



UNITED NATIONS
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UNU-CRIS

Institute on Comparative
Regional Integration Studies

Policy Brief

NUMBER 7, 2019

Keywords

United Nations Security Council,
European Union, United Kingdom,
France, Brexit, CFSP

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on Comparative Regional Integration
Studies, 2019

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The EU in the United Nations Security Council: Trends from the United Kingdom and France

The European Union (EU) is the first supranational organisation to maintain a continuous presence in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) through its member states. As prescribed in its Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and in the amended Treaty on the European Union, a degree of cooperation inside the Security Council through its member states is expected from those holding permanent and non-permanent seats. While the EU has enjoyed a rather privileged position by being able to count on two permanent members, the UK and France, data reveals that these two countries have started to downplay working with the EU in the UNSC, pursuing more independent approaches instead. The UK, under a Conservative-led government, has been hesitant in working with the EU in a multitude of matters relating to foreign policy and since the Brexit referendum this trend has only been exacerbated. France, on the other hand, has been enjoying a reinvigorated Europhilia but prefers to cooperate with the EU through channels outside of the UN. The EU, nonetheless, has very significant advantages when it comes to being represented in the UNSC and should capitalise on the continued presence of its member states in the UNSC via amendments in the CFSP as well as expanding its efforts to use France as a medium to push through its agenda.

Introduction

Despite the Charter of the United Nations prescribing that only nation states can be members of the UNSC, the European Union has nevertheless achieved a considerable presence in the Security Council through its member states, more so than any other regional organisation (Blavoukos & Bourantonis, 2011). This has been further enhanced by the coordination achieved via the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CSFP) framework (Marchesi, 2010). However, when it comes to actorness inside the Security Council proper, the EU still faces hurdles if it wishes to expand its foothold - a foothold that has become unsteady in recent years (Drieskens, 2012).

While the Brexit process undoubtedly is a key factor in detaching the UK from the EU, in foreign security matters (and by extension the UNSC) it has only served to accelerate a trend that had already been developing since 2010 under former Prime Minister David Cameron (Whitman, 2016a). France, although not as emphatically, has also started seeking its own, more independent position in the Council, most notably through peacekeeping missions (Tardy, 2016). A series of stabilisation missions led by France in its former colonies have reignited the French self-realisation of its potential¹. Given the influence these two countries have in the UNSC with their power of veto, the EU is now tasked with a new set of challenges if it is to

secure, and perhaps expand upon its footing in the Council.

The European Union in the UNSC

There has been much debate over the decades as to how and when the UNSC should be reformed to better reflect the current state of global governance (Hosli & Dörfler, 2019). Many have contested the fact that so much power over its decision-making is concentrated in the hands of its fixed five permanent members, whereas the democratically elected, rotational, non-permanent seats do not enjoy the same privileges (ibid). The countries that take up these seats find their efforts and plans are inherently restricted by the short term limits these chairs have. Calls for the reform of this anachronism, rooted in the post-WW2 global order, have so far amounted to little, giving rise to stagnation and scepticism.

Nevertheless, while this asymmetric distribution of power in the UNSC often neglects countries that play compelling roles in maintaining and contributing towards international stability, it in turn has the potential to give an upper hand to the European Union's agency therein. Being able to tap into not one but two permanent chairs has ensured that the EU does not fall foul of this asymmetry and can call upon the veto powers of the UK and France to block opposing agendas². Furthermore, the EU also benefits from the fact that two of the regional groups into

¹France has led some sizeable peacekeeping efforts in recent times. Operation Serval, started in 2013, put the country under the spotlight when the French military intervened in Mali against the rise of separatist Islamist fronts. Other famed missions include Operation Chammal, started in 2014, against the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq as well as Operation Barkhane, also started

in 2014, which aims at containing Islamist advances in the G5 nations of the Sahel region. (Ministère de la Défense, 2019)

² Although it must be noted that British and French vetoes in the UNSC have not been employed since 1989, having veto-yielding members is nonetheless a distinct political advantage.

which non-permanent chairs are divided include a significant number of EU countries: The Western European and Others Group (WEOG) which has two rotative seats and the Eastern European Group (EEG) with one. The WEOG includes major EU countries among its members and is coordinated enough so that at least one EU member always gets the term at UNSC elections. The EEG rotative seat is often also filled by Eastern members of the Union³. Even when not taken by EU members per se, these seats may instead be filled by long-standing European partners such as Australia and Canada, or by countries that seek deeper cooperation with the EU such as the Ukraine.

Currently, there are two guiding frameworks of the EU relating to the UNSC: the current Article 34⁴ of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) and the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). In essence, Article 34 prescribes that:

“Member States which are also members of the United Nations Security Council will concert and keep the other Member States and the High Representative fully informed. Member States which are members of the Security Council will, in the execution of their functions, defend the positions and the interests of the Union, without prejudice to their responsibilities under the provisions of the United Nations Charter”. (Treaty on European Union, 1992)

This article was operationalised under the ambitions of the CFSP, a framework that seeks to unify the continent behind a comprehensive foreign policy strategy in security affairs. Developed right after the end of the Cold War, when the new geopolitical reality offered the opportunity for the EU to better advocate its priorities in the UNSC, it was hoped the CFSP could bring about a formidable level of coordination among EU member states in the Council (Marchesi, 2010). As the Council evolved from a “politico-military” into a proper legal-regulatory organ (Malone, 2006) the CFSP indeed embedded the EU within the new operationalities of the UNSC through its member states. While a discussion on the merits and flaws of the CFSP is a matter of substantive debate in itself, its role in cementing a level of coordination between EU members in the Security Council could be counted as being one of its merits (Marchesi, 2010; Drieskens, 2012).

The degree of leverage and sway the British and French delegations possess in New York means that the principles enshrined by Article 34 and the CFSP relating to information sharing and coordinated action are particularly pertinent in their cases. Here we arrive at the core of the discussion. With no prospect of any reform in the foreseeable future, assessing the level of adherence to these principles by both the UK and France is paramount to interpreting the EU’s influence in the UNSC.

³ Since 2008 of the seven members that were elected into the EEG seat, five were members of the EU.

⁴ Previously this was prescribed in Article 19 of the TEU before the amendments brought in by the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009.

Permanent yet transient: The UK and France as European UNSC actors

Any member of the UN General Assembly can submit a draft resolution (DR) to the UNSC to be voted upon so long as the draft is co-authored/sponsored by a UNSC chair holder. Security Council resolutions have some advantages over UNGA resolutions. Firstly, SC resolutions are universally binding among member-states, which is why they can cause so much controversy depending on the issue. Furthermore, since the Council deals with the most pressing global matters, submitting a resolution can set the course of how a given issue will be addressed. By taking the initiative, authors can shape how a situation is handled and the norms for future action (Monteleone, 2015). Hence, being able to draft, or at least co-sponsor, resolutions for the UNSC can bring positive payoffs for countries that are looking to expand their influence in world affairs.

This analysis, which looks at sponsored and co-sponsored draft resolutions put forth by the UK and France in the UNSC, reveals an interesting trend that has been taking shape since 2015 and coincides with the previous policy decisions that both countries had subscribed to regarding foreign security and how they can reflect the interests of the EU in the UNSC.⁵

France and the UK are prime examples of “residual powers”, nations who once shaped much of the course of history with their vast colonial empires, but today

are relegated to secondary positions in world politics and usually play a supporting role to the initiatives of a larger ally, in this case the United States (Blagden, 2018). Furthermore, unlike smaller members of the EU, they have already developed self-reliant diplomatic, economic and military channels over the last two centuries that can be tapped into without the need for resorting to the EU for leverage. With all this in mind, one could surmise that these two countries may at times show a reluctance in putting the EU’s interests above their own.

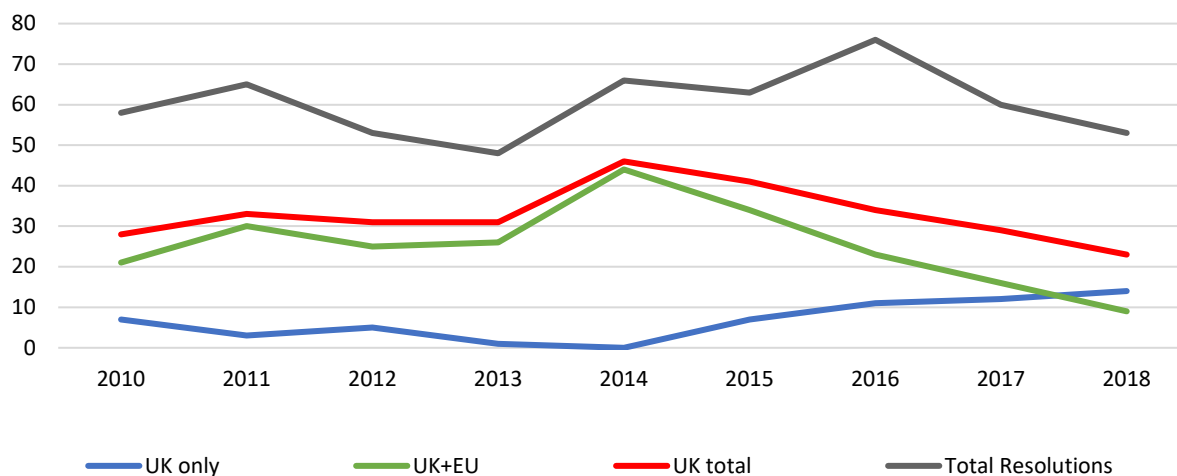
While the ongoing issue of Brexit ought to be kept in mind when contemplating EU-UK relations, the referendum in 2016 simply accelerated a trend already taking place in British politics since 2010 when the Conservative-led government began detangling the country from the EU in a variety of fields in its pursuit of a “Global Britain” (Martill & Sus, 2018). In terms of foreign policy, the shift centred around the idea of a “networked” Britain in international relations, where the EU is only considered as one of many such networks (Whitman, 2016b). In terms of security policy, even before the referendum, in 2015, an updated National Security Strategy (NSS)⁶ situated the EU in a marginal, and mostly supportive, role with regards to British defence and security (HM Government, 2015). The onus instead was on the UK’s “special relationship” with the US, and hence NATO (Martill and Sus 2018).

⁵ Unlike other UN bodies, voting information on the UNSC is not enough on its own to truly detect actors’ intentions. This model of employing sponsorship of drafts was developed by Monteleone (2015) and expanded here. It consists of recording the sponsors of

all draft resolutions put forth in a given year to determine who they tend to co-author DRs with.

⁶ The official HM Government’s statement on security policy and aims for the country until 2025.

Figure 1: Number of DRs sponsored by the UK and total number of DRs submitted by all UNSC members



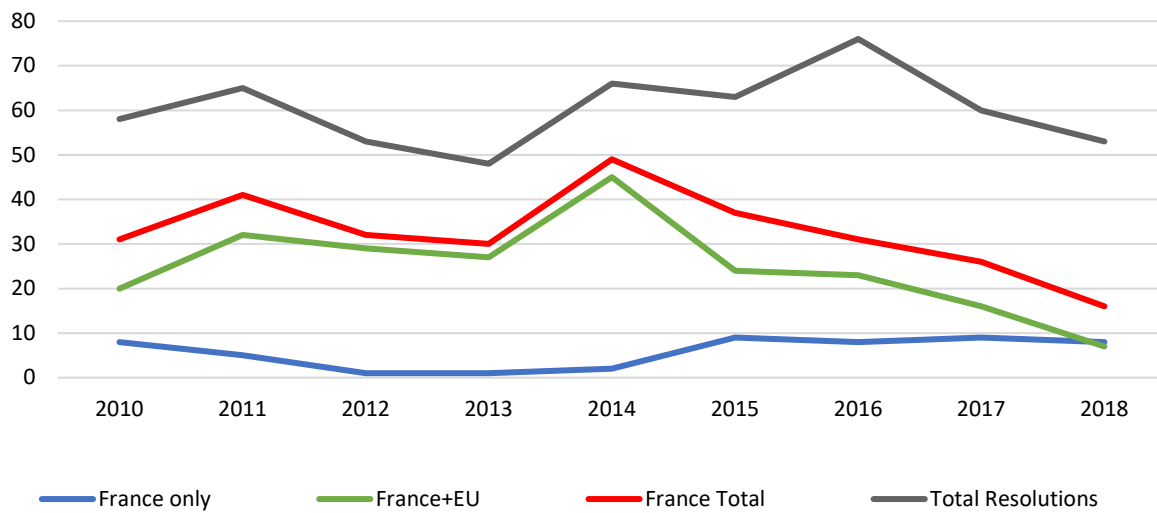
Source: UN Digital Library

These shifts in policy are quite clearly illustrated in figure 1 above. Before 2015, the majority of DRs the UK partook in were drafted in cooperation with the EU. In 2014 alone almost all UK-sponsored resolutions were also co-sponsored with at least one EU member (and the US) while it submitted no DR alone. This trend quickly changed, arguably in light of the 2015 NSS and the 2016 referendum, and by 2018 fourteen out of all twenty-three British DRs were submitted with the UK as the sole sponsor, foregoing the support of both the EU and the US.

France, while never subscribing to the same level of Euroscepticism as the UK, has followed a milder yet similar voting pattern within the UNSC in the past few years. However, upon closer inspection, the slump that takes place in French-EU co-sponsorship in the UNSC after 2014 might actually be best explained by its increased levels of cooperation with the EU outside of the UN framework, rather than a British-style severance (Tardy, 2016).

In contrast with the growing levels of Euroscepticism in the UK since the 2010s, a Europhile tendency has been on the rise in France. The victory of Emmanuel Macron and his fledging party, La République en Marche, represented an emblematically key moment for French-EU relations. Under the leadership of this relative outsider to French politics, the country assumed a more reinvigorated approach to its role in Europe and in the world. Macron's vision for France is that of a leader in a deeply integrated European Union, a bloc that can only weather the new challenges of multilateral governance by remaining united (Tiersky & Eastman, 2018).

Figure 2: Number of DRs sponsored by France and total number of DRs submitted by all UNSC members



Source: UN Digital Library

And while France’s permanent seat in the Security Council is a privilege it has no intention of giving up, it has increasingly opted to pursue its foreign affairs and operations outside of the UN framework, be it through the EU, NATO or unilateral missions. While France has taken on the lead role in some major UN missions, namely in Mali and the Central African Republic, it still carries some mistrust of the UN from previous episodes in Bosnia, Rwanda and Somalia. This added to the several alternative operational frameworks France can tap into for crisis management has led the country to downplay the UNSC and UN Peacekeeping to pursue its own security policies instead (Tardy, 2016).

Sponsorship data shows that indeed there has been a downturn in the percentage of draft authorships France has shared with the EU from over 90% in 2013-2014 to 44% in 2018 (see figure 2). It has also dropped significantly in terms of the total overall activity at the

UNSC in much the same way as the UK (see figure 1). However, while France was the sole author of 15% of all the DRs submitted to the UNSC in 2018, the UK was the sole author of nearly 26% of all UNSC DRs in the same period.

Of course, such data alone does not allow us to fully understand the intentions and objectives these countries have at, and with, the UNSC. Notwithstanding, the observation does suggest that while the UK is seeking to reassert its role in the world as a “Global Britain”, with the UNSC being one of the chosen stages where it intends to brandish its more independent foreign policy, France, on the other hand, seeks to assert a role as a “leader of Europe” whilst simultaneously playing down the role of the UNSC as means of achieving this end.

Recommendations

First, we reject the suggestion that a comprehensive (or any) UNSC reform is going to take place in the foreseeable future since the current status quo seems too well entrenched. Hopes that a possible expansion in the number of permanent seats may be achieved is, despite well-founded, misplaced. Consequently, any EU policy targeting the UNSC should be aligned with the current state of affairs.

Second, while the nature of the relationship between the UK and the EU in the future is rather uncertain, it is in the UK's vested interests to still collaborate with the EU on issues such as international security, be it within or outside the UNSC framework.

Third, the EU should further exploit the use of France as a medium for EU interests particularly given the stance of the Macron administration. France's role in the Security Council should be reshaped into becoming "the" European ambassador facilitating dialogue between the UNSC and the EU. France has much to gain in terms of legitimacy if it decides to pursue this EU leverage more vociferously.

Finally, the EU is unique among international organisations in having the luxury of at least one of its member states holding a non-permanent seat in the UNSC at any given time (and often more than two). To capitalise on this, the EU should seek to amend the CFSP so as to provide a more affirmative expectation regards cooperation in the Security Council. Securing an institutionalised framework with clear agendas to be put forth in the SC would give the EU a more

cohesive voice in the UNSC. However, such a move must also be balanced against the awareness that individual countries will continue to have their own projected national interests in the UNSC and any suggestion that they must delegate their much-awaited turn to hold a non-permanent seat to serving EU interests would be met with resistance if implemented too aggressively.

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