Research Paper

Alice Billon-Galland, Thomas Raines and Richard G. Whitman
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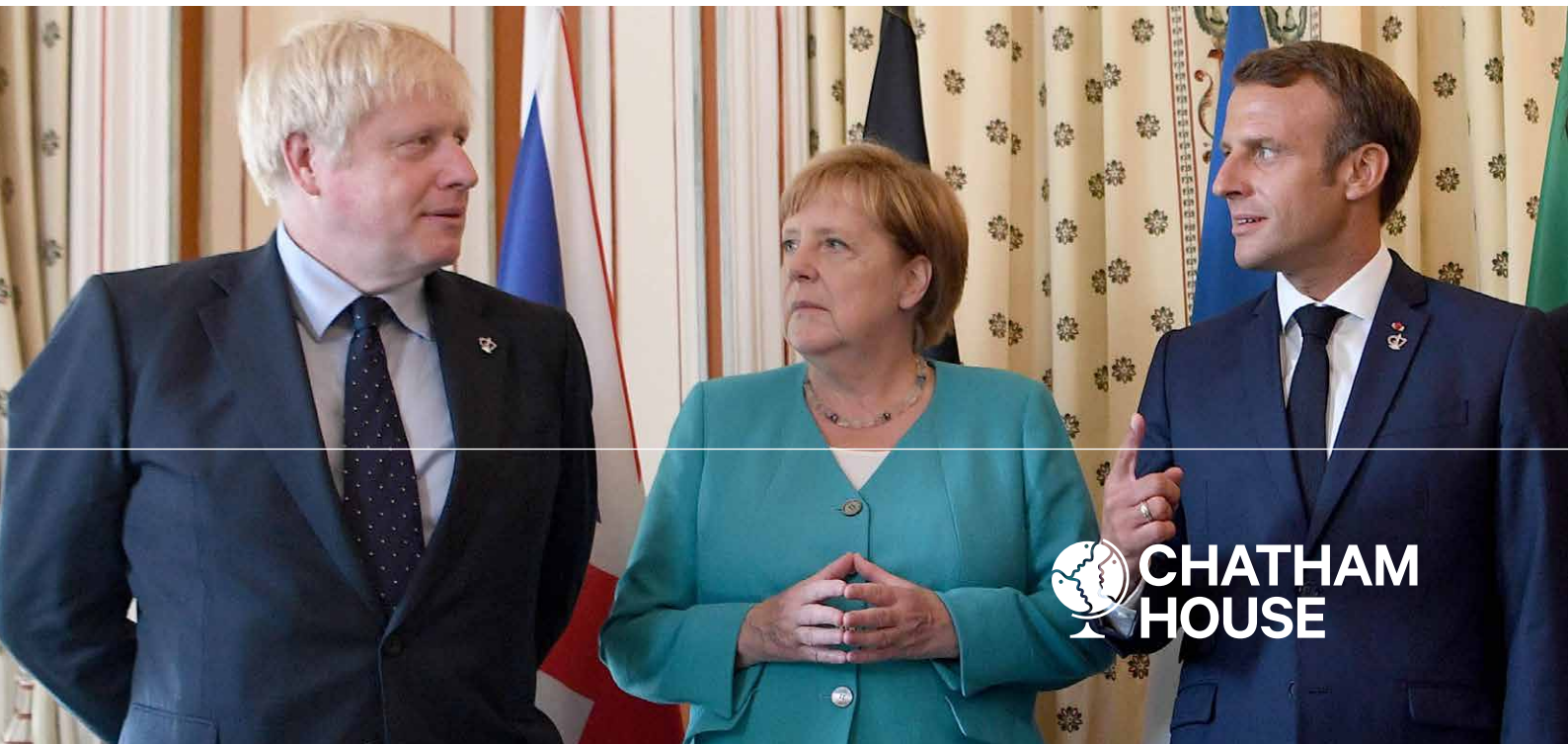
The Future of the E3

Post-Brexit Cooperation Between the UK, France and Germany



Summary

- Since its inception in the 2003 nuclear negotiations with Iran, the E3 has become an established format for diplomatic cooperation between France, Germany and the UK. It now acts as a vehicle for coordination on a broader range of international issues. The E3, frequently working alongside the EU, has been an effective means of efficient consensus-building and European leadership, although its impact outside of the Iran issue has so far been limited.
- Following the UK's departure from the EU, E3 cooperation will take place in a different strategic and political context. While France and Germany have indicated ongoing support for the format and cooperation has so far been insulated from the Brexit process, the future foreign and security policy relationship between the UK and the EU will influence the extent and nature of E3 cooperation.
- Over the longer term, the utility of E3 cooperation will depend on the state of transatlantic relations and the development of the EU's foreign, security and defence policies.
- The UK's ongoing Integrated Security, Defence and Foreign Policy Review offers an opportunity to consider the future of the E3 and prioritize the development of E3 cooperation. The UK government should seek to maintain the E3 as a platform for flexible diplomatic coordination and expand its focus to address a new set of thematic, regional or multilateral challenges.

Introduction

This paper explores the origins of the E3 (European/EU 3) format of diplomatic coordination between France, Germany and the UK, and its possible future development. It addresses the potential role of the E3 over the coming decade and how the UK can make the best use of this format.

The first section examines the origin and significance of the E3 format, from the Iran nuclear deal to broader diplomatic coordination, and discusses its strengths and weaknesses. The second section analyses the current political context and the impact of the UK's withdrawal from the EU on the E3. The third section examines the perspectives of France and Germany as well as the political dynamics within the E3. The fourth section explores how political and strategic developments over the next decade could influence the format's utility. This identifies the evolution of transatlantic relations and the EU's common foreign and defence policies as key factors that will influence the E3. The final section explores how the format could develop and presents a range of options for consideration, as well as recommendations for the UK.

Origins and development of the E3

The E3 format emerged in 2003 as a joint initiative of France, Germany and the UK to negotiate with Iran over its nuclear reprocessing and enrichment activities. In October 2003, the E3 foreign ministers visited Tehran seeking to avert the risk of US military action, following the invasion of Iraq, and to address the international community's concerns regarding Iran's nuclear programme. For more than a decade, the E3 has remained central to the diplomatic process that resulted in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in July 2015.[1]

The E3 format has evolved to reflect the fluctuations of diplomacy with Iran. The inclusion in late 2004 of Common Foreign and Security Policy High Representative Javier Solana, as the EU's point of contact for Iran, created the E3+EU format. This connected the E3 directly with the EU foreign and security policymaking machinery, and helped address fears that the process was bypassing the EU, while maintaining the flexibility and responsiveness of the intergovernmental format. In January 2006, China, Russia and the US joined the negotiations with Iran. This brought the other permanent members of the UN Security Council (UNSC) into a collective approach consisting of UN-mandated sanctions alongside diplomacy (also known as the P5+1 or E3+3). The EU continued to play a coordinating role in the process, frequently acting as chair or co-chair of talks with Iran, through consecutive high representatives for foreign affairs and security policy (HR/VPs)[2] Catherine Ashton and Federica Mogherini.

The Trump administration's hostility to the JCPOA, and subsequent withdrawal in 2018, posed a significant challenge to the E3. Despite this, the grouping has maintained its cohesiveness, which is rooted in a shared commitment to finding a diplomatic resolution to the challenge of Iran's nuclear programme. E3+EU efforts have focused on ensuring that Iran remains in compliance with the terms of the JCPOA, developing measures to mitigate the effects of re-imposed US sanctions on European trade with Iran, and seeking to re-engage the Trump administration in a diplomatic process with Tehran. The transatlantic division on Iran policy has reinforced the shared interests and perspectives of the E3 while straining their relations with the US.

[1] For a comprehensive account of the European diplomatic dialogue with Iran, see Adebahr, C. (2017), *Europe and Iran: The Nuclear Deal and Beyond,* Routledge.
[2] HR/VP is the common way to shorten the job title EU High Representative for Foreign Policy and Vice President of the European Commission.

Beyond the Iran nuclear issue, diplomatic coordination in the E3 format has broadened to encompass other international matters such as the conflict in Syria, the 2019 attack on oil facilities in Saudi Arabia and freedom of navigation in the South China Sea.[3] E3 collaboration has generally been ad hoc and reactive to international security developments, building on informal and habitual contacts at the official level, and primarily focused on issues where it has been slow or difficult to establish a common EU position (such as regarding events in the Golan Heights) or where there has been a gap between European and US positions (such as on Syria or the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi).[4] Germany's recent term as a non-permanent member of the UNSC facilitated additional cooperation beyond the E3, sometimes leading to statements that were co-signed by other European non-permanent UNSC members such as Belgium and Poland.[5] There have been regular meetings of E3 foreign ministers, generally rooted in the JCPOA process but often covering other related issues, including on the margins of international gatherings such as the UN General Assembly. There has also been an E3–Turkey dialogue conducted at the head-of-government level.[6]

Strengths and weaknesses of the format

The main test of the E3 so far has been nuclear diplomacy with Iran but the strengths and weaknesses of the format for diplomatic cooperation have become apparent as its scope has broadened. Its key strengths include:

- **Effective policy coordination** between Europe's three leading diplomatic powers – providing them with a collective weight and credibility that they do not possess individually.
- **Efficient consensus-building**, in particular through the E3+EU, by which an agreed policy among the smaller group could form the basis of EU consensus.
- **Managing transatlantic differences**, helping form collective European positions and insulating individual states from excessive US pressure.
- **Bridge-building capability**, with the E3 providing a credible but distinctive alternative diplomatic interlocutor for Iran. The E3 could perform a bridging function that would have been impossible in an exclusive US–Iran process.
- **Light-touch institutionalization**, the speed and simplicity of the format offers a straightforward and flexible way of agreeing common positions compared to more institutionalized options.

[3] UK government (2011), 'UK, Germany and France call for President Assad to stand down', news story, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-germany-and-france-call-for-president-assad-to-stand-down; UK government (2019), 'Joint statement by the heads of state and government of France, Germany and the United Kingdom', news story, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-statement-by-the-heads-of-state-and-government-of-france-germany-and-the-united-kingdom; UK government (2019), 'E3 joint statement on the situation in the South China Sea', press release, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/e3-joint-statement-on-the-situation-in-the-south-china-sea.
[4] UK government (2018), 'Jamal Khashoggi's death: joint statement by UK, France and Germany foreign ministers', press release, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-uk-france-and-germany-statement-on-jamal-khashoggis-death.
[5] French embassy in Warsaw (2019), 'Golan Heights: Joint statement by Belgium, France, Germany, Poland and the UK', 26 March 2019, news, https://pl.ambafrance.org/Golan-Heights-Joint-statement-by-Belgium-France-Germany-Poland-and-the-UK-26-9060.
[6] Reuters (2019), 'UK, France, Germany, Turkey say attacks on civilians in Syria must end', 3 December 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-nato/uk-france-germany-turkey-say-attacks-on-civilians-in-syria-must-end-idUSKBN1Y72DE.

At the same time, the format has shown the following limitations:

- **Issue-specific origins:** The creation of the E3 was issue- and circumstance-specific, and it may be difficult to replicate the degree of strategic alignment achieved in regard to Iran. This potentially reduces the scope for E3 cooperation to broad statements or calls for respect of international law.
- **Resistance from within the EU:** Cooperation among the E3 has attracted criticism from other member states, based on the perception that it bypasses the EU's collective processes.[7] Italy, which had long felt frustrated at being excluded from the E3 process with Iran, was included in a new initiative in January 2018 to engage Iran on issues not covered by the JCPOA. Soon after, other large member states, in particular Spain, expressed strong reservations, which resulted in it blocking texts at Council level based solely on objections to the process.[8] Although mitigated somewhat by the role of the HR/VP in the Iran negotiations, these concerns remain and may be exacerbated by the UK's position outside of the EU.
- **Impact:** E3 decisions do not have the same weight as EU decisions. If, especially now that the UK has left the union, the E3 does not find a way to link its statements to wider EU policy, its impact is likely to be reduced.

Overall, the E3 has developed into a well-established ad hoc coordination mechanism for France, Germany and the UK, and sometimes the HR/VP, to react jointly to a wider range of international security developments.

The post-Brexit context

The UK's departure from the EU necessitates a recalibration of the country's foreign policy relationship with both the union and other European states. At the end of January 2020, the UK left the EU institutions, ceased direct participation in its foreign policymaking machinery and entered into a transition period that will last until the end of the year.

The 2019 Political Declaration set out ambitions for a future EU–UK foreign, security and defence policy relationship, with the goal of close cooperation but on a third-country basis.[9] The UK has, however, since then, decided not to pursue negotiations on a future relationship in this area.[10] Consequently, E3 cooperation takes on a greater significance in the likely absence of a formal EU–UK foreign, security and defence policy arrangement.

Alongside developing a new working relationship with the EU in foreign and security policy, the UK is undertaking a fundamental examination of its international strategy through the 2020 Integrated Security, Defence and Foreign Policy Review, intended to be the most significant of its kind since the

[7] Brattberg, E. (2020), 'The E3, the EU, and the Post-Brexit Diplomatic Landscape', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 18 June 2020, https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/06/18/e3-eu-and-post-brexit-diplomatic-landscape-pub-82095.
[8] Herszenhorn, D. (2019), 'EU's Iran fight is not about Iran (or Trump)', *Politico*, 30 January 2019, https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-iran-fight-diplomacy-nuclear-deal.
[9] HM Government (2019), *Political Declaration setting out the framework for the future relationship between the European Union and the United Kingdom*, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/840656/Political_Declaration_setting_out_the_framework_for_the_future_relationship_between_the_European_Union_and_the_United_Kingdom.pdf.
[10] See Whitman, R. (2020), 'Why the UK Has Taken Foreign Policy Out of Brexit Negotiations', Chatham House Expert Comment, 1 July 2020, https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/why-uk-has-taken-foreign-policy-out-brexit-negotiations.

end of the Cold War.[11] Currently delayed due to the coronavirus crisis, this review may well place greater emphasis on bilateral and minilateral interactions on foreign and security policy issues now that the UK is no longer an EU member state. The opportunity provided by a standing arrangement for coordination with France and Germany therefore represents an important option for the UK.

The E3 format has so far been successfully insulated from the complexity and politics of the Brexit process. If anything, the pace and intensity of E3 cooperation appears to have increased since at least 2018, primarily driven by the multiplication of security challenges, policy differences with the US and a lack of consensus at the EU level. Preserving E3 cooperation and ensuring it is unaffected by post-Brexit negotiations remains a political challenge.

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The cooperation that evolves between the EU and UK in the realm of foreign and security policy, and the wider political relationship in which this component sits, will likely influence the future of the E3. If the direct UK–EU channels end up being loose or ineffective, as now seems probable, the E3 format is likely to be more useful for London as a mechanism to influence wider European positions. In such a context, the E3 format could also be a crucial way for France and Germany to work with the UK, and allow both countries to influence British decision-making and vice versa. Since the E3 has served both as a caucus through which to establish and transmit a diplomatic position to the wider EU and as a forum for reaching agreed positions in the absence of EU consensus, a now likely minimal EU–UK framework leaves greater space for a distinctive E3 role. Even if a closer UK–EU relationship were to develop in future, it would not necessarily reduce the value of the E3 since the logic that prompted its creation still stands: the current EU foreign policy framework is ill-suited to fast decision-making and does not tackle all issues of interest to the E3.

At the same time, with the UK outside the EU, continued use or expansion of the E3 format may attract more trenchant criticism from member states that are not part of it. The legitimacy of the E3 grouping was already questioned when the UK was inside the EU. Efforts to expand E3 cooperation would risk a counter-reaction from other European states, such as Italy or Poland, that would potentially place pressure on France and Germany to limit the format's role. Greater E3 cooperation could also potentially hurt UK efforts to deepen bilateral cooperation with non-E3 European partners.

A lack of a comprehensive agreement between the EU and UK on their future relationship might actually boost the utility of the E3 format. Yet, conversely, in such circumstances the politics around the format may become trickier, in the short term at least. It is likely that there would be a degree of political rancour associated with any failure to reach a UK–EU agreement by the end of the transition period,[12] which may make ongoing cooperation in other areas more politically sensitive for France and Germany. However, although a failure of post-Brexit negotiations could risk weakening the E3 in the short term, it is unlikely to undermine its relevance in the longer term. Brexit-related diplomatic sensitivities are likely to decrease over time, and all parties have been keen to insulate as much as possible the foreign and defence policy relationship with Britain from the effects of Brexit.

[11] UK Parliament (2020), 'Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy: Written statement – HCWS126', publications and records, https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2020-02-26/HCWS126.
[12] The UK government has made clear its intention to avoid an extension beyond the end of the transition period on 31 December 2020.

Examining how the UK works with its allies is one of the core objectives of the Integrated Security, Defence and Foreign Policy Review, which should directly address the E3. The following sections assess the political dynamics around the E3, including perspectives from France and Germany, and how developments over the coming decade could shape the format, before identifying policy options for the UK with regard to the E3's evolution.

Political dynamics and future developments

French and German perspectives

France and Germany see the E3 as a valuable intergovernmental tool for coordinating European policy positions on international security issues. In the past decade, the format has become an important component of their European diplomacy and both countries would like it to remain so.[13]

Regardless of Brexit, Germany and France share the view that the grouping – sitting outside the EU and NATO – works well and should be preserved. They consider the UK a crucial partner without which they cannot deliver credible European action on international security issues. Moreover, through its position alongside France as a permanent member of the UNSC, the UK brings added weight and credibility to the E3 and Europe on global issues (see Table 1).

Despite some questions in Paris and particularly in Berlin about the mode of E3+EU coordination after Brexit, no serious doubt has been raised about the relevance of the E3 model or the inclusion of the UK in it. For Berlin, non-institutionalized multilateralism (such as the E3) may not be as good as the institutionalized variant (such as in the EU) but is still better than no multilateralism at all. There is currently no obvious European alternative to the E3 as a mechanism for enhancing European foreign and security policy influence beyond EU processes.

> In the short term, Brexit may strengthen the trend in European foreign policy away from the EU framework and towards minilateral formats such as the E3 or issue-specific arrangements like the Normandy Format for resolving the conflict in eastern Ukraine.

Although the European Commission that took office in December 2019 aims to address strategic challenges to the EU in a more coordinated and 'geopolitical' manner, significant impediments remain to the union becoming a strong security actor. Neither France nor Germany credibly envisage that EU unity will render the E3 obsolete in the coming years. Indeed, in the short term, Brexit may strengthen the trend in European foreign policy away from the EU framework and towards minilateral formats such as the E3 or issue-specific arrangements like the Normandy Format for resolving the conflict in eastern Ukraine.[14] Given ongoing intra-European tensions, the EU's poor track record on joint and ambitious foreign policy action and the need to keep the UK engaged, the E3 is likely to remain a valuable framework for France and Germany for the foreseeable future.

[13] See, for example, comments by German Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer in Reuters (2019), 'After Brexit, let's formalise the 'E3' European security trio – German minister', 7 November 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-britain-eu-defence/after-brexit-lets-formalise-the-e3-european-security-trio-german-minister-idUSKBN1XH15X; and remarks by Amélie de Montchalin, French minister of state in charge of European affairs, in Chatham House (2020), 'France, the UK and Europe: New Partnerships and Common Challenges', Members Event, https://www.chathamhouse.org/event/france-uk-and-europe-new-partnerships-and-common-challenges.

[14] Bassiri Tabrizi, A. and Kienzle, B. (2020), 'Legitimation strategies of informal groups of states: The case of the E3 directoire in the nuclear negotiations with Iran', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 55(3): pp. 388–405, https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836720907630.

Table 1: Key facts about the E3 countries

	UK	France	Germany
Membership of major international organizations			
• European Union		•	•
• NATO	•	•	•
• G7	•	•	•
• Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe	•	•	•
• UN Security Council (Permanent seat)	•	•	
Diplomatic network Total of embassies, high representations, consulates, permanent missions, others in 2019	208	267	224
Development aid ODA as % of GNI in 2019	0.70%	0.44%	0.60%
Defence spending 2019	$54.8bn	$52.3bn	$48.5bn
Active military personnel 2019	148,450	203,750	181,400
Estimated number of nuclear warheads 2019	200	300	0

Sources: Lowy Institute (2019), Global Diplomacy Index; OECD (2020), *Aid by DAC members increases in 2019 with more aid to the poorest countries*; IISS (2019), *The Military Balance*; Arms Control Association (2019), 'Nuclear Weapons: Who Has What at a Glance'.

Political dynamics between the three countries

The E3 states share many interests and perspectives. However, there are differences among them, particularly in the approach to security and defence between Germany on the one hand and France and Britain on the other. These constrain the degree of ambition between the E3 on security issues. The challenge is to identify the areas in which cooperation adds the most value for all three countries.

Given the complicated state of Franco-German relations, and the general lack of consensus between the two countries on many strategic issues, both have benefited from the inclusion of the UK in the E3. The British presence changes the balance, giving France an ally in pressuring Germany to think and act more strategically, while offering Germany a way to counterbalance France's proactive approach and claims to European leadership. Due to the current political landscape in France and Germany, both countries are likely to see value in the UK playing such a balancing role in the future. While the UK was an EU member, France and Germany considered its presence in the E3 as a useful way to rally support from other European countries potentially sceptical of Franco-German leadership, such as some Central, Eastern, and Northern European states, as well as, to a certain extent, the US. With the UK now on the outside, the conundrum for France and Germany is how to justify their continued engagement with the UK on European security issues. Moreover, France and Germany are wary about giving the post-Brexit UK too big a role in shaping the European, and possibly EU, agenda. They are also cautious about overly relying on the E3 format at the expense of EU formats.

As argued above, Paris and Berlin worry about the short-term impact of the potentially acrimonious Brexit negotiations. There is a risk that the format could become collateral damage of a difficult divorce, as E3 cooperation might not send the right political signals, both domestically and to other EU member states, amid Brexit-driven disagreements.

More fundamentally, if the foreign policy objectives or approach of the UK were to diverge significantly from those of France, Germany and the EU in the coming decade, the relevance and suitability of the E3 would diminish. There is concern in France and Germany that the UK may prioritize relations with emerging markets and Commonwealth or Five Eyes countries over established European partners, that trade could become a disproportionate focus of its foreign policy or that it could end up acting in lockstep with a US that has drifted from Europe. These fears have been somewhat diminished by the degree to which the UK has stayed close to many European foreign policy positions post-Brexit rather than moved closer to the US, including on Iran and climate change. However, there is still a concern that it may stray from other European positions over time, prioritizing relationships beyond Europe and taking an approach driven by national interest, including more prominent cooperation with its Five Eyes intelligence-sharing partners collectively or individually, as recently demonstrated in relation to developments in Hong Kong.[15]

An alternative European diplomatic and security architecture

The French and German governments recognize the necessity of post-Brexit cooperation with the UK, and believe there is value in an additional security forum alongside the EU and NATO. Alternative propositions for cooperation with the UK have been floated beyond the E3. In particular, French and German leaders have proposed creating a European Security Council (ESC), which would bring together the EU member states (but not the EU institutions through the HR/VP).[16]

The ESC idea has been broadly proposed in two variants. The first as an arrangement to include only member states and to address weaknesses in the existing EU foreign policymaking architecture.[17] The second would include the UK and provide a space for coordination on foreign, security and defence policy issues.[18] At this stage Germany and France disagree on the exact institutional shape of a possible ESC. For Paris it should be a flexible grouping with little decision-making power, closer to the format of a European Council+UK; Berlin wishes for a more formal structure.

The E3 in the 2020s

Several factors will shape the extent to which the E3 is a useful foreign policy format in the years ahead. Two interrelated issues in particular will play central roles in the evolution of the E3: the development of the EU as a foreign and security policy actor; and the nature of transatlantic relations.

[15] The UK, Australia, Canada, and the US gave a joint statement in response to China's proposed new security law for Hong Kong. See UK government (2020), 'China's proposed new security law for Hong Kong: joint statement', press release, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-statement-from-the-uk-australia-canada-and-united-states-on-hong-kong.

[16] President Macron gave impetus to this idea in his speech 'For European renewal' (4 March 2019) supporting a European Security Council with the UK 'on board', see Elysée (2019), 'For European renewal', news, https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2019/03/04/for-european-renewal.en; Wientzek, O. and Rieck, C. (2018), *Brussels' new telephone number? – How a European Security Council could strengthen EU foreign policy*, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, August 2018, https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=64e1e0a6-0460-ee78-904d-8cddd4913dc2&groupId=252038; Novaky, N. (2019), *EU It Yourself: A Blueprint for a European Security Council*, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, March 2019, https://martenscentre.eu/sites/default/files/publication-files/european-security-council-blueprint.pdf.

[17] Kaim, M. and Kempin, R. (2019), 'A European Security Council: Added Value for EU Foreign and Security Policy?', SWP Comment, January 2019, https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2019C02_kim_kmp.pdf.

[18] Whineray, D. (2020), 'The Pros and Cons of a European Security Council', Carnegie Europe, 23 January 2020, https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategiceurope/80869; Scazzieri, L. (2019), 'Towards a European Security Council?', CER Insight, 27 November 2019, https://www.cer.eu/insights/towards-european-security-council.

The development of the EU as a foreign, security and defence policy actor

A key factor for the future of the E3 will be the degree to which the EU becomes a more coherent and effective foreign and security policy actor. The E3 is likely to have the greatest utility if European foreign and security policy architecture is weak or fragmented. However, it will struggle for relevance if Germany and France see little added value outside the EU framework, although the E3+EU format could still be important in this latter scenario.

In recent years, EU member states have sought to create new defence and security structures to improve internal cooperation, with the hope that this will make the union a more influential and effective actor. These efforts have been particularly notable in the field of defence integration, such as the creation of the European Defence Fund (EDF), aimed at strengthening the EU defence industrial base and encouraging joint R&D and procurement, and the establishment of a Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) framework, which is designed to allow smaller groups of member states to take forward deeper defence cooperation without being blocked by the requirements of EU-wide consensus. However, despite the ambitious rhetoric, the majority of these changes are intended to increase the capacity of states to coordinate their planning, research, training and procurement as well as enhance niche capabilities, and therefore they do not represent a quantum leap towards a genuine common EU defence policy. Budget attributions for several of these new initiatives are also still unresolved. Differences in capability, political will and threat perception alongside the principle of unanimity in decision-making will likely continue to constrain the pace of development in the Common Foreign Security Policy (CFSP) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) over the next decade.

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The EU may be able to overcome some of these obstacles to achieve a more integrated foreign and defence policy if external events create political demand for a more robust framework. It is not yet clear whether the COVID-19 pandemic will have this effect, or whether the broader health and economic crisis will exacerbate existing tensions among member states.[19] Other potential triggers for greater EU cohesion could be the re-election of Donald Trump as US president, a sharp deterioration in relations with Russia, or another migration crisis caused by instability in the European neighbourhood.

If member states become more united around a foreign policy agenda, the EU could potentially expand the use of qualified majority voting on external relations, strengthen the European External Action Service (EEAS), and develop further its mutual defence clause (Article 42(7) of the Treaty on the European Union). Changes in political leadership in key member states could shift the balance of perspectives, reducing the number of states with concerns about the implications on sovereignty of deeper foreign policy and defence cooperation. A necessary but not sufficient component of this would be a shared Franco-German view on the direction of policy, which is currently limited.

[19] See Billon-Galland, A. (2020), 'COVID-19 Strengthens the Case for EU Defence', Chatham House Expert Comment, 17 June 2020, https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/covid-19-strengthens-case-eu-defence.

However, at present, the converse looks more likely. The COVID-19 pandemic has awakened dormant tensions within the eurozone, risking a wider political rift. It also comes on the back of a lack of foreign policy cohesion in recent years, illustrated by the inability of member states to reach consensus on issues ranging from the war in Syria, Russia's withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, the political crisis in Venezuela and the situation in Libya.[20] Meanwhile, domestic political fragmentation across the continent has made reaching consensus more difficult by increasing further the heterogeneity of EU governments. At present, the French government, which has been a key driving force behind current initiatives, is frustrated with the modest steps that have been agreed, and there is no clear alignment of ambition between France and Germany on EU foreign and security policy.

Alternative non-EU formats such as the European Intervention Initiative (E2I)[21] and the proposed ESC are to a certain extent the result of these frustrations, alongside a desire to keep the UK tied into European security. Depending on the detail of the final proposal, any ESC could be either complementary or a potential alternative to the E3 format – especially if the European Commission truly becomes a more 'geopolitical' actor, an aspiration outlined by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen.

The nature of transatlantic relations

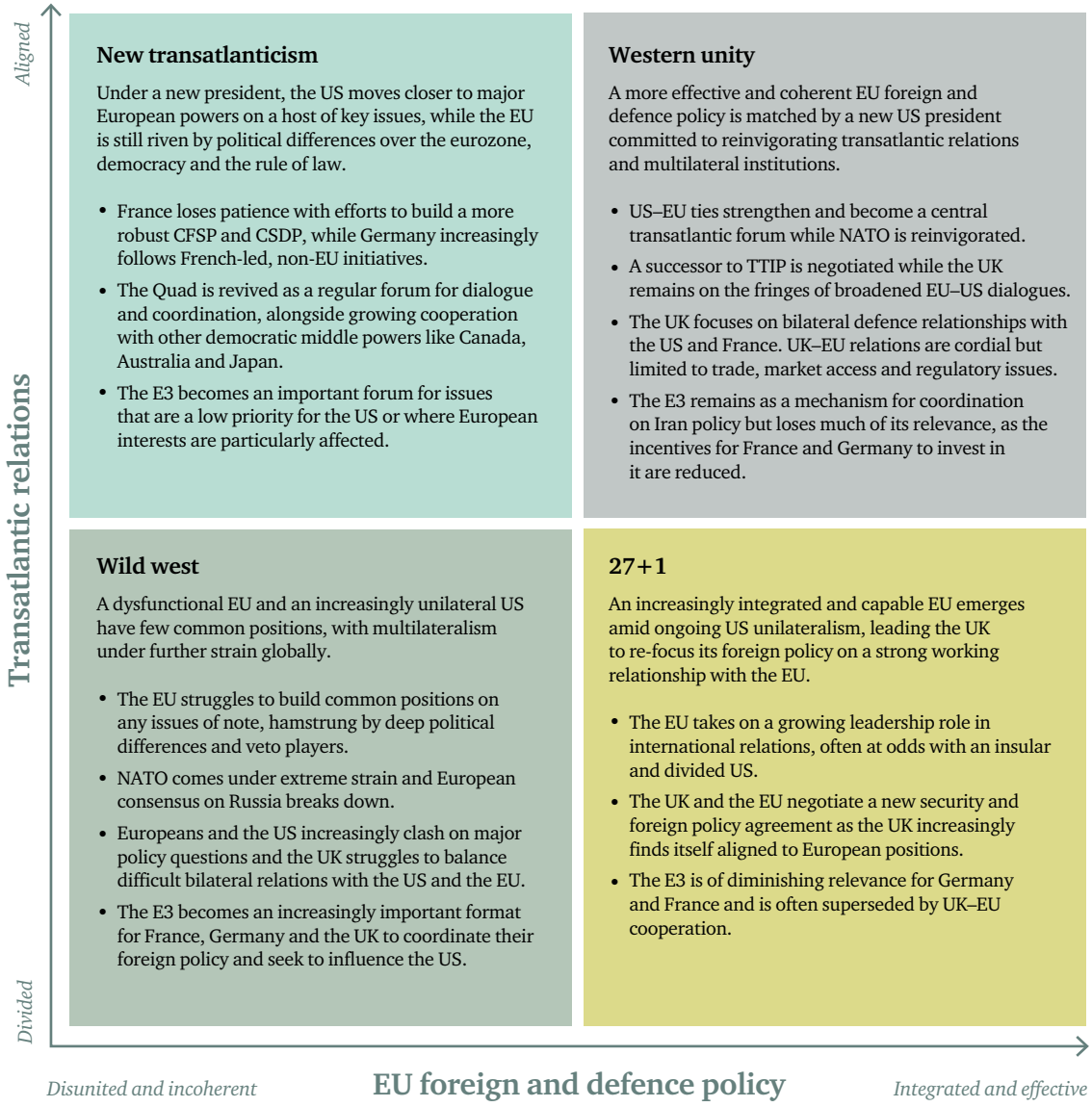
The second consideration is the role of transatlantic relations on the utility of the E3 format over the coming decade. Divisions between European governments and the Trump administration have enhanced the logic of E3 coordination. Through the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (INSTEX) arrangement, the EU agreed an unprecedented vehicle to bypass US sanctions and facilitate continued trade with Iran.[22] More broadly, in the last four years, France, Germany and the UK have had more in common with one another – on issues ranging from Iran to Syria, climate change and China – than with the US. This makes the case for E3 cooperation stronger – as a mode of coordination between like-minded states, as a mechanism to try and influence the US through common positions, and to avoid Washington playing Europeans against one another on divisive questions.

The re-election of President Trump in November 2020 would reinforce this logic. A second Trump administration would almost certainly maintain its aggressive posture towards China and adopt a more detached role on questions of security and instability in Europe's neighbourhood. These positions could also remain components of US policy under administrations of different political hues in the next decade. In such circumstances, the E3 could become a vehicle through which European states seek to manage increasing long-term divergences between themselves and the US and develop shared positions on different issues. It could even become an informal European core within NATO if the alliance continues to face transatlantic splits over its role and focus as well as the relative contribution of its members. While there is a risk that US pressure might lead the UK to drift from its European allies after Brexit, thus far these fears have been unrealized.

[20] Emmott, R. and Baczynska, G. (2019), 'Engine trouble: EU struggles to attune diplomacy in Brussels', Reuters, 6 February 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-foreignpolicy/engine-trouble-eu-struggles-to-attune-diplomacy-in-brussels-idUSKCN1PV286.
[21] Zandee, D. and Kruijver, K. (2019), *The European Intervention Initiative: Developing a shared strategic culture for European deefence*, Clingendael, September 2019, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2019-09/The_European_Intervention_2019.pdf.
[22] UK government (2019), 'New mechanism to facilitate trade with Iran: joint statement', press release, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-statement-on-the-new-mechanism-to-facilitate-trade-with-iran.

On the other hand, a significant change in US policy under a new Democratic administration from 2021 could lead to greater alignment with Europe. This could lower the utility of the E3 format on issues where the US will play a decisive role and reduce the instances of collective European effort to influence or resist US policy. A change in US administration could create the circumstances for boosting the informal quadrilateral security dialogue (Quad) between the E3 and the US, which holds discussions, for example, on the margins of NATO meetings. Washington may still support the E3 format if it leads Europeans to take greater responsibility for regional challenges and if it proves itself better at making and implementing decisions than the EU. If the Quad takes on a more permanent nature, this may help the UK retain its parallel role of helping explain US perspectives to its European partners and vice versa, much as it has done for the past three or four decades.

Figure 1: Four scenarios for the 2020s



Source: Compiled by the authors.

The future of the E3: Options for a post-Brexit UK

The events of 2020 will be significant in shaping the future foreign policy environment facing the UK, with the COVID-19 pandemic causing a global health and economic crisis, a crucial US presidential election in November and the Brexit transition period set to end in December. These developments could have an important bearing in making one or other of the scenarios set out in Figure 1 more likely. It is in this context that the UK government is undertaking its Integrated Security, Defence and Foreign Policy Review. This makes it all the more timely for it to consider the role of the E3 and its potential in UK foreign policy. As indicated, the importance and role of the E3 could vary considerably depending on which future emerges. However, in all scenarios, the E3 will retain utility as a flexible trilateral diplomatic platform. A range of options for the E3's future is explored below, followed by recommendations for how the UK government could make best use of the format in the coming years.

Options for the E3

Downgrade or deprioritize

One option would be to downgrade the degree and intensity of E3 cooperation. If the focus of UK policy in the coming decade turns to developing relations with emerging powers and deepening cooperation with the US and the other Five Eyes partners, this could hamper further E3 cooperation. In this context, it is notable that in May the UK released a statement about the Hong Kong protests in coordination with Australia, Canada and the US rather than with its European partners.[23] E3 cooperation could also become obsolete under certain scenarios in which the UK repeatedly takes a different position to France or Germany on key issues.

However, given the strengths of the format and the current policy alignment of the three countries, downgrading the E3 would not be in the UK's interests. The government's latest approach to the Brexit negotiations, in which plans to develop a formalized and ambitious foreign and security policy relationship with the EU have been scrapped, strengthens the justification for the E3 and E3+EU formats. It is therefore not the right time to downgrade or deprioritize E3 cooperation.

Widen participation

The UK could work with France and Germany to broaden the composition of the format. As discussed, there is already a degree of flexibility with the frequent inclusion of the EU, via the HR/VP, in certain E3 dialogues and statements. The format could expand to include one or two additional EU states (with Italy, Poland and Spain as potential candidates), possibly on an ad hoc basis depending on the issue being discussed.

Another option would be to include a small number of non-European powers. The obvious candidates would be Australia, Canada or Japan. This would see the E3 evolve into a format that brings together democratic middle powers, although it would mean losing the focus on coordinated European action, which is a principal interest for France and Germany. Alternatively, the E3 format could be folded into a broader initiative like the so-called 'D10' of democratic states, which has been considered as a format to address issues like 5G technology.[24]

[23] UK government (2020), 'China's proposed new security law for Hong Kong: joint statement'.
[24] Fisher, L. (2020), 'Downing Street plans new 5G club of democracies', *The Times*, 29 May 2020, https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/downing-street-plans-new-5g-club-of-democracies-bfnd5wj57.

These options could add political and economic weight as well as, on some issues, increased legitimacy to the E3 process. But each would involve losing the distinctive character of the current format and the balance of relationships within it. A larger format would inevitably lead to more compromise and may dilute the political alignment between members. Any expansion would also lead to difficulties in explaining exclusions. There is also a risk that some of the above changes would duplicate aspects of existing formats, such as the G7. Widening E3 participation is therefore not the best way forward for the moment.

Institutionalize the E3

A third option is to try to institutionalize the E3. This could involve organizing regular official dialogues at the ministerial or even head-of-government level, creating a secretariat for the E3 composed of officials from each country or creating dedicated units within each foreign ministry to develop it. It could involve additional components such as exchange programmes and expand beyond foreign ministries to incorporate dialogue in other areas (such as defence, international development, climate or financial regulation).

Such an approach might enhance the E3's value as a venue not simply for responding to crises or current developments, or for managing a diplomatic process, but for holding a dialogue about long-term challenges and strategic planning. This would also potentially insulate the E3 from political change or difficult personal relationships between heads of government.

However, institutionalization could also create excessive demands on government time and resources that outweigh any benefits. It also risks generating duplication and diplomatic activity for its own sake rather than being issue-led or agenda-led, which is one of the main strengths of the E3. It would also increase the perception among other European states that they are being excluded, or that EU foreign policy processes are being bypassed.

Recommendation for the UK: Flexi3

None of the options above is optimal for the UK. Instead, it should seek to engage the E3 in more areas, while maintaining a flexible and adaptable mode of cooperation. To get the most from the E3 and create a format that is resilient to future developments, as well as acceptable to France and Germany, the UK should take a twin-track approach. On content, this would aim to create new areas of E3 coordination (expand the focus), and on process this would aim to prioritize adaptability, informality and responsiveness among the three countries (maintain the flexibility and European character of the format). This would build on the existing strengths of the format, give space for evolution and be adaptable to future scenarios.

Given the dynamic political environment, the E3 will need to evolve to be most effective. Simply maintaining the status quo risks it losing relevance as the JCPOA process potentially unravels further, while the Brexit context requires additional diplomatic investment from the UK to demonstrate commitment and leadership. A 'Flexi3' arrangement as described above therefore makes the most sense in the short term for the UK to pursue.

Expanded focus

The UK should seek agreement with Germany and France to expand the scope and focus of the issues that the E3 addresses beyond the Iran negotiations. This would seek to embed the format more closely into the working patterns between the three countries' foreign and defence ministries on issues that have not yet been addressed in an E3 mode. It would also avoid political and institutional drift, which could occur if cooperation is not anchored in a particular goal or process. The agenda might be broadened in the four following ways.

- *Regional focus*: The E3 could collectively identify regions where they would seek to act on the basis of a shared set of objectives. This might include a focus on the broader European neighbourhood, including collective action on the Balkans, Ukraine or the Israel–Palestine conflict. Relations with Russia could be a focus, though the degree of existing policy differences among them on this issue may make the E3 unsuitable.
- *Thematic focus*: Drawing on the E3's experience dealing with the risk of Iran's nuclear proliferation, a continued focus on non-proliferation and arms control could provide a signature theme for E3 cooperation. Other thematic areas for cooperation might include cybersecurity, management of the global commons through issues like maritime security and climate-change-related issues.
- *Multilateral focus*: E3 activity could be developed with a focus on cooperation in international institutions. Franco-British cooperation within the UNSC is already well-developed and this could be broadened into a collective approach towards UN reform. Cooperation on NATO-related issues might also be pursued further, especially in areas where the E3 are developing significant experience in collectively managing divergences of views with the current US administration. More broadly, the E3 might consider areas where there is a consensus on a reform agenda for multilateral institutions or international law.
- *Crisis focus*: The E3 could also represent a ready-made arrangement for coordinating a European collective response to international crises. The different diplomatic phases in the approach to Iran, which included crisis management, have already demonstrated the utility of the E3 arrangement as an appropriate basis for coordination in crisis response.

E3 cooperation in a new area is most likely to be successful when the following three conditions apply:

- There is a broad alignment in strategic objectives between the UK, France and Germany.
- Wider EU consensus has been hard to reach or the topic is one not usually discussed at the EU level.
- The US position is different or in opposition to that of the E3, or there is relatively little US interest or attention on the issue.

Therefore, these tests could be applied to new issues to help prioritize E3 cooperation.

Flexible process

In terms of process, the UK should prioritize flexibility and adaptability in E3 cooperation, to reflect the format's strengths and the uncertainty of the wider environment. In the first instance, this means seeking to preserve the current mode and depth of cooperation without worrying about developing a fixed vision for its future role.

This approach would avoid the downsides of institutionalization but still require a clear and regular political commitment to the format. It would place a premium on informal relations and working patterns between officials to supplement ministerial relationships, rather than formalized processes. The E3 would remain a mechanism for political coordination and also develop into a platform to respond to crises or as a venue for strategic-level dialogue on new challenges. It would continue its role in negotiations with Iran while potentially being used to coordinate other diplomatic processes, as discussed above.

> Overall, this Flexi3 model has many advantages. It offers the UK a good and easy way to remain plugged into European thinking without explicitly committing to an EU-branded policy framework.

This flexibility would require a willingness on the UK's part to incorporate a role for the EU's HR/VP, as appropriate. This takes on added value and significance in the absence of a post-Brexit UK–EU foreign and security agreement. In addition, as noted above, one issue to be navigated is the perception that the E3 bypasses the EU or excludes other European states. Remaining open to an E3+EU format can help manage these concerns and reduce the risk that broader E3 cooperation could open the UK, France and Germany to increased criticism and resistance. Germany may be unwilling to start discussing an expansion of the E3 format before the end of the transition phase, but there may be more political space to do so from 2021 onwards.

Overall, this Flexi3 model has many advantages. It offers the UK a good and easy way to remain plugged into European thinking without explicitly committing to an EU-branded policy framework. It would also keep the format's European focus, preferred by France and Germany, while remaining open to wider engagement with the EU through the HR/VP. Broadening the E3 agenda when relevant simply means making better use of a good format while committing little resources beyond diplomatic investment and political will. Moreover, adopting a Flexi3 approach would not preclude the expansion of the format into new areas at a later stage, or its further institutionalization, were that in the interests of the three countries.

Conclusion

There is a strong case for the UK to remain closely engaged with France and Germany on international security issues after Brexit. The Integrated Security, Defence and Foreign Policy Review should recognize the E3 as a key diplomatic element in the country's relationship with its closest European allies and in the pursuit of shared international security objectives – and one that has the potential to grow and evolve in the future. At a minimum, sustaining the flexible and resource-lite E3 format as a go-to platform for policy discussion and crisis response offers obvious benefits for the UK as a mechanism to amplify its voice alongside key European partners and to participate in and influence European policy positions, as well as an informal plug-in into wider EU strategic discussions.

France and Germany are very likely to support continued E3 engagement, but the extent, form and timeframe of such engagement will be shaped by several factors, including the UK–EU relationship, the evolution of EU foreign and security policy, and the state of transatlantic relations. Use of the E3+EU format may frequently be the preferred option to a pure E3 for Berlin and Paris. This would avoid the negative symbolism of appearing to bypass the EU and help keep other EU

members on board, while adding an extra layer to the UK's European diplomacy and to intra-NATO relations. However, the E3+EU format will likely work best as a long-term sustained process that plays to the EU's strengths, rather than on issues that require rapid response or on which there is little European consensus.

The E3 format should be maintained as a Flexi3 that is an adaptable diplomatic coordination platform able to address a new set of thematic, regional or multilateral challenges. Reaching out to other diplomatic partners on a case-by-case basis would be preferable to widening the E3 to other members. Furthermore, institutionalization offers less obvious benefits and may undermine the flexibility that has been the hallmark of the format to date. E3 cooperation is, however, likely to be heavily conditioned by the evolution of the wider European and transatlantic security context. Developing the E3 will require the UK to broker a consensus with France and Germany on the way ahead and to invest political will in the format.

There is an opportunity for the UK in 2020 to think about the role of the E3 in the context of the Integrated Security, Defence and Foreign Policy Review. Amid the broader debate about its place in the world after Brexit and proposals about the evolution of the European diplomatic and security architecture, the UK should develop a clear view for the E3 format's future and advocate this with France and Germany.

About the Authors

Alice Billon-Galland is a research associate in the Europe Programme at Chatham House, covering security and defence issues. Prior to that, she led the European defence programme at the European Leadership Network (ELN). Alice's research focuses on European defence cooperation, French foreign and defence policy, transatlantic burden-sharing, and developments in the EU and NATO.

Thomas Raines leads the Europe Programme at Chatham House. Previously, he was manager and research fellow with the programme. Prior to joining Chatham House, he worked in the Strategy Unit of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office. His research interests lie in British foreign policy, the UK's relationship with the EU, and European politics.

Professor Richard G. Whitman is director of the Global Europe Centre and professor of politics and international relations at the *University of Kent*. He is also an associate fellow and former head of the Europe Programme at Chatham House. His current research interests include Brexit and especially the future foreign, security and defence policies of the UK and the EU.

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Cover image: British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron pose during a G7 coordination meeting at the Hotel du Palais on 24 August 2019 in Biarritz, France.

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The Royal Institute of International Affairs
Chatham House
10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE
T +44 (0)20 7957 5700 F +44 (0)20 7957 5710
contact@chathamhouse.org www.chathamhouse.org

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