

UK seeks to shore up relations with Europe at London summit centred on military security alliance

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The UK and the European Union (EU) have signed a “reset” deal at a summit held in London this Monday—the first of what will now be an annual series of UK-EU summits.

The centrepiece of the agreement is a Security and Defence Partnership, framed in terms of combatting Russia. It opens the door to UK arms companies being given full license to fulfil contracts funded through the EU’s €150 billion rearmament programme SAFE (Security Action for Europe).

According to a UK government press release, it will also enable “increasing support for Ukraine with joint work to tackle Russia’s illegal shadow fleet and strengthening our co-operation on sanctions, to maximise economic pressure on Putin’s war machine” and also “co-operation across a wide range of areas, ranging from maritime security, space security, tackling hybrid threats, and enhancing the resilience of our critical infrastructure, to irregular migration, global health, and illicit finance.”

Talks will begin on giving the UK access to EU facial recognition data, as part of a range of measures designed to strengthen cooperation in policing and cracking down on migration.

An agrifoods deal based on the UK agreeing “dynamic alignment” with certain EU regulations—meaning Britain adjusts its rules to match Europe’s—reduces red tape on food and drink exports. The British government claims these changes, plus an agreement on the Emissions Trading Scheme, will add £9 billion a year to the UK economy.

Access to UK waters for European fishing vessels, due to expire in 2026, is extended for 12 years to 2038.

Negotiations are ongoing over the details of the UK’s

return to the Erasmus university exchange scheme and a new “youth experience scheme”, allowing young people to work, study and travel freely across the UK and the EU for a limited period—possibly with a cap on numbers.

Sir Keir Starmer’s Labour government is working to mitigate the impact of the UK’s 2016 Brexit referendum vote to leave the European Union—which surprised the largely opposed British capitalist class—and the “hard” withdrawal enacted by the Conservative government of Boris Johnson in January 2020.

The EU is by far the UK’s largest trading partner, accounting for 41 percent of UK exports in 2024, and 51 percent of imports. As a result of the sharp increase in customs and regulations following the UK’s withdrawal, the value of UK goods exports to the EU has fallen 21 percent, and imports 7 percent. Combining this and other factors, the Office for Budget Responsibility estimates a long-term 4 percent reduction in UK GDP due to Brexit.

Geopolitically, the UK’s withdrawal from the EU significantly knocked its standing on the world stage, removing it from one of the world’s three major trading blocs, alongside the US and China. Britain also lost much of its usefulness to the US as the most reliably pro-Washington voice among the major EU powers. “Britain is back on the world stage,” Starmer announced at Monday’s press conference.

The Labour prime minister has been pushed to act rapidly—the agreement apparently came together in six months—by Donald Trump’s actions since assuming the presidency of the United States.

While the European imperialists remain committed to

the proxy war in Ukraine against Russia, Trump is seeking to use the conflict as leverage to secure lucrative unilateral deals with the Ukrainian and Russian governments. The UK has tried hard to bring Trump back on board but has seen little reward for its efforts.

Likewise, its pursuit of a major US trade deal—touted by the Brexiteer wing of the bourgeoisie as the biggest prize of leaving the EU—has largely faltered. Starmer’s efforts to talk up the agreement with the US signed two weeks ago cannot hide the fact that the UK is in a worse position in its trading relations with the US than when President Joe Biden left office.

For both of these reasons, the UK government has felt the need to tack a little more closely to the Europeans, or at least to maintain more friendly relations than have prevailed in the last decade.

However, Starmer can only go so far in “resetting” relations with the EU, despite the urging of the Liberal Democrats, the Green Party and the Trades Union Congress to go further. Abroad, the Labour government is still seeking to maintain friendly ties with a White House which has been open about viewing Europe as a strategic competitor. Trump, who has called on the UK to orient towards Europe, expects the UK to double down on its role as a US watchdog—which cannot be squared with a long-term rapprochement with the EU.

At home, it is playing to the anti-migrant and anti-EU constituency represented by Nigel Farage’s Reform UK, currently polling the highest of all the parliamentary parties. Starmer told a meeting of Labour MPs after the summit, “Reform are our main rivals for power.”

Farage and Conservative leader Kemi Badenoch were quick to denounce the deal, with the most pro-Brexit papers, the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express* headlining their Monday editions, “PM risks Brexit vote ‘betrayal’” and “PM is hellbent on selling out our Brexit freedoms”. *The Sun* dedicated the entire Tuesday front page to a bullet-pointed list of reasons Starmer had been “Done up like a kipper”.

The agreements on trade announced this Monday are therefore so limited as to recoup just 0.3 percentage points of the 4 percent hit to the UK’s GDP dealt by Brexit, according to the Office for Budgetary Responsibility.

Talks are ongoing on the “youth experience scheme”

because the Labour government is determined not to have it interfere with bringing down the UK’s net migration figure—after Starmer delivered a viciously anti-immigrant speech in Parliament last week.

In its relations with Europe and the US, the British government is balancing between two power blocs moving rapidly apart. Labour is clinging on to this position for the UK, which has for decades secured a place at the top table for an increasingly outgunned nation—militarily and economically. But the intensification of a global crisis involving escalating trade war and military conflicts will rapidly reduce Britain’s room for manoeuvre.



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