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# Towards a strategic agenda for the E3

Opportunities and risks for  
France, Germany and the UK

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## Summary

- Beginning with the Iran nuclear dialogue, France, Germany and the UK have used the E3 format for effective trilateral cooperation on a growing range of issues in recent years. In today's challenging strategic environment, there are potentially further opportunities for Europe's 'big three' to cooperate. But the end of the Brexit transition period means that the three countries now operate in a different context in which their objectives, priorities and constraints are less aligned. This makes it challenging to develop a strategic agenda for the E3.
- The E3 format cannot resolve the issue of the UK's status outside the EU and the lack of an EU–UK agreement on foreign policy, security and defence. France and Germany are more comfortable using the format to cooperate with the UK on issues where EU policy is either absent or fragmentary, or where they see the UK as an indispensable partner. While London is looking for flexible ways of engaging with Paris and Berlin, it is also developing new avenues for addressing international security issues.
- All three countries want to maintain the E3's crisis management aspects, as well as those related to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on Iran's nuclear programme. But all see risks in further broadening and deepening E3 cooperation: Paris and Berlin worry that it could undermine EU cohesion, London that it could bring the UK into undesired alignment with the EU.
- The format has greatest utility as a means of coordinating policies, especially on emergent topics and evolving crises. There is particular value in the E3 functioning as a kind of 'working practice' arrangement that can facilitate consultation, coordination and action.
- The E3 has a potentially important role in dealing with diplomatic and security issues beyond Europe, although it could still be used for informal consultations across the board. But rather than aiming at wider policy alignment, France, Germany and the UK are more likely to be able to develop a shared strategic agenda by identifying specific problems which they need to solve together.
- A key challenge for the E3 has always been how to include other EU member states and the EU itself. This legitimacy problem has become more acute post-Brexit. One way to solve it would be to 'build out' the E3 on a case-by-case basis. Moreover, the Biden administration's reinvigoration of Euro-Atlantic 'Quad' consultations that bring together France, Germany, the UK and the US demonstrates a central and increasing role for the E3 in transatlantic security dialogue.



## Introduction

The E3 format has its origin in the 2003 initiative of France, Germany and the UK to embark on collective negotiations with Iran over its nuclear reprocessing and enrichment activities. The E3 subsequently developed to accommodate the evolution of diplomacy with Iran to halt the country's development of a nuclear weapons programme.<sup>1</sup> From 2004, the E3 + EU format extended participation to the EU high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, connecting EU foreign policy and the other EU member states to Iranian nuclear diplomacy. Since July 2015, the E3 has remained integral to implementation of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), agreed between the P5 + 1 (the permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany) and Iran.

Over the years, diplomatic coordination between France, Germany and the UK in the E3 format has broadened beyond the JCPOA to address other international security issues. This has generally taken place on an ad hoc basis and through joint declarations. Issues in the Middle East have been a notable area of E3 collaboration (for example, the conflict in Syria, the events in the Golan Heights and the killing of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi).<sup>2</sup> Other issues have included freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and instability in the Sahel.<sup>3</sup>

However, the UK's withdrawal from the EU means that the E3 now exists in a different context from that of the early 2000s. It no longer brings together the EU's 'big three' players, nor does it act as a vanguard for foreign policy initiatives that can be presented to the other member states. The decision of the British government not to pursue an agreement on cooperation on foreign, security and defence policy within the December 2020 EU–UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement also means that there is currently no formal relationship in this area between London and Brussels. Consequently, alongside NATO's North Atlantic Council and bilateral/minilateral cooperation, the E3 provides an important format for regular foreign and security policy consultations between Europe's key diplomatic players.

This research paper explores the opportunities and challenges for continuing cooperation in the E3 format, as well as the prospects for a shared strategic agenda for France, Germany and the UK in this new context.<sup>4</sup> It examines whether the E3

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<sup>1</sup> For comprehensive examinations of the origins of, and post-Brexit issues relating to, E3 cooperation, see Billon-Galland, A., Raines, T. and Whitman, R. (2020), *The Future of the E3*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/07/future-e3>; and Brattberg, E. (2020), *The E3, the EU, and the Post-Brexit Diplomatic Landscape*, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/06/18/e3-eu-and-post-brexit-diplomatic-landscape-pub-82095>.

<sup>2</sup> See UK Government (2018), 'Jamal Khashoggi's death: joint statement by UK, France and Germany foreign ministers', press release, 21 October 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-uk-france-and-germany-statement-on-jamal-khashoggis-death>; and UK Government (2021), 'Attack on Abha International Airport, Saudi Arabia: E3 statement', press release, 11 February 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/e3-statement-on-attack-on-abha-international-airport-saudi-arabia>.

<sup>3</sup> UK Government (2019), 'E3 joint statement on the situation in the South China Sea', press release, 29 August 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/e3-joint-statement-on-the-situation-in-the-south-china-sea>; and Deutsche Welle (2020), 'Germany, France, Britain to keep troops in Mali despite coup', 21 August 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-france-britain-to-keep-troops-in-mali-despite-coup/a-54652002>.

<sup>4</sup> This research paper is based on prior work on the E3 conducted in 2019–20 by the authors and a former colleague, Thomas Raines. See Billon-Galland, Raines and Whitman (2020), *The Future of the E3*. It is also based on further research and a closed-door workshop for British, French and German policymakers and experts convened by Chatham House/the authors on 27 January 2021 as part of a joint Chatham House–IFRI–DGAP project (see 'About this project') supported by the Hanns Seidel Foundation.

might be repurposed in a manner that both (a) addresses the concerns of France and Germany to ensure that cooperation with the UK does not undermine the EU, and (b) keeps London connected to decision-making on shared European foreign and security concerns and actions in a mutually beneficial way. The authors argue that a pragmatic, issue-oriented approach should be adopted towards future E3 cooperation. This would involve setting ambitious yet realistic objectives for the extent of collective action by the three countries. It would also recognize the political limits on cooperation in the format, as well as the crucial need for continued trilateral engagement.

## **A new context for E3 cooperation**

E3 cooperation on Iran gained acceptance from other EU member states thanks to its successful contribution to the development of a collective EU position on an issue of common concern to both Europeans and Americans. This nuclear diplomacy allowed for a shared sense of purpose to be maintained even in the difficult transatlantic political context during the presidency of Donald Trump in the US, and during the negotiations on the UK's withdrawal from the EU.

However, the shared approach to working together in the E3 to preserve the JCPOA in the face of the challenge posed by the Trump administration did not alter the fact that the relationship between France, Germany and the UK had fundamentally changed because of Brexit. With all its unresolved points of tension as part of the ambiguous new EU–UK relationship, Brexit continues to contribute to a drastically changing political and strategic environment. It also raises the possibility of EU–UK disputes spilling over into the E3 relationship.

## **Paradoxically, the UK's exit from the EU makes E3 cooperation simultaneously more necessary and more difficult.**

In the absence of provisions for foreign, security and defence policy cooperation in the EU–UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement, the E3 provides an obvious way for France and Germany to work with the UK. Yet a fear that this might undermine the EU also limits Franco-German willingness to use the E3, and circumscribes the agenda of topics for discussion within the format. Paradoxically, the UK's exit from the EU makes E3 cooperation simultaneously more necessary and more difficult.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, the EU has become more committed to developing greater collective capacity for action through the agenda for 'European sovereignty' or 'strategic autonomy'. Already under the previous European Commission (2014–19) there was an ambition for the EU to become a stronger actor in foreign and security policy. This has been reinforced by the objective of President Ursula von der Leyen

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<sup>5</sup> Billon-Galland, A. and Whitman, R. (2020), 'E3 Cooperation Beyond Brexit: Challenging but Necessary', Chatham House Expert Comment, 2 September 2020, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/09/e3-cooperation-beyond-brexit-challenging-necessary>.

to make the European Commission more ‘geopolitical’, with its focus increasingly extending to topics related to critical infrastructure and supply chain dependencies since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>6</sup> The development of an enhanced EU foreign, security and defence policy is not, however, a foregone conclusion. Consensus and decision-making are still difficult, as highlighted by the recent debates on the need for qualified majority voting. There has also been criticism of the EU’s foreign policy performance in recent months under High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell, and this has led to some further disenchantment with the EU’s collective diplomacy in Paris, Berlin and beyond.<sup>7</sup>

The Joe Biden administration has already reinvigorated the US relationship with the E3 through an increased number of meetings of the Euro-Atlantic ‘Quad’ – which brings together France, Germany, the UK and the US. These meetings have covered a range of issues, but have especially focused on changing the tone of engagement on the Iran nuclear issue.<sup>8</sup> The Quad format has existed for years as a means of consulting on difficult defence issues within a broader NATO context. After a pause during the Trump administration, there is now a renewed rationale and desire for Quad discussions on issues relating to transatlantic security, as well as on topics for which the US is a key partner for Europe, such as arms control, China, Ukraine and Russia.<sup>9</sup> This ‘new transatlanticism’ has been welcomed in France, Germany and the UK.<sup>10</sup> Yet use of the Quad has already created a new climate which will likely impact the broader E3 agenda, and which may weaken the E3’s added value in certain cases, as discussed in more detail below (see ‘Building out’ E3 cooperation’).

Finally, a certain desynchronization of the political agenda in the E3 countries could prove challenging. While the UK has ended its Brexit transition period, has published its Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy,<sup>11</sup> and is eager to look outwards, attention in Berlin and Paris will increasingly turn inwards over the coming months as Germany gets ready for federal elections (and the end of the Angela Merkel era) later this year and as France prepares for a presidential election – and for its stint in the Presidency of the Council of the EU – in 2022.

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<sup>6</sup> Tamma, P. (2020), ‘Europe wants ‘strategic autonomy’ - it just has to decide what that means’, Politico, 15 October 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-trade-wants-strategic-autonomy-decide-what-means>.  
<sup>7</sup> Karnitschnig, M. (2021), ‘EU foreign policy RIP’, Politico, 13 February 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-foreign-policy-rip>.

<sup>8</sup> UK Government (2021), ‘Iran and other international issues: statement from E3 and the United States, February 2021’, press release, 18 February 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/statement-by-the-foreign-ministers-of-france-germany-the-united-kingdom-and-the-united-states-of-america>.

<sup>9</sup> See White House (2021), ‘Statement by NSC Spokesperson Emily Thorne on National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan’s Call with Counterparts from France, Germany, and the United Kingdom’, press release, 16 March 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/16/statement-by-nsc-spokesperson-emily-thorne-on-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-s-call-with-counterparts-from-france-germany-and-the-united-kingdom>; and Auswärtiges Amt (2021), ‘Work meeting of France, UK, US and Germany on the verge of today’s NATO meeting’, Tweet, 23 March 2021, <https://twitter.com/AuswaertigesAmt/status/1374461807394316289>.

<sup>10</sup> Billon-Galland, Raines and Whitman (2020), *The Future of the E3*, p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> UK Government (2021), *Global Britain in a competitive age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, policy paper, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy>.

## Perspectives from Berlin, Paris and London

The logic for E3 cooperation on international security is based on bringing together Europe's strongest diplomatic and most military-capable states. However, the political rationale and ambitions of each of the three countries are distinctive, and their respective bilateral relationships on security and defence differ in scale, scope and ambition.

Overall, France and Germany are closely aligned in their assessment that the current state of EU–UK relations limits the agenda for joint action and impedes a higher profile for the E3. Despite differences of interpretation of concepts such as 'European strategic autonomy', both countries want to see a stronger EU in the world. France and Germany also want and need to keep a close working relationship with the UK, but they cannot afford to do so at the cost of EU unity. London similarly acknowledges that its interest lies in maintaining close channels of cooperation with its two key European partners. However, it also recognizes that other European interlocutors (for example, Italy and Poland) are reticent about the use of the E3 format beyond JCPOA diplomacy and crisis management. This impacts the UK government's willingness to use the format, as the UK also needs to manage its relationships with other EU countries beyond the E3.

Germany is particularly conscious of the danger of undermining the EU. It sees its role as being a defender of small member states and guarantor of EU unity, and it therefore favours institutionalized multilateralism over loose intergovernmentalism. However, Berlin demonstrates realism by using formats such as the E3 in cases when relying on the EU would lead either to inaction or to Germany being sidelined from important Franco-British discussions, particularly as the Germany–UK relationship is currently the least developed side of the triangle. Germany's short- to medium-term goal remains to achieve structural cooperation between the UK and the EU as a whole on foreign and security issues. The value of wider E3 cooperation for Berlin is as a way to keep open an important line of communication with London for urgent matters; however, Germany does not want the format to become a means for the UK to bypass the EU.

In France, the E3 is viewed as part of a broader set of flexible intergovernmental arrangements that have a low level of institutionalization. These include the European Intervention Initiative (E2I), a French-led defence cooperation framework that brings together a dozen 'willing and able' European countries (including Germany and the UK).<sup>12</sup> Such small groups and intergovernmental cooperation are considered as catalysts for strengthening result-oriented multilateralism. There is thus a pragmatic approach to E3 cooperation, which provides France with another tool for agile policymaking and efficient decision-making. The E3 also adds to the strong bilateral relationships that France has with Germany and the UK respectively. Nevertheless, just as in Berlin, the view in Paris is that there are limits to what can be achieved in a non-institutionalized format. France therefore draws a clear line between E3 cooperation and EU

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<sup>12</sup> French Ministry of the Armed Forces (2020), 'European Intervention Initiative', 17 April 2021, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/english/dgris/international-action/1-ie/1-initiative-europeenne-d-intervention>.

foreign, security and defence policymaking, arguing that the former should not aim to establish joint positions or a distinct approach on topics on which there is an existing EU policy position or a French ambition to reach one.

The UK's perspective is somewhat similar to France's. The government has a clear appetite for flexible, strategic cooperation with France and Germany – particularly in the post-Brexit context – but within a specific set of constraints (though these are distinct from those affecting Germany and France). The Integrated Review makes only one reference to the E3, in the paragraph on Germany, which indicates that London perceives the format as a possible vehicle for strengthening the bilateral relationship too. The E3 is not currently pushed publicly in any of the capitals as a major vehicle for pursuing European foreign and security policy positions, although there is clear interest in exploring its potential. From London's perspective, the E3 should not operate as a mechanism for bringing the UK into alignment with EU foreign and security policies, nor as a caucus for developing a European perspective which could be presented to the US or leveraged to bypass American policy. Forging a European capacity is seen as having value mostly if this provides utility to the transatlantic relationship. With the Biden administration eager to revitalize transatlantic relations, the UK has expressed a clear interest in – and a preference for – working in the Quad format, as Prime Minister Boris Johnson made clear in his speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2021.<sup>13</sup>

At the moment, France and Germany agree on the need to find a balance between the risks and opportunities associated with working with the UK in the E3 format, while keeping an eye on the extent to which the UK may wish to privilege working through other groupings, such as the Five Eyes with Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the US. France and Germany are also waiting for the UK to settle into a new, post-Brexit foreign policy and to make its Europe policy clearer. The Integrated Review does not provide a full-fledged European strategy for the UK beyond the commitment to European security via NATO and some key bilateral relationships.<sup>14</sup> The review recognizes 'the important role played by the EU in the peace and prosperity of Europe' but is cautious towards cooperation with the EU as an institution, noting that the UK will work with the EU 'where our interests coincide – for example, in supporting the stability and security of the European continent'. An EU–UK agreement (or set of agreements) on foreign, security and defence policy would be considered a positive signal by the rest of Europe. However, the extent to which this would create more space for a long-term joint approach (and possibly an active E3) is uncertain. There are limits to what can be achieved in the E3 format in any case: an agreement would not change the fact that the UK is outside the EU, and that the E3 format excludes other European partners and is mostly useful for creating momentum to move forward on certain issues.

Despite divergences over the next steps for the E3 format, France, Germany and the UK have continued to stress the importance and utility of their strategic cooperation. This is based on the understanding that informal groupings can help

<sup>13</sup> UK Government (2021), 'Prime Minister's speech at the Munich Security Conference: 19 February 2021', speech, 19 February 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-ministers-speech-at-the-munich-security-conference-19-february-2021>.

<sup>14</sup> Whitman, R. (2021), 'UK's vision is confident, but success is a long way off', Chatham House Expert Comment, 16 March 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/03/uks-vision-confident-success-long-way>.



plug policy gaps on some issues, and can potentially act as catalysts for action in bigger multilateral forums. However, the need for trust among participants is at the core of the E3's working practice; that trust is susceptible to, and already being eroded by, friction in the EU–UK relationship. Episodes such as the recent tensions around the diplomatic status of the EU delegation to the UK will further complicate the acceptability of E3 cooperation for Paris and Berlin.<sup>15</sup> So, too, will the disputes on the Northern Ireland Protocol and the COVID-19 vaccine supply.<sup>16</sup>

## **Despite divergences over the next steps for the E3 format, France, Germany and the UK have continued to stress the importance and utility of their strategic cooperation.**

Maintaining a routine of close consultations and the reflex of working together is therefore crucial to compensate for political tensions and the UK's loss of structured contact and consultations with the EU. Although there is a reluctance on the part of all three countries to formalize the E3 too much, there may be an argument in favour of a more timetabled cycle of consultations, at least at the working level, to maintain the frequency of contacts, close networks and familiarity needed to underpin trust between the three governments. This is particularly crucial for the UK in the long term, as Franco-German dialogue on virtually all policy topics will remain highly intensive bilaterally and through the EU. Maintaining the E3 will require active formal and informal engagement from UK officials in Brussels (including at NATO) and EU capitals. However, it will be for both the UK and the EU to decide the degree to which they wish to adopt a pragmatic approach to case-by-case cooperation, in the absence of a formal agreement on foreign and security policy cooperation. In the meantime, the E3 format can help ensure that UK and EU policies and statements are mutually reinforcing, even if these are negotiated behind closed doors, and even if there are now different policy delivery mechanisms for the UK.

## **Further E3 cooperation – what for and on what?**

The E3 is, and will likely remain, an instrument of informal minilateralism. France, Germany and the UK value above all its low level of institutionalization and its informal and flexible nature. They have not invested much political capital in its survival or in deepening the E3 brand beyond the JCPOA, and all agree that trilateral cooperation should be driven by mutual interest on certain issues rather than by the need to keep the format alive for its own sake. This section examines

<sup>15</sup> Tidey, A. (2021), “‘Not a friendly signal’: Brussels warns UK over downgrading EU ambassador status”, Euronews, 26 January 2021, <https://www.euronews.com/2021/01/26/not-a-friendly-signal-brussels-warns-uk-over-downgrading-eu-ambassador-status>.

<sup>16</sup> Landler, M. (2021), “The Ugly Divorce Between Britain and Brussels Is Just Getting Started”, *New York Times*, 28 February 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/28/world/europe/brexit-uk-brussels.html>.

the possible functions of the E3 in the future, and the issues on which it might focus. We also propose a pragmatic approach to identifying specific areas on which France, Germany and the UK can cooperate using the E3 format.

## Functions of the E3

Cooperation in the E3 format can have three functions:

- As a **forum for consultation** when the positions and strategic objectives of the countries do not necessarily align, but there is scope and added value in private joint discussions.
- As a **space for coordination** when the positions and strategic objectives of the countries are close, and there is some added value in private or public policy coordination.
- As a **grouping for action** when the three countries decide to act together, through joint statements or initiatives, either in the E3 format only or in larger groupings.

Given the new context and different perspectives outlined above, and the JCPOA aside, the scope for action beyond joint statements is currently limited. There are also political and strategic constraints on engaging in too much policy coordination – or on being seen to do so. One question mark remains linked to the future balance between cooperation and competition among the three countries. Overall, therefore, the E3 is most likely to be used as a forum for consultation and perhaps some informal coordination.

The next question is what specific issues are the most promising for France, Germany and the UK to consult and perhaps even coordinate on. As a rule of thumb, E3 cooperation on a new issue is most likely to be acceptable and successful when there is enough convergence on it, and when the E3 format brings clear added value to all three countries and is seen as legitimate internally and externally. In such cases, and in the current political climate, the following conditions apply in considering areas for future cooperation:

## Added value

- There should be broad alignment in the security interests, strategic objectives and diplomatic investment of the three countries.
- Cooperation through the E3 should complement, rather than duplicate, that in other forums – especially the EU, the G7, the UN and NATO.
- France and Germany should see the UK as bringing added value, and vice-versa, therefore creating an incentive and a necessity for the three countries to work together despite political sensitivities.

## Legitimacy/acceptability

- The US position should differ from, or be in opposition to, that of the E3, or there should be relatively little US interest in the topic.

- The topic should not be one exclusively discussed at the EU level.
- No other key country should have the same interests, or be able offer similar added value on the issue, as France, Germany and the UK.

The conditions set out above are to determine purely E3 topics. With all this in mind, the scope for new issues to be moved forward by France, Germany and the UK through the E3 is rather limited. Some topics could be addressed in expanded 'E3+' formats that would bring in other countries (for more details, see the section 'Building out' E3 cooperation'), or through the Quad format. This would be possible if the topic in question met the 'added value' criteria, even if it did not meet all the 'legitimacy/acceptability' ones.

### **Focus of the E3 strategic agenda**

All three E3 countries acknowledge that they need to prioritize issues for trilateral cooperation, and that they would rather focus on major issues crucial to their interests than spread themselves too thin on every crisis. The E3 as a format is therefore likely to stay active in crisis management on the big issues of the day – i.e. issues on which the three countries both wish to work together even in the current context and cannot afford *not* to work together. The mechanics of such crisis management are likely to include joint communiqués and consultations, as was the case in the E3 response on Belarus and Mali at the first E3 defence ministerial meeting in August 2020.<sup>17</sup>

Geography does not provide a consistent basis for the identification of topics for potential E3 cooperation. On the one hand, proximity can sometimes mean that there is a clear collective interest in France, Germany and the UK addressing an issue. Developments in Europe and its neighbourhood can not only create a greater imperative for each country to take action, but can incentivize close cooperation to avoid policy conflict. Where the three countries share geostrategic and geopolitical interests, such as in relation to conflicts in their immediate neighbourhood, the impulse for collective action is likely to be greater. The E3 could therefore be more useful in tackling issues in Europe and its neighbourhood, which would also see it bring added value to the transatlantic partnership. This could build on the E3's experience in Iran diplomacy to tackle wider Middle East security issues on which the US has been disengaging (and where it expects European countries to take more responsibility), and which affect Europe more directly.

On the other hand, issues in and around Europe are also more likely to require an EU response and/or be of interest and concern to other European countries as well. The added value and acceptability of the exclusive E3 format would therefore be reduced: for instance, on topics such as Libya where the inclusion of Italy is essential. This is why E3 cooperation is likely to be less politically sensitive on issues beyond the immediate European neighbourhood, where there is greater scope for Europe's 'big three' to align their approaches without the E3's remit and interests overlapping with those of other European institutions or countries.

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<sup>17</sup> UK Government (2020), 'Defence Secretary's speech at meeting of UK, German and French defence ministers', 21 August 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/defence-secretarys-speech-at-meeting-of-uk-german-and-french-defence-ministers>.

The Indo-Pacific presents one such (very broad) topic, discussed in more detail below, on which there is currently both (a) little risk of direct E3 competition with the EU and (b) appetite for more exchanges between the three countries, and therefore more scope for productive discussions.

E3 cooperation is likely to remain at the political and security end of the spectrum. Exclusive military cooperation between France, Germany and the UK is unlikely, as their strategic cultures differ (although those of France and the UK are closely aligned). The three countries have access already to many forums for military cooperation, including via bilateral relations, NATO, the E2I, and other regional and minilateral formats. There has been little follow-up so far to the first E3 defence ministerial meeting, held in August 2020, despite some interest from Germany's defence minister, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer.<sup>18</sup> More strategic-level discussions between officials in the French, German and British defence ministries could be beneficial, in part if the three countries aimed at forming a more active European core, or 'pillar', within NATO. Ways forward for EU–NATO cooperation also constitute a promising topic for E3 discussions. However, unlike their foreign ministry colleagues, defence officials have less of a need to make up for the loss of EU-based discussions or any loss of familiarity post-Brexit, as the EU is not yet an established actor in this sphere and as defence ministers still meet regularly in NATO ministerial meetings. In the future, the UK's absence from regular debates in the EU's defence policy forums could become more problematic as the EU invests more in defence, as seen recently with the launch of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) framework and the European Defence Fund (EDF).

### **In the future, the UK's absence from regular debates in the EU's defence policy forums could become more problematic as the EU invests more in defence.**

The rationale for an exclusive dialogue between France, Germany and the UK is possibly also less relevant outside of the diplomatic sphere. All three are big economic players with regional soft power, but they have less need to caucus in these spheres. In spite of the increasing strategic attention to international environmental and trade issues – especially in relation to supply chains, critical infrastructure or data – such issues are also likely either to fall within EU competencies or be areas in which Paris and Berlin prefer an EU approach. Generally speaking, these issues will be more appropriately tackled through the UK's bilateral relationships with EU countries, through the G7/G20, through NATO, or as part of future EU–UK sectoral arrangements.

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<sup>18</sup> London School of Economics and Political Science (2020), 'Securing Freedom in the Age of Connectivity: towards a deeper German-British partnership?', event recording, recorded 16 January 2020, <https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/podcasts/kramp-karrenbauer>.



## **A problem-solving mindset**

At present, it seems more likely that E3 common action, beyond crisis response, could arise as a consequence of coincidental and parallel national policy development that would benefit from coordination. The new and evolving strategic approaches to the Indo-Pacific offer an example of one area in which trilateral consultations would be welcome, as European countries still need to work out their positions in terms of tensions, competition and shared interests in the region.

There have already been E3 statements and UN coordination on issues relating to Indo-Pacific security, particularly in the South China Sea.<sup>19</sup> France and Germany have been pushing for an EU strategy for the Indo-Pacific, with the Council adopting conclusions on an EU strategy for cooperation on 16 April 2021.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, the UK remains a crucial like-minded partner in the region. Trilateral consultations will therefore remain necessary and complementary, particularly relating to defence issues and the three countries' deployment of naval assets in the region. For its part, the UK sees France and Germany as bringing added value in the economic sphere in the Indo-Pacific. A coordinated approach to Indo-Pacific security would also likely offer a welcome European contribution to the transatlantic relationship, and could support cooperation with the proposed 'D10' grouping of democratic middle powers.

Overall, the way forward for E3 cooperation seems to be via a problem-solving approach, especially on multidimensional thematic and regional topics that are also being addressed at the EU level. In identifying where prospects exist for small-scale initiatives that could contribute to major international and regional issues, it will be easier to flag the specific policy areas in which British interests are better served by cooperation with France and Germany (and possibly with the EU, too), and where UK inclusion also brings added value for the other two countries (and maybe for the EU as well). In the western Balkans, the security dimension would necessarily bring both NATO and the UK into any cooperative action, including on organized crime. In the Indo-Pacific, the maritime security aspect is definitely not a topic on which the EU has a monopoly. A focused, problem-solving approach as outlined here would be particularly relevant for issues on which the UK has historical links and established communications channels, or for those – such as Hong Kong – on which it is a policy leader and where there would be a cost in France and Germany ruling out a joint approach.

One policy area in which E3 engagement has arisen on an ad hoc basis more than by design is in efforts to address political instability and insecurity in the Sahel region of Africa. Germany and the UK have progressively been drawn into France's extensive commitments in this region, where the interconnection of state failure and security issues offers a test case for whether the E3 can provide an effective platform for blending its members' security, military and national development policies – as well as those of the EU – to maximum effect.

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<sup>19</sup> UK Government (2019), 'E3 joint statement on the situation in the South China Sea'.

<sup>20</sup> European Council (2021), 'Indo-Pacific: Council adopts conclusions on EU strategy for cooperation', press release, 19 April 2021, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/04/19/indo-pacific-council-adopts-conclusions-on-eu-strategy-for-cooperation/>.

There could also be opportunities for the E3 to work together on delivering development aid to specific parts of non-francophone Africa where the EU is less active, and where the UK has more established links and programmes and would like to cooperate more with France and Germany. Enhanced cooperation would bring mutual benefits, and would be less likely to become politicized as long as it remained at the technical level rather than extending to wider political alignment.

Finally, there are topics on which France, Germany and the UK share many objectives but have different approaches. In these cases, there would still be added value in using the E3 format to talk through and iron out such differences. Consultations could enhance cooperation and facilitate common positions on issues that are complicated for NATO to address. For example, there is a rationale for deepening consultations on how to make the most of the E3 partners' distinct bilateral relationships with Turkey, and how to choreograph their approach on issues related to the country. Similarly, eastern Mediterranean issues would benefit from sustained E3 or 'E3+' (see next section) dialogues in order to limit policy drift between the three countries. And, despite their different approaches to Russia, dealing with the many challenges Russia presents should remain a topic of discussion for France, Germany and the UK even if the Quad format is likely to be preferred for this task. The E3 members also have different approaches to countries affected by Russia's actions – such as Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia and the other Caucasus states – so there is scope for more coordination on the broader region.

## **'Building out' E3 cooperation**

One of the key challenges for the E3 has always been how to include other EU member states, and how to position itself *vis-à-vis* the EU institutions. The format can only be effective if it is seen as legitimate by such institutions; this need has become more acute post-Brexit. With no institutional relationship between the UK and the EU on foreign policy, and the UK government reluctant to be seen to be closely associated with the EU, tensions between Brussels and London are high.<sup>21</sup> It is hard to imagine that an expanded E3+EU format would be politically acceptable on either side at the moment. Resistance on this matter could be problematic in the long term, given that the public choreography between the E3 and the EU on the Iran nuclear deal was in part what made the format acceptable to the rest of the EU.

The concern of other EU states about E3 cooperation dovetails with their opposition to the emergence of a Franco-German foreign policy *directoire* – whereby the two states would take the *de facto* leadership of EU foreign policy away from other member states, leaving those other states with less influence on EU foreign policymaking. In some respects, however, the UK's presence in the E3 could ease such concerns by diluting Franco-German influence. This could

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<sup>21</sup> As an illustration, see Borrell, J. (2021), 'After Brexit, how can the EU and UK best cooperate on foreign policy?', European External Action Service, 29 January 2021, [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/92345/after-brexit-how-can-eu-and-uk-best-cooperate-foreign-policy\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/92345/after-brexit-how-can-eu-and-uk-best-cooperate-foreign-policy_en).

contribute to a wider European foreign and security approach more in line with the priorities of northern and eastern EU member states, which could therefore view the inclusion of some British leadership as a positive factor – for instance, to strengthen a ‘European pillar’ at NATO.<sup>22</sup> However, the fear remains that the E3 countries will reach a consensus on decisions to which other EU states will be asked to consent, and with their interests possibly ignored. This is of special concern for smaller member states which place a premium on the EU as a force multiplier for their foreign policy. The creation of a European Security Council, as France, Germany and others propose, could provide a forum for including the UK in discussing and tackling European strategic challenges, while the E3 could retain a competitive advantage for crisis management. However, detailed plans for such an arrangement have not yet been advanced.<sup>23</sup>

## **A pragmatic and efficient option is to consider the E3 as an open cooperation format, in which its current members would form a core and partner with other European states depending on the issue at hand.**

A pragmatic and efficient option is therefore to consider the E3 as an open cooperation format, in which its current members would form a core and partner with other European states depending on the issue at hand: for example, with Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden on Arctic/High North issues; or with Italy, Greece and Spain on topics relating to the Mediterranean and southern neighbourhood. Widening the format on an ad hoc ‘E3+’ basis – i.e. for cooperation on specific issues – would most likely result in Italy being frequently included. Italy’s input would be especially relevant for initiatives on Libya, the western Balkans and the eastern Mediterranean, and the country’s G7 membership adds to its attractiveness as a potential partner for the E3.<sup>24</sup> Italy is already a partner of choice for the UK on climate change, as a consequence of the two countries’ joint presidency of the COP26 process. Italy and the UK also share extensive defence industry cooperation. However, Italy could be a more problematic partner on issues related to China and Russia, as its positions have been different to those of the E3 countries in the past. Overall, Italy does not match the E3’s global outlook and role. The inclusion of another country in the grouping, creating in effect an ad hoc ‘E4’,

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<sup>22</sup> As an illustration, see Wieslander, A. (2020), ‘How France, Germany, and the UK can build a European pillar of NATO’, Atlantic Council, 23 November 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/commentary/article/how-france-germany-and-the-uk-can-build-a-european-pillar-of-nato>.

<sup>23</sup> The establishment of a European Security Council has been advocated by France, Germany and others as a more inclusive format. However, the proposed council has not yet offered strong competition to the existing E3 model. For its advocates, a European Security Council could present an alternative model for cooperation, with a variety of different membership configurations all expanding beyond the E3 membership. In some formulations, the proposed council is presented as an ‘EU+UK’ format that would allow for concerns about an E3 *directoire* to be addressed. However, it is still uncertain which issues such a council would aim to tackle, what its tools would be, and where it would add value. See Whineray, D. (2020), ‘The Pros and Cons of a European Security Council’, Carnegie Europe, 23 January 2020, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/80869>.

<sup>24</sup> UK Government (2021), ‘Rocket attacks in Erbil, 15 February 2021: joint statement’, 17 February 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-statement-rocket-attacks-in-erbil-on-15-february-2021>.

would likely prompt questions about why other EU members were omitted. Unless the rationale is clear, this could lead to even more diplomatic complexity in terms of negotiating the E3's role and relationship to the rest of the EU.

Cooperation with other countries on long-term global issues to which France, Germany and the UK are all committed (such as climate change, the energy transition and multilateralism) makes sense. However, there is little scope for the E3 to become a full-spectrum format through which the three partners maintain an all-encompassing dialogue on international issues. Outside of collective statements, there is at present limited E3 lobbying and campaigning in other countries or cooperation in international organizations. The three countries will remain active participants in multilateral forums such as the UN, and could form a more active core in such settings. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) is also a forum in which the E3 could engage in greater joint leadership. The E3 countries have not operated as a caucus within the G7, but their membership of it provides access to a platform for intensive consultation and cooperation with key global partners on a wide range of issues. Consequently, issues for E3+ cooperation would likely be ones not already addressed at the G7 level.

Operating on a case-by-case basis in concert with other states, or within non-European minilateral groupings such as the Five Eyes or a D10, most likely presents the best way to 'build out' E3 cooperation beyond European states. This is because France, Germany and the UK will necessarily prefer to work with democratic, like-minded partners. For instance, Japan is an obvious prospective partner, as it shares good relationships with the E3 countries, which are currently increasing their defence arrangements with Tokyo. France and Germany have also recently joined the Five Eyes partners in the Combined Space Operations (CSPO) initiative to work collectively on space security requirements.<sup>25</sup> Beyond ad hoc arrangements, determining which other states or groupings might be included in more formalized cooperation with the E3 implies that France, Germany and the UK would be willing to give the format a higher profile and able to agree on the appropriate partners. This is not the case today.

E3 cooperation has already been expanded beyond European states since the emergence of collective nuclear diplomacy on Iran. Expanding the use of the 'Quad' format with the US may be a more comfortable mode of operation for the E3 countries in the short term. The recent opportunities presented by the Biden administration to work on a shared and reinvigorated agenda, where transatlantic differences are less pronounced than they were under the Trump administration, may diminish the relative utility of the E3 format for France, Germany and the UK. For Berlin and Paris, more frequent cooperation within the Quad would mitigate criticism that the E3 format might allow the UK to shape aspects of EU foreign and security policy. There have also been instances of so-called 'Quad+'

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<sup>25</sup> United States Space Command (2020), 'Combined Space Operations initiative welcomes France and Germany', 13 February 2020, <https://www.spacecom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/Article/2083368/combined-space-operations-initiative-welcomes-france-and-germany>.



cooperation: for instance, in March 2021 with Italy on Libya.<sup>26</sup> More Quad cooperation would also be welcomed by the UK, given its strong preference for transatlantic cooperation. However, the UK government could find such an approach problematic if the result were less E3 cooperation at a time when Britain is excluded from the US–EU partnership and looking for flexible ways of working with France and Germany.

Although its relations with Europe are now friendlier and more cooperative, the US still expects France, Germany and the UK to take more responsibility for their security and that of their neighbourhood. The US will likely support the E3 format if this leads to European countries taking greater responsibility for regional challenges, both inside and outside of NATO, and if the E3 proves more effective at making and implementing decisions than the EU. Policy towards China may be an example of this, given that the E3 countries are becoming more clear-eyed on the issue than some other European states. It is also likely that the US will insist on the UK being included in joint actions with Europe (especially if the use of military and intelligence capabilities is required), so the E3 could well remain the preferred format on certain topics. If the E3 were to become more of a European engine in NATO, a possible development could be meetings between the E3 and NATO's secretary-general. However, just as with the EU, debates around the exclusion of other European Allies would likely occur.

## Conclusion

This year sees the beginning of a new period for E3 cooperation. There have always been limits to what can be achieved through this format, even before Brexit, given that it excludes other European countries. The changing political and strategic context has accentuated the need for Paris, Berlin and London to work together. However, it has also raised important hurdles to the continuation of E3 cooperation in terms of the ambition for both its scale and scope. Some of these challenges can be managed, but overall France, Germany and the UK now operate in a different environment in which their objectives, priorities and constraints do not necessarily align.

In this context, the E3 should perhaps be considered a working practice more than a format *per se*. Despite political difficulties, it remains crucial as a mechanism for the three countries to consult, coordinate or act. With Germany, France and the UK facing the same strategic challenges and broadly the same outlook on many global issues, there is a strong rationale for them to collaborate closely. The E3's crisis management and JCPOA-related aspects work effectively, and all three members want to maintain this flexible and mutually beneficial form of cooperation. The E3 will also be useful in coordinating policies on emergent

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<sup>26</sup> UK Government (2021), 'Joint statement from the UK, with France, Germany, Italy and the US, to welcome the ratification of Libya's interim Government of National Unity', press release, 11 March 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-statement-from-the-uk-with-france-germany-italy-and-the-us-to-welcome-the-ratification-of-libyas-interim-government-of-national-unity>.

topics such as the Indo-Pacific. But expanding cooperation on some issues of long-term significance beyond informal consultations and ad hoc coordination appears to be circumscribed by the current political context.

Given the constraints France, Germany and the UK each face, as well as their preferences, none of the three countries is looking to deepen and expand exclusive cooperation in the E3 as an end in itself. They are committed, however, to maintaining close, regular and informal channels of communication and consultation, and to working together in this format whenever there is strategic added value and political legitimacy in doing so. As a result, the pragmatic, issue-oriented approach proposed in this paper, rather than any greater institutionalization, appears to make the most sense as an ambitious yet practical path for future E3 cooperation.

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