

POLICY PAPER

A Breath of Fresh Air, or the Winds of Change? CFSP after Brexit and Strategic Challenges for the Czech Republic

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Introduction

Even though the European Union's (EU) Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and its integral part, the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), do not follow the "Community Method" and are conducted on an intergovernmental basis, and despite the fact that foreign and security policy considerations were not significant drivers of the 2016 in/out referendum result (Black et al. 2017: 17), the United Kingdom's (UK) withdrawal from the EU is bound to have serious implications in this area. Pending the final agreement between the UK and the EU and the eventual completion of the exit process, it seems safe to say that the UK's decision to leave the EU carries certain risks in terms of its impact on CFSP and CSDP. In fact, CFSP/CSDP appears to be one of the few areas in which the costs of Brexit might be higher for the EU than the UK (Whitman 2016b: 2). At the same time, however, some opportunities in the CFSP/CSDP area may arise as a consequence of Brexit, such as building a momentum for the EU to develop the latent potential for its security and defence projects and move forward on initiatives that the UK has previously blocked – mostly on the basis of its principled reluctance to a more integrated defence

and security policy (Lain 2016: 1; Whitman 2016a: 45). This policy paper sets out to examine possible implications of Brexit for the CFSP and CSDP, and the ensuing strategic challenges that the Czech Republic is likely to face in this respect.

Czech Strategic Interests and Post-Brexit CFSP

As a small country in a global context and a medium-sized country on the European scale, the Czech Republic understands the EU as "an underlying framework" for its foreign policy (MZV ČR 2015). Czech foreign policy aspires to "security, prosperity and sustainable development, human dignity, including the protection of human rights, serving the people, and nurturing a good reputation abroad" (MZV ČR 2015), while also aiming to improve the Czech Republic's track record in promoting its interests within the EU. According to the *Concept of the Czech Republic's Foreign Policy*, it is in the country's strategic interest to have "a uniform, strategically run EU Common Foreign and Security Policy", with the country pledging to actively help shape the CFSP in cooperation with like-minded EU member

states (MZV ČR 2015). Similarly, the *Concept of the Czech Republic's Policy in the EU* defines a more effective CFSP and operational CSDP as a key Czech strategic priority within the EU (Vláda ČR 2015).

Recently, the Czech Republic has made several steps to move itself closer to the EU core driven by the Franco-German axis, which was demonstrated, for instance, by its announcement of August 2017 that it would seek to gain observer status at Eurozone meetings. Also specifically in the highly sensitive CFSP/CSDP area, it has been trying to develop a higher level of cooperation with Germany and France, with these relationships having become a key element of its post-Brexit CSDP policy orientation. For instance, it announced in February 2017 that it will integrate parts of its armed forces (more concretely, the 4th Rapid Deployment Brigade which is considered the Czech army's spearhead force) into the German army within the scope of NATO's Framework Nations Concept.

The Czech Republic has been also long drawing on British support in the CFSP/CSDP policy area. As one of the most capable and influential countries in the field of defence and security (Black et al. 2017: 25), the UK has been a key contributor to CSDP operations and missions in terms of capabilities, assets, personnel and expertise, having participated in several CSDP missions and operations (including those in Libya, the EU Training Mission in Mali or the antipiracy programme, Operation Atalanta) (Blunt 2017: 2). It is also a significant mover which has driven EU activity in many key CFSP areas. Its Eurosceptic rhetoric notwithstanding, the UK has played an instrumental role in the formulation of many CFSP positions, including Iran's nuclear programme or the EU sanctions against Russia following its military intervention in Ukraine in 2014 (Mance 2017). The country also ranks among the most pro-active and committed advocates of EU targeted sanctions against countries such as Cuba, Burma, or Zimbabwe (Moret 2016) and has been a driving force in some of the EU's most important anti-crime and counter-terrorism measures (Bond et al. 2016: 1).

Whilst one should caution against overstating the significance of the mutual Czech-British relationship in the CFSP/CSDP area, the Czech Republic considers the UK a key

like-minded partner and ally with whom it shares a typically pragmatic approach towards CFSP/CSDP. The *Concept of the Czech Republic's Foreign Policy* even specifically ascribes an important role to the United Kingdom, nominally stating CFSP as one of the two policies (alongside the common commercial policy) in which both countries are especially close to each another (MZV ČR 2015).

Both member states have consistently supported (keeping) CFSP's inter-governmental character under which almost all decisions are being taken by unanimity (notwithstanding the behind-the-scenes tacit agreement that it is, inevitably, the Big Three – France, Germany, and the UK – that take the lead on foreign policy [Lehne 2011]) and argued against extending majority voting in this sphere. Both of them have, too, supported the application of the free market logic to the European defence market. The Czech government (unlike the Czech president) has also strongly sided with the UK in terms of its insistence on sustaining sanctions against Russia. Indeed, amongst the calls from other EU member states for the relaxation of sanctions, the Czech government has already voiced its concerns that Brexit might lead to an increased influence of Russia in the region. Further to that, British transatlantic links have been long considered by the Czechs as a critical guarantee of European security. Moreover, Czech and British troops have closely cooperated in peacemaking operations in the Balkans and more recently, under the British command, in Iraq and Afghanistan. Last but not least, the British Military Advisory Training Team is based in the Czech Republic, assisting the country in increasing its capabilities to participate in multinational peace support operations

Policy Recommendations for the Czech Republic

As the talks over the British withdrawal unfold, the UK's future arrangements for cooperation in the foreign and security policy area will need to be negotiated. In this respect, remaining EU member states, including the Czech Republic, are about to face a challenge of 1) providing the CFSP with a new governance model; 2) establishing some

kind of a partnership framework (either informal, or formal). In what follows, four steps are proposed that Czech policymakers may wish to take in the short term in order to best adapt to the new challenges and shape the post-Brexit CFSP/CSDP in a way that projects Czech interests.

What is worth immediate mention, however, is the fact that the country should not take these steps alone. Instead, it should make use of flexible *ad hoc* cooperation mechanisms of adding other member states with which to cooperate on particular CFSP/CSDP issues within the Brexit negotiations context. Nevertheless, the possibilities of pursuing them within the Visegrad Four framework – very often the first go-to platform to reinforce regional positions – seem to be currently limited, as the group's unity has come under increasing strain recently, fuelling debates about its two-plus-two format.

Set out clear and realistic priorities as soon as possible

The foreign, defence and security dimensions of Brexit has received only limited research and examination in the Czech Republic (and elsewhere, too [Black et al. 2017: 19]). As the interviews (see bibliography) have made it clear, the general view among Czech officials is that the topic of CFSP/CSDP is relatively marginal in contrast to other aspects of the British-EU relationship, especially the economic ones, not least because of CFSP's intergovernmental nature and the EU's rather modest policy achievements in this sphere. Likewise, it is generally believed among Czech officials (and EU officials and members of the Brexit negotiating teams) that it is still rather early to begin talking about Brexit implications for CFSP/CSDP and EU members states' priorities therein. The impression therefore arises, that, at this point, Prague does not attach as much priority to this policy area as it should, especially considering the fact that CSDP has recently become one of the most dynamic fields of European integration. Thus, in order to shape the most positive outcomes from British decision to withdraw from the EU, Czech policymakers should articulate well-defined, realistic, and structured priorities about what needs to be achieved by Brexit in the CFSP/CSDP area. Furthermore, the priority-setting process should strive to be inclusive and transparent

– open, where appropriate, also to input from civil society organisations and think tanks who might provide an additional source of policy knowledge, research, and expertise.

Yet, even though it is very likely that the Czech official position over post-Brexit CFSP/CSDP will converge with that of the EU27 during the Brexit negotiations, it is advisable that there are no repetitions of the January 2017 incident when a leading member of the Czech government broke ranks with the bloc, criticised the EU27 on its handling of the Brexit talks and called for the Czech Republic to undertake an independent initiative with the UK. Such breakaway positions and diplomatic blunders only weaken Czech (and, by extension, also EU) bargaining power, both internally and externally, and compromise its credibility and reputation (Brusenbauch Meislová, 2017).

Equally important, the Czech position on CFSP/CSDP arrangements in the wake of Brexit should be coordinated, coherent, and united. As it stands now, Czech foreign and security policy in the EU has been often labelled as “confused and divided” (Weiss 2015) – repeatedly unable (more often than not, due to its president's inconsistent and out-of-line positions) to act in a concerted way, formulate clear positions, and thus ensure that the Czech Republic speaks with a single voice externally (Weiss 2015: 88). Brexit might be a chance to redeem this unfavourable reputation, as this internal discord would only weaken the Czech negotiating hand.

Promote a high degree of British ongoing involvement in CFSP/CSDP matters

As a country that has been previously drawing on British support in the CFSP/CSDP area, the Czech Republic is going to be weakened in the wake of Brexit. Moreover, losing a member state with such significant diplomatic and military resources, strategic assets, and power projection capabilities will inevitably reduce the collective capabilities available for EU foreign, security and defence policies (Bond et al. 2016: 9; Whitman 2016b: 2). That is why it is in the Czech interest to minimise the impact of the UK's withdrawal in CFSP/CSDP matters and keep the UK intensively involved in the bloc's foreign, security and

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defence issues as a third party, once it leaves the EU. Here, its interests will likely converge with those of France and Germany, the EU's leading tandem which does seem interested in a high degree of British engagements in CFSP/CSDP matters (also in more general terms, the Czech Republic recognizes centrality of neighbouring Germany in any future EU configuration, being naturally keen on building strong ties with it – not least due to the high level of economic interconnection between the two countries).

Prominent examples of areas in which sustained cooperation with the UK might be advanced, to a mutual benefit, include, but are not limited to: cooperation on intelligence gathering and information sharing (especially in the context of cross-border organised crime and international terrorism), participation in the EU's research and technology projects, or policy coordination vis-à-vis Russia. The Czech Republic should also seek strengthened cooperation with the UK in other areas with are of vital importance to the country, such as the Western Balkans or the Eastern Partnership.

Against this background, the Czech Republic should argue in favour of an ambitious and special partnership between the EU and the UK in CFSP/CSDP matters in order to make full use of British substantial diplomatic, military, and intelligence capabilities, thereby helping make the policy stronger, more effective, more influential, and more credible. Such a partnership should recognise the UK as a distinct and unique player. After all, the UK will remain a leading member of NATO, a recognized nuclear weapon state and one of the two European United Nations Security Council permanent members (Blunt 2017; Whitman 2016c: 2). Some elements of the future relationship that the Czech Republic might wish to propose/support include, for instance:

- an enhanced Framework Participation Agreement (the existing Framework Participation Agreements provide non-members with only a very limited scope for involvement in the formulation and planning stages of the missions);
- permanent observer status for the UK in the Political and Security Committee – a linchpin of the CFSP/CSDP;

- regular high-level political dialogue which would not only send a strong political signal about the importance of EU-UK foreign and security partnership but would also facilitate mutual understanding (Blunt 2017).

Simultaneously, the Czech Republic should seek new bilateral projects which will strengthen its cooperation with the UK in the foreign and security area – along the lines of the bilateral projects announced in December 2016 that aim to enhance cooperation between the Czech and British armed forces and improve their fighting readiness and that cover, for example, new training initiatives, formal education and personnel exchange programmes (Gov UK 2016).

Strive to be at the core of the post-Brexit CFSP/CSDP

With the loss of a member who has been traditionally reluctant to fully commit to an integrated EU defence policy, certain of its aspects – be it the EU permanent operational headquarters or joint development of military hardware – are about to come back onto the agenda (Bond et al. 2016: 9; Lain 2016: 6). As the EU27 might now find it easier to start framing a Common Defence Policy, the Czech Republic should continue in the direction which it has recently set forth and keep siding with the EU core led by Germany and France in these attempts.

Moreover, Brexit might bring about implications for the EU-NATO relationship and create certain institutional tensions, since Britain has always been a strong proponent of closer EU-NATO cooperation and often acted as a bridge and a pragmatic mediator between the two organizations. Without the British input, “the implicit inter-institutional arrangement that leaves NATO in charge of Europe's military defence and deterrence, while the EU takes on ‘softer’ security challenges and those outside Europe, could crumble” (Bond et al. 2016: 6). This is essential for the Czech Republic, as it understands NATO's collective defence system, “relying on the mutual defence commitment and a strong Transatlantic bond”, as the “primary tool for safeguarding [its] security and defence” (MZV ČR 2015). The country should hence argue in favour of greater cooperation (and a clear division of labour) between the two

organizations that would allow for combining soft and hard military power, whereas simultaneously respecting the decision-making autonomy and procedures of both organizations.

Help handle Brexit negotiations on CFSP/CSDP in a balanced and objective manner

The interviews have exposed a tendency of many Czech officials to underestimate the psychological and sometimes also highly emotional effects of Brexit (albeit subtle and often difficult to assess) and the ensuing lack of political will among some EU member states to accommodate the UK on CFSP/CSDP (Lain 2016: 4). Yet, the Czech Republic should have zero interest in revenge policy that would make the UK pay a hard price for leaving the bloc. Instead, it should not risk losing sight of the bigger security picture and try to prevent potential attempts of

deliberately or punitively diminishing British future input within CFSP/CSDP frameworks. At the same time, however, EU member states, including the Czech Republic, must be prepared to confront a host of practical challenges that would appear if the engagement was to continue within the existing frameworks (for example, not least in terms of the UK's ceased membership of Europol and European Arrest Warrant).

Further to that, interviews with Czech officials have revealed that they believe the UK will not use security and British armed forces as a bargaining chip to secure a future trade deal with the EU. Yet, as is invariably the case with negotiations, Brexit talks are essentially "a bargaining game between countries with competing objectives" (Sampson 2016: 3). The Czech Republic should be thus well-prepared for a potential turn-around in this respect and know exactly what priorities to pursue, should this situation arise.

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