

Foreign and defence policy

Introduction

When Prime Minister David Cameron announced the date of the referendum in February he argued Britain was 'safer' as a member of the EU. But the Leave side has argued that the EU does not add to Britain's security and may in some cases undermine it.

EU Foreign policy cooperation

EU member states co-operate closely on foreign policy, although all members retain control over their own foreign policy. EU foreign policy decisions require agreement amongst all member states.

Member states try to reach consensus over issues between each other in order to have more weight on the international stage. When there is an international crisis, member states seek to coordinate their responses. For example, through the EU, member states have collectively imposed sanctions on Russia for its intervention in Ukraine and on Iran for its nuclear proliferation efforts.

EU foreign policy is not limited to issues of 'high politics'. Through the EU member states have also pursued a common policy in international negotiations such as those on climate change. They also use the EU to enhance and coordinate their development policies and humanitarian aid.

The EU has carried out so-called security and defence policy missions which involve military and civilian personnel. Such missions are launched by agreement of all the foreign ministers of EU member states. They can only be launched by unanimous agreement by all EU countries and only those states that want to do so participate in missions.

The EU has carried out over 30 missions in Europe, Africa and Asia. These include:

- Border assistance missions: helping countries such as Ukraine and Moldova establish more effective borders.
- Conflict monitoring missions, for example in Georgia.
- Peacekeeping missions, for example in Bosnia and Chad.
- Tackling piracy in the Horn of Africa.
- Provide training to judges and police in Iraq and Afghanistan.
- Provide military training in Mali.

These operations have been small in terms of personnel involved. The EU has not taken on any military missions of any great scale to date. As the EU does not have its own armed forces, the personnel are contributed by the member states. The EU has set up 'Battlegroups', 1,500 strong military formations made up of voluntary contributions from member states to be used if the EU member states agree unanimously that they should be deployed for peace keeping or crisis management operations.. However, they have never been used.

EU defence cooperation

Member states maintain complete control over their armed forces. The EU does not have an army, nor is it trying to develop one. It does not have a defence budget. Through the EU member states are pursuing

efforts to harmonise arms and equipment between national armies. The member states have agreed to create a European Defence Agency to jointly develop, acquire, and maintain equipment for military use. Moreover, the EU's member states have also agreed that those states that want to collaborate together more closely can do so through a mechanism called Permanent Structured Cooperation. It has not been used, although many European countries already cooperate very closely. For example, the Dutch and Belgian navies operate under a unified command and share many of the same facilities.

Finally, the EU has sought to promote a more efficient European-wide defence industry, so far with limited efforts. There have also been moves to use EU funds to invest in the development of technologies relating to defence, such as drone development.

What arguments have been advanced?

Those advocating a British exit from the EU have argued that not being a member of the EU would not affect the UK's influence in the world and with its partners. They also argue that EU membership makes the British army less effective, and that some of the money spent on the EU could be saved and spent on improving the British army. This is the argument advanced by Former Defence Secretary Liam Fox as well as military leaders such as Sir Michael Rose, former SAS commander.

Those advocating remaining in the EU argue that membership of the EU increases the UK's influence and allows it more effectively to pursue its interests in the world. This is the argument advanced by the Prime Minister. Back in February, 12 UK armed forces chiefs spoke in support of the government's position.

Some international figures such as NATO Head Jens Stoltenberg argue that NATO would also be weakened by a British exit from the EU. The same argument has been made by five former NATO Heads and 13 former US defence and foreign affairs chiefs, saying that Europe as a whole would be weakened by a British exit.

What might happen if the UK left?

If the UK left the EU, it would still remain a member of NATO, and its immediate security position would not change. NATO is the most important European military security organisation. But over time, the EU has also gained importance, performing many tasks that NATO does not have the tools to perform. In particular the EU has focused on conflict management, often combining humanitarian and development aid with programs designed to support the rule of law, to increase police capabilities, and to train local military forces.

If the UK left the EU it would lose the ability to directly shape EU foreign policy, which could have a knock-on effect on EU foreign policy, and damage the UK's national interests.

For example, the UK was amongst the strongest advocates of imposing sanctions on Russia in 2014 and is now amongst the strongest supporters of maintaining them even if they cause economic damage in Europe. Leaving the EU and losing the ability to directly influence EU foreign policy could harm the UK's interests and its national security if the EU adopts a policy that runs against them.

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