from 140 million Russians who have been unable to overcome 50 million Ukrainians for three years." [2] Europe must be ready to stand on its own. Friedrich Merz's new leadership in Germany, Macron's push for strategic autonomy, Tusk's resolute action on defence, Meloni's pragmatic attitude towards Brussels and Starmer's common sense - all point to an emerging consensus: Europe must take responsibility for its own security.

But loose coalitions of the willing are not enough. They must be embedded in a more formal structure to ensure links with the EU, because the building of a true European defence industry requires action at the EU level. Therefore, we need a bilateral EU-UK security and defence agreement. It is essential to strengthen Europe's capacity to respond to crises and safeguard our continent's future from being dictated by the whims of foreign powers. It would also show Moscow, Beijing, and Washington that Europe's unity is not easily broken. The meeting of 19 May should send a clear signal in this respect. But it should also prepare the ground for decisive moves in other areas.

On the economic front, opportunities abound. An agreement on sanitary and phytosanitary standards would address absurd trade barriers that harm both sides. More

ambitiously, Britain and the EU should look to the innovative framework recently negotiated between Switzerland and the EU: a model for dynamic alignment that preserves sovereignty while facilitating access to the Single Market. Dynamic alignment is not a betrayal of sovereignty; it is smart governance. Without it, the British economy will continue to suffer competitive disadvantages that no amount of 'regulatory freedom' can offset. [3]

Other areas also demand attention. Fisheries, a perennial flashpoint and politically extremely sensitive, must be managed with care. Britain should avoid wielding fisheries as a political weapon, and the EU must recognise and respect British concerns.

Cultural and academic exchanges via Erasmus or the new Youth Mobility Scheme should be restored. It is baffling that Britain would deny its young people the chance to study, live, and work freely across Europe. It should in fact restore free movement for students from the EU, which poses zero risk in terms of migration and benefits UK universities. The increase in tuition fees for EU/EEA students has led to a decrease in students from EU countries going to British universities.

Beyond that, cooperation on issues such as competition policy, nuclear research (ITER), law enforcement (Europol), cybersecurity, and migration is not just desirable - it is essential.

Europe (EU and non-EU countries) remains one of the most attractive places in the world. As Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued, while Europe must reckon with its colonial past, it can still claim credit for a model of life that offers rights, dignity, and opportunity. [4] [The Charlemagne column of The Economist](#)

[2] The correct figures are 340 million Americans and 40 million Ukrainians.

[3] See the excellent article published by Anton Spisak on the CER website on this issue: Anton Spisak, ["The New EU-Swiss Deal: what it means and the lessons it holds for the UK-EU reset"](#).

[4] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: postcolonial thought and historical difference*, first published in 2000 by Princeton University Press.

recently noted that “In their own plodding way, Europeans have created a place where life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are not just slogans but realities.” In a world wracked by inequality and autocracy, Europe's persistent humanism stands out. Statistical comparisons with the US reveal an important truth: despite lower GDP per capita, Europeans enjoy higher quality of life, better healthcare, greater social mobility, and more security. Europe's soft power - as a system

where people live well - is real, and it matters, for Europe, but also more widely.

Europe's future is ours to build, together. The EU-UK relationship is a key part of that future, not a relic of the past, but a new alliance for a new Europe. Our security, prosperity, and freedom depend on it.

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Editing & Formatting: Hugh Evans, Mariam Khotenashvili & Allegra Wirmer (TEPSA).

Jim Cloos is TEPSA Secretary-General and a former high-ranking European official of longstanding esteem. Having taken on a key role in drafting the Maastricht Treaty during the Luxembourgish Presidency of the Council of the European Union in 1991, Mr. Cloos has an intricate expertise on EU Affairs and the internal functioning of the European institutions. In the 1990s he served at the European Commission, first as Head of the Cabinet of the Commissioner for Agriculture, and subsequently as Head of Cabinet to the President of the European Commission and his G7/8 Sherpa. Mr. Cloos has been a close collaborator of High Representative Javier Solana in shaping the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. For many years he played a key role in preparing European Council meetings. Before his election as TEPSA Secretary-General, he served as Deputy Director General for General and Institutional Policy at the General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union.

