

UK bilateral relations with EU member states after Brexit

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Cleo Davies and Hussein Kassim¹

Since it left the EU, the UK has signed multiple bilateral declarations and statements with EU member states. Although they have received less attention than the UK's renegotiated trade deals, they form an important element of the UK's post-Brexit diplomatic strategy and are featured in the UK government's recent Integrated Review Refresh. This working document offers a provisional examination of these agreements. It looks at their interaction with the WA and the TCA, assesses their significance, and discusses what they signal about the opportunities available to the UK for forging bilateral ties as a third country.

Introduction

Alongside the Withdrawal Agreement and the Trade and Cooperation Agreement, and the UK's renegotiated trade deals that roll over EU agreements with third countries, the UK has signed a multiplicity of bilateral texts with EU member states. In some respects, this is unsurprising. After Brexit, the UK continues to have shared interests with many of its neighbours, reflecting historical ties, commercial interests, concerns about common borders and security, and the presence of citizens on one or both sides. However, how they fit with the Withdrawal Agreement and the Trade and Cooperation, which define the formal relationship between the EU and the UK, is not immediately obvious.

This working document presents some initial insights on the UK's bilaterals with member states since Brexit, based on the contents of the joint bilateral agreements, and what they reveal about post-Brexit diplomatic opportunities for the UK and their limits. On the one hand, these confirm the crucial role of the UK in defence and security in Europe and the UK's position as a strategic ally. On the other, they highlight that opportunities for cooperation in many areas are necessarily delimited by the existing UK-EU framework. As such, they underscore continuing solidarity among EU member states in the face of the UK's withdrawal from the EU and how the possibilities for the UK to arrive at individual understandings with its European neighbours are defined by EU competencies, and structured by the Withdrawal Agreement and, particularly, the Trade and Cooperation Agreement.

A stock-take

Since the transition period came to an end on 31 December 2021, the UK has signed over 30 bilateral texts with EU member states. Table 1 shows the texts that have been signed so far. They can roughly be divided into four main categories:

1. **General joint bilateral memorandum of understandings (MoU), statements or declarations**, which typically cover several policy areas. They are signed by heads of state or government, or by foreign ministers. To date, the UK has signed 15 general

statements or declarations with Germany (1), Belgium (2), Greece (3), Latvia (4), Lithuania (5), Slovenia (6), Estonia (7), Portugal (8), the Czech Republic (9), The Netherlands (10), Cyprus (11), Slovakia (12), Malta (13), France (14) and Romania (15). The statements and declarations vary in scope and in length. The joint leaders' statement between France and the UK is the longest and most detailed, while the joint declaration with Germany focuses almost entirely on foreign policy and has a final paragraph that states the general intention to engage on trade, education and culture.

The statements and declarations are not legally binding and most include a sentence at the end that make this clear. The introductions in all the statements refer to the shared values, with most referring to 'the rules-based international order' and common membership of international organisations, notably the UN. Most refer to belonging either to a network of democracies and/or, in the case of those signed whilst Boris Johnson was PM and Liz Truss Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, to the 'global network of liberty'. Many also refer to the pre-existing bilateral or historical ties between both countries in the introduction and that the statement, or strategic dialogue that it establishes, will 'enhance the bilateral relationship'.

2. **Defence and security statements/declarations**, which are more narrowly focused. They are signed by defence ministers. The UK has signed a MOD with Denmark (16) on defence and security that complements the multilateral cooperation in the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), and a strategic partnership commitment on defence with Croatia (17), which follows a MoU agreed five years before. In February 2023, The UK and Italy (18) signed a joint statement of intent on bilateral cooperation on defence that follows the announcement of the Global Combat Air Programme in December 2022.
3. **Sectoral statements/MoU**, which pertain to specific policy areas. The UK signed with Ireland (19) a MoU on Education in 2021 which follows the MoU on the Common Travel Area (CTA) and reciprocal rights in 2019. The UK and Italy signed a non-binding MoU on Policy Dialogue for Export and Investment Promotion in February 2023. Other examples include the Joint Statement on Technology partnership with Estonia, or the MoU on Energy with Belgium, all signed in 2022 (see Table 1 for list).
4. **Joint leaders' statements that focus on Ukraine**, which are considerably shorter, and flanked by broader agreements. The UK has signed statements with Poland (20), Finland (21) and Sweden (22). In the case of Poland, the statement is complemented by defence agreements and builds on wider Intergovernmental Consultations established in December 2016. The relationship on defence and security with Finland and Sweden complements engagement within the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF). In addition, Boris Johnson welcomed Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán to Downing Street on [28 May 2021](#) and [8 March 2022](#), and signed a short joint statement with the leaders of the Visegrád Group (V4) in [March 2022](#), which includes a commitment to NATO and to supporting Ukraine as well as continued collaboration on cyber security. The statement also includes the 'resolve to further deepen and strengthen bonds' that stem from 'historic ties and our shared values of democracy, rule of law, human rights, and the preservation of peace in Europe'.

Table 1: UK's bilaterals with EU member states*

General joint bilateral statement/declarations		
Belgium	Joint Declaration on Bilateral Cooperation	30 November 2021 (Johnson)
Cyprus	Memorandum of understanding establishing a strategic cooperation	15 November 2022 (Cleverly)
Czech Republic	Joint Statement of Intent	27 May 2022 (Truss)
Estonia	Joint leaders statement	6 June 2022 (Johnson)
France	Joint Leaders Declaration	10 March 2023 (Sunak)
Germany	UK-Germany joint declaration	30 June 2021 (Raab)
Greece	Memorandum of understanding on: strategic bilateral framework	24 November 2021 (Truss)
Latvia	Joint Declaration of cooperation	6 December 2021 (Truss)
Lithuania	Joint declaration on bilateral cooperation	30 May 2022 (Truss)
Malta	Bilateral cooperation framework	10 February 2023 (Cleverly)
The Netherlands	Joint statement on foreign, development and security bilateral cooperation	16 November 2022 (Cleverly)
Portugal	Joint Declaration on Bilateral Cooperation	15 June 2022 (Johnson)
Romania	Joint Statement	23 March 2023 (Cleverly)
Slovakia	Joint Declaration	21 February 2023 (Cleverly)
Slovenia	Statement of Intent	23 February 2022 (Truss)
Sectoral statements/MoU including Defence and Security		
Belgium	Memorandum of Understanding on Energy Cooperation	23 February 2022 (Minister for Energy Greg Hands)
Croatia	Strategic Partnership Commitment (SPC) on defence	2 February 2022 (Wallace)
Cyprus	Memorandum of Understanding on the Enhancement of Defence and Security Co-operation	4 April 2019
Czech republic	Joint declaration of intent to increase mutual Czech-British police cooperation (Czech Embassy statement ; no statement on UK side)	14 March 2023 (Braverman)
Denmark	Joint Declaration on defence and security	8 December 2021 (Wallace)
Estonia	Technology partnership	15 December 2022 (Sunak)
Finland	UK-Finland Statement (Defence and Security)	11 May 2022 (Johnson)
Finland	Framework Arrangement for British-Finnish Defence Cooperation	9 July 2016
France	Joint UK-France arrangement on tackling small boat crossings in the Channel	14 November 2022 (Braverman)
France	Maritime Security Treaty ,	Signed 26 July 2021. Will come into force in May 2023 (Patel and Raab)

Ireland	Memorandum of understanding of education	14 July 2021 (Williamson, Education Secretary)
<i>Ireland</i>	<i>Memorandum of Understanding concerning the Common Travel Area and associated reciprocal rights and privileges</i>	<i>8 May 2019 (Lidington, Duchy of Lancaster)</i>
Italy	Joint-Statement of Intent on bilateral defence co-operation (MoD statement)	9 February 2023 (Wallace)
Italy	'Memorandum of Understanding on Policy Dialogue for Export and Investment Promotion' (UK statement ; Italy Statement)	8 February 2023 (Badenoch)
Italy	UK PM announces Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP) agreement	9 December 2022
The Netherlands		
Poland	Joint Leaders Statement	7 April 2022 (Johnson)
Poland	Air Defence Complex Weapons Memorandum of Understanding (MOU).	22 October 2022 (Wallace)
Poland	Arrowhead-140 Statement of Intent	22 October 2022(Wallace)
<i>Poland</i>	<i>UK-Poland Defence and Security Treaty</i>	<i>4 July 2018</i>
<i>Poland</i>	<i>Joint statement establishing the intergovernmental consultations</i>	<i>2 December 2016</i>
<i>Romania</i>	<i>Joint Action Plan (defence and security)</i>	
Sweden	Declaration of Solidary (Defence and Security)	11 May 2022 (Johnson)
Sweden	Memorandum of Understanding regarding Life Sciences	27 May 2022 Minister for Technology, Innovation and Life Sciences
<i>Sweden</i>	<i>Programme of Defence Cooperation</i>	<i>June 2016</i>
<i>Sweden</i>	<i>three Memoranda of Understanding covering Defence Materiel Cooperation, the Conduct of Exercises, Training and Integrated Test and Evaluation Activities and the Provision of Host Nation Support, and Future Combat Air Systems' Cooperation</i>	

* The list, compiled by the authors, is not necessarily exhaustive.

According to the Integrated Review Refresh 2023, a Strategic Partnership Agreement is under negotiation with Bulgaria (23), with Croatia, and with Spain (24). There is no indication on the scope and timeline for signature.

In the case of Spain, it [took nearly two years](#) to get an agreement on mutual recognition of drivers' licences and a deal on Gibraltar remains elusive post-Brexit. A [bilateral agreement on voting rights](#) agreed in 2019 has not come into force. That said, there has not been any sign of overt animosity between the two countries over the past few years in the way there has been with Ireland or France for instance and bilateral relations have been sustained. For example, Foreign Secretary, Liz Truss met her Spanish counterpart [on a two-day](#) visit in December 2022.

Austria (25), Luxemburg (26) and Hungary (27) are the three countries where there are no provisions indicated for any bilateral statements or declarations in the Integrated Review Refresh 2023.

The discussion in the following sections focuses on the first of the categories and is based on the available text of 14 general joint bilateral statements or declarations. All of these are in the public domain except, to the authors' knowledge, the UK-Slovakia text.

In the shadow of the EU and the EU-UK's formal relationship

A reference to the fact that they are in full respect of the UK-EU framework is a near-common feature of the bilaterals. Indeed, their various titles – memorandum of understanding, declaration, and statement – reveals a desire to avoid the term 'agreement', which could lead to the mistaken view that they have the same status the Withdrawal Agreement and the Trade and Cooperation Agreement that define the UK-EU's formal relationship. Governments of the member states are conscious of the primary status of the Withdrawal Agreement and the Trade and Cooperation Agreement, their obligations as EU member states, and the UK's position as a third country. They report contacts with the UK to the Commission and other member states, and consult with the Commission to ensure that any planned commitment with the UK is legal and that it does not undermine EU solidarity, especially in periods of tension between the UK and the EU such as over the UK's non-implementation of the Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland.

Ten of the statements have explicit references in the opening passages the UK-EU framework and/or to the fact that the European co-signatory is a member state of the EU. Many note that an enhanced bilateral relationship supports the EU-UK framework. In the case of Germany and the Czech Republic, both clearly stipulate in the opening paragraphs that they are committed to the highest level of transparency with the EU and member states on the bilateral relations with the UK. Others refer to the UK-EU framework in the concluding paragraphs, under the section dealing with governance arrangements of the bilateral relations established in the joint statements/declarations.

These references to EU membership and/or the EU-UK framework demonstrate the political importance of the primary commitment to the EU-UK framework for EU member states when it comes to their relations with the UK. Indeed, only the joint statement with Malta does not refer to the broader EU-UK framework or Malta's commitments/obligations as a member state of the EU. Nevertheless, even this text mentions the Withdrawal Agreement and the protection of citizens' and the TCA in relation to cooperation on professional qualifications (see next section).

Ten of the declarations/statements refer explicitly to the TCA, either in general terms (France, Czech Republic) and/or in relation to specific policy areas, and five to the Withdrawal Agreement. For example, both Malta and Portugal's joint declarations refer to professional qualifications but both provide that this can only be developed in compliance with TCA. Similarly, Belgium's declaration states that 'strengthen[ing] commercial ties [is] embedded in the UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement'. This highlights that there are constraints on what can be developed formally in certain areas at a bilateral level either because of the TCA, or because of EU law more generally. Indeed, some statements refer to EU law more generally (Cyprus, France for instance), which reflects the fact that, as member states of the EU, any decisions that an EU member state takes will be in conformity with its obligations under EU law. The next section explores these aspects in more detail.

Areas of specific interest

The statements are aspirational in character and generally state an intention to ‘explore opportunities’, ‘enhance’, ‘expand and strengthen’ or ‘reaffirm’ cooperation in specified policy areas. The level of detail varies considerably, with few setting out concrete steps or undertaking to formalise cooperation. Several policy areas feature across all or most of the declarations. Foreign policy or ‘global issues’ as well as climate and environmental policy feature quite consistently and usually consist of broad statements of intent or reaffirm engagements taken at international level.

Defence and security are covered in more extensive detail than others, which is not surprising given the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the UK’s status as a major defence power and a strategic ally for European member states, as well as pre-existing bilateral relations. All statements, except Malta and Cyprus, refer to NATO and, though not France, Malta and Cyprus, to ‘Euro-Atlantic security/area’. ‘NATO-EU cooperation’¹ is mentioned in the joint statements with France, Belgium, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania and the Czech Republic. The two statements that make no mention of Russia or Ukraine -- Greece and Belgium – were signed in November 2021, i.e. prior to the Russian invasion.

Expect for Germany, which focuses almost entirely on foreign policy, every declaration includes ‘enhancing **bilateral trade and investment**’. Though some of the more developed passages, they remain quite aspirational despite the detail. The major focus on trade and investment is evidence of the need to develop new avenues for cooperation as a way of counterbalancing the increase in trade barriers since Brexit. Leaving the single market has led to non-tariff barriers to trade and investment and a more complicated regulatory environment for businesses (see [Regulation after Brexit Revisited Report](#)). The bilateral statements suggest that supporting businesses and providing for opportunities to foster bilateral exchanges has clearly become a key priority of the UK’s diplomatic work across EU member states since Brexit. This can take the form of setting up specific fora such as the France-United Kingdom Business Forum and the UK-Poland Business, Trade and Investment Taskforce which were both launched in July 2022. In other cases, the statements state the intention to create these going forward, such as establishing an annual British-Romanian Trade and Investment Forum or increasing cooperation between the respective departments for trade in the case of Portugal.

There is also strong evidence of the UK wanting to develop ways to compensate for the loss of efficiency in **criminal information exchange**. The UK has fallen back on Interpol databases and has lost access to the real-time information sharing and more comprehensive database of the Schengen Information System (SIS II) – see ‘Data protection’ in [UK Regulation After Brexit](#). Six statements include more or less word for word the same detailed passage on strengthening cooperation on law enforcement that often includes a specific mention first to the TCA framework and then Interpol as the mechanism. The evidence in the bilateral statements suggests that the UK is having to remind and put pressure on EU member states to engage with the Interpol database, given that its effectiveness depends on EU member states willingness to upload data – see ‘Data exchange’ in [UK Regulation After Brexit Revisited](#). It is less clear whether the UK is also seeking to build a case across European capitals for enhancing the provisions under the TCA, though this could become a future strategy.

¹ The [Joint Declaration on the UK-Norway relationship](#), signed in May 2022, also refers to NATO-EU cooperation.

Professional Qualifications, mentioned in two statements, is also limited by the TCA framework and the broader obligations of member states of the EU². Malta mentions exploring arrangement to facilitate mutual recognition of professional qualifications, but ‘strictly within the boundaries of the UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement, general EU legal order and other EU and international obligations’. Portugal refers to ‘exploring how we can apply best practice to raise standards in the UK and Portugal in policy areas of mutual interest such as recognition of professional qualifications, in compliance with the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement’.

Even in areas that are not covered by the TCA, there may be limits on what can be achieved at a bilateral level because of the EU’s exclusive external competences in certain areas. For instance, the MoU with Cyprus mentions ‘work[ing] together to promote judicial cooperation on civil matters’. But the MoU is explicit that any developments will be ‘in accordance with the obligations of the Republic of Cyprus as a Member State of the European Union’. This is a [particularly complex area](#) for devising formal bilateral cooperation as the EU has developed an implied external competence through jurisprudence in matters of private international law.

Moreover, cooperation on managing **irregular migration** is also complex. In this policy area, there is no exclusive competence at EU level. A [Joint Political Declaration on Asylum and Returns](#) attached to the TCA ‘takes note of the UK’s intention to engage in bilateral discussions with the most concerned member states’. However, for political reasons, member states favour European-wide solutions on managing asylum and irregular migration with third countries, especially when it comes to returns. The joint statements are quite revealing. The UK has a structured dialogue or plan on migration with a few countries, which are referred to in the bilateral declarations – the UK-Greece Migration Action Plan, the UK-Malta Migration Dialogue, and the newly established joint plan with France. The Netherlands’ statement only has one sentence on the matter and it refers to the European Political Community as being a relevant forum for addressing the issue. France’s statement’s emphasises the ‘Groupe de Calais’ and the need to take into account the TCA and EU multilateral discussion in any future EU-UK migration agreement, while Belgium’s declaration refers to ‘multilateralism with neighbours’ in this area. Moreover, only in declarations with those countries with which the UK has an established dialogue or plan is the term ‘illegal migration’ used (France, Greece and Malta). The declarations of the Netherlands and Belgium refer to ‘irregular migration’. Evidently, the extent to which the UK will successfully secure any agreements going forward, especially in terms of returns, is heavily determined by discussions internal to the EU on these matters.

In other areas that are mentioned, such as **education and research or culture**, there is some variation across the statements, which remain largely aspirational. Education and Research are mentioned in eleven of the statements whereas culture is mentioned in nine. Only very few leave out education or research but the depth of detail varies in those that do. This suggest that in these areas, the degree of commitment, is to a greater extent, driven by the co-

² In the case of Greece, the annual review of December 2022 states that they made progress on ‘operational issues, including ... the mutual recognition of seafarers certificates in accordance with IMO/STCW Convention’. Though the governing framework for recognition of certificates is international law (see Chapter on ‘Maritime Transport’ in reports on UK regulation After Brexit [2021](#) and [2022](#)), the European Maritime Safety Agency launched in 2021 the process of approving the UK training and certification system, which authorises all EU member states to recognise UK Certificates of Competency (CoCs).

signatories rather than a systematic concern of the UK. Belgium is the only one that refers to EU-UK framework in relation to research, notably Horizon Europe³.

Sometimes, education and research feature as a heading in and of themselves. In other cases they are covered under the sections to do with trade and investment or **'people-to-people links'**, which is wording that appears for Malta, Latvia, Slovenia, Lithuania, Cyprus, Portugal, Romania and France. Significantly, the word 'diaspora' appears in the statements with Romania, Portugal, Lithuania, Latvia and Slovenia, which reflects the concerns over freedom of movement of people and citizens' rights post Brexit for some member states, especially in Central and Eastern Europe. Malta, Lithuania and Slovenia all refer to the Withdrawal Agreement specifically in relation to Citizens Rights. Once again, variation suggests that the contents of the joint declarations and statements reflect specific concerns of the EU member state rather than a systematic UK approach.

Operationalisation and implementation

All statements and declarations, with the exception of France, clearly state that the UK State Secretary for Foreign Affairs and their counterpart in the EU member state will oversee the implementation and operationalisation of the agreements. Most commit the UK's Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and their counterpart to an annual meeting (Belgium, Cyprus, Germany, Greece, Latvia, Malta, , Portugal and the Netherlands), though some do stipulate that it will be the Secretary of State or a designated representative (Cyprus, Greece, Romania and Slovenia). In the case of France, the tasks are assigned to different competent ministers.

Though the Secretary of State for foreign affairs will oversee operationalisation for the UK and the diplomatic services in member states will carry out implementation, it is clear that a range of departments, Ministers and Secretary of States will also be involved.

The Secretary of State for Defence, and the MoD are central to the bilateral relations in every case. There is a direct reference to bilateral collaboration at this level in many statements. For some there are provisions for new formal cooperation at the level of MoDs (Greece). Overall though, the UK already has an established bilateral relation on defence with many member states and most statements mention existing formal arrangements that pre-date the signature of the recent bilateral declaration (France, the Nordic states, the Baltic States, The Netherlands, the Czech Republic, Poland, Cyprus, Belgium, Estonia, Romania). The statements emphasise that these will be reinforced or enhanced, notably in light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The Department for Business and Trade is clearly set to endorse a very large role in operationalising the intentions in the declarations and statements. The need to set up more structured relations at the level of the Trade and Business departments is a sine quo non since Brexit (see previous section).

Furthermore, the Secretary of State for the Home Office as well as the Ministry for Justice have responsibility for some areas. Beyond cooperation on law enforcement and tackling irregular migration and crime more generally, some statements mention enhancing (Malta, France, Slovenia) or setting up cooperation between police forces – Portugal's declaration suggests 'exploring cooperation/training protocols between the Portuguese Special Police

³ The [Joint Declaration on the UK-Norway relationship](#), signed in May 2022, also refers to 'facilitat[ing] collaboration between our universities, researchers, and other research institutions, including through the EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation, Horizon Europe and efforts to increase student mobility'.

Unit (UEP) and its British counterparts'. The Home Office would also be involved in easing travel for school visits (France) or exploring 'facilitation of seasonal workers' in tourism (Greece).

Ministers in charge of energy, the environment and climate change portfolios are also explicitly mentioned in some statements and declarations (The Netherlands, France, Belgium). These relationships already take place against the backdrop of a number of multinational agreements and commitments at international level.

Concerning the Foreign Office, the UK already has joint training and exchanges for diplomats (Netherlands, France, Germany for instance) and sometimes statements state the intention to encourage joint working through joint diplomat training (Portugal).

Finally, a number of statements refer to areas that fall under culture and education too. France's statement in particular, is detailed in this area. It is also the only one that refers explicitly to cooperation at the level of the Treasury with a relaunch of the 'Treasuries Dialogue' between the French Direction générale du Trésor and the United Kingdom's HM Treasury and the intention to 'explore opportunities for a Direction générale du Trésor - HM Treasury secondments'.

Based on the statements and declarations signed in 2021 (Germany, Belgium and Greece) and early 2022, there are indications of both the delivery of concrete commitments and of delay. Examples of the former include the signing by the UK and Belgium of the MoU on Energy early 2022, as foreseen in the bilateral declaration. The [16th Belgo-British Conference](#) also brought together ministers and businesses from both countries at the Foreign Office in London in June 2022. Similarly, the UK and Estonia signed a UK-Estonia Tech Partnership in December 2022 that had been foregrounded in the joint leaders statement of June 2022.

The UK and Greece published the first [annual review](#) of the implementation of the Declaration in December 2022. However, the Joint Vision Statement as the foundation of the Shared Defence Activity is still pending. The Strategic Dialogue with Germany only took place on January 2023 despite the Joint declaration having been signed in June 2021. At the time, relations [were still overshadowed](#) by the issues around the implementation of the Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland. In April 2023, the UK and Germany [held](#) the first UK-Germany Cultural Commission meeting since 1993, a [stated intention](#) of the January 2023 strategic dialogue meeting.

Conclusion

The bilateral texts signed lay the ground for continuing, re-engaging or developing country-to-country relations after Brexit. They also highlight the challenges faced by the UK in forging and maintaining its relationships with European neighbours as a third country, the consequences of the UK's distance from EU decision making, and the constraints on EU member states.

The declarations and statements confirm the UK's position as a strategic ally, and its role in defence and security in Europe, but they also reveal the limited possibilities for bilateral relations. They also show that UK's bilateral relations with its neighbours are mediated through their membership of the EU, which directly affects where they can act unilaterally or independently of the EU, and underscore how in many areas cooperation is delimited by the formal UK-EU framework. In some areas, such as defence, the UK can go further in formalising relations. In others, bilateral possibilities are more limited. Beyond these

constraints, the UK may face political barriers because member states are obliged or prefer to take prior action at EU level. This makes the task of developing coherent and effective collaboration across the full range of areas of interest to the UK all the more complex.

Of course, it is not only on the UK side that the constraints of post-Brexit arrangements are felt. Routine contact with UK representatives at Council meetings has become a thing of the past for EU member states. How they interact with the UK has to be thought through in terms of interest, but also in terms of the symbolism or messaging to other national capitals, the European Commission, and to the UK.

Moreover, the statements and declarations show how the UK's decision to leave the single market is shaping its post-Brexit relations with member states as much as issues of foreign policy or defence and security. Promoting and supporting bilateral trade and investment relations is now part of the UK's diplomatic work in EU member states, when it was previously partly delegated to the EU and partly shared with it. Beyond the need to ease friction in trade, opportunities for development are limited by parameters set by the TCA. Furthermore, a trade and investment relationship is likely to be all the more important given the EU's agenda for strategic autonomy and emphasis on 'onshoring' – in terms of the defence industry for instance, this will require navigating EU limitations, as could be the case on ammunition procurement for Ukraine currently under development. In addition, the fact that cooperation on law enforcement and criminal information-sharing is one of the most consistently detailed recurring provisions in the bilateral statements and declarations suggests that the need to compensate for access to key databases that was lost or dramatically reduced since Brexit is one of the motivations for the UK's strategy.

In terms of implementation, it is too early to assess whether bilateral dialogues will deliver or become institutionalised. That such a strategy on the part of the UK will require a sustained commitment of resources and soft power to create and maintain the necessary spaces for dialogue and cooperation is clear. The time spent by British ministers and civil servants in preparations and travel to multiple national capitals across the EU to meet and develop relations with their counterparts is probably greater than the time saved by no longer having to attend Council meetings. Describing his core business as 'energetic bilateralism' and 'of maintaining the drumbeat of diplomatic engagement' as a Junior Minister for Europe, when he gave evidence to the House of Lords in March 2023, [Leo Docherty](#) spoke of having visited 25 states across Europe in the past six months, some more than once, and of 'doing his best' to engage with the smaller EU member states too. Greg Hands⁴ [visited](#) Poland no less than three times between November 2021 and December 2022, notably to promote trade and investment relations. These are indicators of the kind of sustained dialogue at ministerial level that will be required to embed, let alone build upon, the intentions outlined in the statements and declaration.

Finally, it remains unclear whether [the UK plans](#) a joined-up approach to its bilateral relations or that combines bilateral relations with member states with the UK-EU framework.

⁴ Greg Hands was Minister of State at the Department for International Trade between 9 October 2022 and 7 February 2023, and a Minister of State at the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy between 16 September 2021 and 7 September 2022

ⁱ [Hussein Kassim](#) is Professor of Politics at University of East Anglia, Principal Investigator of 'Living with the Neighbours: the UK, the EU and wider Europe', and Senior Fellow at [UK in a Changing Europe](#).

[Dr Cleo Davies](#) is Senior Research Associate at the University of East Anglia on 'Living with the Neighbours: the UK, the EU and wider Europe'.