

Select Committee Written Evidence: The UK-EU Reset: Rebuilding a Strategic Partnership in Uncertain Times

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Abstract

In recent years, a plethora of challenges have emerged which confront not only the UK and the EU, but the entire western democratic world, from those posed by continuous Russian aggression and the subsequent return of war to Europe, the expanding conflicts in the Middle East, and the prospects of increasing strain on the US and UK's 'special relationship', new issues continue to threaten the balance of power and world order. As politics students studying global affairs, we have undertaken to research the issues and discuss how they can be overcome.

In the first section, we will discuss the long-term strategic objectives for UK-EU relations, as more challenges arise with escalating global tensions and their long-term objectives in the face of an increasingly unstable situation. In the second section, the focus shall be maintaining and balancing UK relations with the EU and US in an era during which- for the first time in almost a century- UK and EU policy is beginning to diverge from that of US.

Overall, we aim to make the case that there are benefits for the UK improving its relations with the EU, repairing damages occurred from the Brexit campaign, whilst simultaneously maintaining close military, economic, and strategic ties with the US.

Executive Summary

- The UK and EU must rebuild and strengthen their alliance in the face of emerging global challenges.
- The UK should continue to reduce its reliance upon Russian resources and Chinese technology, taking a firmer stance to counteract new threats and challenges.
- The UK can balance its relationship with Europe and the US utilising preexisting agreements and alliances such as NATO, while potentially pursuing new and updated bilateral agreements.
- The UK can utilise its current position as an ally of both the US and EU to act as mediator as US-EU relations become increasingly strained. However, the UK

must improve relations with the EU, mitigating the damage caused by Brexit, to maintain this position.

What are the Government's long-term strategic objectives for the UK-EU relationship in security and defence? How can the UK and EU manage the immediate shared challenges in Ukraine and the Middle East?

The UK and EU share key challenges, and their long-term strategies are aligned on pressing relevant issues. Current economic and foreign issues such as the threats posed by increasing global tensions, in addition to conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East demand their attention and, ultimately, their cooperation.

In terms of the UK-EU security and defence relationship, their long-term objectives correspond. The 2024 Labour Manifesto recommitted to the UK's nuclear deterrent and promised to increase defence spending to keep the UK and its NATO allies safe considering Russia's recent aggression (The Labour Party, 2024). In February 2025 the government kept this pledge with an increased budget of 2.5% of GDP by April 2027 (Gov.UK, 2025). Furthermore, the UK has reached agreements with the EU for creating a way to provide additional channels of defence funding (Scazzieri, 2025), and the Prime Minister has met with his EU counterparts, promising an 'agenda of strengthened cooperation at pace' (Gov.UK, 2025). This demonstrates how the UK and EU are in alignment on policy and long-term strategy, a strategy which includes revitalising UK-EU relations, despite the ultimate tensions that Brexit caused on EU relations, to counter external challenges. In the words of the UK government, to be 'confident in our status outside of the EU, but a leading nation in Europe once again' (Labour Party, 2024).

With regards to Ukraine and the Middle East, there are several challenges which must be addressed. Firstly, economic challenges face the EU and UK, including rising prices affecting businesses and consumers, which have been exacerbated by the UK and EU's ties to globally unstable and potentially hostile regions like Russia. For instance, both the UK and EU purchased energy from Russia prior to the latter's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In 2021 imports from Russia accrued 4% of UK gas- 9% oil and 27% of coal (UK Parliament, 2023). In 2021, Russian fuel imports were worth a combined £4.5 billion, remaining high at £1.3 billion in the year to January 2023 after the UK banned Russian oil imports (Gov. UK, 2023). Since the war began and Russian oil imports have been banned in the UK, oil prices per 1,000 litres skyrocketed to an average of 110,868 pence from 49,566 a year prior (ONS, 2025). Something similar has occurred with the prices of bread since imports from Ukraine, Europe's 'breadbasket', have been affected by the war- rising from an average 107 pence per 800g in 2021 to 139 pence by December 2022 (ONS, 2025).

Similarly, the economic consequences of the crisis in the Middle East have been no less serious, affecting UK energy prices and exacerbating rising inflation (TF Financial, 2025).

Furthermore, Houthi rebels in Yemen caused disruption by harassing and threatening international cargo ships in the Red Sea (BBC News, 2025)- a route for 10-15% of international trade which could result in trade disruption and increased prices (World Economic Forum, 2025). Likewise, the geostrategic challenges include potential threats to European and NATO territory. Concern has risen in recent years that Putin may see fit to attack NATO countries like Poland and the Baltic States, all of which are EU members (Cochis, 2024).

To counter both these threats, UK and EU interests would be best served working closer together, having stronger economic and military bonds (Alder, 2025). As roughly 85% of EU countries are allied with the UK as NATO members (NATO, 2024), (European Union, ND), the UK and EU can work closer together to protect their mutual interests as members of the same alliance. Progress has already been made on this front, with Prime Minister Starmer hosting a summit involving numerous EU countries on 2nd March which served to align their foreign policy and project an image of unity to Russia, with the intended consequence of mitigating Russian aggression. They have also committed to increasing their defence spending, further demonstrating their alignment.

An article published by Carnegie Europe analyses how the UK and EU are cooperating through the enactment of very similar policies in terms of support to Ukraine. Ensuring the protection of democratic institutions of the Western Balkans that are under threat of being isolated from the EU due to Russian interference. This has led to the implementation of an EU-led peacekeeping mission, recognized by the UK Defence Minister (Krivaite and Prakash Nair, 2025). Additionally, the UK and EU are taking a similar approach to the handling of China, with both adopting a policy of improving relations whilst challenging their authoritarian regime of their government, the UK Prime Minister called this a “long-term grown-up relationship” whilst the EU is treating Beijing as both a partner and a rival. This extends to reducing the reliance on Chinese technology and combatting Chinese tech giants such as Huawei, by removing them from access to the EU research funding and reducing equipment, the UK has enacted similar but less harsh policies, a technique to garner more favour with China at the cost of potential harm to EU relations. These countries can also use their position, especially at international bodies like the UN, to promote peace (both the UK and France are part of the P5 and have been close allies for over a century). This could be effective in alleviating tension in situations like the Israel-Hamas war and attacks by the Houthis by provoking an international response.

This report has found that the UK and EU must rebuild and strengthen their alliance in the face of Russian aggression and rising conflict in Europe and the Middle East. This can be done by reducing reliance on Russian resources and Chinese technology, as well taking a more defensive and firmer stance against potential Russian threats. The UKs governmental position over increased defence spending and re-introducing British

influence into Europe, as they have been by establishing an increased cooperation of strength with the European Union. It is crucial that the UK establish relations with all possible allies in the wake of a changing world order and for its security interests.

How can the UK maintain strong relations with the US and EU when their respective positions are at odds? How can it best balance these relationships

This section will discuss ensuring that military and economic ties between the United Kingdom and both the European Union and the United States remain strong, and that the UK remains a close ally of both even at times when their policies diverge.

One of the first ways that the UK can maintain strong relations with both the EU and US is through continuing commitment to international organizations- one of which being the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)- of which the UK and US were founding members (BBC News; Forster and Wallace, 2007: 111). With most of the EU countries now being members of NATO (as previously discussed), this is one of the primary ways that the US is currently linked to Europe, with the US being the primary military provider for spending for much of this time (BBC News), allowing them to keep in close contact with the UK and EU and ensuring their continued cooperation. The US and UK are some of the more powerful militaries in NATO, meaning both countries together can ensure that the organisation can still be seen as cooperating as an important safeguard for Europe and the west (Yap, 2025; Dunn and Webber, 2017:474).

However, the recent political climate has affected this relationship, particularly after the outcome of President Trump and President Zelenskyy meeting on 28 February of 2025 (Tisdall, 2025; Bateman, 2025), and in fact, the United States' position has recently been aligned closer to Russia than its NATO allies (BBC News; Tisdall, 2025; Fox, 2025). Things have been just as tense from an economic perspective. As of the 2nd of April 2025, Donald Trump has placed a range of tariffs on UK exports to the United States. He introduced a 25% tariff on aluminium imports and a 25% tariff on steel imports, which will seriously impact UK steel producers, which claimed they lost customers and struggled with greater competition from cheaper imports (Jolly, 2025). President Trump also declared a 25% tariff on all auto imports into the USA, including autos from the UK, putting the UK automotive sector at risk, as it exported over 101,000 vehicles valued at £7.6 billion to the US in the last year, putting approximately 25,000 jobs at risk (Lancefield, 2025). The Trump administration has also shown intentions to impose tariffs on other industries, such as pharmaceuticals, food and drink exports like salmon, chocolate, and cheese, and the aerospace and chemicals sectors. There is concern amongst some that all UK exports will be hit with a blanket 20% tariff (BBC, 2024). However, some hope that the UK will be able to announce a special trade deal with the US, to reduce or reverse some of the newly announced tariffs (Badenoch, 2025). Research by YouGov found that 71% of polled Brits would support retaliatory tariffs on the US (YouGov, 2025).

This recent shift in the global order prompted European leaders, primarily from the EU to meet and discuss the next steps that can be taken when it comes to the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Al Jazeera, 2025). One way that the UK can maintain the strong relations with both is to continue its efforts in balancing between the US and the EU when it comes to military influence. Currently, the UK, EU, and NATO rely heavily upon the US for military aid. However, due to the divergence in policy between the US and their Western allies since Trump came back into office calls have increased in Europe to have less reliance on the US military for protection (Fox, 2025). Trump has historically been critical of NATO and bemoaned their reliance upon the US – even suggesting he would allow enemies to attack certain countries despite the terms of the alliance prohibiting this (FitzGerald, 2024). President Trump has made no suggestion that the US would take the most extreme step of withdrawing NATO, but his harsh rhetoric has caused concern. Both the UK and France, for example, have coordinated to attempt to fill the nuclear weapons gap that would be created if the US did not side with NATO. This decision comes as both Russia and the US are being seen as more and more unreliable (Fox, 2025). It is actions like this that can ultimately balance the relationship between the two though it could likely lead to more negativity from Trump towards the EU. Another way that this could be balanced is through an individual agreement between the US and the UK, which would strengthen the ties between the two countries (Yap, 2025). With the UK moving closer towards its European allies, a new agreement would ensure that President Trump would still have some stake in UK and not positioned too close towards Russia. Currently there are some connections other than culture and trade that do link the US and the UK, but not all of Europe, when it comes to defence, such as intelligence sharing that is done between GCHQ, the Five Eyes Alliance as well as Trident (Yap, 2025). Ensuring that these ties continue will allow for a better balance between the relations of the EU-UK-US with the UK being the primary link between the US and the EU in further discussion.

Bilateral or trilateral agreements could be beneficial in trade too. The UK and EU share the world's second largest trading relationship, facilitating over £660 billion (€750 billion) in trade each year (GOV.uk, 2024), something that the UK does not wish to be compromised. A large part of securing the future economic ties between the UK and the EU will purely be communication (Roselle, 2010), as is currently being demonstrated by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rachel Reeves (GOV.uk, 2024), and the Prime Minister, Kier Starmer. The US' relationship with the EU is more fraught however, with Donald Trump declaring back in February that the EU was formed 'to screw the US' (BBC, 2025). In 2023, trade in goods and services between the EU and the US reached €1.6 trillion, amounting to €4.4 billion exchanged across the Atlantic every day (European Commission, 2024). The UK has closer relationships with the EU and US respectively, compared to the EU and US' relationship. This puts the UK in a valuable position, geographically and politically, in that it can be a mediator between the two parties if

they so desired. The UK has experience mediating in this way, as they helped mediate the Iran Nuclear Deal (JCPOA) in 2015 (HoL Library, 2021) and discussions around transatlantic data transfers, especially after the invalidation of the EU-US Privacy Shield framework where the UK positioned itself as a bridge between US tech interests and EU regulatory concerns (Department of Commerce, 2024).

Overall, the UK is currently in a good position. Preexisting ties and deals like NATO, in addition to new and updated bilateral treaties should help the UK to balance their relationships on both sides, especially since President Trump has not suggested he desires these links to be dissolved, despite his harsh rhetoric. The previous section of this report suggested strengthening ties with the EU, a process which is currently happening. As the process progresses, they may be in a position to mediate between the US and EU, should their relations continue to worsen.

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