



The E3, the EU, and the Post-Brexit Diplomatic Landscape

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INTRODUCTION

Since the early 2000s, the E3 group of France, Germany, and the UK has been a semiregular feature of European diplomacy across an array of foreign policy and security issues. This loose diplomatic coalition of major European powers has become more strongly established and utilized in the aftermath of the UK's decision to leave the EU and amid the strained transatlantic relationship under U.S. President Donald Trump's tenure.

But as Europe's strategic and political contexts continue to rapidly evolve, major questions surround the future role and relevance of the E3 format in a post-Brexit and post-pandemic world. The evolution of the E3 format sheds light on its likely future trajectory. Ultimately, Paris, Berlin, and London do not have a choice over whether to coordinate their foreign policies more—the question is whether they can manage to overcome internal differences and make the E3 format more regular and strategic, perhaps as part of an eventual European Security Council. Another timely question is whether others in Europe will support such a

development if future European diplomacy is a top-heavy E3-driven process without significant input from other countries and with a potentially weakened role for the EU's common foreign and security policy.

THE ORIGINS OF E3 COOPERATION

While France, Germany, and the UK (or the Big Three) long had independent relationships with each other as fellow EU members, an important impetus for closer trilateral coordination came after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. The three countries' foreign ministers sought to bridge the gaps in their respective Iraq policies and avoid similar divisions over Iran's nuclear ambitions. After the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq, German foreign minister Joschka Fischer and French foreign minister Dominique de Villepin decided to reengage with their British counterpart Jack Straw on the Iranian nuclear issue. In September 2003, French president Jacques Chirac, German chancellor Gerhard Schröder, and British prime minister Tony Blair gathered for a trilateral meeting in Berlin.



The format grew more formalized early in the international nuclear talks with Iran. In June 2003, the Big Three decided to pursue joint diplomatic engagement toward Iran so as to capitalize on U.S. president George W. Bush and his administration's refusal to engage directly with Tehran. The three countries' foreign ministers visited Tehran together in October 2003, reaching an agreement with Iran and securing a subsequent disclosure from Iran to the International Atomic Energy Agency about its nuclear program.

Seen as an early success of European diplomacy, this breakthrough would provide an impetus for further E3 coordination going forward. Key to the format's success was the early inclusion of then EU high representative for foreign affairs, Javier Solana, which helped ensure continued support from other EU member states. In November 2004, the E3 and Iran signed another agreement in Paris. Following additional EU-Iran talks, China, Russia, and the United States finally joined the negotiations in June 2006 as part of the P5+1 group.

Though the first formal joint E3 statement on Iran came in January 2006, meetings organized around the format became more regular from 2013 to 2015 when the Iran nuclear deal (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA) was being negotiated. During these diplomatic talks, E3 coordination was extremely tight and often coincided with collaboration with the EU high representative and other non-European members of the UN Security Council as part of the P5+1 (or E3+3) format.

Before the Brexit referendum in June 2016, joint E3 statements were relatively sparse and mainly focused on the Iran nuclear deal and the conflicts in Libya and Syria. The main achievement of E3 cooperation was its contributions to the final JCPOA agreement between Iran and the other negotiating parties in July 2015. In addition to formal joint statements, the frequency of E3 foreign policy coordination expanded during this time, as the French, German, and British foreign ministers

held several more trilateral meetings (often on the sidelines of formal summits) and consultations. Similar conversations also began to occur between lower-level officials like deputy ministers, political directors, and ambassadors from the three countries.

AN EXPANDED POST-BREXIT ROLE FOR E3 COOPERATION?

Since the 2016 Brexit vote, E3 cooperation has taken on a new meaning: preserving foreign policy coordination among the Big Three even though the UK was departing the EU. In the wake of this seismic change, these trilateral meetings have become more frequent and covered more ground.

One illustration of the British desire for closer post-Brexit collaboration with France and Germany was how then British prime minister Theresa May held a series of separate bilateral phone calls with her French and German counterparts on July 13, 2016, mere weeks after the Brexit referendum, expressing support for this continued partnership. Since then, France, Germany, and the UK have jointly issued or participated in at least sixty-seven different statements as of June 2020 (see the summary table).¹ Whereas some of these were exclusively E3 joint statements, most were co-signed by other external actors, such as the EU high representative, other EU member states, or other non-EU countries. Most of these statements have focused on security issues in the Middle East, but some have also addressed a host of other issues, including tensions in the South China Sea, democratic transition in Venezuela, and the March 2018 poisoning of former Russian spy Sergei Skripal in Salisbury.

On the sidelines of the UN Security Council, the E3 governments have established an informal working arrangement. This type of cooperation has been especially important during Germany's rotating membership of the UN Security Council in 2019 and 2020. Of course, not all diplomatic statements each of the three countries

have signed necessarily reflect a deliberate prioritization of trilateral cooperation since some of these statements are merely a function of them serving together in bodies (such as the G7 or the UN Security Council) or as part of international coalitions (such as Friends of Syria) on particular issues. Furthermore, in many instances, not all of the E3 countries have signed on to key foreign policy statements.

Several factors account for the apparent uptick in E3 cooperation in recent years. The first one is, naturally, Brexit itself. As a leading economic and military power in Europe with extensive international diplomatic reach, the UK's decision to vote to leave the EU created a need to ensure continued close foreign policy coordination between Paris, Berlin, and London outside the EU framework. Moreover, the continued challenges facing the EU's quest for a common foreign and security policy (CFSP) has prompted each of the three capitals to look for alternative platforms to pursue their foreign policy interests. In this respect, the E3 group provides a more [flexible and agile mechanism](#) to reach agreement on certain issues. Finally, the impact of Trump's election in November 2016 should also be considered. Whereas transatlantic cooperation on key foreign policy issues such as Iran generally worked fairly well under former president Barack Obama and his administration, Trump's arrival at the White House and several deep transatlantic policy rifts necessitated a deepened sense of partnership between the three capitals to present a common front against Washington, especially on the Iran nuclear issue.

Although the frequency of joint E3-U.S. statements and meetings seems to have dissipated somewhat since Trump assumed office in January 2017, E3 cooperation with the United States has not entirely disappeared. For example, in the wake of the March 2018 Skripal poisonings in the UK, E3 and U.S. leaders issued a statement condemning Russia for the act (followed by another joint statement with the United States and Canada in September). There are also instances

of meetings between E3 and U.S. officials, such as a meeting between former U.S. national security adviser John Bolton and his French, German, and British counterparts. At the same time, several E3 statements have explicitly been directed against U.S. decisions, such as Trump's choice to unilaterally withdraw from the JCPOA agreement with Iran despite the E3's desire to preserve it. Notably, the triggering of the JCPOA dispute resolution mechanism along with the announcement of the E3's [first transaction](#) under the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (INSTEX) trading mechanism in late March 2020 highlighted the E3's continued commitment to the Iran deal and united posture against the Trump administration's opposition to the JCPOA.

THE VIEWS OF THE BIG THREE

Paris, Berlin, and London are all eager to keep E3 cooperation alive after Brexit but for different reasons, rendering the format full of internal contradictions.

The UK sees the E3 format mainly as a useful balancing act in response to the Franco-German axis. Participating in the group enables London to stay abreast of Franco-German strategic discussions. It also allows the UK to continue playing a leadership role in shaping European foreign policy without taking part in CFSP anymore. More cynically, the E3 format can also aid Prime Minister Boris Johnson's broader personal agenda on Brexit by showcasing that EU foreign policy decisionmaking is weak and ineffective.

The main challenge facing the UK on using the E3 format effectively is how much to invest so as to create enough incentives for France and Germany to prioritize working with the UK on the broader European foreign policy agenda. If successful, London might be able to entice Paris and Berlin to upgrade the status of the E3 format, allowing the trio to jointly move forward on issues on which the twenty-seven EU members would otherwise remain divided. In this way, the E3 format



could become, in the words of one British scholar, an “informal mechanism to propel the EU along a specific course of action—one preferable to London—while operating also as a force multiplier for the triad’s position.” If E3 cooperation takes root in this way, it could reinforce the trend toward more coalitions in European foreign policy—as other countries may seek to align with Germany, France, or the UK on specific issues on a case-by-case basis. Still, the UK will remain wary of French and German efforts to use the format to serve their own needs or to try to rein the UK in, especially if a drift materializes between the key foreign policy dossiers of the UK and the EU.

However, the Johnson government has been reluctant to overemphasize the E3 group since it wants to instead put more emphasis on [British leadership in NATO](#) after Brexit. Another reason for British reluctance to engage forcefully in Europe at this time is its [strong desire](#) to promote Global Britain—an effort to reinforce the UK’s independent, post-Brexit diplomatic positioning—and to strengthen its own special relationship with the United States. Although the UK is closer to France and Germany on most major foreign policy issues than with the Trump administration, there are recent signs of a more independent British role taking shape. For example, the UK’s hesitance to join other European countries in condemning the Trump administration’s [Middle East peace plan](#) suggests a drift between the EU and UK positions, with London once again seeking to carve out a role as a transatlantic bridge between Washington and Europe.

The UK has gone its own way on other occasions too. Another example is the UK’s decision to join the [U.S.-led task force](#) in the Strait of Hormuz, while France led the creation of a [separate European naval mission](#) that Germany joined. Similarly, in January 2020, the UK abstained from a vote in the UN Security Council on [cross-border aid to Syria](#) that France and Germany supported. That said, UK support for U.S. foreign policy goals is not absolute. [Johnson](#) recently opposed Trump’s proposal to welcome Russia back into the

G7 and may also be recalibrating away from Trump based on the possibility that former vice president Joe Biden might be elected U.S. president in November. Regardless, the UK is unlikely to exclusively prioritize the E3 format after Brexit and will continue to engage with Northern, Central, and Eastern Europe as a [complement](#) to prioritizing working with France and Germany. Outside of Europe, the UK is also keen to strengthen cooperation with its companion Five Eyes allies, including Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States. For example, the UK recently took the initiative on a joint statement together Australia, Canada, and the United States addressing the [situation in Hong Kong](#).

France, meanwhile, also sees the E3 as a pragmatic way to advance its own interests. During the Brexit negotiations when the future of E3 cooperation was being discussed, Paris concluded that it should be preserved for practical reasons—primarily for the continued handling of the Iran dossier but also in case it could be put to other future uses. When it serves Paris to have the British involved on a key issue, France pushes the E3 format—as has happened with respect to Syria, where France and the UK share similar stakes. Conversely, when it behooves Paris to not have the UK involved (such as on Africa or Ukraine policy), then it often pursues other diplomatic formats that exclude the British. As a result, Paris has managed to position itself at the center of a range of concentric circles with different countries in various formats—but always with France as the only one who is part of all of them. Another reason France appreciates the E3 group is because it brings together Europe’s three main security players in one single format. While France and the UK have a strong bilateral security and defense partnership, Paris likes having Berlin on board to help promote a stronger [German strategic culture](#).

Illustrating its interest in promoting stronger foreign policy cooperation with the UK, France has actively promoted the idea of establishing a European Security Council. In his so-called [letter to Europe](#), President

Emmanuel Macron proposed the creation of such a body that would include the UK. Although it is still unclear exactly what Macron has in mind, his position seems to acknowledge that European foreign policy decisionmaking must take the UK into account as a special partner for the EU after Brexit. Though Macron is staunchly pro-European, having a small core group of countries intensifying cooperation on foreign and security matters is also consistent with his [preference](#) for a more “flexible” Europe where smaller groups of countries can move ahead with closer cooperation, sometimes outside of the formal EU structures.

Finally, Germany is generally content with the E3 group and is keen to keep meeting regularly in the format. For Berlin, the E3 group can serve as a useful way to balance out its own bilateral dialogue with Paris, as the two sides do not always see eye to eye. The trilateral format with the UK also allows Germany to tap into discussions on global security and defense issues, especially on places like the Middle East, where it is generally less active or influential itself. Yet Berlin has generally been more passive about using the E3, preferring to wait for Paris or London to take the initiative. Germany’s skepticism about Johnson’s leadership might also put a damper on its desire to forcefully engage with the UK.

Several prominent German politicians have expressed strong support for upgrading cooperation with the UK in recent years. For example, in her former capacity as party chair of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer issued a response to Macron’s letter to Europe in which she [expressed support](#) for coordinating foreign policy issues with the UK as part of a European Security Council. In a November 2019 speech, as German defense minister, Kramp-Karrenbauer [proposed](#) that E3 cooperation become “a permanent fixture.” Both German Foreign Minister [Heiko Maas](#) and [Norbert Röttgen](#), the chair of the Committee on Foreign Affairs in the Bundestag and one of the contenders to lead the CDU and eventually succeed Angela Merkel as chancellor, have expressed support for the same idea. [Merkel herself](#) did too in a

speech before the European Parliament in November 2018.

In the German debate, there is often a distinction between those with more pragmatic views who are more comfortable with the notion of flexible coalitions and others who put a more orthodox emphasis on traditional EU diplomatic channels and integrationist objectives in the EU. While the Chancellery generally belongs to the former category and the Federal Foreign Office to the latter, this dynamic so far has not prevented Germany from actively partaking in the E3 format. Even so, cooperation within the EU will likely continue to take precedence for Germany after Brexit. The notion of a “core Europe” goes against Berlin’s traditionally strong emphasis on inclusiveness among EU members. Germany also engages with other member states in various bilateral and regional formats and will continue to do so independently of France and the UK.

Paris and Berlin do not share the exact same vision of their [relationships with the post-Brexit UK](#) and may have different interests as far as how to accommodate a future partnership with the UK on foreign policy. Yet they both see advantages in using the E3 format to keep the post-Brexit UK tied to a common European foreign policy outlook. Both are concerned about the prospect of the UK drifting off to support the United States in ways that would make it harder for them to deliver on their own objectives. This issue is particularly salient at a time of transatlantic stress, with several policy disagreements between the EU and the Trump administration. Yet both Paris and Berlin are also wary of tying themselves too closely to the E3 lest it should allow London to set the agenda or undermine their own influence in Washington. While they are open to engaging with the UK in a trilateral format, France and Germany both want to retain the option of aligning themselves with the United States when they choose to do so without consulting with London first.



HOW OTHERS VIEW THE BIG THREE

External perceptions of the E3 format vary greatly. Among other EU member states, the dominant view is uneasiness. Mid-level EU member states are generally disgruntled about the notion of stronger E3 cooperation after Brexit. Countries like Italy, Poland, and Spain prefer to keep foreign policy discussions inside the EU tent where they can exert more influence (though they have all collaborated with the E3 on occasion). EU members are also keen to maintain their own relationships with London after Brexit and are not necessarily interested in having these ties superseded by France and Germany. Moreover, the inclusion of the UK in European foreign policy discussions raises concerns in some quarters about creating a precedent for the possible inclusion of other non-EU countries such as Turkey.

Meanwhile, Brussels is likely even less supportive of the E3, as discussions about a future EU-UK relationship remain ongoing. There is a strong track record of effective collaboration between the EU high representative and the E3 group on the Iran nuclear issue. But the high representative and other EU officials are reluctant to embrace a diplomatic venture that could further undermine the centrality of CSFP. Instead, discussions in Brussels tend to focus on overcoming the shortcomings in EU foreign policy by introducing more flexible decisionmaking and institutional reforms like the idea of [qualified majority voting](#) instead of requiring unanimity.

Meanwhile, the view from the other side of the Atlantic is complicated by the Trump administration's lack of engagement with European partners. Despite Trump's euroskeptical attitude and [strong support for Brexit](#), the United States generally misses London's influence within the EU and stands to lose from post-Brexit UK-EU divisions. In this respect, Washington might appreciate a stronger UK role in European foreign policy discussions via the E3 group and may even seek to occasionally plug into this format itself. There are several instances of the United States issuing joint statements and convening

meetings with the E3 foreign ministers as part of a Quad-like format. Though Trump has used this format less frequently than Obama, the four players still find it a convenient format for facilitating exchanges between senior officials without too much publicity.

But the Trump administration would not welcome E3 policy coordination across the board. His skepticism toward the EU means that his administration will try to pry the UK away from the rest of Europe, especially in policy areas where transatlantic views diverge. To the extent that the UK aligns with France and Germany on certain issues, close E3 ties could thus make it harder for the Trump administration to get its way.

PROSPECTS FOR FUTURE E3 COOPERATION

The E3 format has seemingly grown in significance following the Brexit referendum, but its future role and relevance are far from certain.

One possibility is that its importance will grow in the next few years. A key test will be whether it can become more regular and formalized while it tackles a wider range of foreign policy topics beyond mainly Iran and security concerns in the Middle East. The proposed idea of a European Security Council could help institutionalize the format, though it is not clear what [this proposal](#) would realistically look like. The most ambitious option might be an exclusive EU format under a different name, such as a separate session of the EU's Foreign Affairs Council or the Political and Security Committee with British participation. Another option could be a miniature European version of the UN Security Council with permanent members such as France, Germany, and the UK and rotating members on a regional basis making formal decisions on foreign policy matters.

The most likely option, however, is a more informal format for consultation between the foreign ministers

of major European states with the E3 at its core. Such a body would be more akin to the G7, perhaps with various working groups on particular issues, but it would not be a legal entity of the EU where members make decisions based on unanimity. How such a body would relate to external players like Russia, Turkey, or the United States is even more unclear.

London certainly finds the latter idea attractive, as it is promoting a bespoke foreign policy relationship with EU partners (outside formal EU structures) that sets the UK apart from the average non-EU third party. Boris Johnson has repeatedly rejected the idea of a formal agreement between the UK and the EU on foreign and security policy cooperation (most recently in a virtual [meeting with EU leaders](#) on June 15) and much to the chagrin of the EU and its member states, many of whom are deeply distrustful of his leadership. Paris and Berlin have been discussing the concept together for the past six months but have not yet decided on anything. For France and Germany to support stronger E3 cooperation with the UK in the form of a European Security Council, broad-based agreement among the trio on major foreign policy issues is probably a prerequisite. To the extent that internal disagreements persist, it is not clear what utility the E3 has as a discussion format.

Both France and Germany will be watchful about the potential risks of being outmaneuvered by the UK and perhaps by the United States in their shared attempts to somewhat downgrade the role of EU foreign policy in favor of bilateral ties with individual member state capitals. The mistrust other EU member states have expressed toward the E3 group means that Paris and Berlin must avoid any perceptions that London is dictating foreign policy terms over EU members. Involving the EU high representative and mid-sized European countries such as Italy, Poland, and Spain could help legitimize the format to a wider European audience, though continued efforts to ensure it does not undermine CFSP would also be necessary.

Another major determinant of future E3 cooperation is the development of CFSP itself. If a more robust EU foreign policy takes root under the [new European Commission](#), the need to find alternative frameworks arguably would be less pressing. For instance, qualified majority voting could allow for a more effective CFSP decisionmaking process. Short of such reforms, the trend toward [flexible coalitions](#) of the able and willing is likely to be a key feature of European foreign policy. But as illustrated by the Franco-German leadership role in the so-called Normandy format focused on the crisis in Ukraine (which the UK is not a member of), this does not always necessarily imply more cooperation through the E3 format.

Other alternative proposals for new frameworks also exist—such as the idea of establishing an [EU8 group](#) consisting of the two European permanent members of the UN Security Council as well as the council's current and incoming nonpermanent European members to help coordinate foreign policy action with each other and the UK apart from the formal EU structures. Alternatively, there is also already the French-led [European Intervention Initiative](#), which over time could evolve into a discussion forum on security issues between its fourteen members (which include the UK). Yet even if a stronger EU foreign policy eventually develops, more informal E3 cooperation could still serve as an important complementary instrument, especially in the absence of a future agreement between the EU and the UK on foreign and security policy cooperation.

Much of the evolution of European diplomacy will also depend on the role of the United States. Whereas the Trump administration is firmly pro-Brexit and does not see Europe as a priority for joint action, a Democratic administration would likely be more supportive of the EU and closer UK-EU cooperation and far more skeptical of Brexit. A Biden administration could help reduce [transatlantic tensions](#) on foreign policy and may help shrink the gap between London and the rest of Europe. And a Democratic administration might be more interested in working with the E3 as part of the



Quad format, as part of the Quint format with the addition of Italy, or even by plugging into an eventual European Security Council on occasion. On the other hand, the E3's relevance might paradoxically suffer if the relationship between the EU and Washington improves and if either side consequently has less of a need to engage the UK. Moreover, both France and Germany may seek to replace the UK as the country that speaks for Europe vis-à-vis a Biden administration.

While the E3 offers some promise for enhancing post-Brexit European foreign policy cooperation, doubts remain about whether it can evolve into more than just an ad hoc discussion format. France, Germany, and the UK all are motivated to see the E3 continue to play a role. Yet they also each have reasons to want its role not to grow too large. The key test will be whether they can overcome internal differences, establish a more formal working arrangement, and convince other skeptical European countries to plug into the format. If so, the E3 could become the backbone of European diplomacy on a range of strategic issues beyond Iran and the Middle East. Other issues ripe for more EU-UK collaboration include China's rise, the sanctions regime against Russia and the Ukraine crisis, stability and fragility in Africa, and multilateral institutional reforms. Closer E3 cooperation can also help maintain European unity in key international forums such as the UN Security Council and the G7.

Yet one thing is certain: the three leading European powers should be wary of opting for too exclusive of a club. Working closely with the EU high representative and midsize EU countries is still essential for building effective European foreign policy coalitions to better assert Europe's values and interests in a post-pandemic world marked by accelerating geopolitical tensions.

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NOTES

- 1 This number is calculated based on key foreign policy joint statements issued by or involving the E3 since June 23, 2016, and it excludes press releases or meetings in the E3 format.

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