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Revitalising the E3 for a more dangerous world

The E3 format should be revitalised and reformed to enhance leadership on European security

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Introduction

Given the deterioration of the international security environment, Berlin, London and Paris should relaunch the E3 format in order to better coordinate their actions, strengthen their defence cooperation and assume their responsibilities as key allies.

The E3 format was initially created in 2003 as a joint initiative of France, Germany and the UK to negotiate with Iran to give up its nuclear programme, to prevent the risk of a US military action¹. Even though the Iranian issue remains a focal point of the E3, over the time, the format encompassed a broader range of international issues (Syria, Africa, Indo-Pacific) to offer a European diplomatic alternative, faced with the realisation that European interests could diverge from those of the US and because of the limitations of security and defence policy at EU-level. This rationale remains relevant today, especially after the outcome of the 2024 US Presidential election. The E3 also has the potential to branch out to other policy areas.

However, the format has progressively faded in significance since Brexit and has struggled to overcome internal political disputes. The E3 is often actually rather an 'E2+1' and lacks unity among all three members on major issues, such as Ukraine's accession to NATO or China policy. In addition, the E3 suffers from a competition with other formats, especially the Weimar Triangle (France, Germany and Poland), which was relaunched after the election of a new Europhile administration in Warsaw and gathered on several occasions at foreign minister, defence minister and even heads of state and government level. In Paris and Berlin, the appetite to relaunch the Weimar Triangle with Warsaw seems greater than the focus on the E3. The format is also contested by other European partners, especially Italy and Spain, who feel excluded from policy-making processes.

However, the recent decision of the E3 to circulate a draft resolution against Iran ahead of a UN nuclear watchdog meeting, despite US opposition, demonstrates that the E3 is still relevant².

Moreover, the E3 seems better suited to adopt a comprehensive approach regarding international security issues than other European informal multilateral formats which focus on regional security aspects (B9³, V4⁴, N5⁵ and NB8⁶...). In addition, the E3 is more flexible than the Weimar Triangle which gives it a comparative advantage.

Yet, so far, the format has failed to take on leadership on major geopolitically relevant issues and to establish itself as a strategic instrument for European (not EU) and transatlantic diplomacy.

Europeans are increasingly being faced with the reality that the US will be less focused on Euro-Atlantic security and continue its pivot towards the Indo-Pacific to deal with the 'pacing' threat of China. In Washington, where this is a non-partisan priority, this trend might be accelerated once the next Trump administration is in place. If the US was to accelerate

¹ <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/07/future-e3/origins-and-development-e3>

² <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/european-powers-seek-action-against-iran-iaea-meeting-despite-us-concerns-2024-05-29/>

³ Bucharest-Format, gathering Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia.

⁴ Visegrad Format, gathering the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia.

⁵ Nordic 5, gathering Denmark, Iceland, Finland, Norway and Sweden.

⁶ Nordic-Baltic, gathering the N5 nations as well as the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania).

and accentuate its withdrawal from Europe, it would leave a security and leadership vacuum in the old continent, which will be very hard to compensate. Therefore, the Europeans will have to become security providers and take on greater responsibility for their own defence to tackle the numerous current and future security challenges. However, the Europeans lack capabilities, leadership and strategic outlook.

Given their economic and military strength, coupled with their robust defence industrial and technological bases, France, Germany and the UK have a key role to play in this regard. None of them alone will be able to compensate for a decrease of the US presence in Europe – but they can mitigate it if they work together. This makes greater coordination and cooperation between the three main powers in Europe even more necessary. A revitalisation of the E3 format is not only in its members’ best interest, but also in the EU’s and NATO’s. It could create a strong leadership group to direct Europe through the uncertain years ahead. Berlin, London and Paris should focus on key priorities in the political, strategic and military fields. They should also include other main European partners, especially Italy and Poland.

Restructuring the E3 format by giving a new political impetus

E3 meetings (or summits) should meet at heads of state level regularly. Some disagreements will remain, but it is important to gain awareness of these and mitigate them as soon as possible. In the past, E3 meetings at Defence Policy Directors (DPD) level were often scheduled ahead of Quad meetings with the US. This “tradition” needs to be re-established, given the foreseeable growing divergences between the US and the E3 – and European – countries in the coming years.

So far, only one defence ministers’ meeting was held, in 2020⁷ in Germany. A new meeting could be organised in France or the UK.

The UK seems to have the greatest interest in relaunching the E3 format, as it allows flexible engagement with its two largest European allies outside of the EU and NATO. Reconnecting with the EU is a ‘top foreign policy priority’ for the new British government. Better EU-UK relations would be a strong driver for re-energising the E3. At the same time, better E3 relations would sustain improved relations with the EU as well. To ensure a link with the EU and address criticism of European partners, the EU’s High Representative could be invited to high-level E3 discussions, as used to be the case on the nuclear negotiations with Iran⁸.

However, the current political situation in Paris and Berlin could be major obstacles as the political impetus, which would be necessary to relaunch the E3, might be lacking. In France, the political crisis which started with the dissolution of the National Assembly following the European election has intensified with the overthrow of Michel Barnier’s government over the budget issue in December 2024. France is experiencing an unprecedented political crisis and President Macron finds himself under growing pressure and sees his freedom of manoeuvre and leadership much reduced.

⁷ Ministers Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, Florence Parly and Ben Wallace gathered in Saarlouis in August 2020.

⁸ Claudia Major, Nicolai von Ondarza, “Germany, the EU and Global Britain: So Near, Yet So Far - How to Link “Global Britain” to European Foreign and Security Policy”, SWP Comment, April 2021, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2021C31/>

In Germany, new federal elections are to take place on 23 February 2025 after the Bundestag's withdrawal of confidence in the Chancellor. Expectedly, the formation of a new government and the drafting of the coalition contract will take some time, thus prolonging the political instability. Beyond the dire political situation, the "Zeitenwende" has failed to deliver, due to a lack of political commitment at highest level where priority was given to other challenges. In many areas, it remained significantly behind the expectations of the partners. Medium-term financing and securing the minimum investment of 2% has not yet been taken into account in future budget planning. Many steps towards integrated security are only being taken slowly and reforms of the armed forces are far too slow. The financing problems are compounded by recruitment issues, which the reintroduction of military service, as planned by the resigning government, is not expected to resolve. All in all, the resigning government lacked a strategic vision, struggled to implement its defence policy and failed to impose itself as the self-proclaimed "backbone of deterrence and collective defence in Europe"⁹. In the end, Germany left its allies and partners rather disappointed after the "Zeitenwende" had triggered high hopes and many expectations but failed to really deliver. The next government will have to work hard to reverse this.

Despite the political instability in Berlin and Paris, there are some encouraging signs for the E3 format: the signature of a bilateral cooperation treaty between Germany and the UK should rebalance the 'E3 triangle' and put each side on an equal political footing by complementing the Franco-German Elysée and Aachen Treaties (signed in 1963 and 2019 respectively) as well as the Franco-British Lancaster House Treaty of 2010.

Also, the attempts of a greater European coordination between the five leading nations in the field of defence (France, Germany, Italy, Poland and the UK) must be consolidated and implemented. With the E3 at its core, the "E5" must set the decisive accents and deliver¹⁰.

Setting a clear agenda

It might be useful for all parties to engage in defining a clear agenda regarding topics of common interest and a timeline for holding discussions at different levels. Until the new German government is in place, the E3 dialogue should be intensified at technical level. In developing the format further, and for more challenging times, it should reform to become more structured, while maintaining its flexibility through setting its own agenda to address following challenges:

1. Stepping up support to Ukraine through the E3

The most acute security challenge to Europe is Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, including Moscow's increased hybrid attacks and nuclear signalling against the continent. Berlin, London and Paris should work together to understand and, if required, mitigate the implications of any proposed US peace plan on Ukraine which would be contrary to the interests of Ukraine and Europe and its wider impacts on the continent's security and stability. Specifically, attention should be focused on a collective response to a request for European military deployments to Ukraine to stabilise and secure any ceasefire, leading to a

⁹ <https://www.bmvg.de/resource/blob/5702190/edabed114d7856c8aa71ad666cbce8b3/download-defence-policy-guidelines-2023-data.pdf>

¹⁰ Pistorius empfängt europäische Partner.

negotiated peace agreement. The E3 alongside other European countries such as Italy and Poland have to be proactive.

The three countries all commit to political, financial, military and humanitarian support to Ukraine for “as long as is necessary” and the three countries were the first to sign bilateral security cooperation agreements with Ukraine in early 2024. These agreements are closely coordinated and are similar in their content and commitments. However, they underline disagreements between approaches to the conditions for Ukrainian membership in NATO, with Germany taking a much more cautious position than France or the UK.

With a growing uncertainty regarding the long-lasting US military support to Ukraine, European countries must step up and work together toward the concrete implementation of their respective bilateral agreements. According to Ukrainian officials¹¹, the implementation of these documents is rather complicated due to bureaucratic processes. Berlin, London and Paris should work on this issue in order to improve cooperation. Many of the commitments can be addressed both bilaterally and multilaterally. E3+Ukraine cooperation should be sought whenever it brings added-value.

In the future, it would also be helpful to coordinate new weapon deliveries as well as the communication surrounding them. Too often, announcements on weapon deliveries have been made unilaterally, with minimal prior coordination. To ensure a sustained and efficient support to Ukraine, the Europeans, especially the most capable ones, have to develop a coherent and comprehensive demand-driven strategy. The Ramstein capability coalitions (CC) are an important tool in this regard and the E3 countries play a key role, jointly taking part in several coalitions such as the CC Integrated Air and Missile Defence (IAMD), co-led by France and Germany, the CC Artillery or the CC armoured vehicles. Yet, much can still be improved regarding the support to Ukraine. Thus, France, Germany and the UK should fully engage in the newly created NATO structures NSATU (Security Assistance and Training for Ukraine, based in Wiesbaden, Germany) and JATEC (Joint Analysis Training and Education Centre, based in Bydgoszcz, Poland) to ensure its success even in case of a drastic reduction of the American aid to Ukraine.

2. Strengthening NATO’s European pillar

All three countries have actively contributed to securing the eastern flank of the Alliance since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. Collectively they are major contributors to the Baltic Air Policing mission, which was set up in the early 2000s. Since 2016, they have also played a key role in the framework of NATO’s enhanced Forward Presence (eFP), Germany being lead-nation in Lithuania with the commitment to station a brigade in 2025, the UK leading the international Battlegroup in Estonia and France alternatively deploying a battalion to both Baltic countries. France also now leads the international Battlegroup in Romania established in 2022. As an initial signal for this leadership role, the United Kingdom and France should work together with Germany to compare the various commitments of NATO’s Eastern European defence.

Mid-October, the UK (and Sweden) joined the European Long-Range Strike Approach (ELSA) which was formally launched by France, Germany, Italy and Poland on the side-lines of the Washington NATO-Summit in July 2024 to jointly develop new cutting-edge long range missile capabilities.

¹¹ Interview conducted at the National Defence and Security Council of Ukraine in Kyiv in October 2024.

Initiatives such as ELSA and the German-led European Sky Shield, to build up ground-based air defence, as well as the ongoing modernization of France's and the UK's nuclear capabilities, contribute de facto to the strengthening of NATO's deterrence and defence posture.

The Leadership of E3 countries should contribute to the gradual shift from burden sharing to burden shifting towards Europe. Being the three major military powers in Europe, they could lead other Europeans down this path, capitalising on their traditional influence in Northern Europe (UK) through existing initiatives such as the Joint Expeditionary Force and Northern Group, Southern Europe (France) thanks to close political, operational and/or industrial partnerships with Mediterranean nations¹² and Eastern Europe (Germany) through leadership of its NATO Framework Nations' concept.¹³

Defence spending will certainly be a key issue during the Hague Summit, especially once the Trump administration is in place. The president-elect and NATO's Secretary-General Rutte already urge the allies to raise the target from 2% to 2.5% or even 3% GDP. All E3 nations meet the current 2% objective - even if Germany has no concrete plan on how to sustainably maintain this course and France's budgetary situation may impact defence spending. But a significant rise in the defence budgets in the short term will be quite a challenge for all three. Hence, a harmonization between the E3 ahead of the Hague Summit is essential to show unity and defend common positions on this critical issue.

3. Taking more action in the Indo-Pacific

The E3 has a role to play in other geographic areas of common interest. All three countries have published national strategies on the Indo-Pacific in which they all recognize that China's assertive and aggressive posture poses a security challenge in the region and beyond. Moreover, each strategy has an aspiration to increase European presence in the region, especially in the naval domain, but there is an inconsistency on how this is applied. While the US has an increasing maximalist posture toward Beijing, the E3 countries have a more moderate stance but different approaches. The UK seems most aligned with Washington regarding the Indo-Pacific and includes the strengthening of ties with Japan, Australia and South Korea in particular. Germany has the greatest economic interests with China and therefore is shakier when it comes to show strength. France has a large number of national citizens in the region and also wants to avoid a confrontational approach.

Last Summer, in the framework of the deployment of the "FCAS Nations" to the Indo-Pacific, the French, German and Spanish air forces joined the Royal Air Force and other nations to participate several exercises ("Pitch Black 24" in Australia¹⁴, "Tarang Shakti" in India¹⁵). The

¹² In the last couple of years, France strengthened its ties with Greece (Strategic partnership agreement signed in September 2021), Italy (Quirinale Treaty signed in November 2021) and Spain (Barcelona Treaty signed in January 2023). France also conducted joint naval exercises in the Eastern Mediterranean with Cyprus, Greece and Italy in Summer 2020, while tensions with Turkey escalated. Paris and Rome have a structured industrial cooperation, especially in the ground-based air defence domain and strive to increase their cooperation in the land domain, as expressed in the Letter of intent signed by both defence ministers in April 2024 with the aim of creating an "European industrial hub in the land domain bringing together the best Italian and French companies in the sector". <https://www.difesa.it/fra/primo-piano/defense--le-ministre-crosetto-rencontre-son-homologue-francais-lecornu/51626.html>

¹³ Ed Arnold and Sean Monaghan, 'Indispensable: NATO's Framework Nations Concept beyond Madrid', June 2022, CSIS Briefs, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/220627_Monaghan_NATO_Madrid_0.pdf?VersionId=tFV_M1IRZU.BmqIfNjlcshxrj,jj1Eny

¹⁴ <https://www.airforce.gov.au/news-events/events/exercise-pitch-black/participants>

¹⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-shows-commitment-to-indo-pacific-following-major-exercises>

E3 nations' navies also jointly participated in RIMPAC 2024, the world's largest naval exercise¹⁶.

In addition to strengthening interoperability, these joint deployments and exercises aim to send a clear message that the three countries are ready to defend their interests in the region. However, even though these exercises are increasing in number and intensity, the small number of assets deployed is unlikely to worry Beijing, let alone make it change its posture, or credibly reassure their regional partners.

The E3 nations have very little military influence in the region – but can increase it collectively by working together. Furthermore, a real strategy is yet to be defined between the E3 countries to determine whether it is more appropriate to organise joint deployments, as a sign of European unity, or separate deployments to maintain a more lasting presence in the region. France and the UK jointly agreed at their 2023 annual summit that they would deconflict Carrier Strike Group (CSG) deployments to the Indo-Pacific which will both increase a European presence over there – in line with the national and EU strategy – and keep a CSG permanently in the Euro-Atlantic. However, Germany has chosen to undertake smaller national missions which have had minimal effect. There would be significant potential for Germany to join either a UK or French led CSG and increase a coordinated E3 presence in the Indo-Pacific, and France and the UK should offer this. Even if Germany reduces its own footprint in the region as a result, the added value for the greater good must be taken into account. However, given the increasing relevance of the region and the arms export potential, national interests remain high and competition among E3 is unlikely to vanish.

4. Securing the European neighbourhood: Western Balkans and Africa

Given the strong US-focus in the Indo-Pacific and the gradual withdrawal from other regions (Europe but also Africa and the Middle-East), the Europeans must put greater efforts in securing their own neighbourhood, especially the Western Balkan States and Africa, where Europeans have been far too dependent on US leadership and capabilities. Both regions are subject to external influence measures as well as massive destabilisation and disinformation campaigns by strategic competitors.

France and Germany are also adapting their strategy in Africa and should publish new strategic documents in this regard. France's footprint is to be lighter and Paris intends to focus more on non-French speaking countries. This could lead to cooperation opportunities with London, or to a competition between the two former colonial States. This should be welcomed by London in order to burden share objectives and missions across the continent as European's capacity to respond is weakened by the focus on warfighting in Europe. The respective approaches of the three should complement each other. Making best use of each country's specific areas of expertise and taking into account the necessity for a demand-driven cooperation, requested by African partners, will be key. This is the only way to mitigate the security concerns that originate from Africa with limited capacities to respond.

¹⁶ <https://www.bundeswehr.de/en/organization/navy/news/rimpac-2024-departure-world-s-largest-naval-exercise-5816742>

A first step within this area could be a joint lessons identified project between the countries on their recent counter-terrorist operations¹⁷ and stabilization¹⁸ and training missions¹⁹. Following the near total collapse of European missions in the Sahel from 2022 it is important that it is fully understood why and what are the strategic options towards Africa given that the demand for a European military presence is unlikely to decrease. One challenge remains: because of the lack of success in the latest crisis management operations (Afghanistan and Mali), and the imminent threat caused by Russia, the Europeans 'appetite to engage in further overseas theatres is limited.

A joint, or at least coordinated strategy between the E3 would benefit Europe as a whole. The three countries should also aim to jointly tackle the great challenge posed by disinformation campaigns, since actors such as Russia, China or Turkey apply a very offensive influence policy in these regions. They should be prepared to counter Russian unconventional military activities across the region conducted in particular by the military intelligence service GRU.²⁰ This activity will have direct relevance to European security to counter Russian regional operations and should not be seen as separate activity.

Finally, international crises will still require close attention and capabilities to take consequent actions. The examples of Afghanistan and Sudan, demonstrate the necessity to be able to jointly plan and conduct evacuation operations. A greater coordination is key. Therefore, joint exercises should be organised between E3 countries to improve preparedness. The situation in Syria and potential consequences for the whole Middle-East and for European security (increased terrorist threat due to the potential resurrection of the Islamic State or the return of foreign fighters to Europe) also require a joint assessment and, if required, joint action.

Conclusion

The worsening Euro-Atlantic security environment and uncertainty over the future US security commitment to the continent under a new American administration that is, on the face of it, much less transatlantic, are strong drivers to revitalize the E3. The underlying principle and drivers for the E3 still remain, despite growing political differences since Brexit. The international context demands greater coordination and cooperation between the major European military powers. The resumption of a high-level political dialogue, which, unlike the military dialogue, has faded away, would be the necessary first step.

It is important however to have realistic expectations on what is possible or not, on where the three converge or diverge, on where the E3 format offers a true added value. On key security issues, consultations could result in Joint Statements, which can then be used to keep each member on course. As is still the case on the NPT²¹ Safeguards Agreement with

¹⁷ French Operation Serval (2013) aimed to support the Malian government. It later developed into Operation Barkhane, with a European rapid reaction task force – Takuba – assigned to it to counter terrorist armed groups in the G5 Sahel countries.

¹⁸ United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), which both Germany and the UK joined.

¹⁹ European Union Training Mission (EUTM) Mali

²⁰ <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/special-resources/threat-russias-unconventional-warfare-beyond-ukraine-2022-24>

²¹ Treaty on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.

Iran (the latest was issued in June 2024, followed by a Quad statement in November 2024). This could be the case on other policy areas.

It is also necessary that the E3 remains flexible and avoids any sort of duplication to other formal and informal formats. Nonetheless, consideration could be given to extending the format (E3+) for certain specific subjects. For instance, Italy and Poland could positively contribute to E3 discussions regarding the support of Ukraine. An E3 + Poland format seems more adequate than a Weimar + UK format for a quadrilateral coordination and cooperation, given the greater flexibility of the former.

The change of government in the UK, which is far more open and supportive of Europe, individually and collectively, is a strong driver to revitalise the E3. This would go far in achieving the 'reconnection' with Europe and an ambitious UK-EU defence and security pact that the UK Labour Party have made central foreign policy commitments. Therefore, and in the context of weakened French and German governments, the UK should push the idea of reinvigorating the E3 to provide stronger leadership in Europe and collectively face the growing challenges ahead. With growing domestic political challenges, a revitalised E3, or even an E5 format, extended to Italy and Poland, can maximise international engagement and compensate the leadership and security vacuum in Europe while taking initiatives focused on European and international security. Europe cannot afford to fail and, once again, see other actors – who would ignore its security interests - decide on the future European security architecture. It is high time for action and the most capable European countries have to show the way and lead by example.

Text

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