

BRITISH GEOSTRATEGY FOR A NEW EUROPEAN AGE

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For decades, European security has been assured by a grand, Anglo-American inspired political and economic project on the continent. Today, there is a risk that the old certainties are unravelling. In a previous *RUSI Journal* article, Luis Simón and James Rogers warned of the new risks in Europe; now, the authors offer a strategy for Britain to retain its vital place at the crux of an open, liberal European system.

In the pages of this journal a year ago, we warned of a return of geopolitical competition in Europe, pointing to the formation of bilateral groupings among the main continental powers (chiefly Russia, France and Germany).¹ Importantly, these relationships have started to bypass the post-war multilateral structures – the Atlantic Alliance and, increasingly, the European Union – which, for over six decades, have organised European political and economic cohesion around integration and representative government. Having identified the US's gradual withdrawal and downscaling of Europe as a focus of its geostrategy, we argued that the proliferation of bilateral groupings could lead to a de-structuring of a largely British-inspired Europe. Over the last year things have moved quickly; both in terms of tectonic geopolitical shifts globally and in Europe, and Britain's response to those changes.

The rise of Asia (and China in particular) is now a dominant theme for foreign policy experts. China's economy has, so far, emerged from the global financial crisis stronger, with larger capital reserves to buy itself influence across the world – including in Europe.² Economic growth has come hand-in-hand with military modernisation: in 2011, a new anti-ship ballistic missile, specifically intended to push American carrier groups deeper into the Pacific

Ocean, reached initial operational capability, and a prototype stealth fighter has generated widespread interest among military experts and political pundits.³ Furthermore, Japan's increasing assertiveness – as evidenced by a new defence review that breaks with the country's post-war introspective tradition – and America's whopping investment of over £8 billion for upgrading its military station in Guam are among many other examples illustrating the increasing geopolitical centrality of East Asia.⁴ These developments exert a 'pull' effect emanating from eastern Eurasia, which continues to weaken America's presence on the European continent, removing the decisive factor that has helped Britain to manage the regional geopolitical balance for over six decades.

At the same time, budgetary crises across the EU have highlighted tensions among key member states over the strategic direction of the European Monetary Union, testing the resilience of European economic integration and political stability.⁵ The US 'reset button' with Russia has crystallised into a new Atlantic Alliance-Russia strategic concept and forced Poland's hand into a more accommodating stance toward Moscow.⁶ Russia's gains and role in Eastern Europe, southeastern Europe and the Caucasus are now broadly recognised, and Moscow takes part in an informal yet increasingly institutionalised framework with Berlin

and Paris (and Warsaw) to discuss European security arrangements. To the continent's southeast, Turkey is also emerging as an important geopolitical actor, often adopting positions that clash with the interests of Britain and the rest of the European Union on energy security or Middle Eastern affairs (particularly concerning Israel, Iraq and Iran).

Against this backdrop, this article assesses the extent to which Britain can prevent the collapse of the balances that have underpinned economic prosperity and general security on the European mainland since the Second World War. We move from geopolitics to geostrategy. We argue that Britain's position in the unfolding decade will depend on the decisions over the next few years. Here, new and strengthened bilateral alliances can and must play a key role in safeguarding Britain's influence over an increasingly challenging regional environment. Indeed, the British Conservative-Liberal coalition government, in office for almost a year, has already started to adapt to new realities: not only has it renewed an historic military alliance with France, but it has also strengthened economic and political ties with the Nordic space. However, these successes aside, Britain's bilateral policies must also be anchored in an institutional framework such as the European Union; otherwise, the chances for long-term success will



No room for the UK? French President Nicolas Sarkozy, centre, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, right, and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, left, meet for a two-day summit in Deauville to discuss joint security challenges, October 2010. *Courtesy of AP Photo/Remy de la Mauviniere.*

be poor due to the sheer scale of the forces working against British interests. In this spirit, we propose a series of policy recommendations that include a strengthening of the bilateral relationship with Germany, an opening of the military agreement with France to other European countries and a greater willingness towards economic and political government at the European level.

The European Plain and British Security

The UK has, for over three centuries, been the ultimate arbiter of European affairs. The British, safe in their island citadel, have been free to gear their military towards power projection, providing the means to usurp budding European overlords. The central logic of British geostrategy has been to maintain a favourable balance of power on the European mainland – and particularly the European plain – to prevent a threat from materialising to the heavily populated English core, which, in turn, would jeopardise Britain’s wider global interests.⁷ Stretching from the French Atlantic coast to the Russian

steppe, the European plain has fertile farmland, numerous river systems and good harbours that have, over the last few centuries, underpinned trade and unrelenting agricultural and industrial development.⁸ These geographic enablers provided Europeans with the stimulus necessary to forge the world’s first modern industrial nation-states and build ‘go-anywhere’ empires. The European plain’s northwestern tip is particularly significant: it has long served as the geopolitical ‘pivot’ of Europe. Since Charlemagne, all the European great powers – France, Spain, Germany and the UK – have struggled to control this zone.

For Britain, this makes the Low Countries particularly significant. Control of the northwestern pivot is essential for the two overriding and deeply entwined objectives of British geostrategy: firstly, the maintenance of a favourable balance of power on the European plain and the European mainland more broadly; and secondly, ensuring that Britain’s global maritime power projection – a prerequisite for commercial activity – is unhindered. So it was in the Netherlands that the British poured the resources

necessary to quash Imperial Spain’s bid for ‘Universal Monarchy’ in the sixteenth century. It was against growing Dutch naval power that the British fought to negate the dominance of the United Provinces in the seventeenth century. It was at Waterloo, in Belgium, in the early nineteenth century, that Britain delivered the final knockout blow to France’s bid for European hegemony. And, it was only for the northwestern pivot during the twentieth century that London was prepared to sacrifice its global imperium on not one, but two occasions to prevent the Low Countries’ incorporation into a hostile German order – or, indeed, get swallowed up by the Soviet empire that followed.⁹

After 1945, the UK (backed by the US) concentrated on devising a lasting institutional arrangement in Europe to prevent another devastating great power run on the Low Countries. The Atlantic Alliance and European integration were central to this enterprise. Here, it is crucial to remember that in spite of its early reluctance to directly engage in the European Community (and its reservations to fully engage in the EU

today), Britain has always understood European integration as part of a wider, largely British-inspired, French-executed and American-backed geopolitical agenda. After all, the 'software' governing European geopolitics over the past six decades – free trade and representative government – was only made possible when filtered through a particular 'hardware', that is, a British and American-led maritime Europe, tamed through institutions but ultimately backed by their overwhelming military power.¹⁰ Ever since, European geopolitics has been organised around two principles (free trade and representative government); one geographic pillar (the northwestern pivot); and two institutions (NATO and the European Union). This constellation was given renewed emphasis after the end of the Cold War: 1991 marked the high point of Britain's approach; all existential threats to British security were erased. The rollback of Soviet and Russian power ensured that the geopolitical fulcrum of power finally rested in the Low Countries, with the Atlantic Alliance and the European Union – with Britain dominant in both – in a position of economic, ideological and military supremacy.

Is Britain's Post-Cold War European Order Falling Apart?

The challenges to Britain's preferred European settlement are now very real. Firstly, European affairs are no longer at the top of US geostrategic priorities, as they were during the Cold War and for much of the 1990s, when the management of the Soviet demise demanded greater attention towards European developments ranging from German reunification, through the crises in the Western Balkans, to the conception and implementation of eastern enlargement. Recent events illustrate this US disengagement. Irrespective of its direct causes, Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008 confirmed the re-establishment of Moscow's grip in the Caucasus – a 'geographic corridor' vital for the future of European energy security.¹¹ The Russian invasion showed that neither Americans nor Europeans were the exclusive actors in the European Union's eastern neighbourhood anymore. And

Moscow's assertiveness towards what it regards as its 'near abroad' snuffed out the likelihood of further pro-European democratic revolutions throughout the region.

Likewise, the 2008 conflict was crucial in undermining Ukraine and forcing it into rapprochement with Russia, best illustrated by the recent change of government in Kiev and the renewal of Russia's lease over the naval station in Sevastopol.¹² Not only does this represent a setback in Ukraine's 'European' orientation, but it also amplifies Russia's presence around the Black Sea. Similarly, Turkey's rapprochement with Syria, its flirting with Iran and increasingly confrontational approach towards Israel, threaten to disrupt the balance of power in the Middle East, just as closer Russo-Turkish relations would effectively shut the European Union out of the Middle East and Central Asia.¹³ Finally, Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons and long-range missiles could destabilise the Middle East, and bring Central Europe under direct threat for the first time.

Next, mainland Europeans have grown progressively more interested in Russian designs. In October 2010, German, French and Russian leaders met at the French resort of Deauville to discuss the so-called 'Medvedev Proposal' for a new European security architecture.¹⁴ Moscow's objective is simple: to transcend the 'British-inspired' European status-quo. Russia loathes this order for circumventing its potential reach deeper into the European peninsula. But this is old hat; Russia has always sought more influence in Western Europe. Back in the Cold War Moscow welcomed West Germany's *Ostpolitik* and Charles de Gaulle's project for a Europe stretching from the 'Atlantic to the Urals'. Russia saw these as windows of opportunity for revising the British and American-led European order. However, the sheer danger of the Soviet threat and British-American determination marked strict limits to France and (West) Germany's flirting with Soviet Russia.

But unlike in the past, the conditions are today ripe for a renewed 'pull' from the east – especially from Russia (and from behind it Turkey and China) – resulting in a qualitative reshuffle of the

political and economic rules that have governed European politics for decades. In this regard, the emergence of the triumvirate between Russia, Germany and France (recently joined by Poland) to discuss European security arrangements has acquired a different meaning, not least due to America's 'reset button' rhetoric vis-à-vis Russia. Paris and Berlin, in particular, see the rise of an increasingly multipolar European order as almost inevitable, underpinned by Russia's resurgence in the east, Turkey's rise to the southeast and the emergence of an American-Russian relationship to hedge against China.¹⁵ In such changing circumstances, and without prejudging their different perspectives and interests, France and Germany see Russia's return to a prominent place in European geopolitics as necessary in order to increase predictability and stability on the continent.

The rationale for a pan-European settlement might have taken a 180-degree turn in the space of ten years. If in the late 1990s France and Germany saw the concept of a pan-European security community as instrumental for hedging against excessive American power, they see today's Medvedev Proposal as a means to overcome Washington's ongoing disengagement from the continent. In some European capitals, the belief is taking hold that a new institutionalised framework that comprises the continent's remaining great powers (chiefly Russia, Germany and France, but also Poland) is required to buttress European stability.¹⁶ Insofar as this threatens to disintegrate the established European architecture and displace the epicentre of European geopolitics away from the northwestern pivot and towards Central and Eastern Europe, Britain's ideological, geographic and institutional framework risks coming apart. An eastwards shift in the balance of power may, to some extent, undermine the basic economic and political liberalism of post-war European geopolitics.

Whither the 'Special Relationship'?

Over the past sixty years, the US has been crucial in helping provide Britain with

the means to secure its key geostrategic objectives on the European plain. But as the attacks of 11 September 2001, the subsequent interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq and the geopolitical rise of East Asia have sucked American power out of Europe and into the east and south of Eurasia, Britain has progressively, and quickly, lost its geopolitical anchor.¹⁷ This compounds Britain's new European question.

Recent developments in Russia, Georgia, Ukraine, Turkey and Iran have run against British national interests, and represent a setback to traditional British objectives in and around Europe; namely, the maintenance of a balance of power centred on the northwestern pivot and spread of economic openness and democratic government throughout the continent. Why has Britain stood idle while the political structures so meticulously put together over the past three centuries are pulled apart?

The answer is simple: current British strategy is not equipped to respond adequately to the ongoing assault on the post-1991 European order, due to strategic complacency and an over-reliance on the so-called 'special relationship' with the US. During the Second World War, many Britons came to believe that the US was indispensable for sustaining the fulcrum of European power in the north western pivot. But as Washington lowers its guard in the continent, Britain's tried-and-tested approach may no longer be appropriate.¹⁸ Recent events clearly prove that the special relationship no longer provides an appropriate framework for defending British interests and values in and around the European peninsula, though we should not overestimate the extent of a potential American retreat.¹⁹

There must be no misunderstanding here: the Anglo-American partnership will continue to be of great importance to the UK. Britons and Americans are united in their commitment to a global order based on free trade, representative government and, ultimately, a balance of power in Eurasia that does not threaten, but rather underpins those principles. Additionally, a close relationship with Washington will continue to fulfil important functions for London's

European endeavours. It will help Britain hedge against the potential failure of any new political order and the UK's inferior alliance infrastructure, and would also continue to provide an insurance policy of last resort against a hypothetical Russian resurgence – let alone any attempts of the latter to extend its power to the Baltic states, or beyond the Vistula or Carpathians. While the possibility of an eventual American 'return' to Europe should not be discounted, the Special Relationship cannot remain the nexus of British geostrategy, if only for the simple fact that the importance the US now attaches to the Pacific and Indian Oceans far outweighs its attention to contemporary Europe.²⁰ And this cannot be the case for Britain, for obvious geographical reasons. Britain's European strategy must be autonomous of the many uncertainties that surround the evolution of American foreign policy. The longer it takes for Britain to realise that there is a growing need for a change of direction, the sooner new narratives and institutions – like 'grand European bargain', 'Franco-German-Russian triumvirate', 'new security architecture' – will gain hold among mainland European elite and public opinion, to the detriment of British interests.

Bilateralism within Multilateralism

Indeed, to assume that the UK can stay aloof from the European mainland or conceive of a future where continental Europeans underperform economically and militarily while British power thrives next to the US, or some sort of renewed Commonwealth, is a dangerous fantasy. Historically, British power has thrived to the tune of military, financial and political developments on the European plain.²¹ The British owe their power and historical capital to their position in Europe, the site of so many key innovations over the last five hundred years: financial innovation, modern science, geographical discovery, military technology, democracy, free trade and the rise of the modern nation-state.²² Such values find their origins in Ancient Greece and Rome, and were further 'finessed' by Renaissance Italy and the Netherlands during the *Gouden*

Eeuw. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain gave this great European vision its maximum expression, not least in a geographical sense. But it remained, ultimately, a European enterprise. As such, the acceleration of European decay – whether due to a resurgence of regional conflict or the inability of Europeans to project their power in pursuit of their security – would inevitably drag Britain down too.

As it confronts an increasingly uncertain European environment, Britain is left with two options: the first one is to recognise that a multipolar Europe is inevitable; the second is to play to Britain's geopolitical strengths by making the successes of the past three centuries permanent. If Britain accepts a multipolar Europe, it should devote its efforts to couching the effects of multipolarity by crafting a network of bilateral partnerships with all great European powers. Britain has already fallen behind in this version of the game: whilst Britain has improved its relationship with France, its ties to Germany could be improved and its relationship with Russia is rather weak. All the other three major European powers have a far more advanced infrastructure of bilateral relationships than Britain has. Although Britain must do its best to improve its bilateral standing with key European partners, it cannot limit itself to such steps. In fact, bilateralism alone would lead to a Europe scattered economically and politically, posing a threat to a British-inspired order whose essence necessarily requires it to be multilaterally tamed through British-backed institutions. In order to succeed in restoring the balances that have governed European geopolitics over the past few decades, Britain needs to complement a reinvigorated approach towards bilateral alliances in Europe with a broader policy that ties all of those together in a multilateral framework, which not only ensures the maintenance of economic and political cohesion around internal free trade and constitutional government, but also maintains London at its heart.

Re-Centring Britain

As an island surrounded by the sea, Britain is geopolitically exceptional. It has

developed a maritime persona, which has been both a strength and a weakness: a strength because it has provided the incentive to maintain formidable naval power, which has enabled Britain to project its interests overseas; and a weakness because it has sometimes discouraged active British participation in European affairs. When the European mainland seems stable Britain tends to disengage, hiding behind the sea and its navy while pursuing interests elsewhere. When the mainland becomes unstable Britain eventually gets stuck in, bringing its full power to bear. This leads to a see-saw effect in British geostrategy. This must stop. As history shows, isolation from the European mainland can never be splendid: it is during periods of British isolation that the European balance of power tends to go awry. Today, Britain faces a similar choice: it can either continue to pursue other interests, seemingly oblivious to European affairs, with all the consequences that are bound to follow; or it can take a renewed and deeper interest.

Accordingly, if Britain is to succeed in restoring the geopolitical system that has governed European geopolitics through the last six decades, it requires a mutually inclusive two-track strategy. First, Britain needs to develop its bilateral partnerships more rapidly, and more effectively. Second, it must engage multilaterally by seeking the transition of the European Union to a politico-military association, while simultaneously positioning itself in the European driving seat. Both tracks are inseparable. Lack of engagement in the European Union limits Britain's ability to develop special relationships with its main European partners. Likewise, without a portfolio of strong bilateral relationships London cannot seriously aspire to lead and engineer European integration in a way that benefits British interests.

Alliance-making

The UK has enjoyed some initial success in diversifying its alliance portfolio in Europe. The coalition government has moved quickly in driving forward a new grouping of Nordic states to create a European vanguard for industrial and technological innovation, and possibly

an alternative to Franco-German primacy in economic matters.²³ However, the 'Nordic drive' serves another, perhaps more important, purpose: to consolidate British power in the Baltic and hedge against Russia. In part in response to the sensitivities of the Nordic states, some of which have set up their own initiatives to co-operate in military matters, London has seized the moment to build up its influence around the Baltic Sea and perhaps send a signal of its interest in the geopolitics of the future of the wider Arctic region, and its potential mineral wealth.²⁴ Most significantly, though, the new British government has worked hard to upgrade Britain's oft-overlooked *entente* with France. On 2 November 2010, the British prime minister and French president signed two historic treaties to foster deeper military co-operation over the next fifty years, including nuclear weapons research.²⁵ The financial boons aside, a tighter alliance with France will also bring important geopolitical benefits to the UK. After all, France is the only other European state with a great-power-style 'strategic culture'; not only is France willing to deploy force and maintain an extended regional military posture through its military stations in Africa, the Gulf and the Indian Ocean, but it is also willing to spend money on military research and development.²⁶ By working together, London and Paris could ensure that they remain – and entrench themselves as – Europe's leading powers, thereby reinforcing a strong and 'strategic' Europe as opposed to a weak and 'pacifist' one.²⁷

Nevertheless, it is imperative that neither Britain's 'Nordic drive' nor the Anglo-French *grande entente* are conceived of in a narrow sense, as merely another 'asset' to strengthen London's position within a multipolar Europe or as a solution to address immediate and pressing financial difficulties. Closer co-operation, particularly between London and Paris, must be set within a wider European design whose objective must be the re-invigoration of the European Union, remodelled to more effectively suit British interests. This is crucial to both reverse the increasing de-structuring of Europe's regional

balances, as well as to serve as the basis for European global power in a world where the rise of continent-sized superpowers is inevitable. Given its population, size, resources and central geographical position on the European plain, Germany's inclusion in any such design is essential. For obvious geographical and historical reasons, France's security and economic prosperity are directly tied to that of Germany. France will not simply choose Britain to the detriment of Germany: a strong Franco-German relationship is not optional for Paris. Further, without a sign of a British commitment to the wider European framework, France will perceive Britain's attempts to improve bilateral relations as a simple hedging strategy devoid of deeper meaning. This would only encourage France to continue investing in a diverse alliance portfolio on the continent – including a highly developed bilateral relationship with Russia – and, ultimately, accelerate the crystallisation of a multipolar Europe. Furthermore, aside from being indispensable to the economic and political success of Europeans, a greater British input into Brussels and a stronger Anglo-German relationship would also serve a more specific purpose for Britain: compensating for the fact that France enjoys a more developed alliance infrastructure in the continent, and reinforcing Britain's own position in the framework of a British-French *grande entente* at that.²⁸ In this regard, Britain must identify key issues where it can work with Germany, such as the promotion of market reforms in general, and that of a liberalised European military-industrial and technological market in particular.

Finally, if London is to preserve the balances that have assured its security and economic prosperity for decades, it cannot seek anything other than absolute control over the European mainland's adjacent seas. This requires a strengthening of bilateral alliances with other key European partners and, crucially, the anchoring of all those initiatives under the broader multilateral framework of a renewed EU under British leadership. A strong, British-led, maritime Europe requires command over the Mediterranean Sea; the projection

of a strong presence in the Arctic; and, via the Atlantic Ocean and Red Sea, deep oceanic power projection into the Persian Gulf, the Indian Ocean and beyond. This mandates that Britain step up its relationship with key partners along those routes, with a view to both courting them bilaterally and integrating them multilaterally. Beyond the European northwestern pivot, Spain and Portugal are key to British-led European maritime security, especially in relation to control of the Mediterranean and Northern Africa, as well as European power projection into Latin America and West Africa. Particularly important for the Mediterranean, as well as Northern Africa and the Levant, are Italy, Greece, Malta and Cyprus. Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, and the Nordic states of Sweden, Denmark and Finland, are key to the Baltic zone – crucial as the outer defensive perimeter of the European plain – as well as for deeper European projection into the Arctic. Finally, Bulgaria and Romania are mandatory for the EU's influence around the Black Sea, itself critical to its presence in the Caucasus, the Middle East and Central Asia. Both stronger bilateral relationships with those countries and their integration within an expanded (EU-anchored) version of the recent Anglo-French military agreements is crucial for Britain to secure its influence within the wider European neighbourhood. Through this wide British-led, EU-anchored politico-military enterprise, the foundations could be laid for the execution of Britain's historical European objectives, namely a regional balance of power that underpins free trade and representative government. Furthermore, it would offer Britain access to the financial and industrial mass needed to afford state-of-the-art military capabilities, whose possession would deter potential aggressors and contribute to 'silent security' in the twenty-first century.²⁹

Conclusion

Insofar as Britain and the US have framed the European system since the end of the Second World War, they have looked on in recent years as the structures they built have started to dissolve. The UK bears a special responsibility for this situation because its geopolitical position – as an offshore balancer *par excellence* – provides it with enviable influence over the European mainland. The US was fully committed to Britain's agenda both during and immediately after the Cold War. Aside from facilitating Britain's global presence, the Anglo-American special relationship served a crucial regional end: ensuring Britain's objectives in Europe were upheld. However, following 9/11 and the prolongation of its interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as rising uncertainty in East Asia, the US has grown less able and willing to place British designs at the centre of its own effort – a trend that will only continue with the rise of China in East Asia and India in the Indian Ocean.

This is not theoretical abstraction. Recent events in Georgia, Ukraine, Turkey, Iran and elsewhere are powerful illustrations of the ongoing retreat of British power in the wider European neighbourhood. Equally, closer bilateral relationships between Germany, France, Poland and Russia that bypass the British-backed post-war institutions are further evidence of change. In response, the UK needs better partnerships with the Nordic countries, France, the Netherlands and Belgium to secure its influence in its immediate neighbourhood. London then needs to use the EU to maintain the continent's power fulcrum around the northwestern pivot; this will require a step-change in British strategic thinking. Last year, the former British ambassador to Washington, Sir Christopher Meyer, stated at RUSI that the 'special relationship' was a means to

an end.³⁰ As the means no longer deliver Britain's ends, an uncomfortable question has arisen: is the UK able to adapt its means to its ends, through a reappraisal of bilateral European relationships and a leadership position in the European Union, or has its geostrategic insight been swallowed by sixty years of effective dependence on the US? Can Britain find the courage to prevent a multipolar European system from taking hold, while simultaneously ensuring that the EU's geopolitical retreat, economic underperformance, political disarray and global irrelevance are halted and reversed? The jury is still out. ■

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NOTES

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