

UK wields military and security cooperation as a weapon in Brexit negotiations

Robert Stevens

22 September 2017

UK Prime Minister Theresa May is to speak in Florence today to outline her government's position on European Union (EU) withdrawal. The speech is being hailed as crucial, amid growing rifts in the ruling Conservative Party over their Brexit strategy and tensions between the UK and EU.

A fourth round of talks between Britain and the EU is to begin Monday, with the parties so far unable to agree to “divorce” terms prior to the October summit deadline, let alone proceed to talks on any ongoing trade relationship.

The week leading up to the Florence speech was dominated by the fallout from an article by Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson—a representative of the “hard Brexit” faction of the ruling elite—who criticised May's EU withdrawal strategy.

While Johnson's comments received enormous media attention, hardly any attention was paid to the two latest UK “position” papers submitted to the EU. The first “future partnership paper,” published September 12, is headed, “Foreign policy, defence and development.” The second, issued a week later, covered the issues of security and intelligence.

On triggering the legislation to leave the EU in March, May threatened that if Britain did not receive a deal in its interests from the EU, the bloc faced losing access to Britain's considerable military and intelligence resources.

The threat is now renewed.

The statements issued by cabinet ministers alongside the defence paper made clear what was at stake. Defence Secretary Michael Fallon said, “At a time of increased threats and international instability the UK remains unwavering in its commitment to uphold European security. With the largest defence budget in Europe, the largest Navy, British troops and planes deployed across land, air and sea in Europe, our role in the continent's defence has never been more vital.”

The paper notes, “European countries face common

threats that are increasing in scale, diversity and complexity—from... instability in the Middle East and North Africa, to the crisis in Ukraine, and to cyber attacks. In particular, the threat of **terrorism** and **extremism** to all European citizens has increased, demonstrated by recent attacks across European cities.”

It warns, “Long-term shifts in the balance of global economic and military power have led to increasing competition between states. Whether it is continued aggressive behaviour by Russia, North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles or regional **conflict** and **instability** that will affect our citizens abroad, the UK and EU partners face a more uncertain international context.” [emphasis in original]

It adds, “The UK's defence capabilities and current cooperation with EU partners make an essential contribution to European security. In 2016 the UK spent 2.17 per cent of GDP on defence, raising the EU22 average to 1.35 per cent.”

Boasting of the reach of the British Armed Forces, it states they are “deployed in Estonia and Poland to deliver NATO's enhanced Forward Presence, and UK Typhoon aircraft have been deployed to Romania to police the skies over the Black Sea. The UK is currently leading NATO's Very High Readiness Joint Task Force. Since 1962, the UK has declared our nuclear capability to the defence of NATO, thereby contributing to the ultimate guarantee of collective Euro-Atlantic security.”

The paper stressed that among the European powers it is the UK, as the second military power in NATO, who carries the big stick. It states, “UK's defence budget is the second largest in NATO and accounts for more than 20 percent of spending on defence by NATO allies other than the United States,” adding that the “UK continues to meet NATO's targets of spending two percent of GDP on Defence and 20 percent of this on researching, developing and procuring new equipment.” From 2015 the UK would

“spend £178 billion over the forthcoming decade on equipment and equipment support with the UK’s research and development spending representing around 40 per cent of the 27 European Defence Agency (EDA) Member States’ total.”

The UK warns that other critical military alliances are threatened, noting the “UK-France Lancaster House Treaties,” signed in 2010, “that provide a framework for cooperation across defence policy, military capability and nuclear matters. This includes establishing the Combined Joint Expeditionary Force—a Franco-British force—for use in a wide range of crisis scenarios, up to and including high intensity combat operations.”

The document makes direct references for the necessity for the UK to have access to open markets for this relationship to continue.

It adds, “The European defence industry sector is closely integrated with leading companies having a presence across several European nations, including the UK, where all the constituent parts of the UK play their part... Open markets and customs arrangements that are as frictionless as possible are important to the continued success of this sector and to ensure that British and European Armed Forces can access the best war-fighting capability to keep us safe.”

Such was the heavily implied threat in the defence paper that Fallon was forced, in response to a question by a BBC journalist, to reply, “No, this isn’t blackmail, this isn’t a negotiating strategy... We want to fight terrorism together. It’s vital. We are not making threats.”

Britain, facing a growing economic crisis, is attempting to threaten its rivals based on its unstable geo-political alliance with the United States. Following Trump’s United Nations speech in which he threatened the annihilation of North Korea’s population, Johnson stated, “We have a duty in the UK government to have strong, dynamic, vibrant relations with our number one ally and the most powerful nation on Earth.”

Trump is an outspoken supporter of Brexit, and May and Johnson both refused to criticise his fascistic rant. Johnson warmly shook Trump’s hand, unlike German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who didn’t attend the UN session in New York, and French President Emmanuel Macron, who absented himself as Trump spoke.

Johnson made his attack on May’s Brexit strategy in a 4,000-word article in the pro-Brexit *Daily Telegraph*, which outlined his “vision” of a “glorious” future for Britain outside the EU. He wrote, “We all agreed on what leaving the EU logically must entail: leaving the customs

union and the single market, leaving the penumbra of the European Court of Justice; taking back control of our borders, cash, laws.”

On the issue of what the UK would have to agree to in order to secure a future trade agreement, he asserted, “We would not expect to pay for access to their markets any more than they would expect to pay for access to ours.”

His comments were widely understood as the basis for a leadership challenge to May, who lost the Tories their parliamentary majority in a disastrous general election campaign after running on a slogan of offering “strong and stable leadership”. She is not expected to be party leader by the next general election.

Johnson’s article came after he was assailed by hard Brexit figures for not playing a more central role in the negotiations to advance their agenda. In July he said that the EU could “go whistle” if they expected the UK to pay anything as part of its exit settlement. But since then Johnson had been largely silent on the EU negotiations.

Johnson published his piece without it being cleared by any senior government figures. It was aimed at spiking May’s Florence speech, where she is expected to propose to the EU that the UK will make an initial offer of around €20 billion as part of the UK’s liabilities.

The *Financial Times* reported Thursday that May will make a “promise that no EU country will be required to make further financial contributions because of Brexit before the next long-term budget is negotiated in 2020. That overture, tied to payments for a transition period for the UK, covers a shortfall of at least €20bn in the EU budget.” However, warned the *FT*, this is “far less than the EU’s opening demand, which covers up to €100bn of gross liabilities, stretching well beyond 2020.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact