

PEACE AND SECURITY

UK-GERMAN DEFENCE & SECURITY COOPERATION

The growing prospects

Ed Arnold
September 2024



The UK-German relationship is a priority for the new UK Government and an additional two Joint Declarations have already been signed since the Labour Party came to power, with negotiations for a bilateral Treaty started.



As Russia's war against Ukraine continues and the Euro-Atlantic security environment deteriorates, the rationale for stronger UK-German cooperation is growing.



The scope for a UK-German agreement appears to be wider than just defence and security, to incorporate economic benefits and other shared social challenges. However, an increase in ambition will also increase the risks to delivery and a meaningful relationship.

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INTRODUCTION

In May 2023, the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung London Office (FES London) published '[UK-German defence and security cooperation: A 2030 Roadmap for Enhanced Cooperation](#)'. At its core, the paper argued that a new bilateral defence and security Treaty between the UK and Germany would be of great mutual value and would strengthen a deteriorating Euro-Atlantic security environment. The research project developed 19 recommendations to enhance cooperation between the two countries, across four categories – Political, Policy, Operational, and Dialogue and Knowledge Sharing. One year on, the drive and determination to strengthen the relationship has grown – and rapidly increased following the change of government in the UK – with progress made against some of these recommendations. It is our view that they remain extant.

However, since the paper was published, the Euro-Atlantic security situation has also changed substantially. This article provides a reassessment of the UK-German relationship and the current Euro-Atlantic security environment. It provides some additional areas of focus and reappraises the challenges to increasing meaningful cooperation.

A STRENGTHENING RATIONALE

Our research project and paper concluded that there were many similarities between the UK and Germany on defence and security which represented strong building blocks for enhanced cooperation. The UK and Germany are the two largest European economies (with Germany being the UK's largest trading partner in Europe and bilateral trade was worth £147.7 billion in 2023); the [top two European defence spenders](#) in NATO; and the [two European supporters of Ukraine](#) by volume of military, humanitarian and economic assistance. In addition, UK and German interests and objectives within NATO are closest: the primacy of the transatlantic relationship; the ambition to fight at the Divisional level; leading Forward Land Forces (FLF) in the Baltic States; and both are Allied Reaction Force (ARF) and Framework Nation Concept (FNC) leads. Building on these synergies, a deteriorating Euro-Atlantic security environment has increased the need for closer cooperation in several ways.

First, the ease with which former US President Donald Trump secured the Republican nomination is a further wake up call for Europe to do more for their own security. Habitual unpredictability, mounting anti-NATO statements and a strategic imperative for the US to pay more attention to the rise of China and the Indo-Pacific mean that a [second Trump Presidency](#) is likely to be far more impactful and consequential for Euro-Atlantic security and Russia's war against Ukraine than the first. His latest announcement was the demand for NATO to increase the [Defence Investment Pledge to 3% of GDP](#). This increased demand and burden on Europe will fall most heavily on the UK and Germany as leading European geopolitical and defence heavyweights. Therefore, they will need to lead by example and show

greater individual and collective leadership across Europe. The UK and Germany should face this challenge together.

However, even if the Democrats retain the White House, Europe must still do much more for its own security. The pivot to Asia will continue under a Democratic administration and US military assets will gradually be redeployed to the Eastern theatre. This presents a strategic risk for Europe. If the US moves its enablers, such as logistics, communications, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, and air to air refuelling assets – all critical, expensive, and requiring an extended period of time to develop – Europeans will have to spend most of their budgetary uplifts replacing these assets, rather than increasing combat capabilities. Moreover, the Democrats could retain the White House, but not take control of the House of Representatives, making it more challenging and time consuming to pass aid budgets for Ukraine. There is still a significant gap between European Union commitments (excluding the UK) of €144 billion to the €77 billion allocated to Ukraine. The Kiel Institute for the World Economy assesses that [«To fully replace U.S. military assistance in 2024, Europe would have to double its current level and pace of arms assistance»](#). The tactical withdrawals that Ukraine had to endure in early 2024, while waiting for Congress to pass the supplemental Ukraine funding package, is a stark reminder of the immediate and direct impacts of a distracted US. Moreover, there is growing realisation that the US cannot [simultaneously deter adversaries](#) in the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific and will have to ruthlessly prioritise.

Second, the 2023 Ukrainian counteroffensive [failed to achieve its objectives](#). As we published our paper, there was a sense of optimism that this would be a decisive operation to push the war into its next phase. However, a range of factors, including the delay and drip feeding of Western support, has seen the war develop into one of attrition. With the hope of a shorter war over, the requirement to maintain momentum and increase support is more vital than ever to the survival of the Ukrainian state. Moreover, the failure of the counteroffensive has pushed Ukraine towards other options, embodied in the current major Ukrainian operation in Kursk – which is [strategically audacious](#) and came as a surprise to partners – which requires a different type of support. While Ukraine absolutely requires more weapons and ammunition, it also needs trust, conviction and assurance. However, the gap between UK and German policy on long-range strike support continues to widen, with the UK pressing allies to allow Storm Shadow missile strikes within Russia. In contrast, Chancellor Scholz' continues to refuse the delivery of Taurus long-range missiles to Ukraine, despite the US having already provided Army Tactical Munitions (AT-ACMS) earlier this summer.

Third, Russian defence production has continued to rapidly expand [much higher than western expectations](#) to an estimated 7.5% of GDP, including running production lines around the clock. Alongside increased Russian aggression against Ukraine and Europe, with [Germany a particular target](#), it indicates that President Putin has not deviated from his original objectives.

Fourth, following the October 7th Hamas attack on Israel, the Middle East has once again risen to the top of the security agenda, with a major risk of a regional war. Managing this risk and supporting a major political ally of both the UK and Germany has drawn up capacity towards a region where the UK and Germany will be expected to play a central role in maintaining peace and security.

Fifth, a range of European elections – including the June EU Parliamentary Elections – have changed the political make-up of Europe. The poor results for centrists pressed French President Emmanuel Macron to call a snap parliamentary election. While the worst-case scenario – a majority for the far right National Front – was averted, French law making will now likely be paralysed, giving more electoral ammunition to the far right for the 2027 presidential election. Two months on from the vote, conservative [Michael Barnier has now taken over as Prime Minister](#) and is facing the difficult task of forming a government that can survive a deeply divided parliament and resistance from both the Left and the Right. With France politically impeded, there is more opportunity, and necessity, for the UK and Germany to cooperate.

Finally, a new pro-Europe and particularly pro-German government in London has already made a diplomatic push to strengthen the relationship. As the UK undertakes a new [Strategic Defence Review](#) (SDR), to be completed by the first half of 2025, this will likely grow in prominence. That this diplomatic overture towards Germany has happened ahead of the analysis and findings of the SDR demonstrates its importance and the seriousness on the part of the UK to develop a meaningful relationship. This attitude appears to be replicated in Berlin.

RESETTING AND STRENGTHENING THE RELATIONSHIP

Since our paper was published, the UK-German relationship has strengthened on several fronts, which started under the previous government.

On 23 April, then Prime Minister Rishi Sunak travelled to Berlin to open a [«new chapter»](#) in defence partnerships, announcing a plan to develop the Boxer Remote-Controlled 155mm Howitzer (RCH155) – a [potent capability](#) and one that will be critical for the quick recapitalisation of the UK's artillery capability under the Mobile Fries Platform (MFP) programme and for increasing the possibility of acquiring other variants. This visit also expanded the potential scope of bilateral cooperation to economic growth (with £8 billion of new investment in the UK from German companies), energy and renewables, and tackling 'organised immigration crime'.

The new Labour Government has wasted no time. Immediately after Prime Minister Keir Starmer's first Cabinet meeting, the new Foreign Secretary, David Lammy, [flew to Berlin](#) for his first overseas visit to reinforce the ambition of a UK-

EU security pact and to reset the relationship, both on a bilateral basis and as Germany as a gatekeeper to the EU. This visit constituted the second UK-German Strategic Dialogue of 2024 between foreign ministers, following the [well-received meeting](#) between previous Foreign Secretary Lord Cameron and German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock in March. We now know that the negotiation of the new bilateral treaty will be led by the foreign ministries and therefore this relationship is crucial.

Most significantly, on 24 July 2024 Secretary of State for Defence, John Healey, and German Minister of Defence, Boris Pistorius, signed a joint declaration on [enhanced defence co-operation](#). Described as an «important first step in a new relationship» it has several priority objectives: Strengthening defence industries, reinforcing Euro-Atlantic security, enhancing interoperability, addressing emerging threats, supporting Ukraine and Deep Precision Strikes. It also established a yearly meeting of defence ministers – to match the governance of the 2021 Strategic Dialogue between foreign ministers.

While there will be a strong political desire to come up with new headline cooperative endeavours, it would be more productive to focus on the on-time delivery of the joint projects and programmes that are already in play. These include cooperation on the Boxer (now including RCH155), the Cold Weather All-Terrain Vehicle (CATV), European Sky Shield Initiative, the Triton bridge replacement of the M3 to be operated by the joint UK-German 130 Engineering Battalion, and the joint Explosive Kinetic Energy (EKE) round to be used by both Challenger 2 and Leopard 2 Main Battle Tanks (MBTs) with turret and gun standardisation.

To add to this agenda in the short-term, the UK and Germany should accelerate the development of turreted variants for Boxer, including Stryker, to increase short range air defence (SHORAD) – an area where the UK has extremely limited capabilities. Moreover, Ukraine continues to demonstrate the value of deep strike capabilities, as Russia also demonstrates its vulnerability to such strikes. Combined UK and German research and development heft could make this a productive and profitable area, provided previously thorny issues with export controls can be mutually agreed upon. Breakthroughs and an increase in capacity on long-range strikes would also provide Europe with more resilience and redundancy as the US also requires ATACMS in the Indo-Pacific theatre.

However, a growing area of concern is sustaining support to Ukraine within the tighter fiscal circumstances the UK and German governments find themselves in. Germany had doubled support in 2024 to around €8 billion. However, budgetary pressures mean this is planned to [halve to €4 billion for 2025](#). Reports also suggest this could be further cut to [€500 million by 2027](#) in the hope that Ukrainian demand will be satisfied with the G7 initiative to provide £38.4 billion in loans from frozen Russian assets held in Europe. Meanwhile, the UK support for Ukraine has remained rhetorically consistent with the change in government but it has not significantly increased. Moreover, Ukrainians have been

disappointed by the [lack of progress](#) on securing more freedom in the use of Storm Shadow. While the decision does not solely rest with the UK, they believe that more could be done to lobby the US and other Allies. With an assessed [£22 billion black hole in the public finances](#), each department, including the MoD has been directed to find almost £1bn of savings. With the MoD already running a [£17 billion black hole](#) in its equipment plan to 2033, further Ukraine funding might therefore come under pressure.

A NEW BILATERAL TREATY

These preparatory visits and agreements have set the conditions to increase the ambition which is being seized upon by both sides. On 28 August UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer travelled to Berlin to meet Chancellor Olaf Scholz. Due to a fortuitous international schedule, it was the fifth meeting between the pair in just two months. The bilateral meeting kicked off [a six month negotiation of a new bilateral cooperation treaty](#) to be ready in 'early 2025', to be led by foreign ministries and have [defence cooperation as a key pillar](#). No.10 describes the ambition as:

«A treaty of such magnitude has never been agreed between the UK and Germany. Alongside the longstanding Lancaster House Treaties that underpin the UK's relationship with France, this new agreement will bring all E3 members into line as our governments work in lockstep on key geopolitical issues, such as the conflict in the Middle East and war in Ukraine.»

In this context, the relationship is also central to the core mission of the new Labour government – growth. The [growth mission](#), on which so much of the government agenda for this Parliament depends, is implicit in this outreach, by resetting relations with Germany, France, and the wider EU as a means to boost growth, improve energy security and try new approaches to tackle shared political challenges such as migration.

Furthermore, it would «rebalance the E3 triangle» with mutual bilateral relationships strengthening «old Europe» at a time when the centre of gravity has shifted eastwards since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. Yet the E3 remain the central European economic and security actors and they need to function well and as much in tandem as possible for a healthy Europe. Moreover, in the short-term, while France experiences [political inertia](#) following the snap election it provides the UK and Germany an opportunity to provide increased leadership in Europe – together.

The joint leaders' press conference in Berlin strongly suggested that the Treaty based relationship is to be broader than just defence and security. It is to include «shared social challenges» such as the desire to develop a «joint action plan» to tackle illegal migration and those who profit from it.

However, increasing the scope of the Treaty will also create governance challenges. The recently agreed joint declarations between Premiers and the one between defence

ministers complement the extant [2021 Joint Declaration](#) between foreign ministers but also create three separate channels of cooperation. The Treaty is an opportunity to establish a comprehensive governance structure where political direction and sponsorship can best create synergies between diplomacy, defence, and business and the wider economy. Structures matter. Our paper concluded that previous UK-German cooperation has been *ad hoc* and transactional which has contributed to the relationship being underdeveloped and significantly weaker than its potential. If this relationship is to do more heavy lifting and bring greater benefits more quickly, then the strategic direction and governance must be structured correctly.

UK-EU COOPERATION

As we identified last year, the UK-EU relationship and UK-German relationship are deeply intertwined, and both need to progress in tandem. Both relationships also require a reset. Indeed, in some ways, the UK-Germany negotiations are a microcosm of UK-EU negotiations and share similar challenges. The UK might prefer a narrower defence and security focussed agreement, whereas Germany seems to prefer to link in with other policy areas. In both cases, [the more ambitious the agreement, the more difficult it will be to agree and ratify in the timeframes](#). If the UK and Germany try to prioritise everything, they will end up prioritising nothing, and progress and momentum might stall. Incorporating wider policy areas are by no means insurmountable but the negotiators should proceed with caution.

As an example, Germany appears to want a mobility scheme for young Europeans to live and work in the UK, while the UK government is yet to reciprocate interest. Moreover, it is important to note that while improved UK-German relations is a precondition to better UK-EU relations, [they are not the same](#), regardless of the encouraging mood music.

INCREASING SECURITY COOPERATION

To complement the defence focus, there is an increased scope to boost intelligence, security, and law enforcement cooperation in several interlinked areas.

First, deterring a more aggressive Russia. Russia's campaign of hybrid aggression is increasingly [targeted at Germany](#) including a plan to [assassinate Rheinmetall Chief Executive](#) Armin Papperger, the [potential sabotage](#) of the water supply at [Geilenkirchen military base](#), and the interception of a senior Luftwaffe conference call in a major security breach. The latter caused a [diplomatic spat](#) between the UK and Germany as details of UK delivery of Storm Shadow missiles to Ukraine were discussed in the meeting, in a significant security blunder. These incidents demonstrate the value of increasing intelligence cooperation, particularly when it comes to counterintelligence and resilience. Both have atrophied (alongside defence capabilities) since the end of the Cold War and the increased focus on

countering Islamist inspired international terrorism, at the expense of maintaining specialisms against hostile state threats. Germany would also benefit from learning more from the UK's more mature national security culture and machinery. As an example, the plan for establishing a German National Security Council (NSC) following the publication of Germany's first ever [National Security Strategy](#) in June 2023 was dropped over a [political disagreement](#) over where the office would sit. In contrast, the UK has operated an NSC since 2010, which has gone through periodic reforms to provide continuing value.

Second, migration is a political imperative in both countries. Most strikingly, in German state elections on 1 September 2024, the far right anti-immigration party, Alternative for Germany (AfD) scored [a big victory in Thuringia](#) (and came second in Lower Saxony) in the East, where it won approximately one third of the vote, ahead of all ruling coalition parties. The AfD – [under observation for extremism by the Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz \(BfV\)](#), Germany's domestic intelligence agency – has been a growing challenge since the migration crisis of 2015 and this win means that they can no longer be ignored. A desire for a «joint action plan on migration» is reflective of this. However, migration is a wider challenge that is best tackled multilaterally and requires an EU plus UK agreement. Therefore, securing an agreement with Germany could be a strong precursor.

Third, and closely linked to the second point, both countries also have a growing far right extremism problem, which has been accentuated with disinformation and influence operations. These [fuelled the recent riots in the UK](#) and also the knife attack in the German village of Solingen, which has been [exploited by the far right ahead of state elections](#). In late 2022, there were [arrests in Germany](#) for terrorism and far right extremism – linked to the military – over an attempted, but thwarted, far right coup.

Given these growing domestic challenges, the UK Home Office and German Federal Ministry of the Interior should also have a prominent role in negotiations, alongside foreign and defence ministries.

TIMING IS EVERYTHING

Declaring a six-month timeline to negotiate a bilateral Treaty demonstrates the sense of urgency. The Labour Party wish to speed up the process and Germany will hold Federal elections at the end of September 2025 with incredibly [challenging polling](#) for Chancellor Scholz's SPD and ruling coalition to manage. In November 2024, the outcome of the US Presidential election will determine the scale of the challenge facing Europe over the next four years.

Now that Labour is in power in the UK, there is an obvious social democratic factor playing a role in the sudden increase in interest of the relationship with Germany. While this political common ground might help the negotiation

phase and push an agreement over the line, a Treaty based relationship goes far beyond party politics. This new relationship must have cross party support on both sides if the UK, Germany and wider Europe is to gain maximum benefit from it.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO ENHANCE UK-GERMAN DEFENCE AND SECURITY COOPERATION

Number	Category	Recommendation
1	Political	The UK and Germany should develop a strategic approach to bilateral cooperation, instead of the ad hoc approach that has characterised the past relationship, by setting clear mutual goals and establishing the right mechanisms and processes for delivery, managed through the UK-German Strategic Dialogue or a more ambitious future agreement.
3		Extend the annual Strategic Dialogue from Foreign Ministers only, so as to include Defence Ministers as a »2+2« format, to better reflect the defence policy orientation of the <i>Zeitenwende</i> and the UK's contribution to the defence of the Euro-Atlantic area. This should be accompanied by regular dialogues between the Prime Minister and Chancellor to set the level of ambition and maintain political momentum, including official government-to-government consultations.
4		The UK and Germany should explore the potential for and content of a bilateral Treaty-based defence and security relationship, consistent with NATO obligations and transparent to EU security structures, to realise the current untapped potential that such an agreement could deliver. This agreement should build on work already undertaken through UK and German leadership of their respective Framework Nations Concepts and should focus on increasing European burden sharing and enhancing readiness of forces. Its objectives should include: – Enhanced cooperation on Northern European security; – Increasing European burden sharing to shape a European pillar of NATO; – Developing further effectiveness and interoperability, with the principle of complementarity and specialisation; and – Expanding defence industry cooperation and developing cooperative equipment programmes.
14		The UK and Germany should commit to a joint high-level statement to make the case for a cooperative strategy for industry, which would outline the associated benefits, to provide the demand signal to industry and best prepare them for any change of approach.
2	Policy	The UK and Germany should update the 2021 Joint Declaration following the publication of the UK IRR2023 and German NSS, to provide a shared vision on the measures necessary to strengthen European defence, security, and foreign policy, and how best to ensure long-term support for Ukraine.
5		The UK and Germany should lead by example and, further to the commitment of initial forces to NATO's New Force Model, they should jointly develop and lead alliance readiness initiatives to help correct problems within their own forces and incentivise other allies to invest in and prioritise readiness. Such a common initiative would strengthen European Security by making a European pillar of NATO more credible and build trust amongst allies.
11		The UK and Germany should commit to developing new Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBMs), within an OSCE framework, and adapt them to the needs of the 21st Century, accounting for new technologies and better protection of civilian populations.
13		The UK and Germany should use the OCCAR framework as a foundation for joint procurement and use the tried and tested framework for any bilateral joint procurement projects identified.
16		The UK and Germany should compare respective arms export policies and regimes in greater depth, including Parliamentary scrutiny, to create more standardised processes across Europe and increase export potential.
8	Operational	The UK should invite Germany to join its trilateral agreement on P8 Poseidon MPA with the US and Norway to increase availability and sustainability of ISR in the North Atlantic, High North and Baltic Sea region and provide more continuous coverage for each sub-region.
9		The UK should invite Germany, and other EU partners, to provide an escort ship, or a marine contingent, for a future Carrier Strike Group deployment to the Indo-Pacific. This would meet the Defence Command Paper commitment to »partner more often with Germany on operational deployments, such as air policing and naval missions outside the Euro Atlantic area«.
15		The UK and Germany, as members of GCAP and FCAS respectively, should lead on identifying collaborative opportunities at a sub-component level and champion cooperation and commonality where possible.
6	Dialogue and Knowledge sharing	Germany should offer positions for UK liaison officers for the 2023 VJTF rotation to help support UK planning and ensure a smooth handover for 2024. This should then be institutionalised for further rotations.
7		The UK should better communicate the JEF and its likely future development to German and other non-member audiences. This should include an offer to host German liaison officers at the JEF operational headquarters. This could support the use of JEF + Germany formats and initiatives (and +Poland), such as the physical and cyber protection of critical national infrastructure in the North and Baltic Seas, which has emerged as a common vital interest.
10		The UK and Germany should establish a British-German nuclear dialogue with the objective of raising both the UK and Germany's »nuclear IQ« and encouraging a more public debate on nuclear weapons and the nuclear threats increasingly posed by hostile state actors (Russia, China, Iran, North Korea), escalation, risk reduction and strategic stability, as well as the joint challenge of nuclear proliferation.
12		The UK and Germany should lead a broader European debate on defence specialisation to make the most of their comparative advantages and build on work already undertaken in their respective NATO Framework Nations. While specialisation is not a new concept in European security, the war in Ukraine has revived it and created political and economic drivers as well as a greater degree of unity and focus on European defence and security than past initiatives.
18		The UK should establish a UAV knowledge sharing programme for a German audience on operating armed UAVs in conflicts, covering the full range of associated issues such as: legality, ethics, targeting processes, collateral damage assessments, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) handling for operators. This would allow the Bundeswehr to operationally integrate armed UAVs much more quickly.
19		The UK should invite the Bundeswehr to visit, and potentially join, its Experimentation Battlegroup, based in Cyprus, which leads on prototype warfare and capability development for the British Army.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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