

The Starmer Government and Europe: Resetting relations in turbulent times



Foreword

Hussein Kassim and Kirsty Warner

It's now nearly a year since the UK general election returned a Labour government to office. In its election manifesto, Labour had [pledged](#) to 'reset' the UK's relations with the EU, strengthen bilateral relations with key European countries, and raise the UK's global standing.

In our report [The UK and its neighbours: views across Europe](#), launched on the eve of the election, members of the '[Living with the Neighbours Observatory](#)' looked at expectations on the part of European capitals about what a change in government might bring. Then, in [UK-EU: What next?](#), two weeks after Labour's victory and against the background of the new government's early diplomatic initiatives, we brought together specialists to examine the issues with which the administration would inevitably have to engage in the short and medium terms. As well as outlining available options, we asked them to identify the challenges and obstacles that the new government was likely to confront at both the European level and at home.

In this report, which we are launching the week following the 19 May 2025 UK-EU summit, members of the Observatory reflect – against the background of the UK's ties to its neighbours and the impact of the UK's departure from the EU – on how relations between London and other European capitals have developed since the Starmer government entered office. The chapters by Cleo Davies and Hussein Kassim look respectively at how the new administration has approached relations both with the EU and with European governments, and at the EU's response to the change of government in London and how it has sought to engage with new interlocutors. All contributors consider the future prospects, not only for those bilateral relationships, but for the UK-EU relations with which for EU and EEA member states and arguably Switzerland they are indissolubly linked.

We should like to thank our contributors for their excellent insights that offer a rare and broad overview of the UK's relations with its nearest neighbours.

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The United Kingdom

Cleo Davies and Hussein Kassim



Background

The UK referendum and its aftermath had a far-reaching impact on the UK's relations with the EU and its European neighbours. Despite its [reputation](#) as an 'awkward partner', the UK had made an important contribution to the EU, especially in the creation of the internal market project where it played a leading role in the liberalisation of aviation, energy, and financial services, and left a deep imprint on competition policy, environmental policy and international trade. Although, its preference for a limited and non-federal conception of the EU and attachment to the transatlantic relationship were not shared by all member states, the UK did not stand alone on these issues.

Moreover, the UK was widely admired for its ability to define, communicate, and defend its favoured positions at EU levels. However, as the result of the 2016 referendum showed, the effectiveness of its governments in engaging with its EU partners was not matched by the success of any domestic efforts to win over the British public to the merits of EU membership.

David Cameron's decision to hold an in/out referendum, Leave's victory in the vote on June 2016, and the policies pursued by successive Conservative governments not only led to a fundamental recasting of the UK's relationship with the EU, but changed how the UK interacts bilaterally with its closest European neighbours. As a third country, the UK's interaction with the EU is structured by the [Withdrawal Agreement](#) and the [Trade and Cooperation Agreement](#) (TCA) and mediated through the respective committee structures set up by the two treaties. Since the Commission [represents](#) the EU side, the UK [no longer interacts](#) directly with EU member states at the EU level. Instead, the UK's interaction with its European neighbours is bilateral. Since its departure from the EU, the UK has struck multiple non-binding agreements with European partners. Although they have been central to the UK's post-Brexit diplomacy, the [UK's bilateral deals are constrained](#) both by the terms of its two Agreements with the EU and the obligations of its European partners as member states to the EU. As a result, they focus overwhelmingly on security and defence cooperation, which is not covered by the TCA.

Aside from the changed formal basis of the relationship, at a political level relations between the UK and the EU have been tense and often antagonistic. Prime Minister Theresa May could not find a way to square her desire for a close and deep relationship with the EU with the red lines that she had outlined and struggled to arrive at a negotiating position that could be accepted by both her Cabinet and the EU. The Johnson government took a different, more adversarial approach and sought to distance the UK from the EU. Though his administration succeeded in negotiating the UK's withdrawal from the EU, the EU suspected that he had little intention of fully implementing the terms of the Northern Ireland Protocol. The agreement that his government reached on trade relations with the EU was broad but thin, achieving his goal tariff and quota free access for goods, but both during the negotiations of the TCA and after the administration sought to disengage as fully as possible with the EU.

The distancing was reflected in the rhetoric of the Johnson administration, which echoed many of the themes of the Leave campaign. Free of the EU, the UK would be able to pursue its destiny as a global, free trading nation, ready as the ['greatest country on earth'](#) to provide a ['beacon of hope'](#), rediscover its links to countries of the Anglosphere, including the UK, and seek to renew its influence in the Pacific – a vision reflected in its [Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy](#). In a [programmatic statement](#) of the Johnson government's position, the UK Chief Negotiator David Frost [celebrated](#) the restoration of UK sovereignty, portrayed the EU as redundant and anachronistic, and welcomed the return of a state-centric world order.

Although the UK and the EU cooperated on support for Ukraine following Russia's invasion in February 2022, broader EU-UK relations deteriorated, particularly as the EU became frustrated at what it perceived as the UK's government failure to implement the Northern Ireland Protocol and later its threat to [override](#) the provisions of an international agreement it had only recently signed. Despite the decision of Johnson's successor Liz Truss to [attend](#) the first meeting of the European Political Community, the relationship only began to thaw after Rishi Sunak's negotiation of the Windsor Framework took a big step towards normalising the relationship. Though Sunak declared his support for Brexit and committed himself to ridding the UK statute book of EU laws, the [Integrated Review Refresh](#) – a further review of UK foreign policy undertaken by the Foreign Commonwealth and Defence Office – reinstated 'Europe' (or at least European states) as an important partner.

Against this background, the election of the Labour Party in July 2024, with a promise to 'reset' UK-EU relations, marked a major departure from its Conservative predecessors. Aiming to 'reconnect with allies and forge new partnerships to deliver security and prosperity at home and abroad', the [Manifesto](#) pledged that the UK would become 'a leading nation in Europe again, with an improved and ambitious relationship with our European partners'. It promised 'an ambitious new UK-EU security pact' – a theme [forefronted](#) by Shadow Foreign Secretary David Lammy – as well as closer bilateral relations with France, Germany, Ireland and Poland. Although it ruled out a return to the customs union or the single market, or the restoration of freedom of movement, the Labour Manifesto listed a number of specific objectives that would involve closer interaction with the EU. These included: a sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) or veterinary agreement; help for touring artists; and mutual recognition for professional qualifications. The Manifesto also committed Labour to strengthen the UK's influence abroad by working across government to bring leading creative and cultural institutions together to 'increase the UK's international clout', and with diaspora communities to enhance the UK's cultural links internationally.

Developments since July 2024

Following its election with a 174-seat majority, the Starmer government embarked immediately on a major diplomatic campaign with European leaders. After an [early call](#) with Commission President Ursula von der Leyen on 5 July, Starmer met international leaders at NATO Summit on 11 July and his European counterparts a week later at the fourth European Political Community Summit which he hosted at Blenheim Palace – the beneficiary of a decision taken by his predecessor – where he welcomed leaders of over 40 countries. The new PM used the plenary to affirm his government's [commitment](#) to international law and ECHR membership.

The priority the new government assigned to EU relations was underlined by portfolio and organisational changes, including the appointment of Nick Thomas-Symonds as cabinet minister for relations with the EU. The PM also [decided](#) to return national EU coordination from the Foreign Commonwealth and Defence Office to the centre of government. A European Union Relations Secretariat was created in the Cabinet Office, which assumed responsibility for driving the government's EU agenda, overseeing existing UK-EU relations, including co-chairing the ministerial level structures under the UK's treaties with the EU, and leading work across Whitehall to deepen the relationship.

In contrast to previous governments, Starmer saw improved bilateral relations as [an integral part of the government's relations with the EU](#). Within days of Labour's election victory, David Lammy made visits to Berlin, Paris and Warsaw by David Lammy, which Defence Secretary John Healey followed up in August 2024. It was also notable that, while the PM's predecessors had largely left bilateral relations to Foreign Office officials and – except for Sunak with Italy's PM Giorgia Meloni – were scarcely visible when deals struck with their counterparts in EU capitals, Starmer has often been personally involved.

- **France:** Relations with Paris have intensified under the new government. Beyond their meetings on the fringes of multilateral events, Starmer became the first UK PM to attend the commemoration of the World War I armistice since Winston Churchill and Macron was the first President invited to Cheques for a decade (see chapter on France). Beyond these high-level political meetings, the UK and France have continued to work together at official level in the context of the bilateral framework they agreed in March 2023, covering such areas as science, innovation and technology, cyberspace, and irregular migration. Starmer has also worked closely with French President Macron in responding the uncertainties concerning European security, the defence of Ukraine, and the future of the US security guarantee and NATO surround generated by the second Trump administration. Against the long-standing cooperation between the two countries on security and defence issues, the two countries have stepped up cooperation to support Europe. They have worked on a ‘reassurance force’, intended to deter further Russian aggression and to protect Ukrainian infrastructure. They have also led diplomatic efforts to create a ‘coalition of the willing’.
- **Germany:** the UK followed up on [its stated intention](#) to negotiate a [British-German defence agreement](#) similar to the Lancaster House treaties the UK signed with France in 2010 with a widely [publicised](#) leader-level meeting in Berlin in August 2024. A visit by PM Starmer to Chancellor Scholz was followed up by a meeting of the Defence Ministers of the two countries. Germany and the UK formalised closer cooperation in the [UK-Germany Trinity House on Defence](#) in October 2024 (see chapter on Germany). The change of government in Germany towards the end of last year has led to a hiatus at political level, though interaction between the two countries at official level has continued.
- **Ireland:** improving relations with Dublin has been a particular priority of the new government. Taoiseach Simon Harris was the first foreign leader to be received by the new PM and Starmer became the first PM [to visit Dublin](#) for five years in September. Starmer was followed in October by his Foreign Secretary David Lammy, who visited the Tánaiste (deputy PM) and Foreign Minister Micheál Martin on 3 October. They issued a [communiqué](#) that highlighted the importance of a positive UK–EU relationship and looked forward to strengthening cooperation. In March 2025, Starmer and Michael Martin, the new Taoiseach, signed a [UK-Ireland 2030 Joint Statement](#). Northern Ireland Secretary Hilary Benn made it clear that [‘Labour was committed to implementing the Brexit deal in full in Northern Ireland’](#).
- **Poland:** Security ties have been at the heart of bilateral ties between London and Warsaw (see chapter on Poland). UK Defence Secretary John Healey met Poland’s Minister of National Defence Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz [in Warsaw to discuss European security](#) and NATO’s strategic direction soon after Labour’s election victory. The UK subsequently committed to assist in the construction of Poland’s East Shield defence infrastructure and announced the deployment of Eurofighter aircraft for an air policing mission over Poland in 2025. In January 2025, Keir Starmer met Poland’s PM Donald Tusk in Warsaw and announced plans for a [Defence and Security Treaty](#), which will provide a framework for closer cooperation between the two sides to support Ukraine and counter Russian aggression.

Despite these bilateral initiatives and the early diplomatic flourish with EU leaders, it was not until October 2024 that Keir Starmer met Commission President Ursula von der Leyen to discuss how he foresaw bringing about an improvement in UK-EU relations. Their meeting marked a major milestone. In a joint statement that noted the close alignment of the UK and the EU on global issues, the two leaders [announced](#) a first UK-EU summit to take place in 2025. The UK Foreign Secretary, David Lammy, [attended](#) the EU Foreign Affairs Council the same month and Chancellor Rachel Reeves [addressed](#) EU Finance Ministers in December 2024. In February 2025, Starmer became the first PM to attend an informal meeting of the European Council.

Somewhat more below the radar, and later than anticipated by some, talks between the two sides to prepare the ground for the UK-EU May 2025 summit did not begin until some months later. The UK side was represented by [Michael Ellam](#), who was appointed to head the EU Relations Secretariat in the Cabinet Office with responsibility for leading discussions on the EU, G7 and G20. The EU side, meanwhile, was represented by Alexandre Adam, a member of Commission President von der Leyen's cabinet.

The UK's approach to the UK-EU summit has been very guarded. Despite polls that consistently show that a [majority of voters](#) would now vote to remain in the EU and [others](#) that suggest that most Britons think that Brexit has been more of a failure than a success and that it was wrong to vote to leave the EU, Brexit remains a toxic issue in the UK. The aims set out by Labour in its Manifesto were relatively modest, partly because it does not want to reopen the wounds of the past, partly because it had factored in the likely response from the Conservative Party, Reform, and sections of the media, and partly because it is anxious about the electoral consequences of a rapprochement with the EU. Labour is particularly worried about its electoral vulnerability in 'red wall' seats – constituencies that it lost to Conservatives in 2019 and regained in 2024 – as well as the threat posed by Reform, which the results of the local elections on 1 May 2025 appear to justify. These factors also account for the repeated assertions from the Labour frontbench that its ambition is to make Brexit work and to repair Johnson's '[botched deal](#)', and constant reassurances that Labour has no intention of joining the customs union or the single market, still less of rejoining the EU – a prospect that Keir Starmer has specifically said he does not expect to see during his lifetime. It explains too the government narrative – justifying efforts to improve relations with the EU to grow the UK economy and make life easier for ordinary working people – and also why it has sought to assuage the concerns of voters it considers could potentially switch to Reform with tough language on immigration.

These considerations perhaps explain why the government communicated its concrete aims for the UK-EU Summit to the EU side somewhat late in the day and why the dialogue that took place between the two sides happened a long way from public view.

The area in which the UK counted on making the most progress was security and defence. Although the 'ambitious new UK-EU security pact' sought by the UK would not be obtainable at the Summit due to time constraints, it hoped to secure a non-binding Security and Defence Partnership that would represent a major step in that direction. Such a framework would cover joint action on cybersecurity and maritime security, protection of critical infrastructure, freedom of navigation, and freedom of overflight. Crucially, it would also open the way for UK defence firms to access EU funding. A concern that the EU would insist on agreement to prolong the TCA chapter on fisheries significantly beyond the current 2026 deadline, thereby giving EU fishers access to UK waters – an issue of high political sensitivity in the UK, despite the industry's relatively small contribution to the economy, estimated at 0.04% of UK GDP – as a precondition for a deal on security had receded by the final run-up to the Summit.

Long-term extension of the fisheries expiry date was linked, however, to another UK ask - its pursuit of an SPS agreement. A veterinary agreement would both remove the obstacles to trade between the EU and the UK in farming and agrifood products that had arisen as consequence of Brexit and ease restrictions on GB-Northern Ireland trade. However, the EU would require dynamic alignment – that UK standards replicate EU rules – and a role for the jurisprudence of the European Court of Justice, both of which previous UK governments had rejected.

On energy, the UK had secured an agreement under the TCA on electricity trading that had allowed the UK to trade electricity to the EU on terms that stopped short of full access to the internal market. However, the option that the two sides had agreed to explore had proved elusive on technical grounds. The UK wanted a solution to this issue, which would allow it to supply electricity to the EU market. However, the EU was reluctant to cede access on the grounds that the UK should not be allowed to cherry pick the rules it liked without having to comply with other obligations that are faced by the member states and thereby gain a competitive advantage. The EU was similarly reticent about the UK ask for mutual recognition of professional qualifications.

People-to-people exchange has perhaps posed the greatest challenge for the new government. The Leave referendum campaign established a [link](#) between immigration, the free movement of people, and mobility that often goes unchallenged in UK political debate. For this reason, the UK has been hesitant about youth mobility – Labour rejected a Commission proposal while in Opposition and a call by Germany after the new UK government had taken office – which also runs counter to its pledge to reduce immigration. Although the UK has similar schemes with 13 other countries and could impose important restrictions on a scheme with the EU – visa controls, age eligibility and time limitations – the UK has still been reluctant. When the UK also proposed a cap on numbers, the EU [rejected it](#) as too low.

The UK has also rejected entry to ERASMUS+. Like previous governments, Labour is concerned that the UK would run a net deficit, since previous evidence suggests that more EU students would travel to the UK than UK students to the EU. Moreover, the proposal that EU students could enrol at UK universities and pay the same fees as home students poses difficulties at a turbulent time for the UK HE sector. It would also be politically difficult for a UK government to charge EU students lower fees than other international students who come from the Commonwealth, notably India and Nigeria.

The UK's unwillingness to make concessions in youth mobility or ERASMUS reportedly accounts for the EU's unwillingness to reduce [red tape for touring musicians](#) from the UK, where since Brexit artists must complete formidable quantities of paperwork to perform in each country they visit.

The UK's proposal for EU-UK cooperation in the return of irregular migrants – a facility that the UK lost as a consequence of Brexit – also received a negative response, though this is an area where there are important differences between EU member states. Although there have been [reports](#) a pilot scheme for a migrant returns agreement with France, which would involve one person being deported from the UK in exchange for France sending another individual the other way, the prospects of an EU-level agreement with the UK appear remote. However, the EU was receptive to UK requests for closer involvement in legal and judicial cooperation, including database access.

The UK secured many of its objectives over the course of the dialogue that took place between with the EU in the months, weeks and days leading up to the Summit. It is important, however, to see [the texts](#) adopted on 19 May 2025 as the outcome of a set of exploratory talks that included a small number of agreements on specific issues, but for the most part set out a [roadmap](#) for ongoing discussion and negotiation between the two sides on shared priorities.

The two sides agreed to a Security and Defence Partnership, which will institute regular dialogues and exchanges and cooperation on crisis interventions. It also opens the door to UK access to EU defence funds, though this will be one of a number of topics to be negotiated. On the economic side, there were several significant agreements. On fisheries, the UK agreed to a 12-year extension of the fisheries chapter of the TCA. Energy, which often passes under the radar, saw agreement in two areas: extension of the TCA chapter with further exploration of how the UK might access the internal market and alignment of the UK and EU carbon pricing schemes (CBAM). The two sides have agreed to work towards a wide-ranging deal on SPS, where the UK has accepted dynamic alignment with EU rules and a role for the European Court of Justice in dispute resolution in exchange for the easing frictions in trade in farming products and agrifood, and a role in EU decision-taking. The commitment to discuss closer cooperation in law enforcement and judicial cooperation, included the possibility of granting UK access to the EU's facial recognition database. The provisions relating to people-to-people, by contrast, were shorter on detail beyond a commitment to further exploratory discussions concerning youth experience and UK participation in ERASMUS+. Mutual recognition of professional qualifications and easier mobility for touring musicians both seem unlikely to progress.

Future prospects

Since the outcome of the Summit consisted mainly in commitments to talk further, the extent to which it will achieve the specific aims set out by the Starmer government remains to be seen. But it is hard to dispute that the event marks a new stage in UK-EU relations. Despite some of the continuities in UK policy between the new government and its predecessor – the Sunak government’s readiness to negotiate and adopt the Windsor Framework, agreement on cooperation with Frontex, and the quiet dropping of the commitment to UK regulatory divergence – Starmer’s approach has been different in style, scope and substance. The hosting of a high-level summit, the broad range of issues up for discussion, and the preparedness of the government to accept dynamic alignment and a role for the European Court of Justice would not have been conceivable for his Conservative predecessors.

Also significant were the areas in which the EU was prepared to depart from its previous stance – for example, in accepting in principle the possibility of UK participation in areas of the single internal market (energy, agri-food), while on people-to-people exchange the EU looks very much as though it is a *demandeur*. Of course, the UK also made notable concessions in agreeing, for example, to a twelve-year extension to the fishing chapter of the TCA in exchange for the SPS agreement, in accepting dynamic alignment and a part to be played by European Court of Justice jurisprudence also in SPS.

Overall, the prospects for a more cooperative relationship between the UK and the EU have changed dramatically as a result of the gradual building of trust between the Starmer government and the EU side, particularly in the Commission, but also in national capitals. The European diplomacy of the new government, the security initiatives launched jointly by Starmer and Macron in reaction to the destabilisation caused by the second Trump administration, and the dialogue that led up to the Summit and the Summit itself have all played a part in the process, as have less visible elements, such as the attention paid by the Starmer administration to the implementation of the two UK-EU treaties, and their participation in the institutions and processes set up by the Good Friday Agreement.

However, that the relationship is yet in the clear is not yet obvious, nor is there enough in the way of concrete measures to be confident about the stability of UK-EU relations. First, as [Chris Grey](#) has commented, the relationship between the UK and the EU may have gone through a reset, but the same is not true of post-Brexit domestic politics. The response to news about the terms of the agreement from Brexiters in the Conservative Party and on the part of Reform, as well as the anti-European media has been unrelentingly, though predictably, negative. According to [Boris Johnson](#), the deal ‘combines the vassalage of Chequers with the surrenderism of Chagos’, while for [David Frost](#) ‘Starmer has betrayed Brexit comprehensively. The will of the people has been flouted’, [Jacob Rees Mogg](#) claimed the government was ‘reversing Brexit’, and [Steve Baker](#) called it ‘the surrender Starmer always dreamed of’. [Kemi Badenoch](#) pronounced it ‘a ‘stitch-up for our country’ and a ‘betrayal’, while [Nigel Farage](#) referred to it as ‘abject surrender’ and a ‘sell out’. Also, as Grey notes, the Brexiters have shaped the framing of coverage in the mainstream media. This is problematic when, while opinion polls are generally positive about UK-EU relations, there is a lack of public understanding of how the EU works, the terms of the Withdrawal Agreement or the TCA, what the Brexit changed, or UK’s patterns of trade, since it makes it difficult to assess government claims.

Second, it is unclear whether the Labour Party’s has yet found a successful or effective way to narrate the underlying rationale for the reset. One line of continuity with previous governments is the narrative strand used by Starmer and by Rachel Reeves emphasizing UK sovereignty or strength, which carries the danger that it conceals the sharp asymmetry of bargaining power between the UK and the EU, as well as the inevitable need to compromise in any agreement with the EU. The same applies to the transactionalist line of argument, where the government appeals to the hard bargaining in which it has engaged.

Nor are other narrative strands risk-free. The promise to ‘work with partners if it means we can improve people’s lives here at home’ could be difficult if the economic benefits – for example, [the £9bn](#) that the PM estimates will be gained by removing restrictions on agrifood – are not visible or immediate. A [deal for travellers to use European e-gates](#) would, however, fit the bill.

More broadly, although the Labour government has justified its rapprochement with the EU on economic grounds, with its red lines on the customs union and the internal market it has effectively accepted the terms of a Conservative Brexit. Yet it is highly unlikely that its deal will generate economic benefits that will compensate for the 4 per cent loss to GDP or £100 billion a year that the OBR estimates to have been caused by Brexit.

The second Trump administration is a third source of uncertainty. So far, the Starmer government navigation of relations with the EU and US has shown deft handling, but there is always the possibility that the choice between the UK’s ‘largest trading partner’ and ‘its closest security partner’ as [Anand Menon](#) puts it will suddenly become binary. At that point, the PM’s line that the UK can act as a [bridge](#) between the US and the EU will no longer be plausible, and the UK may then have to choose.

Finally, there is always the more prosaic possibility that, despite the warm words of the Joint Statement, the UK and the EU simply cannot reach agreement on the areas that matter to each. The Security Defence Partnership, the SPS Agreement, energy, and people-to-people all carry potential difficulties for one side or the other. Since the Summit points towards Swiss-style [permanent negotiations](#) between the UK and the EU on its bespoke arrangements, such an outcome cannot be excluded.

The European Union

Cleo Davies and Hussein Kassim



Background

The EU saw the Labour Party's election victory in July 2024 as an encouraging sign. The Labour's Manifesto promise of a 'reset' of relations with the EU and a strengthening of relations with its European neighbours suggested at the very least a change in tone following a decade of an often antagonistic and at times hostile approach on the part of successive UK governments. The Johnson government's failure to comply with its obligations under the Northern Ireland Protocol, as well as its introduction of legislation that threatened to override a number of its key provisions, provoked a breakdown in trust and a standoff with London which only came to an end when Rishi Sunak's administration efforts to normalise relations led to the Windsor Framework.

The EU's general wish for closer cooperation with the UK has been reinforced since Donald Trump's return to the White House. The current geopolitical context has made working with the UK as a near-neighbour that shares its values, security concerns, and support for the international liberal order more desirable. The EU had already been cooperating closely with the UK on Ukraine following Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, despite the general chill in UK-EU relations. However, the wider uncertainties associated with the Trump 2.0 administration's position on the war, doubts surrounding continuation of its post-war security guarantee to Europe as well as US commitment to NATO, and the disruption to the international economy that has resulted from the imposition of tariffs by Washington, have brought the two sides closer together. At a bilateral level, virtually every member government has signed a bilateral deal with London where [security and defence feature prominently](#) in the wake of the UK's departure from the EU.

But the EU's approach to the UK since July 2024 has also been cautious. It was concerned about what a new UK government would be able to achieve in practice, given the UK's pledge to remain outside of the single market and customs union. The EU is also weary of the obstacles that stem from the highly polarised political environment in the UK. Even for a government prepared to confront opponents of closer relations with the EU, the challenge was likely to be formidable. Conservatives, as the party of Brexit, and the anti-European Reform Party, as well as Leave veterans in the UK press and wider media, could be counted upon to interpret any indication of a Labour-engineered rapprochement as a betrayal of the 'will of the people' or at the very least an attempt to reverse the result of the 2016 referendum. Moreover, given the way in which Brexit has transformed, polarised and radicalised British politics, the EU worried that expectations of a fast turnaround could be exaggerated. A promise of a change in direction coupled with a failure to demonstrate the benefits could harm the prospects of reestablishing trust and therefore the possibility of a more stable relationship in the long term.

In addition, the EU retains the [firm stance](#) it adopted in dealing with London in the immediate aftermath of the UK referendum. The EU prioritises unity and the protection of the Union. It regards the four single market freedoms as indivisible and will not allow the UK to 'cherry pick' or take an 'à la carte' approach to its relationship with the EU. In other words, any benefits extended to the UK will need to be matched by corresponding obligations. As the UK is a third country that has withdrawn from the EU, it would be difficult to justify a situation where the UK or UK business enjoyed a more advantageous position – for example, enjoying access to a particular sector of the internal market, while not having to comply with more general rules in, say, competition, environmental or social policy or being subject to the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice – than a member state.

These principles, which were written into the 2017 [European Council guidelines](#) that set out the EU's negotiating position with the UK, continue to inform the EU's approach. The European Commission, which negotiates with the UK on behalf of the EU27, operates within the bounds of those guidelines. Moreover, the Commission can only negotiate agreements with the UK where the Council of the European Union adopts by unanimity a specific mandate that is also based on those guidelines.

In addition, the EU has put in place [arrangements](#) to manage the EU's interaction with the UK that were designed to ensure continuous interaction and exchange between EU institutions – specifically, the Commission, the European External Action Service (EEAS), and the Council – and the member states. The Council Working Group on relations with the UK acts as a sounding board and [clearing house](#) for EU decisions relating to the UK, and reminds governments of the terms of the two agreements – the Withdrawal Agreement and the TCA – that govern EU relations with the EU. It is where the Commission and the EEAS brief member governments about negotiations with London and where member states report their bilateral contacts with the UK.

Finally, the EU has continued to view the UK as a *demandeur*. It thereby places the onus on London to come forward with proposals. At the same time, it makes clear that it is only likely to engage with the UK on proposals that promise mutual gains, especially since the EU is generally satisfied with the terms of the two Agreements that it negotiated with the UK.

Developments since July 2024

The EU welcomed the positive tone of the new Starmer government and the declaration of its intent to rebuild relations. There was some hesitation, however, about what room for manoeuvre its Manifesto had left the Labour government to negotiate a closer relationship in view of its equally clear red lines – no return to the customs union or the single market, and no free movement. An additional concern was how the new government's hardline on immigration was likely to impact the [desire of many European countries](#) to reestablish people-to-people exchanges in work and education, since previous governments had linked the two.

Furthermore, some of the pledges made by the Labour Party did not land easily for the EU. The desire for a security and defence pact was the least problematic, not only due to the geopolitical context which had been pushing the sides together, but because the EU had already prepared a text. The form of security and defence partnership between the two had been prepared as part of the Political Declaration agreed when Theresa May had negotiated the Withdrawal Agreement, but abandoned when the Johnson administration made clear that it had no interest in institutionalised cooperation with the EU in foreign policy and defence. However, there was the issue of how far such an agreement could go and whether the UK, as a third country outside the single market, could be granted access to EU joint procurement programmes in defence.

Labour's pursuit of a sanitary and phytosanitary agreement (SPS) suggested a problem of a different sort. Such an accord would make trade easier between the EU and the UK, but it raised the question of whether the UK would accept either a role for the European Court of Justice in dispute and arbitration or dynamic alignment with EU rules or both. The UK's aim of mutual recognition of professional qualifications was problematic because it touched on the free movement of people and therefore the single market, where the EU had insisted that there would be no cherry picking – a point made and repeated by the Commission as well as by [leaders](#) of the EU27. The same was true of the promise of making mobility easier for touring musicians, which also recalled memories on the EU side that the EU had offered this possibility to the UK during the negotiations, but that the Johnson government had rejected it.

The EU was also clear that it would only consider changes that brought gains for both sides. It would be expecting quid pro quos within a wider package. Member states were particularly keen to resume cultural exchanges with the UK and especially youth mobility. However, the signs that the new government would be receptive to such initiatives were not good. Before the general election, Labour had [rejected](#)

a Commission proposal that would have allowed students from the UK to work or study abroad for up to four years in the EU and vice versa. It [responded negatively](#) again in the month following its general election victory when the issue was raised by the German Chancellor and the German Ambassador to the UK, leading to [speculation](#) that a meeting between the Commission President and the UK PM could be postponed if the UK was not open to restoring cultural contacts. In addition, the Labour government, like previous UK governments, seemed unprepared or unwilling to distinguish youth mobility from free movement of people, or to separate the issue from immigration more broadly.

There was a further concern on the EU side about the slow speed with which the new government seemed to be moving after its initial burst of diplomatic activity. Some wondered if the prospects for a 'reset' had receded as the administration's post-election honeymoon period came to an end and an anticipated meeting between the PM and Commission President Ursula von der Leyen had not materialised. However, the Commission President's reluctance as she prepared for parliamentary hearings and a second term of office also contributed to the difficulty of finding a date.

Hopes picked up again when the two met in Brussels in October 2024 – the first visit to the city by a UK PM since 2019. At the meeting, von der Leyen [welcomed](#) the wish of the new government for more positive and closer cooperation with the EU and expressed its desire to work with the UK on strengthening the relationship. The two leaders adopted a joint statement on global issues. They underlined their commitment to the full implementation of the Withdrawal Agreement, including provisions under the Windsor Framework, and the TCA, and to uphold international law and the ECHR – key issues on which the new government [differentiated](#) itself from his predecessors. They also [agreed](#) to hold a first UK-EU summit in spring 2025.

The rapprochement continued in December 2024 when the new President of the European Council António Costa visited Number 10 and the PM attended an informal meeting of the European Council on 4 February 2025. UK Foreign Secretary David Lammy [was present at](#) the EU Foreign Affairs Council in October, and Chancellor of the Exchequer Rachel Reeves [joined](#) the meeting of EU Finance Ministers in December 2024. To underline the close alignment of UK and EU positions on security and defence, Lammy and EEAS High Representative and Commission Vice President Kaja Kallas wrote a [joint opinion piece](#) on European Security in March 2025.

Nevertheless, on the eve of the meeting between von der Leyen and Starmer, [member states](#) made clear that they wanted assurances that the new UK government would abide by its commitments under the Withdrawal Agreement and the TCA, and that national capitals would have the opportunity to collectively decide the areas where relations could be advanced with the UK. Following a meeting of ambassadors to the EU, the Council Working Group undertook an exercise to set out the EU's position on the areas identified in the Labour Party [Manifesto](#). Undertaken by the Hungarian Presidency of the Council, it concluded in December with broad support among member states for exploring ways to improve the relationship. Support was particularly strong for the UK's aims concerning security and defence, where two-thirds wanted very close cooperation.

Other areas identified as a priority in relations with the UK by member states, however, would prove more problematic. Fisheries was a key preoccupation. With the review of the relevant chapter of the TCA up for review in 2026, member states wanted a long-term guarantee for the access of EU fishers to UK waters and for the UK to agree early in the talks. [Energy](#) posed a particular problem. The TCA provides for a high level of cooperation in this area where the UK has a strong interest in close relations with the EU, not least because it is physically connected to the continent by gas and electricity interconnectors. But the approach the TCA foresees for trade in electricity has run into technical problems, which are not easily resolvable. However, in the eyes of the member states it is the UK's decision to remain outside the internal market that makes progress difficult.

On SPS, member states could see the benefits of an agreement, but it would require that the UK agreed to full alignment with the *acquis* and accept the jurisprudence of the Court of Justice, which successive UK governments had rejected ever since May's pledge [in October 2016](#). There was also significant

support for exploring possibilities for cooperation on irregular migration, including additional data sharing with Europol and the European Migrant Smuggling Centre, but not for the agreement on readmissions sought by London, which many member states found unacceptable. On people-to-people questions, as well as highlighting a wish to reduce what they saw as obstacles to trade in services on the UK side, member states were especially keen for UK participation in the Erasmus+ programme. Governments supported an alignment of the EU and the UK's emission trading schemes. They were also positive about closer EU-UK relations on key issues of law enforcement and judicial cooperation. Characteristically, member states foresaw any agreement with the UK as [based on a 'package approach'](#), with links between particular issues

When its negotiations opened, however, frustration on the EU side emerged, first, on account of what was perceived as a slow follow-up on the part of the UK government to the October meeting and the late communication of UK asks. This delay – the UK local elections on 1 May 2025 were seen as a reason for why London had taken a cautious attitude – limited what could be agreed at the May summit, since it did not leave enough time on the EU side to secure authorisations for formal agreements on issues. Then, as the summit approached, [questions were raised](#) about the UK's lack of flexibility, particularly in regard to the people-to-people chapter, where the EU was calling for reciprocity in university fees, meaning EU students would pay the same as home students. The difficulty of bridging the gap between the two sides was illustrated by the inability of the von der Leyen cabinet to secure approval for a draft deal from EU ambassadors on the Friday before the Monday 19 May Summit. Last minute [concessions](#) on the EU side were finally waved through by the member states hours before the Summit opened.

Future prospects

The first UK-EU Summit marked a crucial post-Brexit milestone for the EU. The Commission President [declared](#) that 'We're turning a page,' and 'opening a new chapter'. The President of the European Council [praised](#) the UK PM for the success in realising his aim of rebuilding the relationship. He noted the close cooperation between the two sides since Starmer's attended the informal European Council three months previously on Ukraine, Russia, the transatlantic partnership, and international law, and welcomed the adoption of three documents – a [joint statement on cooperation on global issues](#), a [security and defence partnership](#), and a [common understanding and a renewed agenda for cooperation](#).

The texts may not be as ambitious in places as many on the EU side had hoped. They are for the most part framework documents that are not binding but outline issues of mutual concern and provide a roadmap for the two sides to continue exploratory talks. The Security and Defence Partnership, for example, is a non-binding instrument of a sort that the EU has signed with a number of third countries, including Norway, Moldova, South Korea, Japan, Albania and North Macedonia. It is not the security and defence pact that the UK had sought nor that several member states had wanted. Although it opens the door for the participation of UK defence industry firms to EU defence funds – a partnership agreement is a prerequisite for access to [SAFE](#) – discussions will need to continue to finalise the conditions for access.

The documents do, however, show evidence of compromise on both sides. The UK agreed to extend the TCA's current provisions in the fisheries chapter for twelve years, but the EU did not make it a precondition for the SPS agreement sought by the UK – the linkage was dropped on the Friday before the summit. The SPS will be especially beneficial to the UK, where farming and the agrifood sector have been most affected by being outside the single market. Crucially, it will pave the way for reducing trade frictions between GB and the EU and between GB and Northern Ireland. To achieve this agreement, the UK has consented to dynamic alignment and a role for the European Court of Justice – though at arm's length – in disputes and arbitration, and will have opportunities to shape EU decisions [in a similar way to Norway](#).

In some areas, there is a win-win. For example, agreement to improve data-sharing and operational arrangements in justice and law enforcement cooperation should be beneficial for both sides, as will be a decision to align emission trading systems. However, in others, the outcome is disappointing for the EU. The two sides have agreed to discuss people-to-people programmes, but the UK has made clear that it would want a cap as well as age and time limits on any youth mobility scheme and that it will be difficult for it to accede to EU requests for university students from the EU to pay the same fees as UK students.

Beyond their substance is the significance of the new level of engagement between the two sides that the UK-EU Summit that the agreements represent. For the EU, the Summit marks a major milestone in rebuilding trust with a neighbour that had not merely left the Union at the end of January 2020 but been antagonistic towards it ever since. The UK's engagement with the EU under the Starmer government has moved relations onto firmer footing that promises – provided that agreement follows on the issues that have been staked out – to pave the way for closer cooperation and even joint action between the EU and UK as friends and allies.



Background

Cyprus and the UK are linked by special historical ties. Having gained independence from British colonial rule in 1960, Cyprus became a member of the Commonwealth. When the Republic of Cyprus (RoC) was established, the UK was designated as a 'Guarantor Power' of the country's Constitution alongside Greece and Turkey. All three countries, effectively, have had the authority to intervene, unilaterally if necessary, to prevent any alteration to the Constitution or reinstate it in the case of violation.

In addition, since 1960 the UK has maintained two Sovereign Base Areas (SBAs) on the island under the Treaty of Establishment, signed by the three Guarantor Powers and the new Republic. The SBAs fall under the responsibility of the UK Ministry of Defence. Although the SBAs and the RoC are distinct legal entities, there is no hard border on the island, which allows for unrestricted travel between them and for goods to circulate without undergoing checks. Indeed, the Treaty of Establishment prohibits customs checks or other frontier barriers on the island.

The events that unfolded on the island in 1974, resulting in the illegal military occupation of the northern part of the island by Turkey and the unresolved 'Cyprus Problem', highlighted an even more critical role on the island for the UK. As well as a Guarantor Power, the UK is a permanent member of the UN Security Council. A United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) was created following intercommunal unrest in 1964, and, since then, the UN Security Council has extended its mandate every six months. Moreover, since 1974, Security Council resolutions have defined a framework for peace talks that have been taking place between the two communities on the island, with the UN taking over a mediating role.

This deep and complex history has fostered close ties between the two countries across commerce, culture, education, finance, and personal connections. Each year, over a million British tourists visit Cyprus, more than 300,000 Cypriots reside in the UK, and tens of thousands of Cypriots have pursued their studies there. Given that Cyprus has a population of just over one million, these figures are particularly significant in relative terms.

Notably, Cyprus's entry into the EU allowed for a further strengthening of commercial and business ties under the single market framework. Moreover, the two governments typically voted on the same side in the Council of the European Union and shared a common outlook on multiple issues.

Following the UK referendum, independent reports from ratings agencies and consultants, cited Cyprus as one of the countries likely to be most affected. In a report listing those countries most exposed by Brexit, [Fitch \(2016\)](#) noted that: 'the most exposed countries are Ireland, Malta, Belgium, the Netherlands, Cyprus and Luxembourg, all of whose exports of goods and services to the UK are at least 8% of GDP.' [Moody's \(2016\)](#) noted that while the direct impact of Brexit is likely to be limited for most EU member states, the effects on Ireland, Belgium, Spain and Cyprus could be more significant. [KPMG \(2017\)](#) commented that: 'Ireland may have the most to lose from a deterioration in economic relationships between the UK and EU, as well as Cyprus, Malta and Luxembourg.' As a result, the primary concern for Cyprus would be to limit the adverse economic effects as well as to establish a workable arrangement for the SBAs on the island.

What is also worth noting, however, is a key difference between the two countries, with the political elite in Cyprus being much more committed to the European project relative to their UK counterparts. Cypriot politicians neither anticipated nor could they relate to the referendum result and the UK's subsequent exit from the EU. Nevertheless, in the post-referendum era, Cyprus would never risk disrupting its special relationship with the UK. While it respected the EU stance during negotiations, Cyprus remained friendly towards the UK and, after Brexit took place, has actively sought to deepen its relations.

Developments since July 2024

Bilateral relations between Cyprus and the UK after Brexit remain strong, with a shared ambition to advance collaboration in new areas. Unsurprisingly, the Cypriot Government expressed no preference regarding the July 2024 elections in the UK, and there was limited coverage in the press. However, there was anticipation for the emergence of a stable government that would enhance the prospects for stronger cooperation.

A Memorandum of Strategic Cooperation was signed in 2022, under the Conservative administration, between the two Ministries of Foreign Affairs ([UK Foreign Office](#), 15 November 2022). It came into effect in 2023 with the aim of strengthening bilateral relations through a structured framework and across multiple fields — including foreign policy, security, the economy, and education — and included a commitment to conduct annual progress reviews. The first review was held in December 2023 under the Sunak government, while the second took place a year later under Prime Minister Starmer. On that occasion, the Cypriot Minister of Foreign Affairs, Constantinos Kombos, and the UK Foreign Secretary, David Lammy, met in London to formally launch the review process. Ministers were not present during the first review in 2023.

[Key highlights](#) from the second review of Cyprus–UK Bilateral Collaboration are summarised under certain thematic areas in point form below:

Foreign and Regional Policy

- Joint efforts on sanctions compliance, including UK support in establishing Cyprus's National Sanctions Implementation Unit to counter illicit finance linked to Russia. The UK's contribution in this field has been practical and evident.
- Active UK support for Cyprus's Amalthea Initiative — a maritime humanitarian corridor to Gaza — with tangible delivery of aid and UK participation in the Amalthea Fund Steering Group.
- Effective collaboration in civilian evacuation planning, recognising Cyprus's role via the ESTIA Plan and joint engagement in the Non-combatant Evacuation Operations Coordination Group (NEOCG).

Defence and Security

- Four bilateral meetings between Defence Ministers and expanded military engagement at senior levels.
- Signing of a renewed and broadened Bilateral Defence Co-operation Programme in November 2024.
- Ongoing joint military exercises, defence education initiatives, and efforts to improve interoperability.

Education, Culture, Science and Innovation

- Visa resolution for Cypriot teachers in the UK, enabling continuity in Cypriot diaspora schools.
- Launch of higher education internationalisation initiatives and exploration of joint university programming via the Commonwealth Higher Education Initiative.
- Promotion of research cooperation in environment, energy, health, and maritime through British Council-led events and Horizon Europe collaboration.

Trade and Prosperity

- UK facilitation of bilateral trade through engagement with professional bodies

Maritime Affairs

- Implementation of the 2023 shipping MoU focusing on green transition and seafarer welfare.

Law Enforcement and Security

- Strengthened operational cooperation in law enforcement, including counter-terrorism, organised crime, judicial cooperation, and addressing gender-based violence

In October 2024, President Christodoulides visited the UK, and three months later, Keir Starmer became the first UK Prime Minister in 50 years to visit Cyprus. The official visit, which included a one-on-one meeting with the President of the RoC, is widely regarded as a major milestone. Symbolically, the Prime Minister chose to travel via Larnaca Airport rather than through the Sovereign Base Areas (SBAs), although he did visit British military personnel stationed on the island. The visit to Cyprus proceeded despite concerns raised by UK opposition parties over potential issues that could be raised regarding the SBAs. Additionally, the PM's programme remained unchanged, despite criticism from the Turkish Cypriot 'President' of the unrecognised breakaway entity in the North, who expressed disappointment at not being formally informed or invited to meet the PM. Discussions during the visit [addressed key issues](#) within the ongoing Strategic Dialogue, including efforts to combat illicit Russian financial flows.

In practice, the change in government in the UK appears to have injected new momentum into bilateral relations, as reflected in the above-mentioned high-level meetings and an unwavering commitment to pursue this further. At the same time, both sides acknowledge that it will require patience for the issues discussed to mature and materialise.

Future prospects.

For Cyprus, the SBAs are often perceived as a residual vestige of colonial rule. While they provide the UK with considerable strategic advantages and geographical presence near the turbulent Middle East, they offer no discernible benefits to Cyprus. The presence of British military forces is questioned periodically by some political actors – mainly political parties, though they disagree on the timing of raising such an issue – and parts of the [local press](#), who have even urged the Cypriot government to seek recourse through the International Court of Justice. In addition, prominent UK politicians, such as [Jeremy Corbyn](#), have questioned the purpose of the Bases.

The issue resurfaced after the UK announced in October 2024 that it would return sovereignty of the Chagos Islands to Mauritius. Nonetheless, the Government of Cyprus has consistently refrained from raising the issue officially and appears disinclined to pursue any formal challenge to the status quo. Instead, it has adopted a pragmatic approach, contributing constructively to post-Brexit arrangements concerning the functioning of the bases and the steady use of the necessary infrastructure – such as water, electricity, and road access – by the UK. It is likely that, for the foreseeable future, the matter will remain off the formal bilateral agenda, as both parties prioritise the further strengthening of their relationship in a multifaceted manner.

A separate and persistent concern that unites parties across the political spectrum is the issue of university tuition fees for Cypriot students who want to study in the United Kingdom. The application of international fees to Cypriot students has led to a sharp decline in numbers of students opting to study in the UK. Although it could be argued that, in relative terms, Cyprus has been hit harder than other EU states, a solution can only be reached at the European level in a way that applies to all EU countries. So far it does not appear that the Labour government is likely to resolve this issue. In the meantime, Cypriots who do not opt for the local state or private universities have found other places in Europe (such as the Netherlands, Ireland, Italy, Sweden, etc) to study.

At the same time, the Republic of Cyprus has been pursuing closer relations with other EU member states. Notably, it has engaged actively in the Med Group, which comprises Mediterranean EU countries — namely France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Greece, Cyprus, Malta, Croatia, and Slovenia. Although established before Brexit to coordinate on issues of shared concern—particularly migration and the EU’s southern neighbourhood—the group’s role has gained further momentum in the post-Brexit period, not least as a counterweight to cooperation between member states in northern Europe. This development cannot be entirely disassociated from Brexit, as the UK’s departure disrupted internal EU dynamics and underscored the need for stronger regional groupings. At the bilateral level, Franco-Cypriot relations have also deepened significantly since 2015, particularly in the areas of defence, energy, and maritime security. While these developments were not initiated as a direct consequence of Brexit, the UK’s absence has arguably provided additional impetus for strengthening such bilateral ties.

Overall, one may argue that in light of the instability caused by Trump’s administration, the strains created in US relations with other countries, including the UK, and the UK’s position outside the EU, the Labour Government has no option other than to bolster relations with its traditional allies. Cyprus is undoubtedly one of these countries, and, even more, such a collaboration will help the UK to preserve its geopolitical influence in the region. Cyprus’s response has undoubtedly been positive, yet despite the intensity of bilateral contacts at the senior level, concrete results are, as expected, yet to materialise to the extent aspired.



Background

The result of the United Kingdom's 2016 referendum on EU membership was met in Czechia with a mixture of dismay, confusion, and quiet frustration. While Brexit never became a deeply politicised issue in domestic Czech politics, it triggered a sense of strategic loss among political elites, who had long viewed the UK as a key ideological and policy ally within the EU. The subsequent years of drawn-out, often chaotic negotiations only deepened this sense of disillusionment, which was also reflected in popular sentiment. Long one of the most admired countries among Czechs, the UK's popularity experienced a dip in the wake of Brexit. Yet, the shift proved to be short-lived and the UK's image has since revived.

The departure of the UK from the EU had a nuanced but meaningful impact on Czechia's external posture. Economically, the direct consequences have been limited, but strategically, the UK's absence within the EU has been deeply felt. Since its 2004 accession, Czechia had often found in the UK a powerful and like-minded partner, notably in promoting the deepening of the single market, defending the prerogatives of national capitals vis-à-vis Brussels, and maintaining strong transatlantic ties in EU foreign and security policy. In the absence of its key ally, there has been a reorientation in Czech Euro diplomacy in the form of more [assertive coalition-building within the EU](#) – albeit as a consensus-seeker posture that contrasts with the more polarising, sovereigntist approaches adopted by some neighbouring states. Relations with the UK on issues that were previously handled in the EU now need to be pursued through direct [bilateral engagement](#) with London.

The result has been an intensification of Czech-UK bilateral ties. What had long been a broadly positive but relatively low-profile relationship has, in the post-Brexit period, acquired a new dynamism. For the UK, seeking to mitigate its diminished influence in Europe, [deeper bilateral ties](#) with individual EU member states became a strategic necessity. For Czechia, the resulting shift has offered a rare opportunity to recalibrate an asymmetrical relationship on more equal terms. Although the structural imbalance in size and capacity remains, London's increased proactivity has led to Prague being treated as a more consequential partner than at any time in recent memory.

This has also been reflected in the formalisation of cooperation across a range of domains. A series of sectoral agreements – on [foreign policy and security](#) (2022), [police cooperation](#) (2023), [nuclear energy](#) (2023), and [rail transport](#) (2023) - illustrate this expanded agenda. Though non-binding and lacking enforcement mechanisms, these memoranda are widely regarded in Prague as effective instruments of practical coordination, with several including detailed implementation plans and demonstrating tangible outcomes.

Against this backdrop, expectations were cautiously optimistic in the run-up to the July 2024 UK general election. The Labour Party's victory was broadly welcomed in Prague as signalling a potential return to more stable, predictable, and constructive diplomacy. Hopes centred not on a reversal of Brexit, which is understood to be an unrealistic prospect, but on a change in tone, and strategic alignment. Labour's pledges to reset the relationship and rebuild trust with the EU resonated in Czech policymaking circles. As such, Brexit may have complicated the UK's relationship with Czechia, but it also created scope for bilateral reinvention.

Developments since July 2024

Since the election of the UK Labour government in July 2024, Czech-British bilateral relations have proceeded along an uninterrupted trajectory of continuity and pragmatism rather than rupture or renewal. Indeed, what stands out most clearly from the Czech perspective is the robustness and resilience of bilateral ties, which appear impervious to government change in London. As confirmed by diplomatic interlocutors, the election of a new government has not led to a major shift in Czech perceptions of the UK, nor necessitated a significant strategic adjustment in Prague's approach to bilateral cooperation. The Czech government, consistent with its longstanding depoliticised and transactional posture vis-à-vis the UK, has instead maintained a steady course of engagement centred on mutually beneficial sectoral cooperation, underpinned by a clear-eyed recognition of the UK's continued relevance as a key non-EU partner.

This continuity notwithstanding, several developments in the post-election period merit attention. Most prominently, bilateral cooperation in the field of nuclear energy has taken a significant leap. The most tangible manifestation of this progress is the October 2024 agreement between the semi-state-owned Czech energy company ČEZ and Rolls-Royce SMR, formalising a strategic partnership on the development of small modular reactors. The deal, which involves ČEZ acquiring an approximately 20 per cent stake in the British enterprise for a sum in the low billions of Czech crowns, marks a turning point in energy relations. Not only does it deepen technological interdependence between the two countries, but it also positions the UK as a cornerstone partner in the Czech Republic's long-term energy diversification and decarbonisation strategy. The first such reactor is expected to become operational at Temelín nuclear power plant in the early 2030s.

Beyond nuclear cooperation, momentum has been sustained in other areas of bilateral engagement. Security and defence collaboration continues to be a major pillar of the relationship, with the British Military Advisory and Training Team in Vyškov operational since 2000. Both countries remain closely aligned in their support for Ukraine and have pursued further intelligence-sharing and capacity-building initiatives in relation to hybrid threats and cyber security. While no totally new outcomes have materialised since the 2024 election, the groundwork for deeper cooperation is in place. The Czech government is among the member states eager to see a substantive upgrade of EU-UK coordination in this domain, with hopes that a security and defence pillar may become a lasting fixture of post-Brexit European architecture.

Youth mobility, by contrast, remains an area of concern. Although not exactly a source of disappointment for Czechia, the question of how to restore meaningful exchange opportunities with the UK remains a major preoccupation. Prague strongly supports an EU-UK youth mobility scheme, which it sees as the most appropriate vehicle for advancing such cooperation.

Strains in Czech-British relations have been fairly limited. Matters such as the sporadic misuse of UK welfare provisions by Czech citizens or occasional complications surrounding the EU Settlement Scheme for Czechs residing in the UK do arise from time to time, but are perceived as isolated cases with no meaningful effect on the broadly constructive tone of bilateral cooperation.

Future prospects

Looking to the near and medium term, the Czech government would welcome further strategic deepening of bilateral relations with the United Kingdom, underpinned by continued sectoral cooperation. Building on the successful conclusion of a series of non-binding but pragmatic bilateral agreements since 2022, Prague seeks more structured mechanisms of engagement, particularly in domains of growing geopolitical salience. In line with its preference for low-key but operational partnerships, Czechia favours action-oriented frameworks that deliver measurable outcomes. Overall, Czechia remains cautiously optimistic about the trajectory of the UK's relations with its neighbours and anticipates at most a gradual

improvement, but the actions of the second Trump administration could precipitate moves towards closer engagement, especially in security and defence.

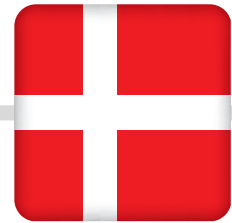
Although the Czech government has remained diplomatically neutral in its public commentary, there is a discernible sense among Czech policymakers that Trump's return has incentivised the UK to re-anchor itself more firmly within the European security orbit. In this light, the Czech view is that the UK may now be more inclined to align itself strategically with EU partners - particularly on security and defence - both to hedge against uncertainties in transatlantic relations and to safeguard its own influence in shaping the Euro-Atlantic order.

The Czech Republic has been among those member states invested in seeing the May 2025 UK-EU summit yield a tangible package of initiatives, ideally centred on operational defence cooperation, strategic dialogue, and resilience-building. However, it is also acutely aware of the structural constraints: the UK's political sensitivities around sovereignty, the EU's internal divergences, and a persistent deficit of trust accumulated during the Brexit years. These obstacles may limit the pace and scope of progress. Yet Czech policymakers judge that security cooperation, given its relative insulation from trade-related disputes and its clear geopolitical rationale, remains the most promising domain for near-term convergence.

On EU-UK relations as they stand, the Czech government considers the implementation of the TCA to be largely satisfactory. The level of Czech involvement across TCA's various chapters is shaped by the degree to which specific provisions intersect with national priorities. Prague is unlikely to be vocal on fisheries, given that Czechia is landlocked. Conversely, in sectors of strategic economic importance, most notably the automotive industry, which accounts for a significant proportion of Czech exports to the UK, its engagement is likely to be more pronounced, with efforts focused on safeguarding smooth trade flows and mitigating regulatory disruptions. Nevertheless, since its capacity to shape the broader EU-UK agenda remains structurally constrained and its influence is largely confined to issue-specific advocacy, Czechia is likely to align with the broader EU position, in keeping with the low-key stance it adopted during the Brexit negotiations.

Denmark

Sara Hagemann



Background

Historically, Denmark and the UK have been close allies and often sided together on EU and wider international matters. Denmark entered the EU at the same time as the UK in 1973 and, like the UK, considered its core interests as a member state to be the single market and European geopolitical developments. This is for good reason, given Denmark's strong dependence on its European neighbours. Trade with the EU accounts for just over 60 per cent of Danish exports — £87 billion in goods and £51 billion in services — and 66.4 per cent of imports. By comparison, Britain is Denmark's fourth largest trading partner, with 6 per cent of goods exports and 7 per cent of services, mainly in the areas of agriculture, agribusiness, renewable energy technologies, and chemicals including, pharmaceuticals. UK exports to Denmark currently amount to £8.6 billion, with imports at £8.9 billion.

Despite this dependence, Denmark has voiced reservations over the EU's direction of travel over its more than five decades of membership. Following the 1992 referendum, which rejected the Maastricht Treaty, Denmark negotiated opt-outs in security and defence, the euro, and justice and home affairs. However, recent years have seen the fading of Eurosceptic voices in Denmark, a development that may be due to the changing geopolitical context. In the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a referendum in 2022 overturned the opt-out in security and defence. More broadly, support for EU membership has increased dramatically to [89 per cent](#) in recent polls. Indeed, [82 per cent](#) of the population now support increased defence collaboration and military capabilities in the EU, which represents a dramatic change in Danish attitudes. Against this background, Foreign Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen recently suggested that Parliament could soon consider whether to hold a referendum on the remaining opt-outs.

These developments come after Brexit served to sharpen understanding of what is at stake when EU membership is rejected. After June 2016, it quickly became clear in the light of its economic and political ramifications that the UK's decision to leave the EU was not a recipe to follow, even if some political figures and parties in Denmark had sought to follow the same path.

Moreover, Brexit had a major impact on Denmark. Several industries were strongly hit, notably agriculture and agribusiness producers, fishing, and the large logistics sector, although the Danish government—in close collaboration with the European Commission—made considerable efforts to cushion the blow to the most affected industries by managing expectations and providing compensation.

The most significant effect of Brexit for Denmark, however, was not economic, but political and in particular the UK's absence from the EU at a time of upheaval. The Danish government has had to rethink tactics and pursue a new approach within the EU, where ministers and civil servants direct attention to multiple capitals in an attempt to influence EU affairs.

Ahead of the UK elections in July 2024, Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen expressed hope that, under a new government, Britain would move closer again to its European partners. Since her Social Democratic Party had just suffered a historical blow in elections to the European Parliament, and public opinion was critical of their performance in national politics, Frederiksen was especially pleased to welcome an incoming Labour government in a Europe otherwise dominated by the centre-right or right.

Developments since 2024 elections

Since Keir Starmer became UK Prime Minister in July 2024, relations between the UK and Denmark have been notably strengthened across several key areas.

First, from day one the Danish government was particularly keen to see signs that the UK would move to improve relations with the EU. Denmark hoped for the Labour government to change course and engage with the EU as a bloc rather than through multiple bilaterals, which it has done since the government of Boris Johnson. Denmark greatly values EU unity and wanted the UK to acknowledge and engage with Brussels. As it became clear that Starmer's government was intent on mending relations with Brussels, Copenhagen applauded the UK's change of diplomatic strategy but also stressed the need to take things step-by-step and to secure commitments along the way. Starmer's gradual move towards a closer relationship between the UK and the EU, focusing on economic growth and enhanced security cooperation, has therefore been warmly welcomed by Prime Minister Frederiksen, who has noted the UK's clear intent to strengthen ties with European partners.

Second, the UK and Danish governments are closely aligned on security and defence and both now push hard for stronger military capabilities in Europe. Like the UK, Denmark has for many years been an active NATO and UN member, and it is currently a temporary member of the UN Security Council. Since ending the opt-out in 2022 which led it to become a full member of the EU's common defence and security policy, Prime Minister Frederiksen has been vocal in support of European Commission President von der Leyen's ambitious defence initiatives and has played an important role in shaping EU's important next steps in security and defence. Frederiksen's words have been matched by action. The Danish government has committed to radically increasing defence spending as well as providing advanced military packages to Ukraine, including F-16 fighter jets and training for Ukrainian pilots.

Third, amid tensions involving the US administration's bold territorial interest in Greenland, Denmark and the UK have agreed to work closely together on security in the Arctic region. Greenland is an autonomous part of Denmark. Moreover, the tension with the US goes beyond the issue of Greenland's status. Territorial integrity and a rule-based world order are at stake if the US makes advances to Greenland against the wishes of both Greenland's population and Denmark.

Hence, it was significant that, on the day following an EU meeting and informal dinner in February 2025 where Britain was present for the first time since Brexit, Starmer hosted Frederiksen at Downing Street. They agreed on a commitment to enhanced collaboration on European defence and the handling of security and geopolitical interests in the Arctic and High North regions, including through joint efforts through NATO and the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force. After the meeting, Frederiksen described the UK as 'one of our closest and most important allies'. She highlighted the Danish government's appreciation of the UK's renewed collaboration with its European partners and its return to a more committed and pragmatic diplomacy in the current global climate.

Future prospects

Denmark, and indeed the rest of Scandinavia, finds itself in a vulnerable position in 2025 that is unprecedented. With the volatility of the second Trump administration and the heightened security risk from Russia, Denmark is acutely aware of its dependence on the EU and the strategic interests it shares with the UK.

In a context of rapid change, the UK and Denmark look set to strengthen their bilateral relationship across several strategically vital areas. Security cooperation is expected to remain at the forefront of this relationship. Both countries are proactive NATO members, important contributors to the Joint Expeditionary Force, and share a common concern over Russian aggression and Arctic geopolitics. Denmark's enhanced role in EU defence priorities complements the UK's renewed interest in closer defence alignment with European partners. Joint initiatives on Arctic security, cyber resilience, and continued support for Ukraine are expected cornerstones of their defence collaboration.

In the energy sector, the UK and Denmark could further align their green ambitions through joint projects in offshore wind, green hydrogen, and carbon capture technologies. The Viking Link interconnector already demonstrates how infrastructure cooperation can enhance energy security and accelerate the green transition. Mutual investment in climate technologies and resilient energy systems offers significant potential for growth and influence in global sustainability efforts and in a rapidly moving European market, and the May summits agreement was an important step for such increased collaborations. Moreover, emerging areas of technological innovation—such as quantum science, AI, and cybersecurity—present significant opportunities. Both countries are investing heavily in next-generation technologies, and recent agreements on academic and commercial cooperation in quantum research suggest that the relationship will continue to develop.

More broadly, the renewed dialogue between the UK and the EU, with Denmark as a key interlocutor, may lead to a greater engagement by the UK with Europe. Denmark sees this as a moment to build not just bilateral ties, but to help Britain develop a more constructive role in Europe. Denmark is hopeful for stronger cooperation between the UK and the EU in defence and security, which is the main issue discussed at the UK-EU summit. It is also concerned about fisheries and continued access for EU fishers to UK waters, but in contrast to other fishing nations, it has not insisted that a multiannual deal should be a precondition of a security and defence agreement. Denmark welcomes the agreed closer energy cooperation between the UK and the EU, especially more efficient electricity trading, but aligns with the established view on the EU side that the UK should not be granted the benefit of access to the single market without the obligations. Like other member states and as it was reflected in the summit conclusions, Denmark also takes the view that the UK must be prepared to give ground on people-to-people issues, such as youth mobility and ERASMUS+, if the package is to be balanced.

France



Cleo Davies, Thibaud Harrois and Pauline Schnapper

Background

Franco-British relations suffered a major shock with Brexit, with tensions surfacing during the UK/EU negotiations, especially during the premiership of Boris Johnson. A number of bilateral disputes also took place in 2020-21 over fisheries, cross-Channel migration and, especially, the AUKUS agreement and the cancellation of the Australia/France submarine contract, which led to an unprecedented freeze in the relationship for several months in 2021-22, both at political and official levels.

It took first Liz Truss's decision to attend the first European Political Community — Emmanuel Macron's pan-European project — and then a further change of British Prime Minister to start repairing the bilateral relationship. When Rishi Sunak signed the Windsor framework in early 2023, he opened the door to a normalisation of relations with France. The first bilateral summit since 2018 took place in Paris in March 2023 and covered a wide range of topics of common interest, including energy, mobility, defence and migration. It was followed by a state visit by King Charles in September. Cooperation also resumed between government departments on both sides of the Channel, spurred by the need to coordinate European support for Ukraine following Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022.

In terms of bilateral economic relations, trade in services [recovered](#) its pre-Brexit levels in 2023. Overall [trade in goods and services](#) between France and the UK increased in 2023 and again in 2024. Moreover, in contrast to the more pronounced [drop in UK-EU trade in goods](#), the UK share in overall French exports in goods only dropped slightly from 6.7 per cent to 6 per cent between 2018 and 2023. The UK's share in overall French imports has remained the same over the same period, reflecting the fact that France is now a transit country for UK goods coming into the EU. However, three quarters of UK businesses [that had been exporting](#) to France in 2018 had ceased to do so by 2023, whilst the number of French businesses exporting to the UK had dropped by 6 per cent.

Developments since July 2024

The Labour Party [manifesto](#) singled out 'rebuilding' bilateral relations with France and Germany on security and defence cooperation, as part of a broader 'reset' of relations with the EU. Once in power, Starmer and his government set out to improve bilateral relations.

At a leadership level, whilst Rishi Sunak and Emmanuel Macron had a good relationship, there has been a substantial intensification of cooperation between Keir Starmer and Emmanuel Macron since the former became prime minister in July 2024. Notwithstanding the opportunities for bilateral meetings on the fringes of multilateral summits (EPC in [July 2024](#)) and international events (Paralympic games in [August 2024](#)), there has been a real effort at joint leadership, in particular on matters of security and defence across Europe, especially since Donald Trump re-entered the White House. Symbolically, Starmer [attended](#) the commemoration of the armistice of WW1 in Paris, the first UK leader to attend France's national commemoration event since Winston Churchill in 1944. In January 2025, meanwhile, Macron became the first French President [invited to Chequers](#) in a decade for an extensive bilateral meeting. And the two leaders drove the creation of a coalition of the willing to provide further military support to Ukraine.

Cooperation at the level of officials had already resumed smoothly and intensively across the numerous areas listed in the [March 2023 joint statement](#). For instance, [the third round of the dialogue](#) between the French Direction générale des Entreprises (DGE) and the UK Department for Business and Trade

took place on 5 November 2024. The [first science, innovation and technology dialogue](#) took place in London in February 2024, with cooperation on AI, hydrogen, space and research security was high on the agenda. The next dialogue will be in France in 2026. The UK-France Business Forum, created in July 2022 to promote economic growth and stimulate employment and innovation in the Franco-British business community, held [its fifth conference](#) on 16-17 October 2024.

In the area of cybersecurity, the UK and France launched [the Pall Mall Process](#) in February 2024, an international and multi-stakeholder dialogue to develop joint solutions to address the shared threat of the proliferation and irresponsible use of commercial cyber intrusion capabilities. Work has been ongoing, and the second conference took place in Paris on 3-4 February 2025, at which the UK and France [reiterated their commitment](#) to working further with ‘the global multistakeholder community’ on the issue. Implementation of the 2023 joint statement has been successful across the board. However, France would have wanted to see more on facilitating youth exchanges and underlines that cooperation on irregular migration remains complicated.

Cooperation over irregular migration on the North Sea coast involves action in several areas, including measures to combat crime and sea rescue operations, but is complicated by the fact that it is such a politically sensitive domestic issue for both countries. Following the 2018 Sandhurst Treaty, France agreed to put in place prevention arrangements for small boat crossings [in exchange for UK funding](#). This led to France putting reinforcements on the ground in the Northern coastal region. An official report in January 2024 found, however, that cooperation with the UK could be better, noting that [the UK could do more](#) in terms of exchange of information and data with French counterparts. In November 2024, France [outlined three priorities](#) for a redefined post-Brexit migratory framework with the UK: open legal routes into the UK; the introduction of readmission mechanisms into the EU or the UK; and reinforced coordination.

Cooperation has since intensified with the new Labour government. On 27 February 2025, UK Secretary of State for the Home Office, Yvette Cooper and her French counterpart Bruno Retailleau, signed an agreement [to extend](#) the Sandhurst provisions until the end of 2027. The French Minister of the Interior, who had previously [called for](#) the UK ‘to do more than just subcontracting the guarding of its border’, [described](#) discussions over the size of the UK contribution as tough. But he also welcomed the ‘innovative solutions’ put forward by the UK to render it less attractive to migrants. Cooperation has also been substantially reinforced by the [signing of](#) the Upstream Working Group roadmap for action to combat organised immigration crimes and people smuggling. Finally, [reports](#) have emerged of a pilot scheme for a migrant returns agreement that would involve one person being deported from the UK in exchange for France sending another individual the other way. The UK sought a bilateral agreement immediately after Brexit to return irregular migrants to France. However, France is aware of the European dimension and [emphasises](#) that 30 per cent of flows of irregular migrants entering Europe converge on Calais, which makes it one of the main irregular migratory routes on the continent. France and the UK also [collaborate](#) in the Groupe de Calais, alongside Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands and with the European Commission, Frontex and Europol also present on combating organised immigration crime. The last meeting took place in December 2024.

On defence cooperation, at the 36th UK-France Summit in Paris in March 2023 the two countries had agreed to enhance interoperability between their armed forces, as well as to advance collaborative projects, including the Future Cruise and Anti-Ship Weapon (FC/ASW) programme. They also committed to coordinate aircraft deployments, with a view to maintaining a constant European presence in strategic regions. The two nations used the occasion to reaffirm their unwavering support for Ukraine, pledging to continue providing military assistance and training to Ukrainian forces.

In 2025, the election of Donald Trump led to concerns over the USA’s commitment to Ukraine and European security. In that context, the UK and France have significantly enhanced their cooperation to support Ukraine. A pivotal aspect of their collaboration is the development of a European ‘[reassurance force](#)’ intended to deter further Russian aggression and to safeguard Ukrainian infrastructure. The proposed force would comprise fewer than 30,000 troops, with a primary focus on air and maritime

defence, and with minimal ground forces stationed away from active conflict zones. The UK and France have led a joint diplomatic effort to form a [‘coalition of the willing’](#) that would include allies from Europe and beyond. However, the implementation of this force is still contingent upon the securing of a US ‘backstop’ to provide supplementary support, with a view to deterring Russian challenges. Faced with the US administration’s wavering support, European allies are reconsidering the use of NATO assets, even if US intelligence and surveillance capabilities appear indispensable.

Future prospects

For the first time since he was elected president in 2017, Macron will pay a state visit to the UK. The president and his wife will be hosted by King Charles and Queen Camilla at Windsor Castle on 8-10 July. The state visit will be coupled with the 37th bilateral summit. Discussions will cover the full range of the bilateral relationship. In particular, the summit will provide an opportunity to update the 2010 Lancaster House treaties to provide joint responses to new threats, including hybrid warfare, and harness the full potential of the Combined Joint Expeditionary Force (CJEF) to address modern security challenges.

However, for France, the bilateral relations with the UK are inseparable from the broader EU-UK relations. France takes a strong view on the fact that, as a third country, the UK cannot benefit from the same advantages as a member state without the corresponding obligations. In other words, there can be no ‘cherry picking’. Press reports highlighted France’s resistance to adapting EU third country rules in order to allow UK companies to participate in EU defence industrial projects or access to the new £150 billion SAFE European defence fund. Moreover, apparent vagueness on the UK’s part over its ambitions for the ‘reset’ combined with the UK’s commitment to maintaining the so-called Brexit red-lines with the EU left France perplexed in the first few months of the Starmer government. France has been one of the more vocal EU member states in calling for using any negotiations over UK demands for a reset with the EU as leverage for securing commitments on fisheries, for instance. France took a maximalist position on the EU’s [‘package approach’](#) to negotiations with the UK. An agreement on fisheries was thus seen by France as an essential condition for moving forward, which was not always understood by those states for whom the priority was to pave the way for greater British participation in the security of the continent.

Finally, there is a sense that Starmer’s attempts to straddle the relationships with the EU on the one hand and Trump’s US on the other hand, is unsustainable. With Macron having long advocated for ‘European Strategic autonomy’ and in a context where US isolationism is fueling trade wars, France remains vigilant, even if it fully accepts that the UK is bound to seek competitive advantage over its near neighbours, notably in the fields of financial services and AI, now it is no longer bound by EU membership.

Germany

Eva Heidbreder and Nicolai von Ondarza



Background

Germany's approach from the date of the referendum, throughout the negotiations that led respectively to the Withdrawal Agreement and the TC, and ever since has been stable. Germany continues to regret the UK exit but has adhered firmly to the primacy of EU cooperation over substantive bilateral moves. Within these parameters, Germany has become more open both to normalising its relations with the UK and to formalising pragmatic agreements, based on mutual interests. Germany is most open to bilateral cooperation in defence policy and capacity building. While it had identified defence as a priority during Brexit, closer cooperation was formalised in the so-called [UK-Germany Trinity House on Defence](#) in October 2024. A friendship agreement covering horizontal issues remains in the works as Germany's snap-election derailed the process.

The move to a pragmatic partnership has been set on track by two centre-left leaders: UK PM Stamer and German Chancellor Scholz. However, on 6 May 2025 a new CDU/CSU/SPD (conservative-social democrat) coalition government led by Chancellor Friedrich Merz took office. Merz emphasises the foreign political role he aims to play and the UK's relevance as a close partner, especially in defence. The main driver is the continuing Russian war against Ukraine, but the question mark over the transatlantic alliance has made cooperation in this area even more urgent. Whereas from a domestic point of view, this suggests that there will be a greater involvement of the Chancellery in foreign policy and EU affairs compared to the last government, the guidelines outlined in the coalition agreement indicate substantive stability in the approach of EU-first and EU-coordinated German-UK relations to develop an independent European defence capacity.

Germany had firmly taken an 'EU-first' position immediately in the aftermath of the UK referendum, prioritising EU-unity and the integrity of the single market over links with London. The commitment that bilateral agreements have to be in accordance with a joint EU-approach and that multilateral agreements are preferable still remains dominant in the German approach. This said, in defence Germany has launched important initiatives outside the EU framework, in particular the German-led [European Sky Shield Initiative](#) in which the UK participates (but not France or Poland). Cooperation has not been promoted in other areas – at least publicly. German public debate and opinion remain by-and-large in a state of post-Brexit inertia, with little attention paid to the UK.

Overall, small, but important steps have been taken in UK-German relations. The chill in relations started to thaw when UK PM Rishi Sunak negotiated the Windsor Agreement and ended when Keir Starmer took office in 2024, leading to a tangible agreement in security cooperation. The new government under Chancellor Merz is likely to continue along this path and pursue security and defence cooperation in new formats. However, it remains a firm supporter of the EU-first approach, hoping that the UK will drop long-standing Brexit red lines and move the relationship forward. The [EU-UK summit agreements of 19 May](#) are fully in line with the approach.

Developments since July 2024

Since July 2024, relations between Germany and the UK have moved from cautious normalisation to pragmatic partnership. First, the change of government in Whitehall meant that the SPD-led chancellor Olaf Scholz and Labour PM Keir Starmer could build on party linkages that the SPD had maintained with Labour during its years in opposition. Second, shared security interests and support for Ukraine gained

increased relevance in face of the growing threat posed by Russia. Third, the change in government in the USA amplified security concerns and the common perception that an independent European defence capacity had to be developed. For Germany, this must include an EU dimension.

The conditions for increased cooperation improved when Keir Starmer took office, which brought centre left-led governments were in power in the UK and Germany as well as Spain. The SPD and Labour had maintained close links during Brexit and its aftermath, as was exemplified by the [joint endorsement](#) by then shadow defence minister John Healey and SPD spokesman for defence Nils Schmid of a 2023 RUSI-FES report on British-German defence cooperation. The fact that Keir Starmer's second foreign visit as PM was to Berlin, after Washington, underlined the commitment for a rapprochement. Indeed, Starmer visited Scholz in consecutive months, July and August 2024, once for the UEFA 2024 cup final and later for a formal inaugural visit. The two centre-left leaders [agreed](#) to intensify bilateral relations, tasking the FCDO and the Auswärtiges Amt to work towards a bilateral friendship treaty. This treaty is intended to mirror the Franco-German friendship treaty and the UK-France Lancaster House treaty, thus 'complementing' a triangle of cooperation between Germany, France and the UK. Another expression of the quick push for deeper cooperation and the SPD-Labour link was a [joint declaration](#) by Defence Secretary John Healey and his SPD counterpart Boris Pistorius on deepening defence cooperation as early as 24 July 2024.

The first tangible outcome of this pragmatic partnership was secured in October 2024. The two governments frontloaded the defence part of the bilateral cooperation in the [Trinity House Agreement on Defence](#). The agreement consists of two parts: the first establishes deeper, institutionalised and regular consultation mechanisms between the two defence ministers, including joint working groups. The second part outlines future joint projects, such as a European deep precision strike capability, and cooperation on the Eastern flank of NATO, the protection of undersea cables in the Northern Seas and uncrewed aerial systems. In May 2025, the first progress was announced on the path towards developing the 2,000-kilometre range deep precision strike capability.

The friendship treaty itself has not yet materialised. From late August 2024 onwards, the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office and the Auswärtiges Amt worked intensively on the treaty, aiming to finalise a draft by the end of 2024 or early 2025 to ensure ratification under the two centre left-led governments with their respective parliamentary majorities. The German government also checked the draft with the European Commission in order to avoid encroaching on EU competences or the provisions of the TCA. The talks around the treaty were wide-ranging, covering foreign, security and defence, internal security and combating irregular migration, people-to-people contacts, as well as economic cooperation and climate and energy policy. After the fall of the Scholz government in November 2024, the talks were [put a hold but not abandoned](#).

With respect to the UK-EU summit and deeper cooperation, Germany maintained its traditional stance of supporting for the EU institutions and a joint approach. For most of the time that talks were on going between London and Brussels, Germany had a caretaker government, with Friedrich Merz elected chancellor on 6 May 2025 – only two weeks prior to the summit. Nevertheless, this did not prevent the government from working at official level to support the EU in the internal part of the negotiations, including a strong support for the Security and Defence Partnership (SDP). Here, Germany was amongst the EU countries pushing for a possibility of the UK to take part in the EU's €150bn SAFE loan facility for defence via an SDP and pushing back against a too strong linkage with fisheries. In addition, Germany was also very vocal in support for a youth mobility scheme, with the German ambassador Miguel Berger to the UK making Germany's wishes to restore programmes of cultural exchange to the [British media](#).

Future prospects: Redefining British-German friendship

After the interim period (from November 2024 to May 2025), Germany has a new government under Chancellor Friedrich Merz (CDU), with the SPD now the junior partner in the coalition. Although the composition of the new government in Berlin reduces the overlap between party families in Germany and the UK, the path towards a pragmatic partnership with a focus on foreign and security affairs is set to continue.

First, Merz wants to engage the UK in security and defence, particularly in transatlantic relations and the support of Ukraine. In the first week of his tenure, Merz travelled to Paris, Warsaw, Brussels and Kyiv – though not yet London – his trips to Kyiv were made jointly with Keir Starmer, Emmanuel Macron and Donald Tusk. Since then, Merz has met the same three leaders plus Georgia Meloni, including in a joint attempt to engage Donald Trump on Ukraine. In public remarks, Merz has continuously stressed the importance of the now called ‘Weimar-Plus’ format that builds on the trio (France/Germany/Poland) plus Italy, Spain and the EU institutions and the UK. The personal relationship between defence ministers John Healey and Boris Pistorius – who has retained his defence portfolio in the new government – appears conducive to realise the ambition of a European deep strike capability.

The CDU/CSU-SPD coalition agreement shares this outlook. It endorses the EU-level reset with the UK – notably the Commission’s mandate to conclude a youth-mobility accord allowing 18- to 30-year-olds reciprocal stays of up to four years. People-to-people contacts between Germany and the UK have declined due to Brexit, as with trade in goods, where the UK now ranks below Poland and Austria. However, the partnership with the UK is mentioned only in the area of security and defence. For Germany, the EU remains the principal forum for trade, digital and climate policy, and London’s relevance for Berlin is now rather limited.

Last but not least, the new German government aims to revive the negotiations on the bilateral British-German friendship treaty. With negotiations almost completed in 2024, the aim is to finalise the treaty before the summer break of 2025. The negotiated sections build on the Trinity House Agreement on Defence and complement these with elements on foreign and security cooperation, internal security and migration, economic growth, societal contacts as well as climate and energy policy. Although it copies elements of the Franco-German friendship treaty, it is likely to be less encompassing both in scope and degree of institutionalised cooperation as Germany wants to avoid creating conflicts with the European Commission or hampering a joint EU-UK partnership. EU-UK interaction remains Germany’s preferred route for closer relations.

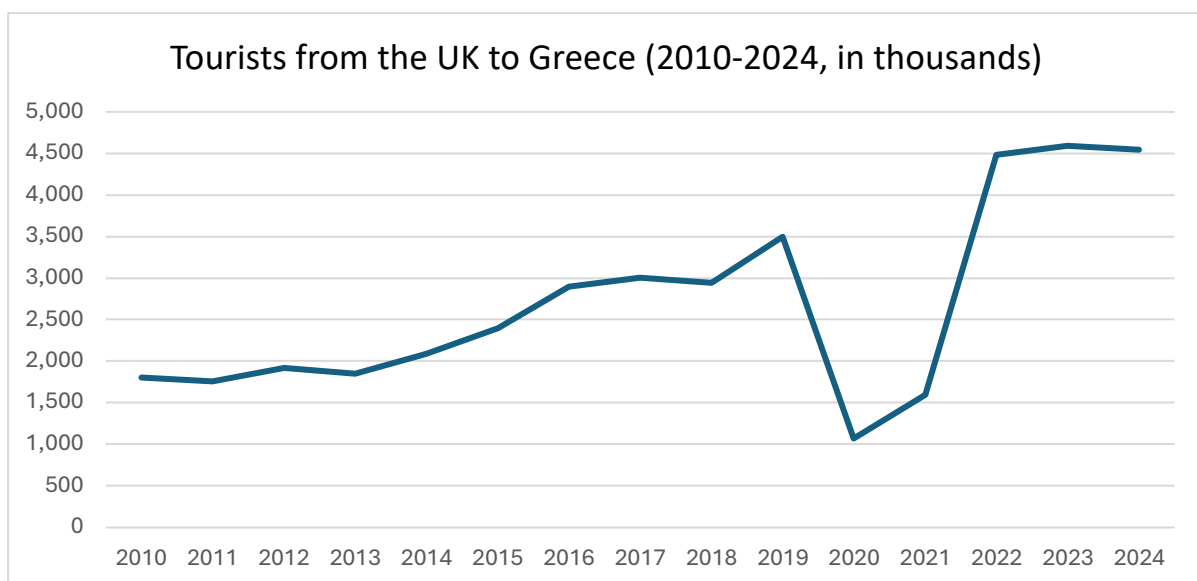


Background

Three main issues have been prominent for Greece in relation to the UK during the Brexit negotiations and since the UK's departure from the EU: the future of Greek nationals living in the UK; tourist flows to Greece, given that Greece is one of the most popular destinations among British citizens, traditionally accounting for almost 10 per cent of the total number of tourists; and the access of Greek students to UK universities.

As regards the first issue, the official number of Greek citizens living in the UK has actually increased. This is mainly due to the fact that many Greeks had lived in the UK for years without residence status, since it was not needed due to their European citizenship. Many of them applied for such a status post-Brexit, becoming suddenly statistically 'visible' and 'countable'. In a 2021 study of the [Greek diaspora in the UK](#), it was found that the Greek population had more than doubled since the outbreak of the financial crisis, estimated to count approximately 80,000 people. The diaspora has a balanced gender ratio and a young demographic make-up with more than 80 per cent of the adult population less than 45 years old, reflecting the preponderance of post- economic crisis migrants and the large number of Greek students in the UK. [The Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs](#) estimates that there are between 130 and 150,000 Greeks residing permanently in the UK.

Nor have tourist flows to Greece been negatively affected. In fact, the reverse is true. The popularity of Greece as a tourist destination has increased. In 2024, British tourists numbered more than 4.5 million, marking a full recovery from the COVID years. Visitors from the UK accounted for 12 per cent of the total number of tourists visiting Greece.



Source: Institute of the Greek Tourism Confederation - INSETI ([2025](#))

Finally, the number of Greek students in British universities has dropped considerably, – somewhere in the region of 30 per cent by 2021 (also due to COVID). Against this background, the two countries signed a [UK-Greek Strategic Partnership in Education](#), which aims to increase collaboration at the tertiary level, particularly in the fields of research, envisaging among other things joint and dual study programs.

In 'high politics' issues, [Greece and the UK share the same views on many major international issues](#). Both countries strongly support Ukraine against Russian aggression, making military and financial contributions. The UK acknowledges the positive role of Greece from the outset of the crisis both within the EU context and beyond it. The two sides also responded similarly following Israel's response to the taking of hostages on 7 October 2023 and, more recently, with calls and pledges for a ceasefire and support to the ending of the Israeli military operations in Gaza. Contrary to expectations, trade between the two countries has not declined in either goods or services after Brexit. Indeed, trade and foreign direct investment have increased.

Developments since July 2024

The entry into office of the Starmer government following the Labour Party's overwhelming victory in the July 2024 elections has not altered much in the general picture of the UK-Greece relationship post Brexit. The good relationship between the UK PM and the Greek Premier Kyriakos Mitsotakis was reaffirmed during the latter's visit to London in December 2024. [At their meeting](#), the two PMs expressed their support for Ukraine and called jointly for a ceasefire in Gaza. They acknowledged the need to counter illegal migration to Europe, including the UK, stressed the strong opportunities to deliver growth between the two countries through increased trade, investment, education and defence, and looked forward to building on the relationship. The UK welcomed Greece's election at the UN Security Council and pledged its support to when required.

Although it may seem banal to describe a meeting between the two PMs as 'successful', the story of the last visit of the Greek Prime Minister to London in November 2023 provides context and shows that high-level, apparently tightly choreographed events, can go badly awry. The then UK PM Rishi Sunak cancelled his meeting with the Greek prime minister when the UK considered that a promise not to publicly discuss the Parthenon sculptures – known more commonly in the UK as the Elgin Marbles – had been broken. In an interview with BBC, Mitsotakis noted that he wanted the return of the artefacts from the British Museum to Greece, mentioning that ['...having the frieze in London was like having the 'Mona Lisa' painting 'cut in half'](#). Although the UK said that there was a prior agreement not to mention this issue during the visit, this claim was vehemently rejected by the Greek side. The meeting between the two leaders was scrapped at the last minute, turning the visit into a fiasco.

On this issue, which has a highly symbolic but also political importance in Greece, the Starmer government appears to have departed from the position held by the previous government. Starmer has expressed his willingness to engage constructively with the issue, which contrasts with the more guarded stance of his predecessor. The government has indicated that [it will not block an agreement between Athens and the British Museum](#). This approach is important given that negotiations between the Greek side and British Museum are at an advanced stage, with both sides reportedly aligned on a potential 'Palermo-style' framework for returning the sculptures, based on the return of the 'Fagan fragment' from Palermo's Antonino Salinas Museum to Greece. An agreement would see parts of the sculptures returned under a 'deposit' scheme, which sidesteps the contentious issue of ownership. The returned fragments could be displayed in Athens under a renewable loan arrangement, with the hope of an eventual permanent return. It does not follow that Starmer intends to overturn the 1963 legislation that would prevent the British Museum from permanently returning the marbles, but he would not obstruct a creative solution to address the issue.

Other areas of enhanced relations and cooperation include defence and maritime cooperation. Greece's Minister of National Defence Nikos Dendias [met](#) the UK Minister for Defence Procurement in February 2025 to discuss ways to strengthen defence collaboration between the two countries, which has been limited in recent years. The main concern on Greece's side was Turkey's move to purchase of Eurofighter jets and Meteor missiles, which have raised security worries in Greece. Other areas of Greek interest were the upgrades to the Super Vita missile boats and Commander radar systems, as well as exploring the potential of broader defence cooperation including issues of innovation and technology. These bilateral

developments go hand in hand with the EU-UK ongoing negotiations to strengthen their defence ties, including the eventual signing of a Security and Defence Partnership. Greece is an ardent supporter of such a prospect.

In the area of maritime cooperation, the two sides signed in January 2025, a [memorandum](#) to enhance bilateral cooperation on various aspects of the maritime sector, including sea transport, the sustainable development of shipping, green shipping initiatives, and the development of human resources in the sector. It covers key areas such as maritime safety, training, environmental protection, and the overall facilitation of the maritime industry. In practice, the memorandum will facilitate the exchange of knowledge, the sharing of best practices, the organization of conferences, and the promotion of training programs. It will also encourage private sector participation in addressing challenges facing the global maritime sector, an issue of primary interest to the Greek side.

The signing of the EU-UK agreement in May 2025 is a significant development between the two sides. Greece had low stakes in the negotiations regarding the fishing quotas and the new sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) agreement. The 'Youth Experience Scheme' was positively appraised, as any scheme that allows full freedom of movement would be. This scheme is expected to reopen access for thousands of young Greeks to the UK job market. Furthermore, lower tuition fees for Europeans in British universities will possibly lead to a return of Greek students to the UK. Greece was very supportive to the UK-EU defence and security agreement, which establishes a structured framework of enhanced collaboration and paves the way for the UK-based defence industry to access the £150bn EU fund set for defence projects. The Greek side [spoke](#) for a major achievement that significantly upgrades the European strategic autonomy potential.

This position is in line with the broader Greek view of engaging the UK in any discussion regarding the future security architecture of Europe. Greece has repeatedly stated in its bilateral contacts with the British government that the deepening of the EU-UK security cooperation is crucial, a position consistently advocated in and throughout the intra-EU negotiations preceding the EU-UK agreement.

Future Prospects

Greece and the UK have established after Brexit a deep bilateral relationship. The signing of the EU-UK agreement offers a new impetus for its further development, within the overarching EU framework, especially given the very good relationship between the prime ministers of the two countries.

The visit of the Greek Minister of Defence in February 2025 reaffirmed the intention of the Greek side to deepen bilateral security and defence cooperation not only in political terms but also in terms of industrial collaboration, research and development. This is a topic of high concern to Greece, which seeks opportunities to bolster the country's defence ecosystem by establishing ties with the British one. The implementation of the bilateral agreements as well as the opportunities generated by the EU-UK one open an opportunity window for the British defence industry to enhance its presence and market share in Greece, a country that traditionally invests heavily on its military forces.

At the same time, the more constructive approach of the Starmer government regarding the Elgin Marbles addresses one of the few thorny issues in bilateral relations. Overall, the current relationship is a much improved one compared to the early post-Brexit period.

Ireland

Brigid Laffan



Background

Ireland's relations with the United Kingdom stretch across place and time as the island of Ireland was constitutionally part of the UK following the Act of Union in 1801. From the twelfth century Norman invasion of Ireland onwards, relations between the two islands were marked by contestation, insurrection, plantation and a clash of identities and religions. The Protestant landowning class ruled over a majority dispossessed Catholic population. A calamitous potato famine in the 1840s that led to the death of two million and emigration of a further two million had a deep impact on relations between the two islands. In the late nineteenth century modern Irish nationalism evolved as a state seeking nationalism. Initially the demand was for Home Rule – akin to contemporary devolution within the UK – but there was always a strain in Irish nationalism that wanted full independence and sovereignty. Unionist and protestant opposition to Home Rule during this period brought to the fore a fault line on the island between the Unionist/Protestant majority in the northern part of the island and a nationalist majority throughout the remainder of the island.

The contemporary state structures on the island of Ireland were forged during ten turbulent years from 1912 to 1922. Unionist opposition to Home Rule of any kind was backed up by an armed defence force known as the Ulster Volunteer Force (1912-1914). Irish nationalists began to arm in preparation for an insurrection against British power that began on Easter Monday 1916. The Rising was a military failure and within one week it was over. However, the British authorities already at war in Europe and beyond reacted harshly and executed fifteen of the leaders in early May 1916. Public sentiment in Ireland changed profoundly. Within two years Sinn Féin a party seeking independence not devolution emerged as the dominant political force in Ireland outside the Unionist heartlands of Northern Ireland. A War of Independence fought using guerrilla tactics transformed the issue of statehood. A ceasefire in July 1921 was followed by negotiations between the rebels and the London Government. This culminated in the Anglo-Irish Treaty signed on 6 December 1921 which led to the establishment of the Irish Free State consisting of twenty-six of the thirty-two historical counties on the island. Six counties would remain as a devolved sub-state of the UK. The emergence of two political entities on the island required a border that remains contested to this day.

Stability and peace within Northern Ireland were shattered in the 1960s as the minority Catholic population demanded equality and an end to sectarianism and discrimination. The then Unionist Government reacted to the civil rights movement with undue force and London sent the British army into Northern Ireland. The IRA emerged as a potent terrorist organisation willing to engage in death and destruction within Northern Ireland and in the British mainland. Thirty years of communal conflict was ended with the signing of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement in 1997. The GFA was ratified by a majority in Northern Ireland and in Ireland. The architecture of the Agreement was based on a complex web of institutions that governed politics within Northern Ireland, relations between Northern Ireland and the rest of Ireland and east-west institutions between the two islands. The GFA signalled that although the conflict was not over, it moved to a non-violent phase. Northern Ireland remained divided, and reconciliation proved difficult.

The outcome of the Leave/Remain referendum in June 2016 whereby the UK opted to depart the EU was a major challenge to the GFA and relations between the UK and Ireland. The border on the island of Ireland was about to become an EU border. However, the border had become normalised and people on both sides of the border moved across it with little visible signs of a frontier between two states. The population living in the border areas were adamantly opposed to a return to the borders of the

past. The UK Government under Theresa May recognised that the UK's exit from the EU posed distinct challenges to the GFA and relations between the two parts of the island of Ireland. The Irish Government backed by public opinion was determined that there would be no visible land border in Ireland and elevated the issue to the EU level. The border in Ireland was one of three issues that the EU identified as requiring resolution in the Withdrawal Agreement. Put simply, finding a solution to this challenge was a precondition for negotiations on the future trading relationship between the EU and the UK.

It is no exaggeration to assert that the border in Ireland proved to be the most problematic and contentious issue to address in the Brexit negotiations, particularly in the Withdrawal Agreement. PM May agreed a Protocol on Northern Ireland known as the backstop that kept the UK in a customs union with the EU and Northern Ireland within the EU's regulatory orbit in all those areas that impacted the all-island economy. The backstop created internal differentiation within the UK. For Northern Irish Unionists, by creating regulatory alignment between the EU and Northern Ireland, the backstop was vehemently opposed. In any event the backstop was never implemented because PM May could not secure ratification of the Withdrawal Agreement and was replaced on the 24 July 2019 by Boris Johnson when he was elected leader of the Conservative Party and subsequently took office as prime minister. PM Johnson was determined to get Brexit done. At the outset, he was determined to secure the removal of the backstop from the Protocol. He adopted a far more confrontational stance with the EU but had to address the issue of the Irish border. From an EU perspective, there had to be checks on goods coming into the single market via Northern Ireland to obviate the need for checks on the border. Effectively PM Johnson agreed to creating a border between Northern Ireland and the remainder of the UK as the price of getting Brexit done.

The implementation of the Northern Ireland Protocol (NIP) was fraught. Negotiations between the EU and the UK on its implementation proved challenging until PM Sunak negotiated the Windsor Framework which altered the NIP in a number of ways. The challenge was to respond to the difficulties being experienced by businesses in Northern Ireland as the impact of the new regime was felt. Continuing opposition to the Protocol from Unionism was hampering the internal workings of the Northern Ireland institutions. In February 2022, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) withdrew from the power sharing Executive in protest the Protocol. The Windsor Framework was agreed in February 2023 and ratified by the EU-UK Joint Committee in March 2023. Thus, well before the UK election in July 2024, the political heat surrounding the NIP abated and the issues it engendered were addressed.

Relations between the UK and Ireland experienced considerable strain from June 2016 onwards. The normalisation of relations marked by the Queens visit in 2011 was from a different era. Brexit was more consequential for Ireland than any other member state because of Northern Ireland and the close relations between the two islands. Successive Irish governments uploaded the issue of Northern Ireland to the EU level and robustly defended Ireland's preferences on the border. During the Brexit negotiations, Ireland received the backing of its twenty-six partners which was a strong signal that membership mattered. Given that the polls indicated a Labour Party win, considerable attention was paid to Keir Starmer, the future PM and Hilary Benn, Labour Shadow Secretary on Northern Ireland. Keir Starmer pledged 'to committed engagement with Ireland and his time as human rights advisor to the Police Service in Northern Ireland (PSNI) gave him a familiarity with Northern Ireland. Although the Irish Government was careful not to display any preference concerning the election outcome in public, there was widespread relief that the end of Conservative rule in the UK was coming to an end. Dublin wanted to put British- Irish relations on a more neighbourly and sounder footing.

Developments since July 2024

The impact of the election was immediately felt in relations between Dublin and London. Keir Starmer held his first major bilateral with Simon Harris, Irish Taoiseach on 17 July at Chequers. A joint statement between the two prime ministers pledged to 'reset' the partnership between the two countries and committed to holding an annual summit. British and Irish PMs no longer had the possibility of informal

meetings at the margins of European Council meetings. The emphasis was on their joint role as co-guarantors of the Agreement. The language was striking: to deepen and reinvigorate cooperation and strengthen all aspects of the relationship. The Irish Taoiseach [welcomed](#) the UK's commitment to closer cooperation with the EU.

The two leaders signalled that they wanted to put the turmoil of the Brexit years behind them and repair the relationship. The bilateral was followed the next day by the meeting of the European Political Community held in Blenheim Palace where PM Starmer pledged to reset relations with the EU. The tone of relations between the UK and Ireland and the UK and EU shifted. The question was just how much would change in substantive areas.

The Taoiseach welcomed Keir Starmer to Dublin in September 2024 to scope areas of potential joint cooperation. Four areas were identified in the [conclusions](#); security, justice and global issues with an emphasis on cyber and maritime security; climate, energy, technology and innovation; growth, trade and investment; and culture, education and people-to-people relations. The political framework of the reset was described as follows: *The leaders agreed that to take the UK-Ireland relationship to a new level and to deliver on the promise of that relationship, the first of a new series of annual leader-level UK-Ireland summits would take place in March 2025.*

The first formal summit took place on 6 March 2025 which put further flesh on the different areas of cooperation. The leaders stressed their responsibilities of 'co-guarantorship of the Good Friday Agreement' and created a UK-Ireland 2030 Steering Group serviced by the Cabinet Office and the Department of the Taoiseach. This arrangement provides for administrative and policy support for the process at the heart of both governments. It signals a serious commitment by both leaders and governments to improve relations after the strained Brexit years and create the institutional and political capacity for good neighbourliness. Separately the Irish Government launched the 'shared island' initiative in 2020 to harness the potential of the Good Friday Agreement.

Future Prospects

The reset in British Irish relations interacts and intersects with the improvement in UK-EU relations. On 19 May 2025, the EU and UK held the first post-Brexit Summit, a meeting that was broadly welcomed by the Irish government. The Taoiseach Micheál Martin called the outcome of the summit a 'landmark moment' in UK-EU relations and welcomed the Strategic Partnership. The decision to work towards a sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) agreement for plants and animals based on dynamic alignment will make the implementation of the Windsor Framework smoother and reduce trade barriers between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The decision to extend fishing rights to 2038 brings certainty to the fishing communities in Ireland.

The reset in British-Irish relations demonstrates that both governments want to move beyond the Brexit rupture and replace cooperation within the EU with stronger bilateral engagement. State-to-state relations are enhanced and facilitated by improved EU-UK relations.

The reset of UK-EU relations must be seen against the UK red lines which include non-membership of the single market and customs union. The deal reflects selective agreements that facilitate market access short of full participation in the single market. The renewed emphasis on geopolitics reflects upheavals in global politics and the impact of Trump 2.0. These developments can be built on in future provided the two sides reach a common understanding in additional spheres. The most likely scenario is incremental layering.



Background

In Lithuania, the UK's departure from the EU was regarded with regret and disappointment. Since Lithuania's accession to the EU in 2004, the UK was considered a like-minded partner on multiple issues, including consolidation of the single market, further EU enlargement and transatlantic relations. It also became a major destination for Lithuanian citizens eager to benefit from free movement of people. Moreover, since for Lithuania's political elites membership of the EU was seen as a way of consolidating the sovereignty that the country had regained after its independence, Brexit was viewed as a sign of potential fragmentation which would only weaken a club that amplified the voice of small European states. Thus, Brexit was a double loss.

Since the UK referendum, Lithuania has sought to maintain a strong relationship with the UK. During UK-EU negotiations, Lithuania prioritised [the rights of its citizens living in the UK](#). With an estimated 150,000 Lithuanian citizens with settled status – and around 50,000 with pre-settled status – residing in the UK, Lithuania was concerned to safeguard the rights of EU citizens in the UK. On the trade front, there were concerns that Brexit would harm commercial relations, but ultimately it did not result in a major shock. The UK remained among the 10 most important trade partners of Lithuania ([in 2022](#)), but behind EU member states such as Latvia, Estonia, Poland and Germany. It ranked fifth as a source of foreign direct investment and sixth for the number of tourists.

Although Lithuania sought to maintain strong bilateral relations with the UK after the UK's formal departure from the EU, EU solidarity came first. This ranking of relations was reflected in [the Joint Declaration on Bilateral Cooperation](#) signed by Lithuania's foreign minister and the UK foreign secretary on 23 May 2022. The declaration came following the launch of Russia's large scale war against Ukraine which was [stressed in the press release](#). The text notes that Lithuania, as an EU member state, views the UK as a key strategic ally and aims for closer cooperation between the EU and the UK, but that bilateral cooperation must be consistent with the EU-UK framework. Indeed, the negotiations, which took about six months, went through multiple amendments during which Lithuania was in constant contact with the European Commission.

The Joint Declaration observes that Lithuania and the UK are bound by a shared strategic vision and universal values. It commits the two countries to working together as part of a wider global network of liberty to defend peace, freedom, democracy, human rights, the rule of law, gender equality, rules-based international order, free trade and economic security. The declaration focuses on strengthening transatlantic solidarity, countering Russia's aggression, supporting Ukraine, cooperating on the issues related to Indo-Pacific region and China to tackle global challenges and advance freedom as well as supporting other principles and values of democratic societies. It includes sections on formats of regional cooperation aimed in particular at advancing reforms in Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, as well as in defence and security. Provisions on cooperation in other areas including international criminality, economic relations, technology and bilateral trade, education, science and culture make frequent reference to the TCA and to NATO-EU cooperation.

Bilateral cooperation has mostly focused on security, in particular support for Ukraine. Lithuanian policy makers appreciate the leading role of the UK in the Joint Expeditionary Forces of ten Northern European countries with high readiness military elements conducting regular exercises. At the same time, however, Germany's commitment to station a brigade in Lithuania by 2027 has strengthened bilateral defence cooperation between Vilnius and Berlin, while the shift in France's approach to the threat posed by Russia aggression has led to more intense cooperation with Paris.

The main hopes in Vilnius in the run up to the UK's July 2024 general election were related to the geopolitical crisis in Europe and the importance of the UK as a strategic partner. There was an expectation that a new UK government would cooperate constructively and that there would be greater opportunities for joint initiatives in security, defence and support of Ukraine. There was also hope on the people-to-people front that a Labour government might decide to resume cooperation with the EU on youth mobility and education. Overall, the main expectation was that the UK relations with the EU would be more cooperative.

Developments since July 2024

Despite a change of government in Lithuania following parliamentary elections in October 2024, which resulted in replacement of the centre-right conservative and liberal three-party ruling coalition by a three-party centre-left coalition led by social democrats, the country's foreign policy priorities have carried over. The outgoing government had highlighted '[closer cooperation with the UK](#)' in the defence and security sections of its programme for 2020 to 2024. Closer bilateral relations with London were also envisaged as part of Eastern policy, in economic relations and technology, and support for Lithuania's diaspora. Interaction with the UK via the [UK-NB8 \(Nordic-Baltic8\) cooperation format](#) was viewed as a way of ensuring that Lithuania's voice was amplified. Indeed, for this reason, Lithuania has often held talks with the UK [alongside Estonia and Latvia](#). When in July 2024 UK Foreign Secretary David Lammy met Lithuania's Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis on the margins of the NATO Summit in Washington D.C. Latvia's Foreign Minister Baiba Braže was also present.

The [programme](#) of the social democrat-led government also refers to the UK in relation to defence. It notes the importance of further strengthening defence cooperation with the USA, in particular to ensure the long-term and uninterrupted presence of the US troops in Lithuania, before committing to a reinforcement of cooperation with Germany, Poland, Baltic States, Nordic countries, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands in the Baltic Sea region security, protection of critical infrastructure, military mobility, support for Ukraine and other areas. In March 2025, on his way to the Baltic-Nordic and the UK ministerial meeting, Minister of Foreign Affairs Kęstutis Budrys met David Lammy in London. The [message from this meeting](#) repeated familiar lines of stressing the importance of the UK's leadership for a just and lasting peace in Ukraine and a stronger, more resilient and united Europe. It also emphasised the importance of working with the UK in all formats, including NATO and bilaterally.

The importance of bilateral and regional cooperation with the UK has become even more urgent with the second Trump administration. Vilnius had to find a balance between convincing the US administration that Lithuania was contributing its fair share towards collective defence within NATO, with a commitment in early 2025 to an increase in defence spending to 5-6 per cent of the country's GDP, strengthening defence within the EU and advocating greater cooperation with NATO partners outside the EU, specifically the UK and Norway.

The geopolitical context as well as an assessment of the UK's domestic political situation have shaped expectations concerning a new partnership agreement between the UK and the EU. From Lithuania's perspective, two key concrete expectations and one general hope are stressed. First, a security and defence partnership could formalise consultation, information sharing, regular meetings and the UK's participation in EU public procurement in the area of defence. Second, agreement on youth mobility which, ideally, would allow young people of up to 30 years old to visit the UK and stay for up to several years and study under the same conditions as UK citizens. Lithuania's preference is for a UK-EU agreement rather than serial bilaterals between the UK and individual member states. Finally, the hope is that the new partnership agreement would become a stepping stone toward closer cooperation between the UK and the EU more generally.

Future prospects

Overall, Lithuania's bilateral relations with the UK should be seen within the context of geopolitical tensions. Russia's war against Ukraine combined with statements on the part of the new administration in Washington have increased the urgency for military and security cooperation with allies. The thinking in Vilnius is that Europe is witnessing epochal geopolitical shifts which make both bilateral cooperation with the UK and cooperation between the EU and the UK more important.

Lithuania wants to cooperate with all NATO partners and leverage all possible formats including Baltic-Nordic and UK cooperation, as well as coalitions of willing, which could provide support for Ukraine and deter Russia in the context of the possibility of a reduced US military presence in Europe. There is a strong appreciation in Vilnius of the joint leadership shown by the UK and France in spring 2025 to support Ukraine and expectations that Germany's new government will further reinforce these developments.

Initial hopes that the UK's new Labour government would take practical steps towards enhancing cooperation with the EU were soon replaced by a degree of disillusionment when for more than half a year it went no further than general declarations about the importance of a reset of relations with the EU. In bilateral relations, for example, a technical agreement on mutual recognition of driver's licences was the only notable development, has and that had been in the making since 2020. The UK-EU summit is seen in Vilnius as an opportunity to provide a push for a more ambitious agreement which might lead to more concrete steps. To paraphrase the words of one diplomat, we hope that in the UK and EU relations the bottom has been reached and that we can only move towards higher aspirations. From Lithuania's perspective, any closer cooperation between the UK and the EU would be welcome, even though there is an understanding that the UK's domestic politics – notably the recent electoral success of the Reform Party – still make closer economic ties a challenge.

The Netherlands

Rem Korteweg



Background

The Netherlands favours strong ties between the EU and the UK. Historically, for economic and geopolitical reasons, it was a fervent supporter of UK membership in the European Communities that were the predecessor organisations of the EU. The Hague reasoned that with a like-minded state inside the Community, a balance would be achieved between the three largest European countries and the European Commission, which would address Dutch concerns that the integration process was overly ‘continental’ or ‘centralising’ tendencies.

Brexit was not only a shock to the Netherlands, but it had a chilling effect on bilateral relations. During the negotiations that led first to the Withdrawal Act and later the TCA, the Netherlands made a clear choice: protecting the integrity of the internal market and support for the EU over a lenient approach to the UK.

Dutch businesses felt the downside of Britain’s departure from the EU. The lack of a sanitary and phytosanitary agreement resulted in more paperwork for Dutch firms exporting to the UK. Rotterdam as the transshipment hub for intercontinental trade to the UK also saw a decline in traffic. The Dutch economy reoriented away from the UK market and towards the EU. Growth prospects were to be found elsewhere. There were also fears that Brexit might set off similar dynamics in other countries.

Despite Brexit, the Hague continued to pursue a close bilateral relationship with London. In 2022 the UK and the Netherlands signed a partnership agreement, the [Joint Statement on Foreign, Development and Security bilateral cooperation between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Netherlands](#). Throughout the Ukraine war, the Netherlands and the UK cooperated closely on developing initiatives to support Kyiv, for instance with regards to the F-16 fighter jets that were made available to Ukraine, and training for Ukrainian pilots.

Amid persistent geopolitical concerns, closer alignment between the Netherlands and the UK made sense. The Netherlands had always embraced its own close defence and security relationship with the UK, for instance in the field of naval cooperation, as exemplified by the participation of a Dutch frigate in HMS Queen Elizabeth’s maiden voyage to Asia. But security issues closer to home also became more important. Coordination on North Sea security and energy matters made its way to the top of the bilateral agenda. Economic security, the protection of critical infrastructure and how to reduce unwanted economic dependencies emerged as a new area of bilateral interest and cooperation.

Though PM Mark Rutte had been an outspoken critic of Brexit, the Netherlands remained a key ally of the UK inside the EU and even on occasion promoted British interests. One example was the lobbying the Netherlands undertook in Brussels to make PESCO projects – primarily in the area of ‘military mobility’ – accessible to third countries, including therefore the UK.

Developments since July 2024

The election of Keir Starmer coincided with changes in the Dutch electoral landscape, and posed a number of challenges to the UK-NL relationship. Mark Rutte, the longest-serving Dutch prime minister, was out and the relatively unknown official-turned-politician Dick Schoof was in. A new Labour government with an agenda to deepen cooperation with the EU now faced a Dutch coalition government that was critical of closer European cooperation and had to deal with an image problem. The largest coalition partner

is the Eurosceptic PVV, whose leader Geert Wilders had previously called for a Dutch departure from the EU. This new government emphasised the ‘national interest’ as a guiding principle in its foreign relations, and the key position occupied by the PVV in the government made the Dutch less natural sparring partners in the EU.

Across the Channel, the election of Keir Starmer and the comfortable majority held by the Labour Party in the Commons led to the belief in the Netherlands that a page could be turned on the chaotic Brexit years. Business associations in particular saw a positive potential for change.

One challenge, however, was a drop-off in interest in the UK and the UK-EU relationship in the Netherlands. An interdepartmental taskforce that focused on the UK during the Brexit talks had been disbanded after negotiations had concluded and the TCA was signed. The Brexit rapporteurs in the Dutch parliament had all left politics. Institutional memory faded, as did the media attention paid to the UK. No longer was there a strong political constituency or platform to rally for stronger UK-NL or UK-EU ties. The relationship, it seemed, had been dealt and with, and time had moved on. Instead, political momentum was with supporting Ukraine, reducing Europe’s economic dependencies, pursuing the Green Deal, crafting a European industrial policy and managing irregular migration.

That the UK might be able to contribute to these objectives was left underexplored. New leadership in The Hague with different priorities did not help. The Commission was left in charge of managing the relationship with the UK, while The Hague and London explored bilateral issues of common interest – mainly on security and law enforcement – to which the TCA had not extended.

Future prospects

The election of Donald Trump and the continuation of the war in Ukraine increased geopolitical concerns across the European continent. The Netherlands, a staunchly pro-Atlanticist country, was left reeling as the Trump administration was perceived to challenge core assumptions underpinning the transatlantic relationship. Despite the shift of focus away from the EU-UK relationship, the general sense in the Netherlands was that better integration of the UK in ongoing EU security and defence discussions now was urgent.

An EU-UK ‘reset’ agreement could also unlock possibilities in economic security and trade. As part of the North Seas Energy Cooperation (NSEC) agreement, the UK and the Netherlands share the ambition to develop offshore energy projects in the North Sea. But connecting the UK to the European electricity market has obvious implications with regards to the TCA agreement and issues such as state aid and carbon emissions policies. A deal between the EU and the UK would enable more bilateral projects to emerge, possibly even connecting wind power projects to ambitions in the area of hydrogen production, both of which would support objectives to improve Europe’s energy independence.

As neighbours that share a sea, the Netherlands and the UK also have an interest to develop deeper cooperation on issues relating to the protection of critical undersea infrastructure, improving maritime security, maintaining sustainable fish stocks and protecting vulnerable habitats, while at the same time exploring North Sea energy potential and common projects.

As part of the EU-UK reset, the Netherlands supported movement towards an SPS agreement, which would have a direct positive impact on Dutch food and plant exports to the UK. But the issue of the continued access of EU fishers to UK fishing waters – on which many Dutch fishermen rely – was perhaps even more urgent and a key concern for one of the coalition parties in the current Dutch government that is a staunch supporter of farmers and fisheries.

Given events in Washington, the Netherlands is grappling with the question of how to manage the relationship with the United States, which has been a central element of Dutch foreign policy for eighty years. Bilateral consultations and discussions with the similarly pro-Atlanticist UK on how to deal with the uncertainties associated with the Trump administration could help The Hague to think through its strategy.

In the realm of foreign policy, the 'reset' could herald more smooth alignment on sanctions policies as well as enable closer cooperation on law enforcement. The Hague and London are also exploring closer ties on police cooperation to counter drugs-trafficking and irregular migration. A general rapprochement between Brussels and London would help. In the background, the Netherlands would also favour improved relations between the UK and the EU to enable London to use its role as a bridge-builder as an effective intermediary between Brussels and the US. Keir Starmer's seemingly positive relationship with Donald Trump and his leadership of the 'coalition of the willing' in support of Ukraine, have received positive reviews in the Netherlands. However, while general foreign policy alignment is to be expected, it remains unclear to what extent the UK would also be keen to align with Brussels over any trade disputes with the US. Or whether the UK will pursue a trade policy, which balances between the EU and the US, without having to pick sides. As of yet, the latter seems more likely, which could limit the extent to which the UK is able to reset relations with the EU.

Similarly, it remains unclear as to whether President Trump will pursue an anti-EU agenda, aimed at challenging the EU directly in foreign policy and trade terms, with the intent to ensure that the UK-EU reset does not lead to growing alignment by London with Brussels. Washington's role in deciding the future of EU-UK ties may be as great or greater than developments in London, Brussels or The Hague.

Poland

Natasza Styczyńska and Volodymyr Posviatenko



Background

The United Kingdom is regarded as one of Poland's key allies and has played a significant role in Poland's integration into the European Union. It was one of the strongest supporters of the EU's eastward expansion, viewing the 'big bang' enlargement as an opportunity rather than a threat. Moreover, in 2004, the UK – alongside Ireland and Sweden – opened its borders immediately to workers from new member states, including Poland.

The outcome of the 2016 referendum on Brexit was therefore met with concern in Poland, not least on account of its implications for nearly a million Polish citizens living in the UK. During the Brexit negotiations, protecting the rights of Poles in the UK was one of the government's top priorities. There was also a concern about international security, particularly in relation to the Russian aggression. The UK shared Poland's apprehensions and underscored the necessity of strengthening eastern policy.

Further, the governing parties in Poland and the UK shared the same outlook on the EU. Like the Conservative Party in the UK, Law and Justice – the leading party in the coalition that governed Poland between 2015 and 2023 – called for limits to European integration and a greater role for individual states. Indeed, the two parties were co-founders of the European Conservatives and Reformists group in the European Parliament.

The common outlook between London and Warsaw persisted following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. When Poland's foreign policy became heavily focused on promoting military, financial, and humanitarian support for Ukraine, the UK emerged as a natural ally. The UK government cooperated closely with Poland and the Baltic countries in these initiatives.

In October 2023, parliamentary elections in Poland saw pro-democratic and pro-European parties come into office. Discussions regarding the possible new Labour government in the UK often revolved around hopes for stronger bilateral relations, particularly in areas such as trade, security, and migration. Following the Labour Party's victory, Polish leaders and the Polish community in the UK expressed expectations for a strengthening of Poland-UK cooperation, especially in international partnerships, with the aim of improving diplomatic and economic relations. Poland has expressed hope that the Labour government will work towards establishing favourable trade agreements that would benefit both nations.

Migration issues have also emerged as a desired area of cooperation, with calls for a more accommodating immigration policy to support the rights of Polish citizens living and working in the UK. Currently, there are about 750,000 Poles residing in the UK, making Polish the second most common spoken language. However, educational and cultural exchanges between Poland and the UK weakened significantly following Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic. The hope was that the revival of cooperation, following the changes in government leadership in both Poland and the UK, will not only address defence and trade but also restore cultural ties. In 2025, cities in Poland and Great Britain will participate in the 'Poland-Great Britain Cultural Season 2025', a nine-month cultural exchange programme, which mark a renewed commitment to cultural collaboration.

Developments since July 2024

Since the Labour Party's victory in the July 2024 general election, the UK and Poland have further deepened their bilateral ties, particularly in defence and security. This strengthening of relations is evident in a series of high-level initiatives aimed at addressing shared geopolitical challenges and bolstering mutual security. Nevertheless, these developments are unfolding within a complex environment marked by shifting global power dynamics, rising military risks, and broader non-military security concerns. Trump's second presidency has introduced considerable uncertainty, posing new challenges for UK–Poland cooperation, how the two countries should respond to Washington's unpredictability, and how security cooperation can be sustained amid doubts about NATO's reliability. While the UK seeks to maintain its role as a bridge between the US and Europe, Poland – traditionally supportive of the US as a security guarantor for Central and Eastern Europe – has now to reconsider its stance towards European strategic autonomy, a concept it once viewed as weakening the alliance.

Security ties, which have traditionally been a priority in bilateral relations between the UK and Poland, were reaffirmed soon after the Labour Party came to power when on 24 July 2024 Poland's Minister of National Defence Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz met UK Defence Secretary John Healey [in Warsaw to discuss European security](#) and NATO's strategic direction. The UK committed to deploying Royal Engineers to assist in the construction of Poland's East Shield defence infrastructure and announced the deployment of 4-6 Eurofighter aircraft for an Air Policing mission over Poland in 2025.

A pivotal development occurred on 16 January 2025, when UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer met with Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk in Warsaw to [initiate negotiations on a new UK–Poland Defence and Security Treaty](#). The new treaty aims to provide a framework for deep cooperation across a range of external and internal security threats. The discussions in Warsaw highlighted the need to strengthen military collaboration to counter Russian aggression. The two leaders agreed to continue working together to support Ukraine, focusing on military assistance, training, and reconstruction efforts. Prime Minister Starmer reinforced the UK's support for the East Shield initiative and announced the opening of a new [UK–Poland Joint Programme Office in Bristol](#) in 2025, the main task of which will be to implement the bilateral agreement on the next generation of short-range anti-aircraft missile systems under the NAREW programme, with a contract valued at £4 billion. [Prime Minister Tusk also noted](#) that the two countries would strengthen security cooperation in the Baltic and North Seas. Additionally, the Prime Ministers identified irregular migration and human smuggling as significant challenges [to be addressed under the new treaty](#). The joint statement also expressed an intention to deepen bilateral dialogue on energy security to address shared challenges and opportunities, including the potential establishment of a new ministerial forum focused on energy security and transition.

In [March 2025, Royal Air Force Typhoons](#) from II Army Cooperation Squadron at RAF Lossiemouth landed at the 22nd Air Base in Malbork for Operation Chessman, part of NATO's enhanced Air Policing missions. The deployment of Typhoons is intended to signal the UK's commitment to regional security and underscore its robust bilateral partnership with Poland. The Typhoons are [expected to remain](#) in Malbork until the end of July. [On 15–17 April, RAF Typhoons were scrambled three times](#) in three days to intercept and identify Russian aircraft leaving Kaliningrad air space and close to NATO airspace.

The actions of Trump 2.0 are also likely to impact the UK's engagement in broader security and trade initiatives with Poland and other European partners. The UK's focus on the transatlantic relationship could affect its involvement in European security cooperation. Traditionally, London has held a special position as an intermediary between Washington and Brussels. However, Trump's trade policies and scepticism towards European security commitments raise concerns that reliance on the US might undermine the UK's standing in European politics.

In this context, Prime Minister Starmer's government [finds itself in a position](#) where it is likely to face a choice. Seeking a special partnership with the US could jeopardise agreements with the EU that are essential for regulating trade, defence, and migration. Meanwhile, the EU – actively trying to decrease its reliance on the US military industry – signals to the UK that access to European rearmament defence funding for British defence companies is conditional upon finalising a defence agreement with the EU. Therefore, London's choice to pursue closer cooperation with the EU would implicitly acknowledge the failure of the Brexit idea and further entangle the UK military industry with the EU, risking political repercussions from the White House. The UK's nuclear capabilities, which are heavily reliant on cooperation with the US, could be one casualty of falling out with the US administration.

For Poland, the UK's geographical location and its consistent support for Ukraine and NATO's eastern flank suggest that deeper cooperation with the EU – and with Poland specifically – is both logical and desirable. However, a shift towards closer ties with Trump's US could weaken the UK's role in the region and undermine its own security. Poland's strategic positioning is likely to be influenced by whether the UK prioritises transatlantic relations or opts for closer engagement with the EU. If the UK leans towards the EU, this could strengthen European defence, ultimately benefiting Poland through enhanced collective security. The evolving context may also shape the ambitions of the new UK–Poland defence partnership.

Future prospects

There are several key priorities for the Polish government in strengthening bilateral relations with the UK, particularly in the context of changing political and security dynamics. These areas were discussed by the prime ministers of the two countries during their joint meeting in January 2025. The focus of cooperation appears to remain consistent, suggesting that continued efforts in the development of collaboration in trade, energy transformation, education, and science can be expected.

The Polish authorities, who continue to emphasise the military threat from Russia, have also advocated for increased defence spending, which may lead to a growing defence industrial relationship between the UK and Poland.

In a broader context, cooperation may also occur within the framework of the 'Coalition of the Willing' to carry out a peacekeeping mission in Ukraine. This coalition consists of 31 countries willing to provide various forms of assistance, including military aid, financial support, humanitarian assistance, and diplomatic backing, and both Poland alongside the UK may play key roles in this initiative.

The UK–EU Summit on 19 May presented an opportunity to address ongoing challenges and reinforce multilateral cooperation. Poland is a strong supporter of coordinating strategies with the UK that enhance European security. Given Poland's shared strategic interests with the UK, the hope deeper UK–EU engagement will follow in the wake of the Summit. In turn, stronger UK–EU relations may help mitigate the uncertainties posed by current US policies.

Spain

Enrique Feás and Ignacio Molina



Background

Over thirty-five years of shared EU membership, Spain and the UK forged close ties. The strength of the relationship in business and people-to-people links did not, however, fully translate to the political level first because the countries had different views about the scope and purpose of the EU and second on account of the occasional tensions over Gibraltar. Still, they were aligned on many key internal EU debates, particularly support for free trade.

Once negotiations on Brexit began, Spain adopted a pragmatic approach to ensure an orderly withdrawal and avoid a 'no deal'. Apart from emphasizing EU unity and the integrity of the internal market, it focused on three main concerns: avoiding tariffs and minimising frictions in trade; the protection of citizens' rights; and the future of Gibraltar.

Most of Spain's concerns were covered by the Withdrawal Agreement and later the TCA, but tensions emerged briefly in November 2018 because of a textual ambiguity in the Withdrawal Agreement regarding territorial scope, from which it could have been inferred that future agreements between the EU and the UK could be applied to Gibraltar. The issue was clarified through a [protocol](#) and a common declaration of the UK and the EU, the effect of which was to require Spain's explicit approval.

Gibraltar aside, the two countries were concerned to preserve the bilateral economic and social exchanges between them. In practice, the impact of Brexit has had little effect. Despite the frictions in the movement of goods and limited provisions concerning services that result from the TCA, only certain sectors such as agri-food or consumer manufactures have experienced trade diversion to third countries. Foreign direct investment has remained strong, and a solution was found to the very specific problem of joint ownership of the flag carriers of the two countries by [IAG](#) – 55 per cent owned by British Airways and 45% by Iberia. Under EU rules, EU airlines must be majority controlled by EU-based investors in order to serve routes within the EU and, thus, the holding company had to modify the [share structure of Iberia](#) to retain its traffic rights.

On the question of fishing, Spanish vessels represent only a small proportion of the EU fleet in UK waters. The TCA has ensured that this access will continue until June 2026 with a gradual reduction in catch quotas, but the species that were of primary interest to Spain were mostly exempted. Hence, Brexit's impact on [Spain's fishing sector](#) has been limited.

Just as important as maintaining the good business and commercial bilateral relationship was not to disrupt the extremely high level of people-to-people exchange after the free movement of people came to an end. The UK is the main source of foreign tourists for Spain, with [more than 18 million Britons visiting](#) the country each year.

Spain is also home to the largest group of British expatriates in Europe. There are around [270,000 officially registered](#) residents in Spain in 2024 (down from 400,000 ten years ago), although estimates of the actual number, including those who are not registered or who own property and spend part of the year in Spain, amount to around 800,000. On the UK side, the [2021 census](#) recorded almost 220,000 Spaniards in England and Wales, a figure does not include several thousand students.

The tourism sector is affected by new visa rules. While short stays under 90 days remain visa-free, longer stays require permits, complicating extended visits by Britons. Work visas are now harder to obtain under the UK's points system, requiring offers with salaries over €30,000. This has reduced Spanish worker flows to the UK, impacting sectors such as hospitality, agriculture, and healthcare.

In terms of residence for citizens post-Brexit, Spain has been more generous than the UK. Britons residing in Spain before Brexit retained their status automatically. By contrast, EU citizens in the UK needed to apply under the Settlement Scheme if they wanted to continue to live in the UK after 30 June 2021. However, UK citizens living in Spain have been affected by other inconveniences. These include: residency restrictions that affect property markets, especially in Spanish coastal regions popular among Britons; increased roaming fees and credit cards costs; the invalidity of UK car insurance; and restrictions on pet travel. The [reciprocal recognition of driving licenses](#) agreed in March 2023 did make life easier in one respect, however, since Spain removed the requirement to take an additional test.

On education, the UK's decision to withdraw from the Erasmus student exchange program was a big blow to Spain. Almost 4,500 Spanish students – the third largest EU contingent – participated in Erasmus in the UK in 2018-19, while the UK accounted for the fourth highest number of international students in Spain at 4,300. In July 2023, the two governments signed an [agreement on educational cooperation](#), which allows students in the British education system to enter universities in Spain and to study in the UK without sitting a general entrance exam

Finally, no account of the relationship between Spain and the UK would be complete without a discussion of Gibraltar. In December 2020, shortly after the TCA was signed, which excludes Gibraltar from its territorial scope, London and Madrid reached [a bilateral understanding](#), on the basis of which the European Commission prepared a [negotiating mandate which was adopted in 2021](#). The negotiation of this Protocol, which would incorporate Gibraltar into the Schengen area, has been intense since 2023 involving the Vice-President of the European Commission Maroš Šefčovič, the Chief Minister of Gibraltar Fabian Picardo, and the foreign ministers of Spain and the UK. Significant progress has been made, but in June 2024 talks were suspended because of the UK elections. Negotiations resumed in late 2024 with the new Labour government, but agreement has still so far proved elusive.

The two countries did, however, sign in 2020 a package of [Memorandums of Understanding \(MoU\) on several specific issues](#) affecting Gibraltar, covering citizens' rights, tobacco, the environment, and police and customs cooperation. The MoU on citizens' rights guarantees social benefits for cross-border workers living on the Spanish side, without discrimination against British workers. The MoU on tobacco establishes obligations to align prices in the Gibraltarian market as a means of reducing the smuggling that currently takes place, and which causes security and tax revenue problems for Spain. Finally, MoUs on the environment and on police and customs co-operation aim to improve co-ordination between the authorities on both sides. Cooperation on taxation has also been increased to reduce money laundering and tax evasion.

Developments since July 2024

Over the last year, the [economic and commercial ties](#) between the UK and Spain have grown stronger. Total trade in goods and services increased 5.6 per cent (or £3.4 billion) in 2024, up to £64.6 billion, with services remaining more dynamic than goods. UK exports to Spain slightly decreased 0.4 per cent, due to an 8.4 per cent fall in goods (down to £9.3 billion) despite the 7.6 per cent increase in services (up to £10.9 billion). UK imports from Spain grew 8.6 per cent, with increases in both goods (5.7 per cent, up to £21.1 billion) and services (11.3 per cent, up to £23.4 billion). Tourism has reached a new high, with 18.4 million arrivals in Spain from the UK, far more than those from France and Germany.

UK foreign direct investment flows in Spain [more than tripled in 2024](#), up to €12,2 billion, a third of the total received by Spain in that year, turning the UK into Spain's number one foreign investor. UK flows in 2024 more than doubled those of the US – now in second investor – and exceeded the sum of the remaining 26 members of the EU. The UK also consolidated its position as one of the top three investors in Spain, along with the US and France.

The government change in London and the prospect of a less tense relationship with the EU have renewed the confidence of Spanish business in the UK economy, making it Spain's second top FDI destination after the USA, with €4.2 billion (more than three times higher than in 2023). [Surveys show](#) that nearly half of Spanish companies operating in the UK are planning to expand their investments, workforce, and revenues in the coming year.

Despite the optimism, however, 37 per cent of Spanish firms report difficulties in recruiting suitable staff in the UK – 10 per cent more than in 2023 – citing skill mismatches and calling for a more flexible immigration approach to address labour shortages.

Although developments on the economic front have been positive following the election of the Labour government, there has been little progress in the political dimension. Negotiations over Gibraltar remain stalled, and high-level bilateral dialogue has been scarce in spite of the apparent ideological alignment. Alongside Denmark and Norway, Spain and the UK have the only centre-left governments in Western Europe. However, on key issues such as irregular immigration, their positions are far apart.

Keir Starmer and Pedro Sánchez have met only within the framework of multilateral summits, such as the G20 or the European Political Community, and only once — on the sidelines of the EPC meeting held on 18 July 2024 in Woodstock, when they spoke for 30 minutes — had a [personal conversation](#). Although they committed to a 'structured dialogue', there is little evidence ten months later of any follow up.

The two PMs even agreed that the positive state of bilateral economic relations could serve as a model for the broader 'reset' between the UK and the EU—particularly given the large number of citizens from both countries who live in or travel to the other, given the strong commercial and business ties, all of which underscore the urgent need for a better legal framework to enhance mobility. However, negotiations with London on this sensitive matter have been left in the hands of Brussels, with Madrid playing no particularly prominent role.

Donald Trump's return to the White House has helped promote an agenda of shared concerns around European security, including several ad hoc meetings involving a select group of European countries with both British and Spanish participation. These include the '[Securing Our Future London Summit](#)' held in March 2025 and ministerial meetings in [Madrid](#) and [London](#) of the G5+ (or Weimar+) on Ukraine and Euro-Atlantic security. Nonetheless, the two governments remain far apart. Although Spain is opposed to Russia's war in Ukraine, it does not at all embrace the idea of deploying troops on the ground, which France and the UK have floated.

Future relations

The Labour government's proactive approach has led to a warmer economic relationship between the UK and Spain, characterised by increased investment and collaborative policy discussions. The bilateral tension that existed when the Conservative Party was in power no longer exists.

As well from improving relations on security and defence – albeit with doubts about the access of the UK's defence industry access to EU defence funds – Spain would be interested in progress on youth mobility, something the UK could consider, although equal university prices for EU students seems unrealistic given current UK sensitivities about immigration.

Spain would most likely be in favour of an EU-UK veterinary agreement, although this possibility is could be hampered by the UK's reluctance to guarantee long-term access to British waters for EU fishermen. As for the ultimate interpretation of EU law, a system of arbitration would probably be reachable as a corollary of major advances in other areas.

If a good result comes out of the EU-UK negotiations, challenges related to labour market constraints are properly addressed, and there is a reasonable solution for Gibraltar, there are strong prospects for even closer ties between the UK and Spain. The peculiarity of Gibraltar makes this the [issue of most concern](#). The ambition is to remove all physical obstacles – the so-called 'fence' – and, since Gibraltar would be part of the Schengen area and its rules on asylum, returns, visas, residence permits, operational police cooperation, and information exchange would apply, to eliminate police check points at the land border. In theory, the agreement has long been close to being reached. The main problem remains UK reluctance to accept that Spanish police as part of Frontex can operate at Gibraltar airport and the port. The week before the UK-EU summit on 19 May 2025, a new round of negotiations took place in Madrid. But no agreement was reached and Spain warns that the whole post-Brexit reset [could depend](#) on a successful deal about the rock.



Background

Relations between the UK and Norway, which have been especially strong since the second world war, remain vibrant. As a major player in NATO, the UK is an essential partner for Norway's security and defence, not least due to the threat posed by Russia, with whom Norway shares a 197.7 kilometre-long border. The UK is also Norway's most important single trading partner, while Norway ranks as the UK's twelfth largest. No less than three quarters of UK goods imports from Norway are accounted for by oil and gas commodities, reflecting Norway's central role [centrality](#) in the supply of oil and gas not only for the UK, but for Europe in general.

Norway received considerable attention during and after the UK's referendum on EU membership, when the possibility of the UK remaining in the EU's single market as a non-member was dubbed the 'Norway option'. Such a designation was not entirely accurate. Norway's EU affiliation consists of a total of around 100 agreements. Norway's access to and participation in the EU's internal market is through the multilateral European Economic Area Agreement (EEA), which covers all the EU's member states and the non-members Iceland, Lichtenstein and Norway. Decisions to incorporate EU provisions are taken by unanimity by all EU and EEA-EFTA states. Norway is not part of the EU's customs union but is inside Schengen with responsibility for EU border controls. For the UK it would have been very difficult to be inside the internal market but not the customs union. Moreover, the UK's socio-economic model is more (neo)liberal than Norway's. The latter combines an open international economy with a higher level of state intervention and a strong welfare state.

Following the UK referendum, the UK opted for a much looser EU affiliation than Norway's. Since opinions are deeply divided on how Norway should organise its relations with the EU, it seemed possible that the UK's experience would prompt a Norwegian re-examination of its EU affiliation. However, the UK's departure from the EU worked more as a [deterrent](#) than as an inducement for change in Norway's EU affiliation. Moreover, the [Eldring Report](#), which evaluated the EEA, and the UK, Canada and Swiss models of affiliation with the EU, concluded that Norway's affiliation was superior and had served Norway well. There is little to suggest that the Norwegian political leadership is [interested](#) in a new EU membership bid at present. The Eldring Report's conclusions can be taken to suggest that accession should be considered the only option to the relationship Norway has currently. The general tendency has been for both Norway and the UK to [seek a closer affiliation](#) with the EU albeit from different starting positions and at different speeds.

The change to a Labour government in the UK was no doubt welcomed by the Norwegian government, then a minority Labour-led government coalition, which now after the coalition partner withdrew a minority Labour government. Closer Norway – UK relations would benefit from closer security cooperation with the UK which Norway considers essential. Defence industrial cooperation is regulated by the EEA, and is therefore affected by the EU. Norway wants as good an economic alignment with the UK as possible as long as it does not conflict with Norway's EEA obligations.

Developments since July 2024

The UK's decision to leave the EU instituted a new triangular dynamic in the UK-Norway-EU relations, in the sense that the TCA between the EU and the UK necessitated a new agreement between Norway and the UK, which affected Norway-EU relations formally and informally. The main challenge was to navigate around different configurations of legally regulated trade relations. That has changed with President Trump's re-entry to the White House in January 2025.

The critical issue now is whether or to what extent legally regulated interstate relations are giving way to power politics, where sovereignty is less an international convention than a reflection of brute power relations. Under such circumstances, power differentials, patterns of vulnerability and relational dynamics come to predominate, and predictable systems of law-based rule give way to uncertainty and arbitrary and person-oriented modes of governing.

The Trump administration has a radical domestic and international agenda, where the removal of legal constraints and democratic controls on presidential power plays an important part. As well as bullying allies and friends, seeking to undermine the EU and using bilateral channels to circumvent the EU, Trump 2.0 has so far pursued security and trade unilateralism backed up by threats and actions that threaten to overturn the post-war liberal international order.

In the realm of security, continued US commitment to NATO and the defence of Europe in case of Russian aggression have come into question. Insofar as the US security guarantee still applies, it is conditional on levels of defence spending, initially at a minimum of two per cent of GDP and recently increased to five per cent. It seems likely that the US believes this will benefit its defence contractors. The uncertainty surrounding NATO emerges just after the European and especially the Nordic security landscape has been dramatically altered by Finland's and Sweden's recent accession.

The EU is also taking a more active role in the realm of conventional security. It has long had a 'soft' security policy, including cyber-security and dealing with hybrid threats. The EU is now working towards equipment standardisation, increased interoperability and joint defence procurement. For Norway this takes on added importance insofar as defence procurement is regulated by the rules of the EU's internal market, because then it is directly EEA relevant.

In this new context of uncertainty, the UK is developing closer cooperation with the EU, and on 20 February 2025, a new UK – Norway strategic partnership agreement was [announced](#), which would 'look to build on the UK's longstanding defence relationship with Norway by strengthening our armed forces, developing closer industrial ties and enhancing [the UK's] capabilities to face common challenges such as protection of critical undersea infrastructure. It follows the Defence Secretary signing the landmark Trinity House Agreement with Germany in October.' This was followed up on 7 May 2025 with a [Memorandum of Understanding on a Green Industrial Partnership](#) between the UK and Norway.

The Trump administration has also started a near-global series of trade wars. For the UK and Norway this has two facets. The 'sword' is the US tariff, and the issue facing the EU, UK and Norway is whether to retaliate or not. Leaders go to the White House to plead for their countries. Norway has decided not to take retaliatory measures, but the EU will do so if higher tariffs kick in. Meanwhile, the 'shield' concerns whether a country such as Norway will be protected against the EU's retaliatory measures or be treated as a third country. The issue is relevant since Norway is not in the EU's customs union and the EEA Agreement does not offer explicit protection. Opinions in Norway are divided on how strong this protection is. The UK which is of course also outside the EU's customs union would face a similar dynamic.

One issue that has sparked some triangular EU-UK-Norway tension is a mackerel quota agreement between the U.K., Norway, and the Faroe Islands. European fishers' organisations claim that this will lead to overfishing.

Other developments since July 2024 include the UK's being back in the EU's Horizon scheme. Norway is part of the EU's system of research collaboration and the UK's re-entry offers greater prospects for research collaboration between the UK and Norway.

With regard to climate and energy, there was uncertainty as to the status of CBAM in Norway. It is now accepted, and Norway will establish its own in 2027. There are grounds to assume that this will be EU and UK compatible.

Finally, Norway's position in relation to the EU is likely to change if Iceland should accede to the EU. The new Icelandic government decided late last year to hold an EU membership referendum by 2027. Iceland had never withdrawn the application it submitted after the height of the financial crisis, and the government is now determined to conclude the negotiations. If Iceland should join, it is questionable whether the EEA will remain a viable arrangement.

Future prospects

Norway welcomes a UK government that wants closer relations to the EU and contributes to international stability, as a bulwark against the US. This Norwegian government sentiment is more pronounced now that the anti-European Center Party has left the coalition and Labour governs alone. The government wants predictable EU-UK relations that carry over to, and do not disrupt, Norway-UK and Norway-EU relations. Having said that in trade Norway follows the EU, so if the UK aligns with the Trump US and that means the UK de-aligning from the EU, then Norway follows the EU. If for instance the UK were to accept US food standards against the EU's red lines, then Norway would follow the EU.

For Norway, the UK's support is important for addressing challenges in an uncertain world. Cooperation on military security and other forms including economic security have taken on added salience since Trump's machinations. The fact that he has also put NATO in play makes the UK's contribution both to the EU and to Norway even more important.

Before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Norway-UK economic issues were subject to the agreements and regulations that created trilateral relations between the UK and the EU (TCA), Norway and the EU (EEA), and the UK and EEA-EFTA. In today's more securitised world, these relations can no longer be confined to economic interaction but will include a security component, from economic security (including investment regulations to cybersecurity or hybrid warfare to military security aspects of which is working its way into the EU's internal market through the EDF. That will have bearings on Norway-UK-EU economic dynamics and Norway-UK-US security dynamics.

Norway is keen to gain an ally in addressing concerns over the ongoing Russian militarization of the Arctic. Norway has historically sought to involve the EU as a counterweight to Russia but also China's increased interest in the Arctic. While the UK is not a major Arctic player, its large naval presence makes it relevant. The High North was central to the UK's post-Brexit Global Britain approach, with a stronger focus on security in recent years following the 2018 UK Arctic Policy Framework to advance prosperity and security in the region. The UK and Norway already cooperate in multilateral groupings such as the Northern Group and the Joint Expeditionary Force. There is also the status of Spitzbergen, which is currently under Norwegian suzerainty, but which could become politicised. Norway would be interested in support from friendly powers in this area, and there are voices in the UK that urge the government to take a more active role in the Arctic.



Background¹

In the years following the UK referendum, many in Switzerland hoped that Theresa May would succeed in securing a soft Brexit, and that the UK would obtain some level of integration into the EU's internal market, albeit without continued EU membership. There were hopes that the UK would leverage its economic and political power to secure a superior institutional framework to the one the EU has been trying [to impose](#) on Switzerland for the last twenty years.

In Switzerland, this was known as the 'snowplough' theory; the UK's negotiations would ease the way for Switzerland and [strengthen](#) Switzerland's hand in its own negotiations with the EU. Instead, following Theresa May's failed attempts at negotiating a soft Brexit, her successors opted for minimal formal relations with the EU. The TCA is [very modest](#) compared to the [bilateral agreements](#) between Switzerland and the EU.

At a bilateral level, the Swiss government views a good relationship with the UK Post-Brexit as an opportunity to work with a close European partner outside the EU framework.

A champion of free trade and pragmatism, Switzerland shares many values with the UK and considers the UK a like-minded partner in many areas. Both countries have advanced economies with high standards, boast large financial sectors, are world leaders in research and innovation, and share a strong engagement on sustainable development.

Switzerland is one of the UK's most important trading partners.

Since the Switzerland-EU bilateral agreements ceased to apply to the UK at the end of the Brexit transition period, both countries have negotiated a series of follow-up agreements as part of Switzerland's so-called 'Mind the Gap' strategy (including 'Mind the Gap+').

- [The Agreement on Trade](#) (signed on 11 February 2019) transferred several existing trade and economic agreements with the EU to the relationship between Switzerland and the UK. This includes the 1972 Free Trade Agreement, the 1999 Agreement on Government Procurement, the 1999 Agreement on Mutual Recognition in relation to Conformity Assessment (MRA), the 1999 Agreement on Agriculture, the 2004 Agreement on Combating Fraud, and the 2009 Agreement on Customs Facilitation and Security. The Trade Agreement came into force on 1 January 2021.

Since some of the aforementioned agreements, or parts thereof, are predicated on an alignment of rules between Switzerland and the EU, they will only apply once the EU and the UK agree equivalent terms based on harmonised standards. This applies to the Customs Facilitation and Security Agreement, certain sectors under the Agricultural Agreement (e.g. veterinary standards), and most sectors under the MRA agreement, excluding motor vehicles, good laboratory practice, and good manufacturing practice for medicines (which account for two-thirds of trading volume). The diagonal cumulation of origin of goods is not guaranteed either, as the EU and the UK have agreed on a strictly bilateral system, which has negative repercussions on certain value creation chains involving Switzerland.

1 This section draws extensively from the author's contribution to Kassim and Davies (2024) [The UK and its Neighbours: views across Europe](#).

- The [Agreement relating to Scheduled Air Services](#) signed on 17 December 2018 ensures that existing air transport rules continued to apply in full, allowing air carriers to retain their current traffic rights. The agreement came into force on 1 January 2021.
- **The Agreement on the International Carriage of Passengers and Goods by Road** allows carriers to continue transporting goods without requiring an authorisation and ensures the continued transportation of people and goods between the two countries. The agreement came into force on 1 January 2021.
- **The Agreement on Direct Insurance** other than Life Insurance signed on 25 January 2019 allows Swiss insurance companies active in direct insurance, to operate and establish branches in the UK and conversely for British insurance companies. The agreement came into force on 1 January 2021.
- Switzerland and the UK signed a **Citizens' Rights Agreement** on 25 February 2019 that protects the rights of Swiss citizens living in the UK – which they acquired under the Agreement on the Free Movement of Persons (AFMP) – such as residency rights, social security entitlements and the recognition of professional qualifications. Reciprocal conditions apply to UK citizens in Switzerland. As the approval process is still ongoing in Switzerland, the Citizens' Rights Agreement has applied on a provisional basis since 1 January 2021. In relation to social security, the agreement provides for a decision by the Swiss–EU Joint Committee under the AFMP, which extends the protection of rights to citizens of EU member states.
- The **Services Mobility Agreement** (signed on 14 December 2020) sets out the terms of mutual access and temporary stays for Swiss and British service providers, i.e. natural persons, such as IT specialists and engineers, supplying services in the other country. British service providers have access to the Swiss market for periods not exceeding 90 days per calendar year, while Swiss service providers have access to the UK market for periods not exceeding 12 months in any 24-month period through market access commitments for over 30 services sectors and other preferential terms. The agreement also contains provisions on the mutual recognition of professional qualifications. The agreement applies on a provisional basis from 1 January 2021.
- On 14 April 2021, Switzerland adopted the **agreement on the mutual recognition of authorised economic operators** (AEOs) with the UK. The agreement is designed to make it easier for Swiss companies with AEO status to trade with the UK and vice versa, and to reduce technical barriers to trade. Companies with AEO status are considered particularly trustworthy, which is why they enjoy privileges in security-related customs controls and are entitled to simplified customs clearance. The agreement entered into force on 1 September 2021.
- **An agreement on Police Cooperation** was signed on 15 December 2020 to strengthen and develop cooperation with the British police authorities, particularly in the fight against organised crime and terrorism. The agreement enhances public security in both countries and further expands Switzerland's relationship with the UK (Mind the Gap+, see below). The agreement entered into force on 14 October 2021.
- The agreement on **coordination of social security** ensures largely equal treatment for insured people and facilitates access to social security benefits. It also aims to avoid over insurance and insurance gaps for people who come into contact with the Swiss and UK social security systems. The agreement has been provisionally applied since 1 November 2021.

On 30 June 2020 the two countries issued a joint statement regarding closer cooperation on financial services. They confirmed their willingness to sign an agreement to open up cross-border market access to a wide range of financial services in the areas of insurance, banking, asset management and financial market infrastructure. But despite [announcing](#) the signature of the Berne Financial Services Agreement in December 2023, the agreement has not been ratified by the Swiss and UK Parliament as there are a few difficulties.

Switzerland and the UK issued another statement on 21 December 2020, which sets out their intentions to explore ways to enhance cooperation on migration following the signature of a [Memorandum of Understanding](#) on 18 December 2020 to strengthen bilateral cooperation on mobility and migration.

Switzerland's 'Mind the Gap+' strategy provides for possible further developments in the relationship with the UK. Discussions are currently ongoing regarding possible areas for closer cooperation where the two countries have common interests, including negotiations on a UK-Switzerland enhanced FTA. The enhanced FTA builds on the rollover deal that was put in place following the UK's departure from the EU by expanding free trade into new areas and sub-sectors.

Beyond negotiations on the enhanced FTA, Switzerland would look forward to improved cooperation between the UK and EU under a new UK government. More specifically, it would prefer the UK to regain a level of integration with the EU's single market comparable to that enjoyed by Switzerland, but not participation in the customs union.

Developments since July 2024

The Federal Council communicates much less than other governments. It is very cautious and very rarely expresses an opinion on international issues. It hardly ever gives its view on its political preferences because it is made up of ministers from very different political parties, from the socialist left to the national-conservative right. And, to the author's knowledge, no Swiss politician expressed an opinion on the outcome of the UK elections, even though the left was more favourable to Keir Starmer than the right.

Generally speaking, the press, even on the liberal right, welcomed the end of the Conservative era and the arrival in power of the Labour government, with a new leader in Keir Starmer who appeared moderate and pragmatic.

The right-wing parties and the Swiss business community were however a little wary of Starmer because of the risk of nationalisation and possible protectionist measures, especially concerning steel.

Nor did Switzerland take a positive view of Labour's plans for a customs union between the United Kingdom and the European Union. From the Swiss point of view, a customs union is a bad idea with at least two disadvantages. The first is that in a customs union the UK would lose its ability to negotiate free trade areas individually and take on the EU's Common External Tariff. Moreover, a customs union would not resolve the issue of non-tariff barriers such as technical barriers to trade. Switzerland was therefore relieved that the Labour Party dropped the proposal before it published its 2024 election manifesto. As a result, London has more room to manoeuvre when it comes to negotiating trade agreements with Switzerland.

Berne appreciated the fact that the Labour government was continuing the policy of cooperation with Switzerland followed by its Conservative predecessors. The Swiss authorities are happy with the continuation of policy.

Two rounds of negotiations between the UK and Switzerland have taken place since Keir Starmer's government took office in October 2024 (the fifth round of negotiations) and the second in March 2025 (the sixth round). Neither produced significant breakthroughs, apart from the services sector (see below). Modest advances took place as follows:

- Goods & Customs Discussions focused on enhancing market access. Efforts continue to address remaining tariffs, particularly in the agricultural sector. It is important to remember that (99% of Swiss exports to the UK and UK exports to Switzerland are already tariff-free).
- Both sides provisionally agreed a chapter on transparent, predictable and efficient customs procedures that help facilitate trade at the border. It includes commitments on the release of perishable goods that go further than Switzerland has agreed before in a trade agreement.

- The [UK and Switzerland](#) also agreed measures that promote the simplification of customs procedures and reduce administrative burdens for traders, including through digitisation and automation.
- Good progress was also made on rules of origin.

From the Swiss point of view, the decision of the Starmer government to continue the December 2023 agreement between Switzerland and the UK on mutual recognition in financial services is the most important development since the UK election. This agreement only covers certain sectors, but it is the first in the world to have such a broad application. It establishes a principle of equivalence between the regulatory frameworks of the two countries, particularly in the areas of banking, investment services, insurance and asset management. It was approved by both houses of the Swiss parliament and is currently before the UK Parliament. It is due to come into force on 1 January 2026.

In very practical terms, the text eliminates frictions that exist between the Swiss and British systems. It will give Swiss companies access to more customers in the UK and British companies greater access to Swiss firms. The agreement is the first in this area to have such wide coverage (banking, insurance, wealth management) on a global scale. The UK is ready to sign such agreements with other countries, but the agreement with Switzerland is a pilot.

The financial agreement with Switzerland would not have been possible if the UK had remained in the EU. Nor would it have been possible if Switzerland had been part of the European Economic Area like Norway, because the EEA also covers most financial services, unlike the bilateral agreements between the EU and Switzerland. In this area, as in others, rapprochement between the UK and Switzerland takes place independently of the economic policy of the European Union. Since Switzerland is neither in the EU or the EEA, its bilateral relations with the UK and Switzerland is not constrained by the two other sides. Switzerland feels very free to negotiate with the UK in virtually all economic areas, including social, environmental cultural and research. While it does have agreements with the EU, it is only constrained in certain areas such as air transport and some aspects of the mutual recognition agreements.

The Federal Council is prepared to move forward in all areas with the UK if the latter is willing and if there is no opposition internally in Switzerland. The current agreements between Switzerland and the EU allow considerable room for manoeuvre.

Future prospects

The conclusion of a 'global package' between Switzerland and the EU in December 2024 will not fundamentally change how Switzerland interacts with other European countries. The text of this agreement will not be published until June 2025 and will be subject to a very long consultation process before a referendum, which is not expected to be held before February 2028. Even if it is approved – it is already provoking intense debate in Switzerland and it is by no means assured that it will be adopted by the Swiss people – the 'global package' will not bring about any major changes in relations between Switzerland and the EU. Broadly speaking, it provides for Switzerland to dynamically take over the development of EU law in a limited number of sectors, and for an arbitration tribunal to settle disputes between the two parties, the Court of Justice of the European Union being the ultimate authority for all questions of European Union law. It also brings in three new agreements of limited importance; namely, electricity, health and consumer protection.

The Swiss authorities and media have been closely monitoring the Common Understanding adopted at the meeting of 19 May 2025 between the leaders of the EU and the UK. There are two promises in the [Joint Statement](#) in future agreements that concern Switzerland: establishment of a common Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) area; and access to the EU's internal electricity market. Switzerland already has an agreement with the EU on SPS. Even if it calls it otherwise. And the 'global package' also provides for consolidating and guaranteeing Switzerland's access to the European electricity market. The mechanisms envisaged are the same as those that the EU is trying to impose on Switzerland through the 'global package'; namely that should include dynamic alignment with European Union rules where

relevant and should be subject to a dispute resolution mechanism with an independent arbitration panel that ensures the Court of Justice of the European Union is the ultimate authority for all questions of European Union law.

The Swiss negotiators of the 'global package' have, however, obtained the possibility of not adopting the evolution of EU law in the event of a refusal by the Swiss parliament or people. This would make it possible for the EU to adopt countermeasures, but these countermeasures would have to be proportional, and their proportionality could be submitted to the arbitration tribunal. It is not yet known whether the British negotiators have obtained the same guarantees.

The day the agreements between the EU and the UK on electricity and SPS measures are accepted, Bern and London will begin negotiations on these two subjects. And they will have no choice but to note that EU rules will apply.

In Switzerland, as elsewhere, the anti-EU, national-conservative right welcomed Trump's return to the White House. It especially relished the anti-immigration and 'anti-woke' measures of the first weeks of Trump's second administration, as well as his criticism of the European Union at a time when the stock market was hitting record highs. There was a lot of talk about not getting closer to the European Union, not adopting the agreements signed with the EU in December 2024 and diversifying Switzerland's economic relations as much as possible, especially with the Global South and with the United Kingdom.

Many thought that Switzerland would be able to develop a privileged partnership with the Trump administration, given that both countries are liberal, and that Switzerland has already unilaterally abolished its tariffs on industrial products with the rest of the world.

However, since the economic earthquake triggered by Donald Trump's announcements of huge tariff hikes and huge uncertainties, even Trump's most ardent supporters in Switzerland have become more discreet.

The final blow came with Trump's announcement that tariffs against Switzerland would rise to 31 per cent compared with the 20 per cent rate levied against the European Union.

Those in favour of closer ties with the European Union have regained the upper hand, and even the Federal Council has spoken albeit timidly about a 'community of destiny' with other European countries. It has also discreetly warned of the dangers of entrusting its destiny to non-European countries such as the United States, China or other Global South states.

Nobody in Switzerland, however, is talking about joining the European Union or the European Economic Area, even in the medium term. The debate is not the same as in Norway and Iceland. Geostrategic fears are barely mentioned. American imperialism over a Danish territory and Russian threats to Eastern Europe seem remote to most Swiss.

When it comes to security, Switzerland is still very timid. The Federal Council talks a little more than before about the need for closer ties with NATO, the European Union and other European cooperation mechanisms on a voluntary basis. The UK is not mentioned specifically.

Such cooperation would be ad hoc and limited, without any risk of growing or undermining neutrality. The Federal Council's room for manoeuvre is limited, even more so than usual, because the Swiss people will have to vote in a referendum at the beginning of 2026 on an initiative aimed at strengthening neutrality and preventing any military rapprochement with NATO or the EU, as well as preventing the resumption of economic sanctions decided by the EU. The initiative is backed by the Swiss People's Party, Switzerland's largest party, with around 30 per cent of the electorate behind it.

In conclusion, Switzerland should not be expected to go very far in its attempts at military rapprochement with NATO, the EU, the United Kingdom or any coalitions of the willing.

‘Living with the Neighbours’ explores relations between the UK and its European neighbours. As part of the project, a cross-national Observatory brings together distinguished experts from across Europe to provide commentary on how the UK and its relations with its neighbours are viewed. ‘Living with the Neighbours’ is led by Professor Hussein Kassim, ESRC Senior Fellow under the ‘UK in a Changing Europe’ initiative, with Kirsty Warner, Associate Professor and Dr Pippa Lacey, Administrative Assistant, at the University of Warwick.