



Wilton Park



Image: Johan Swanepoel

Report

The future of the UK's bilateral relationships in Europe

Wednesday 31 January – Friday 2 February 2018 |
WP1603



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This Wilton Park conference invited a selection of representatives from governments, parliaments, business, academia and civil society across Europe to reflect on how the UK and its European partners can best work together to maximise their shared values and interests through renewed and strengthened bilateral relationships. In particular, the participants explored:

- What a 'new bilateralism' for the UK and its European partners should look like;
- Which areas are most promising for future partnerships;
- How strong partnerships could be built at various levels, including government, business, academia, civil society and other;
- What steps could or should be taken to develop such partnerships in the context of continued withdrawal negotiations.

Future relations: promoting and protecting shared interests

1. While the environment in which relations between the United Kingdom and the institutions and 27 member states of the European Union take place will be transformed by the UK's withdrawal from the EU, there will continue to be strong economic and geopolitical imperatives for close cooperation. The UK, the EU and its member states will continue to pursue mutual interests, face common threats and share particular values, providing a clear rationale for all parties to cooperate across a broad spectrum of issues. Indeed, there is recognition across sectors and at multiple levels in the UK and Europe that such collaboration is not only necessary, but offers particular promise by focussing investment and energy into creative partnerships in areas of recognised mutual interest. There is therefore both an enthusiasm for, and a commitment to, building and strengthening the relationships, alliances and networks necessary to realise the potential of collaboration in the context of the UK's new position vis a vis the European Union.
2. One of the most critical bilateral relationships will be that between the UK and the EU. Until the conclusion of the withdrawal negotiations, however, there will inevitably be a degree of uncertainty regarding the future institutional relationship between London and Brussels (which is beyond the scope of this report). Nevertheless, there are a range of areas outside the competence of the EU where existing projects can be nurtured and future projects developed. Early progress and successes in these areas will be essential to establishing the relationships that will sustain cooperation and demonstrating their potential. In parallel, this period must also be used by all parties to actively explore and agree the nature of their post-Brexit relations and to ensure that the frameworks to enable cooperation take shape before the conclusion of the negotiations. There will be an onus on all parties to ensure that post-Brexit relations between the UK and EU 27 member state countries are supported by new principles of

collaboration which enable continued cooperation and sustain as far as possible the trust, reliability and predictability provided by the current procedural and legal architecture. Progress in these areas cannot be delayed until the conclusion of the negotiations.

3. Importantly, it should be recognised that any relationship-building initiatives are not attempts to threaten the unity of the EU 27 and/or supplant the EU's institutional architecture, but necessary, practical steps to protect and promote the interests of all parties. There is of course no 'either/or' for the UK's post-Brexit relations in Europe, nor should there be any concern that strong partnerships with both the EU and the EU 27 member states are incompatible. Rather, these strands of cooperation will often overlap, and will certainly be complementary and mutually reinforcing. While there are clearly strong imperatives for both the EU institutions and for individual member states to maintain and evolve constructive relations with the UK, these are not consistently articulated at all European levels. Those parties that recognise, and want to realise, the substantial benefits of UK-European cooperation therefore have a role to play in advocating the necessary political and practical measures at both national and supranational levels. For those benefits to be achieved, it will be important that the UK's post-Brexit position corresponds with its ambition to be a strong partner for Europe.
4. Collaboration and cooperation are of course already taking place between the UK and its European partners outside the institutional architecture provided by EU treaties. Partnerships already exist both vertically - through regional, sub-national, business, institutional and civil society collaboration - and horizontally - across sectors spanning defence and security to culture and the creative arts. These existing networks can inform and support future relations by offering both a model and a foundation, and they will need to be recognised and cultivated in order to sustain cooperation. The following section explores the opportunities for building, renewing and strengthening relationships at multiple levels and across different sectors.

Opportunities for building or strengthening relationships

5. **Collaboration beyond EU competence:** substantial interstate cooperation already takes place outside the EU architecture, including in defence and security, intelligence, culture, tourism, sport, education and innovation. The areas beyond EU competence provide particular opportunities for future cooperation, in particular on future-facing issues such as innovation, cyber, digital and artificial intelligence (AI), where UK capability could enable it to take on a leadership role and set direction for European and/or global collaboration.
6. **Strengthening existing relationships:** the UK already enjoys mutually beneficial bilateral relations with its European partners through a range of interstate agreements (with differing degrees of formalisation). Such arrangements provide the foundations for enhanced cooperation and models for future collaboration. In particular, the recently agreed UK-France Summit Communiqué and the UK-Poland Treaty on Defence and Security Cooperation illustrate the potential for such relationships to respond to particular mutual interests and reflect specific shared agendas.
7. **Sector-specific cooperation:** as reflected in the UK's bilateral agreements with other European countries, focussed relations can be particularly efficient and advantageous for partners. By focussing on particularly promising sector linkages, reflexive relationships can be strengthened and/or developed to capitalise on shared interests. Areas where cooperation would be particularly welcome and mutually beneficial include:
 - **Security and defence:** security and defence cooperation between the UK and other European states pre-dates the UK's membership of the EU and will undoubtedly outlast it. Given its military strength and unique security and intelligence capabilities the UK will continue to be in high demand as a strategic

partner for all EU 27 countries across multiple security and defence dimensions. On intelligence matters, bilateral partnerships will continue to provide the key framework in which cooperation takes place. On defence matters, the trend towards bilateral relations and/or small group alliances complementing extant NATO and evolving EU infrastructure will enable the UK to build on existing cooperation projects such as the Joint Expeditionary Force.

- **Foreign policy and global issues:** the UK and EU 27 hold common positions on a range of foreign policy and global issues, and continued cooperation will be essential for pursuing and defending shared interests. There is an expectation that the UK will continue to speak as a European country at the global level and that in particular the UK and EU 27 will continue to share a commitment to upholding the international rules based order and preventing the erosion of global norms. Additionally, the UK and EU 27 are likely to pursue common positions on issues including counter-terrorism, climate change, migration, energy security, nuclear proliferation, developments in the EU periphery, and sanctions. Given the weight of these issues, and importance of cooperation, mechanisms for consulting on, or coordinating, positions will need to be agreed and established ahead of the UK's exit from the EU.
 - **Economic cooperation:** UK and European businesses currently interact in a highly integrated transnational economy. Capitalising on these existing linkages and identifying new opportunities for collaboration and investment will be an essential element in ensuring the sustained health of UK and European economies. While businesses currently face uncertainty about the relationship between the UK and EU markets, assurances at the supranational and national levels that there is a collective commitment to ensuring an attractive business environment will help to encourage collaboration and enable investment decisions. This can be achieved through proactive economic outreach and engagement with business owners, investors and chambers of commerce across Europe in advance of the conclusion of withdrawal negotiations.
 - **Innovation, including research and higher education:** very strong science and innovation links already exist between the UK and other European nations which it will be important to maintain. Indeed, science and innovation could provide an important vehicle for strengthening relationships among states and institutions. In particular, there are opportunities to increase university collaboration (and, indeed, competition), maximise transborder fundamental-research-to-product-market pathways, and connect with global research networks. While much innovation is currently underpinned by strong national systems, increased cross-border collaboration will be essential for successful, globally competitive initiatives.
 - **Culture and the creative industries:** the cultural affinity of the UK and EU 27 countries already enables many constructive partnerships and can provide a foundation on which to build cooperation, including through exploring and celebrating shared heritage. In particular, connections can be forged through twinning projects, creative hubs, sustainable cities, virtual spaces and cultural institutions. Creative and cultural collaboration will most likely take place beyond the interstate dimension by connecting institutions, networks and practitioners, but will require political and practical support from various levels of government.
8. **'New-look' bilateralism:** cooperation has been taking place between towns and cities, businesses, universities, museums, schools, churches, youth groups and more long before the UK's membership of the EU, illustrating that opportunities for collaboration can be identified beyond the UK-EU or intergovernmental dimensions. In particular, partnerships should be encouraged and supported at regional or sub-national levels of governance (for example cities and devolved administrations); between institutions such as legislative assemblies, universities and cultural organisations; between

businesses; and amongst civil society. In particular, these connections offer opportunities for collaboration on innovation, education, cultural engagement and youth exchange.

9. **Beyond bilateralism:** increasingly, regional and geopolitical developments (including the UK's withdrawal from the EU) will result in 'minilateral' patterns of state cooperation in which dynamic networks reflect complex, sometimes unstable, patterns of interests. Thus, the UK's future engagement with EU 27 countries will likely need to take the form of multiple, dynamic alliances, which will require focussed but flexible political strategies by all parties in order to identify, and respond to, changing priorities.
10. **Alternative architectures:** European cooperation extends far beyond the specific institutional form provided by the EU and comprises a variable architecture of different arrangements and alliances. European and international forums such as the Council of Europe, United Nations, NATO, G7 and G20, will therefore continue to provide a framework for continued cooperation between the UK and the EU 27. Mechanisms for identifying and articulating shared agendas in these alternative architectures will be important for protecting and promoting collective interests.

Clarifying post-Brexit identities and objectives

11. In order to realise and maximise the potential offered by post-Brexit partnerships, the UK will want to clearly articulate its identity and intentions, and in particular the values, interests and orientation associated with the brand 'Global Britain'. The EU institutions and member states will also want to clarify their commitment to, and position(s) on, future collaboration with the UK. By doing so, all parties will better understand where and how their interests might intersect and make informed decisions about avenues for fruitful cooperation. The objectives of the relationship-building projects that emerge during this process will need to be clearly defined by all parties, as will the values and principles that will underpin future relationships. Critical to any such initiatives will be an emphasis on trust and a common commitment to ensuring that the UK emerges from the withdrawal process as a strong European partner.

Practical considerations

12. Inevitably, the emerging pattern of new relationships will be more complex and resource-intensive than existing arrangements and will require greater investment in building and sustaining partnerships. Governments and institutions will therefore want to take advantage of developments in smarter working and 'new diplomacy' to cultivate and sustain new cooperative networks. The UK in particular will look to maximise its regional and international impact by prioritising relationships according to areas of particular value and opportunity and potential partners will therefore want to engage in discussions at the earliest opportunity.

Practical ways forward

13. There are a number of principles and practical actions that parties could commit to pursuing in parallel with the continued withdrawal negotiations in order to maximise the potential of post-Brexit UK-European relations. These preliminary steps towards establishing a constructive collaborative framework are summarised below.
 - **Committing to cooperation:** all parties should clearly articulate their commitment to a negotiation outcome which enables constructive cooperation between a strong post-Brexit UK and the EU institutions and member states.
 - **Acting promptly:** all parties should recognise that exploring and developing these avenues for future partnership cannot be delayed until the withdrawal negotiations have concluded. Certain opportunities can be capitalised on immediately, while others will only be realised if the groundwork is laid during the current negotiation phase.

- **Celebrating early success:** early successes on specific collaboration projects between partners will help with 'proof of concept', encourage other dimensions of cooperation, and help to identify future opportunities.
- **Scoping:** the UK in particular will want to carry out mapping exercises to identify priority areas for collaboration based on mutual interests with potential partners, and/or particularly promising sectors for cooperation. European partners will want to engage with and contribute to this process at an early stage.
- **Prioritisation:** all parties, and particularly the UK, will want to direct resources and capacity towards priority areas where cooperation can bring maximum mutual benefit.
- **Building on existing foundations:** all parties will benefit from building on the foundations existing cross-European collaboration, be it within or outside the EU institutional architecture.
- **Looking to the future:** the UK will want to build on its strengths in particular future-facing areas (eg cyber, digital and AI) by anticipating innovations and leading future collaboration at European and global levels.
- **Incentivisation:** governments will want to determine their appetite for encouraging, supporting and/or incentivising transborder collaboration at the non-state level. Any such considerations will be informed by the priorities identified in early scoping exercises.
- **Messaging:** the UK and the EU institutions and member states will all want to develop and clearly articulate positive narratives about their ambitions for, and commitment to, future collaboration.
- **Trust and engagement:** rebuilding and strengthening trust among all partners will be essential to ensuring constructive collaboration, the realisation of mutual interests and continued promotion of shared values.

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