

Written evidence submitted by the Foreign Policy Centre (EUR0022)

Foreign Affairs Committee Inquiry

The UK-EU reset: rebuilding a strategic partnership in uncertain times

Introduction

1. The Foreign Policy Centre (FPC) is an independent and non-partisan international affairs think tank based in the United Kingdom. The FPC publishes independent research and provides an open and accessible space for the exchange of ideas, knowledge and experience, so that the voices of experts and advocates can be heard and acted upon.
2. The FPC has a broad network, including academics, practitioners, experts and former policymakers, many of whom have expertise on Europe, the European Union (EU) and the United Kingdom's (UK) relationships with European states. For the purposes of this submission, the FPC engaged with Dr Ed Turner (FPC Senior Research Fellow, Reader in Politics at Aston University and Co-Director of the Aston Centre for Europe); Dr Andrew Gawthorpe (Lecturer at Leiden University, expert in US politics); David Harley (member of FPC Advisory Council and former Deputy Secretary General of the European Parliament); Andra-Lucia Martinescu (FPC Research Fellow); and Dr Sasikumar Sundaram (Senior Lecturer at the Department of International Politics at City St George's, University of London) to gather their insights on the UK-EU reset. This submission is not intended to be a comprehensive analysis of these areas but seeks to present relevant insights from the FPC network that can prompt further consideration of key issues. The views expressed in the submission are those of the authors as cited. Each contributor reviewed and approved citations before submission to the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Summary

3. In a rapidly changing geopolitical context, and at a time of heightened global uncertainty, now is the time for the UK to pursue a wide-ranging reset with the EU. The UK-EU Summit, to be held on 19th May 2025, is an opportunity for the UK Government to advance progress in this area and should focus primarily on establishing defence and security arrangements. With a review of the implementation of the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) upcoming in 2026, the Government must work with EU Member States to identify areas of synergy that could develop into new cooperation mechanisms suitable for today's global landscape, which has changed rapidly since Brexit. If progress is to be made, both sides will have to show willingness and be prepared to make concessions. Challenges relating to the policy decisions by the United States (US) administration, and subsequent fallout, look likely to continue to pose a risk to progress and, while great uncertainty remains, the UK should be preparing for how best to overcome potential hurdles in this regard. This includes finding opportunities for greater cooperation, rather than division or competition, in light of shocks to markets and global trading. The UK-EU Summit is the first step of a much-needed process to realign both sides as they work to secure their mutual interests.

Recommendations for the UK Government

4. Shift from ad-hoc engagement with the EU and Member States to an approach that encompasses structured cooperation while respecting legal and political boundaries. A more predictable and strategic relationship would allow both sides to more effectively respond to emerging global challenges and capitalise on areas of mutual interest. One suggested way in which this could be achieved is through a UK-EU Strategic Forum, established at the UK-EU Summit.
5. Communicate to the EU and Member States that the UK is committed to a substantive reset of relations during the May Summit. This will require credible commitments on the part of the UK Government. Furthermore, make the UK asks of the EU clear, including by consistently communicating asks when in bilateral dialogues with each Member State and with the EU Commission.
6. Prioritise defence and security cooperation with the EU as an area of mutual interest. This could include defence industry integration, mitigating reliance on non-European actors. At this stage of a reset, focusing the majority of effort on 'win-win' cooperation is a sensible approach.
7. Build on pre-existing models as an early-stage mechanism for developing a UK-EU reset. For example, non-binding Security and Defence Partnerships, which have been recently agreed with other countries, could be a first-step to establish political dialogue around defence cooperation that could lead to greater integration.
8. Develop and deliver a communications strategy with a clear narrative about why the UK is pursuing a reset with the EU to build public support and trust in establishing closer ties with the EU. For example, separating out issues, such as youth mobility from immigration.
9. Develop strategies to ensure preparedness for potential shifts in the US approach to Europe and the EU.

Key Insights

What would a positive outcome to the 19 May UK-EU Summit look like for the UK? Which policy areas are the most contentious for the UK? For the EU? How can these different 'asks' be accommodated?

The Summit comes at a critical moment

10. The UK-EU Summit comes at a critical time globally and domestically. David Harley, member of the FPC Advisory Council and former Deputy Secretary General of the European Parliament, outlined that the *"stakes could hardly be higher, with liberal democracy and the rule of law under threat in the US, a belligerent and expansionist Russia, inadequate military capacity in Europe... and a sluggish economy in both the UK and the EU, exacerbated by US-imposed tariffs*

*and a looming global trade war”.*¹ Given the current context, the Summit “*must mark a definitive change of tone*” in the UK-EU relationship, moving away from generalities, an insistence on “*red lines*” and accusations of “*cherry-picking*”.² Instead, “*both sides must raise the level of ambition, to make sure it matches the scale of the challenge*”.³

Prioritising a security and defence agreement

11. The foremost item upon which progress must be made at the Summit on security and defence.⁴ Dr Andrew Gawthorpe, Lecturer at Leiden University, explained that the UK must recognise that “*many bilateral and minilateral agreements with EU member states is no substitute for structured, comprehensive UK-EU cooperation on defence procurement*” and shared that leaving the Summit with a clear trajectory towards signing an agreement would be a positive outcome.⁵ Harley emphasised that such an agreement should be “*comprehensive and binding*”.⁶
12. Important to note is that reaching a defence and security agreement, argued Dr Gawthorpe, will also require movement from EU member states, “*dropping extraneous linkage demands, for instance on fishing rights*”.⁷

Other opportunities

13. A number of proposals were agreed by the UK-EU Parliamentary Partnership Assembly in its Recommendation adopted following the 5th meeting of the Assembly in Brussels on 17-18th March 2025.⁸ Harley identified key points that could be considered further in May, including:
 - a. “*Given the changing world order and the emergence of new threats, the UK and the EU should increase the coordination of foreign, energy, security and defence policies, and this should be the central theme of the renewed EU-UK relationship*”.⁹
 - b. “*Explore options for closer customs cooperation and alignment of regulatory standards to facilitate trade and stimulate economic growth, while ensuring that both sides’ systems are as streamlined and interoperable as possible. This could include UK accession to the Pan-European Mediterranean Convention (PEM)*”.¹⁰

¹ David Harley, comments to FPC, April 2025

² *ibid.*

³ Sir Julian King, ‘UK-EU relations: Time to raise the level of ambition’, Centre for European Reform, 21 March 2025, <https://www.cer.org.uk/insights/uk-eu-relations-time-raise-level-ambition>

⁴ Dr Andrew Gawthorpe, comments to FPC, April 2025

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ David Harley, comments to FPC, April 2025

⁷ Dr Andrew Gawthorpe, comments to FPC, April 2025

⁸ UK Parliament, Fifth meeting of the UK-EU Parliamentary Partnership Assembly takes place in Brussels, March 2025, <https://www.parliament.uk/business/news/2025/march/fifth-meeting-of-the-uk-eu-parliamentary-partnership-assembly-takes-place-in-brussels/>; and European Parliament, Delegations, 5th EU-UK Parliamentary Partnership Assembly, 17-18 March 2025, Brussels, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/delegations/en/5th-eu-uk-parliamentary-partnership-asse/product-details/20250224DPU39839>; and EU-UK Parliamentary Partnership Assembly, Recommendation on strengthening the EU-UK partnership, March 2025, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/293904/5th%20PPA%20Recommendation%2017.03.25.pdf>

⁹ David Harley, comments to FPC, April 2025

¹⁰ David Harley, comments to FPC, April 2025

- c. *“Consider linking the respective Emission Trading Schemes, as suggested in the TCA, and further pursuing energy cooperation in the North Sea”*.¹¹
- d. *“Coordinate military and financial actions in order to strengthen defence industries”*.¹²
- e. *“Reaffirm the decision to hold regular strategic consultations on Russia/Ukraine, the Indo-Pacific, Western Balkans and hybrid threats”*.¹³

An opportunity for institutionalising broader shifts

14. As noted in point 10, the Summit comes at a critical time. While a defence and security agreement was outlined as a key objective, it was also seen as a moment in which the UK and EU could rebalance their broader bilateral approach.
15. Dr Sasikumar Sundaram, Lecturer at the Department of International Politics at City St George’s, University of London, explained that the Summit must be the start of a *“pivot toward a comprehensive framework and grand strategic rebalance”* that goes beyond the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement’s (TCA) limited scope.¹⁴ Dr Sundaram stressed that currently, the UK Government does not appear ready for such a shift, but instead will use the Summit to carve out *“bespoke trade and diplomatic agreements”*.¹⁵
16. Andra-Lucia Martinescu, FPC Research Fellow and Co-founder of The Diaspora Initiative, echoed this sentiment and stated that a positive outcome to the 19th May UK-EU Summit would *“signal a strategic reset, grounded in mutual interest and long-term resilience”*.¹⁶ Such an outcome would also signal a move away from *“ad-hoc engagement toward a more predictable and institutionalised relationship that can evolve in response to global emerging challenges, and in foreign policy areas of mutual interest, for instance, sanctions coordination”*.¹⁷
17. Following Brexit, *“the UK’s approach to the EU was defined by a desire to assert regulatory sovereignty, minimise institutional dependencies, and create visible political distance from previous integration frameworks”*.¹⁸ This was a reflection of the context at the time, but also led to a *“limited and transactional form of engagement that has since proven insufficient in addressing shared strategic interests”*.¹⁹ In recent years, *“tangible experience – especially in responding to global crises such as the war in Ukraine, the COVID-19 pandemic, and growing*

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ David Harley, comments to FPC, April 2025; discussed during meeting of the EU High Representative for foreign affairs and Security, Josep Borrell and the UK Foreign Secretary, David Lammy on 14 October 2024, House of Commons Library, Resetting the UK’s relationship with the European Union, March 2025, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10207/>

¹⁴ Dr Sasikumar Sundaram, comments to FPC, April 2025

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ Andra-Lucia Martinescu, comments to FPC, April 2025

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ Andra-Lucia Martinescu, comments to FPC, April 2025

¹⁹ *ibid.*

*tensions in the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific – has exposed the limitations of an isolationist posture, removed from European realities”.*²⁰

18. Martinescu shared that a *“more mature and pragmatic approach – one that embraces structured cooperation while respecting political and legal boundaries”* has become essential.²¹ This includes acknowledging the EU’s *“established legal posture in relation to third-country partnerships, intended to safeguard the coherence of EU decision-making”*.²² However, the EU should also *“respect the UK’s status as a sovereign, third country actor with distinct foreign policy priorities and regulatory autonomy. This includes recognising the UK’s strategic weight in European security, and its unique contributions as a NATO power, global intelligence actor, and diplomatic partner”*.²³
19. Dr Ed Turner, FPC Senior Research Fellow, Reader in Politics at Aston University and Co-Director of the Aston Centre for Europe, explained that there is a *“real risk of the US playing divide and rule between the UK and the EU at any number of moments in the coming years”*.²⁴ Such efforts could be through issues like standards or trade, or *“ideational”*.²⁵ Echoing points made by other contributors, Turner argued that *“robust political structures will help to mitigate this risk and that is one reason why a developed institutional framework for UK-EU cooperation should be agreed in May”*.²⁶

The UK Government needs to make its willingness clear

20. The potential opportunities from the UK-EU Summit are vast, however the UK Government must show willingness to advance progress. Dr Gawthorpe shared that EU countries are reportedly unclear about whether the *“UK government wants, or is politically able, to be an integral part of”* processes to develop European security and defence capabilities.²⁷ Given the critical context, in which European nations are pursuing policy changes to advance greater European strength, Dr Gawthorpe stressed that the UK must urgently *“communicate to the EU and Member States that it is serious about a substantive reset”*.²⁸
21. Discussing a UK-EU reset more broadly, Martinescu shared that there is a need for *“clear-eyed recognition that re-engagement with the EU demands credible and commensurate commitments”*.²⁹ She shared that in approaching negotiations, the Government could take on an approach of *“political realism, shifting the tone of cooperation from risk management to mutual strategic gain”*.³⁰

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ *ibid.*

²² *ibid.*

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ Dr Ed Turner, comments to FPC, April 2025

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ Dr Andrew Gawthorpe, comments to FPC, April 2025

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ Andra-Lucia Martinescu, comments to FPC, April 2025

³⁰ *ibid.*

22. Significantly, a *“rebuilding of trust and demonstration of concrete progress”* will position both the UK and EU well for the review of the TCA, which is set to begin after December 2025.³¹
23. Martinescu proposed that, with the intention of building trust and advancing social connection between the UK and EU, the Government could re-assess the structures for university tuition fees for EU students, for example *“reinstating home fee status - or offering targeted tuition relief”*.³² Such a move, *“while not a central pillar in strategic, economic, or the broader defence and security negotiations...would carry substantial symbolic weight, and long-term trust dividends – if framed as a soft-power gesture rather than policy reversal”*.³³ Martinescu explained that there is already a *“precedent”* for such a move, where other non-EU countries, such as Norway and Switzerland have established such policies.³⁴ Such a policy decision would have much broader implications, particularly during a UK-EU reset. Martinescu argued that *“such a move would help shift negotiations beyond the rigid framing and well-worn terrain of red lines, demonstrating the UK’s willingness to innovate and compromise in areas of mutual societal interest, reaching beyond institutions, into the classrooms, campuses, and the young British and European citizens who will ultimately define the UK-EU relationship”*.³⁵ Harley agreed with these points.³⁶

Areas of contention and how they could be navigated

24. Dr Gawthorpe argued that the *“most contentious issues for the UK are freedom of movement and sovereignty”*.³⁷ For the EU, most contentious is any attempt to *“cherry pick from among the four freedoms”*.³⁸
25. Often wrapped up in discussion about freedom of movement is the conversation of youth mobility. Dr Turner stressed that the Government should not be discussing youth mobility in the same context as discussions about a red line on free movement.³⁹ This is because he says that these two issues are not connected: *“youth mobility would be governed by quota and would be time limited, rather than presenting a universal and limitless entitlement for all young people to come to the UK”*.⁴⁰ Furthermore, there are *“huge soft power benefits”* for the UK in expanding access to the UK for young people; however, these benefits can be lost in discussion of bringing down overall numbers of migrants to the UK.⁴¹

³¹ Dr Andrew Gawthorpe, comments to FPC, April 2025; and UK Parliament, The UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement: Review Clauses, July 2024, [The UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement: Review clauses - House of Commons Library](#)

³² Andra-Lucia Martinescu, comments to FPC, April 2025

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ Andra-Lucia Martinescu, comments to FPC, April 2025. She also noted that this process would most likely involve negotiations with the Treasury and the universities themselves, not an easy path in the very short term.

³⁶ David Harley, comments to FPC, April 2025

³⁷ Dr Andrew Gawthorpe, comments to FPC, April 2025

³⁸ Dr Andrew Gawthorpe, comments to FPC, April 2025; and, European Council, ‘EU single market’, Council of the European Union, 05 February 2025, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/deeper-single-market/>

³⁹ Dr Ed Turner, comments to FPC, April 2025

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ *ibid.*

26. For managing contentious points, Harley noted that potential trade-offs for progress could revolve around a youth mobility scheme, EU countries' fishing rights and Gibraltar.⁴² Another point of discussion could be *"limited and targeted financial contributions for possible partial access to the single market in specific regulatory areas, on the principle that 'to enjoy the benefits of the club, you have to pay a membership fee'"*.⁴³
27. Dr Gawthorpe noted that ultimately there is a strong argument to be made that enhanced economic integration is the *"best way to strengthen the economies of both the UK and EU, signal strategic unity, and generate growth in order to fund further defence spending"*.⁴⁴ Politically and at this stage, however, such plans are viewed as a *"non-starter in the UK and EU, and attempting to solve them now would be counterproductive"*.⁴⁵ Harley noted that *"nevertheless, it is difficult to imagine any significant growth in the UK economy without closer economic and trade relations with the EU"*.⁴⁶
28. While opportunities for trade-offs are possible, Dr Gawthorpe highlighted that, currently, instead of seeking accommodations on issues of significant difference between the UK and EU, it would be sensible to focus the majority of efforts on defence and security cooperation, where both sides have a mutual interest.⁴⁷ Furthermore, there is a *"clear potential for win-win cooperation through defence industry integration"*.⁴⁸ Increased EU defence spending is economically beneficial and good for security, including countering Russian aggression.⁴⁹
29. Given the sensitivities that exist within the UK over sovereignty, the inclusion of other policy areas would make this harder, not easier.⁵⁰ Thus the challenge that the UK government is facing is to *"credibly signal"* to the EU its commitment to enhanced security/defence cooperation, not to expand talks to cover other, more contentious policy areas.⁵¹

Has the Government clearly articulated a whole-of-government approach to the negotiations? Are there any policy areas that have not been included but should be included?

Establishing clarity around asks

30. Dr Gawthorpe noted that *"within the EU, the government has been widely perceived as not having set out clear asks"* and, as a result, *"many politicians and civil servants within the EU and Member States do not understand what it is that the Starmer Government wants from its reset"*.⁵² This point was reiterated by Dr Turner, who said that many EU Member States were not

⁴² *ibid.*

⁴³ *ibid.*

⁴⁴ Dr Andrew Gawthorpe, comments to FPC, April 2025

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

⁴⁶ David Harley, comments to FPC, April 2025

⁴⁷ Dr Andrew Gawthorpe, comments to FPC, April 2025

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁵² Dr Andrew Gawthorpe, comments to FPC, April 2025

clear on what the UK sought.⁵³ Furthermore, *“they fear that the Government does not know itself, and/or, that it lacks the political will to antagonise eurosceptic sentiment”* that remains in British politics.⁵⁴

31. As outlined in points 11 and 12, defence and security cooperation are central. Beyond making requests clear to EU leaders, if trust is to be rebuilt and progress is to be made in this area, Dr Gawthorpe argued that the UK Government must also garner support for its aims from the British public.⁵⁵ This would include highlighting the importance of defence and security cooperation for longer-term peace and conflict resolution, for example, in countering Russia’s aggression.

What role should the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office play in supporting the reset? Are UK embassies in EU Member States, resourced and equipped to support this process?

Supporting and leveraging pre-existing channels

32. There are opportunities for the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) to play an enhanced role in supporting a UK-EU reset, and Martinescu outlined that this could be done through supporting pre-existing channels. Martinescu explained that post-Brexit, British civil society, trade and sector-specific bodies retained a presence in Brussels and developed their own approaches for engaging and influencing the EU. Indeed, UK groups kept their membership in *“pan-European representative bodies”*.⁵⁶ For example, *“the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) is part of Business Europe, the EU’s main business lobby group, and Tech UK of Digital Europe, respectively”*.⁵⁷ As a result, Martinescu explained that *“in the absence of formal UK representation within EU decision-making bodies, this network of civil society organisations, trade associations and sectoral groups have remained embedded in European policy conversations, maintaining trust and continuity, while identifying avenues for reengagement, often well in advance of formal government initiatives”*.⁵⁸
33. A central way in which the FCDO can support a reset, particularly in the context of the upcoming summit, according to Martinescu, is by providing support to these organisations and bodies that have established *“bilateral links and institutional memory”*.⁵⁹ Beyond support, these organisations are seen as a significant soft power asset and should be leveraged by the Government, particularly the FCDO, as part of a *“whole-of-government approach to the reset”*.⁶⁰

⁵³ Dr Ed Turner, comments to FPC, April 2025

⁵⁴ Dr Andrew Gawthorpe, comments to FPC, April 2025

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

⁵⁶ Andra-Lucia Martinescu, comments to FPC, April 2025;

⁵⁷ Andra-Lucia Martinescu, comments to FPC, April 2025; more information available at: techUK, International Policy and Trade, <https://www.techuk.org/shaping-policy/international-trade.html>

⁵⁸ Andra-Lucia Martinescu, comments to FPC, April 2025

⁵⁹ Andra-Lucia Martinescu, comments to FPC, April 2025

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

Assessing the UK's presence in EU Member States

34. Regarding the FCDO and wider government, Dr Turner shared that he is *“not at all sure that existing structures do enough to make the most of the possibility of UK-EU and European bilateral relationships”*.⁶¹ Embassies in some key smaller European Member states are smaller than their equivalents outside Europe and require more attention to mitigate future risks.⁶² Dr Turner pointed to Slovakia (bordering Ukraine) or Bulgaria (bordering Turkey) as key examples and asked whether the UK's *“current presence, specifically on the EU's eastern flank”* delivers *“us all that we need”*.⁶³
35. Given likely changes as a result of the Government's spending review, and with changes to Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) projects, the UK Government must consider its priorities closely. In a context of potential cuts, Dr Turner also stressed that, although not part of the FCDO, consideration should be given with posts funded by the Department for Business and Trade (DBT) within the UK's European embassies. The projects *“are ‘invest to save’, and if they are pared back, crucial projects for the UK's economy and potentially security will be missed out upon”*.⁶⁴ Instead, investment should be made in DBT staff in relevant roles underpinned by a clear analysis of financial benefits to the UK and robust targets.⁶⁵

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

Strategic signalling

36. In the current global context, the UK Government should focus on what Dr Gawthorpe described as *“strategic signalling and concrete moves towards closer cooperation”*.⁶⁶ As Russia's illegal war in Ukraine continues, it is paramount that the UK and EU show Russia that they are unified and advancing their relationship.⁶⁷ Regardless of differences in other policy areas, both the UK and EU share a *“core national interest”* in upholding the security of the North Atlantic area.⁶⁸ The UK and EU together *“pose a vastly tougher target for a militaristic Russia than they do separately”* and should therefore prioritise their cooperation to achieve a mutual security priority.⁶⁹
37. If cooperation between the UK and EU advances, it can be expected that Russia will attempt to stoke division between the two. Dr Gawthorpe stated that Russia *“may attempt to enlist the United States, whose current administration is responsive to Russian interests, in doing so”*.⁷⁰ Indeed, there are indications that such a process has already begun. The importance of finding

⁶¹ Dr Ed Turner, comments to FPC, April 2025

⁶² *ibid.*

⁶³ *ibid.*

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

⁶⁵ *ibid.*

⁶⁶ Dr Andrew Gawthorpe, comments to FPC, April 2025

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

⁶⁹ Dr Andrew Gawthorpe, comments to FPC, April 2025

⁷⁰ *ibid.*

unity on shared aims is therefore more important than ever. A failure to focus on joint interests as a result of disputes over lower-priority issues would not only stifle progress toward rearmament but would “*signal to Russia that the UK and EU can be easily divided*”.⁷¹

Advancement of cooperation and synergy

38. Dr Turner noted that the EU’s 27 Member States are currently unable to act in a unified manner, particularly as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban is reluctant to include EU-wide statements.⁷² There has been a push by some Member States to have Qualified Majority Voting on security and defence topics, however Dr Turner saw this as unlikely alongside any treaty change.⁷³ Against this backdrop, there could be more flexibility and opportunity for the UK to be part of less formal structures.⁷⁴ If this is the case, Dr Turner emphasised that the UK should “*push to be an equal partner, not a rule taker*”.⁷⁵

39. While the US approach towards NATO and transatlantic security still remains unclear, there is much scope for change in the European-UK security landscape.⁷⁶ However, Dr Sundaram emphasised that Europe should push for “*synergy*”, working to harness the UK’s “*defence and security strengths - its NATO role, technological edge, and integrated defence firms - rather than duplicating efforts*”.⁷⁷

40. Defence procurement from non-Member States remains an issue of divergence within the EU.⁷⁸ Openness would have an economic benefit and would also mean that European security can be increased.⁷⁹ Dr Turner emphasised that defence innovation in the UK should be accessible to the EU Member States, so they have “*access to the most innovative suppliers, not just the biggest players*”, and that this would need to be part of wider UK-EU negotiations.⁸⁰

41. The likely next German Chancellor, Friedrich Merz, had regularly highlighted that the UK is important to European security and defence, which Dr Turner noted was telling.⁸¹ Dr Sundaram underlined German proposals, including those from outgoing Chancellor Olaf Scholz, particularly relating to the suggestion of cooperation by the UK, France and Germany through a “*European nuclear umbrella*” and the EU’s calls for structured cooperation, as clear signs of opportunity for progress.⁸² In this context, Dr Sundaram shared that progress should be made to advance

⁷¹ *ibid.*

⁷² Dr Ed Turner, comments to FPC, April 2025

⁷³ *ibid.*

⁷⁴ *ibid.*

⁷⁵ *ibid.*

⁷⁶ *ibid.*

⁷⁷ Dr Sasikumar Sundaram, comments to FPC, April 2025

⁷⁸ Dr Ed Turner, comments to FPC, April 2025

⁷⁹ *ibid.*

⁸⁰ *ibid.*

⁸¹ Dr Ed Turner, comments to FPC, April 2025

⁸² Dr Sasikumar Sundaram, comments to FPC, April 2025; and Euronews Chancellor Scholz meets Prime Minister Starmer as UK seeks ‘reset’ with EU, February 2025, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/02/02/chancellor-scholz-meets-prime-minister-starmer-as-uk-seeks-reset-with-eu>; and The Guardian, Labour to seek joint declaration with EU on wide-ranging security pact, July 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/politics/article/2024/jul/07/labour-to-seek-joint-declaration-with-eu-on-wide-ranging-security-pact?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other; and European Council on Foreign

broader and more ambitious security agreements in the TCA, which are currently seen as limited.⁸³ This would see an expansion to *“security interdependence, military logistics, supply chain credibility, cybersecurity training and resilience, and coalition of the willing for deterrence”*.⁸⁴ At the Summit in May, the UK should *“push for joint strategic planning, ensuring its private defence companies align with this shift rather than driving fragmented relations”*.⁸⁵

Focusing on wider aspects of security

42. At this stage of a reset between the UK and EU, other aspects of security should not be overlooked.⁸⁶ Dr Turner shared that *“disinformation, outside interference in domestic political processes, cyber security, and climate security”* are examples of areas upon which to focus.⁸⁷ Harley added that *“the real possibility of further Russian military incursions into Eastern Europe and the Baltic States gives added urgency to closer EU-UK cooperation on security”*.⁸⁸

What, if any, new frameworks or agreements are needed to support a UK-EU strategic partnership? Is a non-binding Security and Defence Partnership in the form of an MoU sufficient, or should the UK pursue a formal Security and Defence agreement?

Limitations of the TCA in a changing geopolitical context

43. There have been *“profound geopolitical shifts”* since frameworks for the UK-EU relationship post-Brexit were established.⁸⁹ While the TCA was comprehensive, it was primarily a tool for overseeing *“economic separation, not as a platform for joint strategic action”*.⁹⁰ Given the vastly changed global strategic landscape, there is a need for a new approach.⁹¹ Martinescu shared that the TCA *“lacks the agility and ambition to respond to escalating challenges – Russia’s continued aggression, shifting US-EU / US-UK dynamics, the rise of strategic competition with China, growing instability in the Middle East”*, all of which take place *“amongst the myriad localised crises puncturing the continent, from the rise of illiberal regimes, and the mainstreaming of extremist discourse, to hostile, foreign interference in democratic elections and multifaceted hybrid threats”*.⁹²
44. Harley echoed this sentiment about a changed context and underlined that *“different times call for a different mindset.”*⁹³ He stated that *“the UK should demonstrate that it is once again a*

Relations, Transatlantic drift: UK-EU defence cooperation in the second Trump era, December 2024, <https://ecfr.eu/article/transatlantic-drift-uk-eu-defence-cooperation-in-the-second-trump-era/?amp>

⁸³ Dr Sasikumar Sundaram, comments to FPC, April 2025

⁸⁴ *ibid.*

⁸⁵ *ibid.*

⁸⁶ Dr Ed Turner, comments to FPC, April 2025

⁸⁷ *ibid.*

⁸⁸ David Harley, comments to FPC, April 2025

⁸⁹ Andra-Lucia Martinescu, comments to FPC, April 2025

⁹⁰ *ibid.*

⁹¹ *ibid.*

⁹² Andra-Lucia Martinescu, comments to FPC, April 2025

⁹³ David Harley, comments to FPC, April 2025

*reliable partner, and the EU for its part should show a greater degree of flexibility, with less technocratic and legalistic nitpicking”.*⁹⁴

Moving toward a security and defence agreement

45. Martinescu pointed to recent non-binding EU Security and Defence Partnerships, of which Japan, South Korea and Norway have become part.⁹⁵ These models could be an early-stage mechanism for the UK and EU to lay a “*political foundation*” for “*re-alignment on a range of issues...while also creating space for structured consultations and joint threat assessments*”.⁹⁶ While a positive first step, this kind of cooperation would be limited and would lack the operational coordination seen as necessary by Martinescu in a volatile global context.⁹⁷
46. Martinescu instead proposed that “*To ensure the reset moves beyond rhetoric and delivers a real strategic effort, the UK and EU should pursue a formal Security and Defence Agreement (SDA), commensurate with their capability offerings and level of strategic ambition.*”⁹⁸ Such a move would “*provide the legal and technical framework required for UK participation in Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions (on a case-by-case basis), structured command roles, asset and intelligence sharing protocols, as well as personnel protections.*”⁹⁹
47. Explaining further, Martinescu emphasised that “*an SDA would not amount to defence integration per its previous iteration, but rather solidify a pragmatic, interest-based agreement, similar to the EU’s arrangements with Norway, Canada and a number of strategic partners*”.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, Norway and Canada “*maintain both non-binding SDPs and legal Framework Participation Agreements (FPAs), which function in tandem to balance political cooperation with operational capacity.*”¹⁰¹
48. Martinescu proposed that the May Summit could therefore establish an UK-EU Strategic Forum that would “*act as a permanent dialogue mechanism, while serving as an institutional platform to negotiate and shape the mutually reinforcing, two-tiered approach to security and defence cooperation. It would be within the confines of this Forum that the Government gauges the appetite for, and progress towards, a more robust, strategically coherent, institutionalised framework, ideally in the form of an SDA*”.
49. Such a Strategic Forum, however, “*must not become a vehicle for endless political discussions at the expense of delivery*” if it is to maintain any standing.¹⁰² Martinescu explained that “*first and foremost, it must serve as a space where strategic intent is translated into actionable priorities, whether through joint threat assessments, coordinated sanctions, or shared defence planning.*”

⁹⁴ *ibid.*

⁹⁵ Andra-Lucia Martinescu, comments to FPC, April 2025; and European Parliament, Briefing, The EU’s new bilateral security and defence partnerships, January 2025, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2025/767215/EPRS_BRI\(2025\)767215_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2025/767215/EPRS_BRI(2025)767215_EN.pdf)

⁹⁶ Andra-Lucia Martinescu, comments to FPC, April 2025

⁹⁷ *ibid.*

⁹⁸ *ibid.*

⁹⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*

¹⁰² Andra-Lucia Martinescu, comments to FPC, April 2025

*Secondly, it has become abundantly clear that without such engagement the UK risks forfeiting long-term influence over Europe's strategic culture, where military doctrine, and security architectures are being fundamentally re-shaped. Amid a widening transatlantic rift, Europe's strategic autonomy is no longer a distant aspiration, but a palpable reality impacting defence cooperation, capability development, as well as crisis response".*¹⁰³

What are the Government's long-term strategic objectives for the UK-EU relationship on economic security?

Economic security as a long-term goal

50. The UK Government has been clear that its number one priority is economic growth.¹⁰⁴ Dr Turner argued that *"growth" and "security"* are likely the two aspects that the Government seeks to secure as part of a UK-EU reset.¹⁰⁵ Dr Sundaram outlined that UK economic growth has been slow, and the *"UK's current economic situation is precarious"*.¹⁰⁶ In this context, he shared that the Government's economic approach needs to be underpinned by *"robust partnership"* and that Europe could *"offer the launchpad for the UK to reorient its regional and global partnerships"*.¹⁰⁷

Prioritising defence and security

51. While advancement of economic integration with the EU would be beneficial for increasing economic growth and for facilitating greater expenditure on security and defence, Dr Gawthorpe explained that economic integration would be very unexpected.¹⁰⁸ He shared that *"such a broad undoing of Brexit is unlikely, and seriously discussing it would sap political capital needed for more concrete, short-term steps"*.¹⁰⁹ At this stage of the reset, economic integration should not distract from achieving defence and security goals, particularly *"defence sector integration and supply chain resilience"*.¹¹⁰

US tariffs as a driver of uncertainty in the UK and EU

52. Tariffs recently introduced by US President Donald Trump will have a significant impact on long-term thinking about UK-EU economic security. Harley noted that with both the UK and EU facing tariffs on goods exported to the US, the UK and EU should cooperate to *"restore stability in global trade relations"*.¹¹¹

¹⁰³ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ GOV.UK, Prime Minister's Officer, 10 Downing Street, Kickstarting Economic Growth, <https://www.gov.uk/missions/economic-growth>

¹⁰⁵ Dr Ed Turner, comments to FPC, April 2025

¹⁰⁶ Dr Sasikumar Sundaram, comments to FPC, April 2025

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ Dr Andrew Gawthorpe, comments to FPC, April 2025

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Dr Andrew Gawthorpe, comments to FPC, April 2025

¹¹¹ David Harley, comments to FPC, April 2025

53. How the two sides respond to tariffs could have implications for future UK-EU cooperation on economic security. Important to note, however, is that *“under the Treaty the EU is represented in trade negotiations by the Commission, and decisions in the overall approach are taken by majority, not unanimity”*.¹¹² As a result, Harley noted that *“in all likelihood the EU will have a united position vis-a-vis the US”*. Dr Turner discussed similar issues, explaining that if the UK is seeking an economic deal with the US, this could require changes in UK standards, which would have implications for trade opportunities with the EU, meaning, *“the government might have to choose between these two partners”*.¹¹³ Consideration of increased economic cooperation between the UK and EU therefore cannot be considered in a vacuum, and the introduction of US tariffs is a key destabilising factor.
54. Dr Gawthorpe noted that even after President Trump temporarily paused some of the high tariffs that he imposed during the period April 2 – 11, the US tariff rate is *“higher than it has been since the Great Depression”*.¹¹⁴ As a result of the *“complexity of global supply chains, this has implications for the UK economy which go beyond the direct tariff rate applied to it by the US. It will lead to lower global growth and higher input costs, harming the UK economy”*.¹¹⁵ Considering potential future implications, Dr Gawthorpe explained that *“if the US continues on this course and the economic pain becomes apparent over the long term, then economic cooperation and integration between the UK and the EU would have even greater benefits and may become more politically feasible”*.¹¹⁶ With this in mind, *“it would be short-sighted to instead seek to appease the US while celebrating the so-called ‘Brexit dividend’ of lower tariff rates”*.¹¹⁷ Dr Gawthorpe therefore underlined that *“Trump’s policies directly threaten the long-term existence and health of a globalised economy, which is vital to the long-term security and prosperity of our island nation. This is an issue of much greater concern than a relatively small difference in tariff rates. Joining with the EU to defend this economic order would be more in line with the UK’s long-term strategic interest”*.¹¹⁸ Dr Gawthorpe also noted that *“as the world moves in a more protectionist direction, there is a great chance that either the UK or the EU could find themselves without access to critical supply chains, including the defence industry”*.¹¹⁹ Developing resilience across Europe as a whole is one way to counter this”.¹²⁰

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

Managing uncertainty

55. President Trump has broken away from previous US administrations in his approach to Europe, and Dr Gawthorpe shared that the Trump administration’s level of hostility is

¹¹² *ibid.*

¹¹³ Dr Ed Turner, comments to FPC, April 2025

¹¹⁴ Dr Andrew Gawthorpe, comments to FPC, April 2025

¹¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Dr Andrew Gawthorpe, comments to FPC, April 2025

¹²⁰ *ibid.*

“unprecedented”.¹²¹ Unpredictability is *“one of the key characteristics of the second Trump administration”*, including with relation to Europe, including the US approach to NATO.¹²² The real-world implications of this hostility toward Europe are still not entirely clear, and neither is the impact this could have on the UK as it tries to navigate its relationships with the US and EU.¹²³

A potential change in approach toward the US and EU

56. So far, the UK Government’s approach of refusing to *“choose”* between the EU or US has been seen as *“correct”*.¹²⁴ However, Harley noted that as circumstances change and the US pursues policies *“clearly not in the UK’s national interest”* a change in approach may be required. Gawthorpe also shared that if the US stance toward Europe *“moved further towards open hostility”* the likelihood of the UK being forced to *“choose sides”* will increase.¹²⁵
57. Determining a path forward will require the UK to be *“cognisant of the changing world”*.¹²⁶ The UK’s primary reason for close relations with the US is because of the *“US defence commitment to Europe”*, however this is now *“precisely the thing that is most questioned by the Trump administration”*. Indeed, Harley noted that changes to the defence relationship may be required, including the possibility that in the future the UK’s intelligence relationship with the UK may have to be *“downgraded and progressively disentangled”*.¹²⁷
58. On the other hand, Dr Gawthorpe underlined that *“simple geographical proximity means that the UK will always have shared security interests with the EU”*.¹²⁸ Furthermore, if there is a possibility that the US withdraws more broadly from defence commitments, the UK will have *“no choice but to change course and tilt toward European neighbours”*.¹²⁹ To protect UK interests by beginning to prepare for such a shift would be reasonable.¹³⁰
59. Summarising his thoughts on the question of UK-EU-US relations, Dr Gawthorpe shared that *“the UK government must be prepared to decide that maintaining close relations with both the US and EU is not possible, and in such a situation to choose the EU. This would be a watershed in British foreign policy. But its enormity would be justified by the enormity of the events that precipitated it – namely, the Trump administration’s decision to abandon the postwar rules-based order”*.¹³¹

¹²¹ *ibid.*

¹²² *ibid.*

¹²³ *ibid.*

¹²⁴ David Harley, comments to FPC, April 2025

¹²⁵ Dr Andrew Gawthorpe, comments to FPC, April 2025

¹²⁶ *ibid.*

¹²⁷ David Harley, comments to FPC, April 2025

¹²⁸ Dr Andrew Gawthorpe, comments to FPC, April 2025

¹²⁹ David Harley, comments to FPC, April 2025

¹³⁰ David Harley, comments to FPC, April 2025; Dr Andrew Gawthorpe, comments to FPC, April 2025

¹³¹ Dr Andrew Gawthorpe, comments to FPC, April 2025

Could UK divergence from the EU's approach to 'de-risking' its economic relationship with China affect the UK-EU reset, and if so how?

60. Regarding economic security and relations with China, Dr Turner shared that there is “*little appetite on the part of either the UK or EU governments to get into fights which are potentially harmful to trade and growth on any more fronts than currently exist*”.¹³² Despite this, however, Dr Turner underlined that there is still “*an underlying need for European self-sufficiency*”.¹³³ For example, in securing supply chains for critical raw materials, medical goods, vaccines and energy sources.¹³⁴ Dr Sundaram also highlighted Europe’s “*dependency on trade with Asia*” as requiring a new “*long-term vision*” by building partnership with South and Southeast Asian countries.¹³⁵ In this regard, the UK should view the EU as a partner in this process and that “*a shared analysis is needed, not a competitive approach (harking back to ‘vaccine wars’)*”.¹³⁶
61. These considerations take place against a backdrop of changing global alignments. Dr Sundaram pointed to developing relations between the US and Russia as a “*troubling development for the UK*”, even if an aim is to counter a Russia-China relationship.¹³⁷ As these developments unfold, the UK has a unique role to play. Dr Sundaram argued that the UK should use its “*special relationship*” with the US to “*hold the Trump administration accountable*”.¹³⁸ Dr Sundaram shared that “*Europe’s geographical reality close to Russia cannot be wished away*” and also stressed that, as a result of the UK’s “*defence expertise and NATO leadership*” it can play a role in steering Europe through shifting US-Russia relations “*provided it moves beyond bespoke arrangements to a unified strategy*”.¹³⁹

This submission was prepared by Alice Copland (FPC Policy and Parliamentary Affairs Manager) with support from Susan Coughtrie (FPC Director). It was drafted with inputs from Dr Ed Turner (FPC Senior Research Fellow, Reader in Politics at Aston University and Co-Director of the Aston Centre for Europe); Dr Andrew Gawthorpe (Lecturer at Leiden University); David Harley (member of FPC Advisory Council and former Deputy Secretary General of the European Parliament); Andra-Lucia Martinescu (FPC Research Fellow and Co-founder of The Diaspora Initiative); and Dr Sasikumar Sundaram (Senior Lecturer at the Department of International Politics at City St George’s, University of London). The views expressed in the submission are those of the authors as cited.

15th April 2025

¹³² Dr Ed Turner, comments to FPC, April 2025

¹³³ *ibid.*

¹³⁴ *ibid.*

¹³⁵ Dr Sasikumar Sundaram, comments to FPC, April 2025

¹³⁶ Dr Ed Turner, comments to FPC, April 2025

¹³⁷ Dr Sasikumar Sundaram, comments to FPC, April 2025

¹³⁸ *ibid.*

¹³⁹ *ibid.*