

Five years after Brexit: prospects for strategic cooperation between the European Union and the United Kingdom

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Abstract

Five years following the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union, the relationship between two actors has stabilised into a form of strategic coexistence, which is both pragmatic and asymmetrical. This article presents an analysis of the evolution of the EU–UK partnership between 2019 and 2025, examining to what extent it has acquired a strategic dimension. The hypothesis tested in this study posits that the relationship was not perceived as strategic during the withdrawal and early post-Brexit phases. However, the article explores an evolution of this perception under the pressure of geopolitical developments of the last years. The author employs a framework of strategic analysis that integrates institutional, political, and security dimensions. The study posits that the 2025 EU–UK Security and Defence Partnership is indicative of a pragmatic re-engagement, rooted in a recognition of shared vulnerabilities. The findings demonstrate that while the 2020 *Trade and Cooperation Agreement* institutionalised separation, subsequent crises compelled both actors to re-discover their functional interdependence. The analysis integrates document and discourse-based evidence from EU and UK official sources, complemented by academic and analytical literature. The present paper contributes to the understanding of the EU–UK relationship by situating it within the broader transformation of European security. This, in turn, enables a more profound understanding of post-membership strategic partnerships and Europe's capacity for adaptive cooperation in a multipolar order.

Keywords: Brexit, European Union, United Kingdom, strategic partnership, foreign policy, security cooperation, strategic autonomy, AUKUS, TPD, European strategic autonomy

Pięć lat po Brexicie: perspektywy strategicznej współpracy między Unią Europejską a Wielką Brytanią

Streszczenie

Pięć lat po wystąpieniu Zjednoczonego Królestwa z Unii Europejskiej relacje między obiema stronami ustabilizowały się w formie współistnienia strategicznego, starającego się pogodzić wyjściowe asymetrie potencjałów stron z potrzebą ich pragmatycznej współpracy. Artykuł przedstawia analizę ewolucji partnerstwa unijno-brytyjskiego w latach 2019–2025, badając, w jakim stopniu zyskało ono wymiar strategiczny. Autor weryfikuje hipotezę, iż relacje te nie były postrzegane jako strategiczne w okresie negocjacji związanych z realizacją Brexitu i w okresie bezpośrednio po wystąpieniu Wielkiej Brytanii z UE, ale że percepcja ta uległa zmianie w wyniku wydarzeń geopolitycznych z ostatnich lat. W badaniu zastosowano metodę analizy strategicznej obejmującej wymiary instytucjonalny, polityczny i bezpieczeństwa. W artykule założono, że unijno-brytyjskie *Partnerstwo w dziedzinie bezpieczeństwa i obrony* z 2025 r. odzwierciedla decyzję stron o odnowieniu pragmatycznej współpracy w odpowiedzi na uznanie wspólnych słabości. Wyniki badania wskazują, że o ile *Umowa o handlu i współpracy* z 2020 r. zinstytucjonalizowała separację, późniejsze kryzysy zmusiły obie strony do ponownego odkrycia swojej funkcjonalnej współzależności. Analiza integruje dokumenty i dowody oparte na dyskursie z oficjalnych źródeł UE i Wielkiej Brytanii, uzupełnione literaturą naukową i analityczną. Niniejszy artykuł przyczynia się do zrozumienia relacji UE–Wielka Brytania, umieszczając je w kontekście szerszej transformacji bezpieczeństwa europejskiego. To z kolei umożliwia głębsze zrozumienie strategicznych partnerstw oraz zdolności Europy do adaptacyjnej współpracy w porządku wielobiegunowym.

Słowa kluczowe: Brexit, Unia Europejska, Wielka Brytania, partnerstwo strategiczne, polityka zagraniczna, współpraca w zakresie bezpieczeństwa, autonomia strategiczna

The European Union (EU) underwent a pivotal historical transformation with the United Kingdom's departure from the organisation in January 2020. It marked the end of nearly five decades of membership and initiated a process of redefining the political, economic, and strategic relationship between the two actors that had once been deeply interdependent. The initial phase of negotiations and the subsequent *Trade and Cooperation Agreement* (TCA), signed in December 2020 and ratified in April 2021, produced a framework that was comprehensive in scope yet limited in strategic ambition (see: *Trade and Cooperation Agreement* 2021).

While the early post-Brexit years (2019–2022) were dominated by EU–UK disputes over trade, fisheries, and the Northern Ireland Protocol, their strategic and security cooperation was notably absent. The *Withdrawal Agreement* signed in 2019 and ratified in 2020 provided an orderly legal exit, but not a vision for future strategic relations (see: *Agreement...* 2020). The *Revised Political Declaration* (Council of the European Union 2019), signed in 2019, articulated aspirations for a "broad, deep, and flexible partnership," yet this ambition was diluted in practice. Both sides pursued divergent priorities: the EU sought a rule-based, predictable arrangement preserving legal integrity, while Britain prioritised sovereignty, flexibility, and global outreach (European Commission 2020; UK Government 2020b). The omission of foreign, security, and defence cooperation from

the TCA manifested this divergence. For the EU, security cooperation outside the *Common Foreign and Security Policy* (CFSP) and *Common Security and Defence Policy* (CSDP) raised institutional and legal complications. For the UK, it risked diluting the symbolic "break with Brussels." Consequently, this agreement fully institutionalised strategic separation of the EU and the UK (Biskup 2021).

The circumstances began to shift in 2022–2023, when situation in Ukraine transformed the European security environment and revealed the limits of unilateralism. The UK's leadership in supporting Ukraine, including its close coordination with a group of most active EU Member States, as well as leadership in European NATO, and the EU's robust sanctions regime underscored re-emerging interdependence. *The Windsor Framework* (UK Government 2023b), signed in 2023, which resolved tensions around the Northern Ireland Protocol, restored a minimum level of mutual trust and opened the way for a renewed dialogue.

These developments culminated in the Security and Defence Partnership between the European Union and the United Kingdom (SDP) signed in 2025, which explicitly (re) introduced the notion of "strategic partnership" into the bilateral relations (Council of the European Union 2025a, 2025b, 2025c). Although hitherto limited in institutional depth, the 2025 framework reflects and represents a new level of re-engagement driven by shared vulnerabilities and external pressures.

Nevertheless, asymmetry remains evident. The UK's participation in the trilateral security partnership between the United Kingdom, and the United States and Australia (AUKUS), announced in 2021, accession to the *Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership* (CPTPP) (UK Department for Business and Trade 2023), joined by Britain in 2023, and the establishment of the US–UK *Technology Prosperity Deal* (TPD) (US Government 2025) signed in September 2025, demonstrate the UK's continuous Transatlantic and Indo-Pacific orientation. Conversely, the EU has intensified its pursuit of strategic autonomy, including strengthening defence-industrial capacity through the European Defence Fund (EDF), *European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act* (EDIRPA), and the *Strategic Compass* (2022) (Kozioł 2025). Both sides thus have been moving along parallel – but distinct – strategic trajectories, acknowledging each other's relevance while defining their identities separately.

Against this background, the central research question of this paper is: to what extent have the European Union and the United Kingdom perceived each other as strategic partners between 2019 and 2025, and how has this perception evolved? The **hypothesis** holds that the relationship was not initially conceived as strategic, but has since been partially remodelled as a strategic one due to external pressures, most notably the situation in Ukraine, global technological competition, and the reconfiguration in the Transatlantic relations.

Combining a strategic-studies lens with European integration theory, the article interprets the EU–UK post-Brexit relationship not only as a legal-institutional arrangement, but as an evolving process of strategic communication and recognition. It offers insight into how former European integration partners reconstruct their strategic relations under

conditions of autonomy and interdependence, and how this dynamic reflects Europe's broader adaptation to a multipolar world.

Theoretical and methodological framework

The theoretical foundation of this study integrates approaches from strategic studies, international relations, and European integration theory. It defines *strategic partnership* as a dynamic process of mutual strategic perception and recognition. This distinction between *institutional* and *strategic* relations is essential for interpreting the evolution of EU–UK interactions after Brexit. Institutional relations are rooted in legal and procedural frameworks that regulate cooperation; strategic relations are determined by perceptions of long-term common interests and by actors' willingness to align policies and resources toward shared objectives (Freedman 2013). A relationship can therefore be "institutionally dense", yet "strategically thin" (as was the case between the EU and the UK under the TCA – or strategically meaningful despite minimal institutionalisation (as demonstrated by the UK's participation in the AUKUS or TPD).

Strategic perception refers to the cognitive framework, through which political actors interpret one another's intentions, credibility, and relevance for their own long-term goals (Freedman 2013). It defines whether an actor is viewed as an ally, partner, or competitor. Realist and constructivist literature converge on the idea that perceptions of identity and legitimacy are as important as material power in shaping cooperation (Buzan 2016; Hill et al. 2022).

During the Brexit process, the erosion of shared strategic perception was both one of causes and consequences of the British withdrawal. The EU's official documents, including the *Council Decision authorising the opening of negotiations with the UK* (European Commission, 2020), emphasised the defence of the Union's legal order and autonomy – an institutional approach to prevent disintegration. The UK's negotiation mandate, by contrast, defined the future relationship as one between sovereign equals, rejecting alignment with the EU law (UK Government 2020). Each side thus framed the other not as a strategic ally, but rather as an external actor to be managed within a transactional framework. The absence of shared strategic perception persisted through the early post-Brexit years, when the EU sought to reaffirm its cohesion and global identity, while the UK has undertaken to re-model itself as a global player.

The second conceptual pillar, *strategic autonomy*, originates from European foreign-policy research (Biscop 2021; Fiott 2018). It denotes the capacity of the EU to act independently in pursuit of its own interests while maintaining partnerships when useful. The post-2016 pursuit of autonomy, strengthened by Brexit, became a key organising principle of EU's external action (i.e. foreign policy). For the EU, the need to preserve the integrity of the internal market and to deter further exits led to an emphasis on rules-based separation. The European Commission's negotiating directives and the European Council's mandate therefore limited flexibility in foreign and security cooperation. This was a strategic choice: by prioritising internal cohesion, the EU sought to demonstrate its viability

as a unified actor. Yet, paradoxically, this same autonomy provided a framework for later re-engagement. Once the EU had reaffirmed its cohesion and control over its institutional order, it could re-open strategic cooperation with the UK on its own terms. Hence, the 2025 SDP demonstrates the logic of cooperation as a controlled extension of autonomy in the field of international relations.

The third theoretical dimension – *strategic hedging* – characterises the United Kingdom's post-Brexit foreign-policy trajectory (Ciorciari, Haacke 2019; Biskup 2024). Hedging involves the diversification of strategic alignments to balance risks and preserve flexibility amid uncertainty. For the UK, this meant rebuilding a network of global partnerships, such as AUKUS, CPTPP, TPD, that could offset the loss of the EU framework of cooperation. This approach reflected a logic of middle power: Britain sought to maintain strategic agency through overlapping partnerships rather than through a single institutional anchor. The "Global Britain" concept, best defined in the 2021 Integrated Review (UK Government, 2021) and its 2023 Refresh (UK Government, 2023a), encapsulated this philosophy of agility, innovation, and sovereignty. Within this worldview, a close and structured cooperation with the EU was initially seen as potentially restrictive.

However, the outbreak of the war in Ukraine (2022) altered the calculations on both sides. The UK's leading role in supporting Ukraine alongside EU Member States demonstrated that autonomy and partnership were not mutually exclusive. Britain's pragmatic coordination with Europe during the conflict revealed an underlying strategic interdependence despite their institutional separation (Biskup, Piechowska 2025). Combined concepts of perception, autonomy, and hedging allow for interpreting the EU-UK relationship as an adaptive strategic process rather than a fixed institutional design (in accordance with Freedman 2013). Both the EU and the UK have engaged in such adaptation: the EU by balancing autonomy with external flexibility; the UK by recalibrating global diversification with renewed European engagement. Post-Brexit cooperation between the EU and the UK may therefore be strategic without reproducing pre-Brexit close institutional cooperation.

This study employs a qualitative analysis grounded in the strategic studies. Its purpose is to reconstruct how the EU and the UK have perceived one another's strategic relevance from the negotiation of the *Withdrawal Agreement* to the conclusion of the SDP. The methodology combines documentary analysis, discourse analysis, and process tracing in order to identify both institutional and perceptual transformations, linking formal structures of cooperation with evolving strategic narratives.

The research is focused on the interplay between official documentation, political discourse, and contextual developments. The design follows a process-oriented logic typical of strategic and foreign policy analysis (Allison, Zelikow 1999; Freedman 2013), reconstructing the development of EU-UK relations as a sequence of *critical junctures*, i.e., moments where external or internal pressures and shocks redefined strategic narratives and perceptions of interdependence. Among these were Theresa May's Florence Speech (Biskup 2017), the parliamentary debates on the *Withdrawal Agreement* (Biskup 2019a,b), the conclusion of the TCA (2020), the situation in Ukraine (2022), and the es-

establishment of the strategic partnership (2025). They are analysed in terms of how they shifted the balance between autonomy and cooperation and how they influenced both sides' willingness to re-engage strategically.

Although the central focus of the study is the bilateral relationship between the EU and the UK, it also situates this relationship within broader, comparative framework. British participation in AUKUS, accession to the CPTPP, and the launch of the TPD serve as benchmarks for assessing the relative depth of the EU–UK partnership. Conversely, the EU's initiatives such as the Global Gateway, the EDF and the EDIRPA, provide the broader context for understanding the Union's approach to strategic autonomy and external partnerships.

The study relies on a combination of primary and secondary sources, including the *Withdrawal Agreement* (2020), the *Revised Political Declaration* (Council of the European Union 2019), the *Trade and Cooperation Agreement* (2021), the *Joint Statement on the Strategic Partnership* (Council of the European Union 2025a), the *Common Understanding on the EU–UK Relationship* (Council of the European Union 2025b), and the *Security and Defence Partnership* (Council of the European Union 2025c). These documents are complemented by national strategic papers such as the Integrated Review (UK Government 2021) or the EU's *Strategic Compass for Security and Defence* (Council of the European Union 2022). Each text articulates assumptions about sovereignty, partnership, and autonomy, allowing the identification of both explicit commitments and implicit strategic signals that shaped the evolving relationship. The analysis is further informed by secondary sources, notably analytical studies from the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM) and other scholarly works on Brexit and European foreign policy. These sources provide longitudinal depth and ensure conceptual consistency throughout the study.

Research results

The post-Brexit relationship between the European Union and the United Kingdom has evolved through several distinct but interconnected phases, reflecting the gradual transition from institutional separation to selective strategic re-engagement. Between 2019 and 2025 the legal, political, and strategic frameworks defining the partnership were shaped by competing imperatives: the EU's determination to safeguard its internal cohesion and the UK's drive to recover sovereignty and global agency. The result has been a hybrid configuration: legally stable, yet strategically limited. Its nature can be traced through the successive stages of withdrawal, adjustment, and pragmatic reconvergence.

The legal foundations of the relationship were established through the *Withdrawal Agreement* (2019) and the *Trade and Cooperation Agreement* (2020). Together these documents ensured an orderly exit, but offered no forward-looking strategic vision. The *Withdrawal Agreement* addressed technical issues such as citizens' rights, financial obligations, and the *Ireland and Northern Ireland Protocol*, while the accompanying *Revised Political Declaration* outlined a "broad, deep, and flexible partnership" that never fully materialised in practice. The negotiations revealed serious differences between the expectations of both sides. For the EU, the overriding objective was to preserve the

integrity of the Single Market and to avoid setting a precedent that might encourage selective participation. For the UK, the priority was to restore full regulatory sovereignty and policy autonomy (European Commission 2020). The outcome, in the form of the TCA, produced a comprehensive, yet shallow, trade regime which excluded structured cooperation in foreign, security, and defence policy. This omission was not a technical oversight, but rather a deliberate political choice that reflected mutual caution. While the EU sought to compartmentalise the relationship, the UK favoured flexibility and bilateral engagement with individual Member States and NATO.

The institutional architecture that emerged was detailed, yet strategically thin. The TCA established more than thirty specialised committees, councils, and working groups to manage regulatory and technical matters, but it created no forum for sustained strategic political dialogue. In practice, it produced partnership a managerial framework intended to stabilise relations without endowing them with strategic depth (Biskup 2020 and 2021). The EU's negotiating strategy was defensive and aimed at deterring fragmentation; while the UK's one was assertive and focused on symbolic control and independence. At that stage, both sides effectively deprioritised strategic cooperation.

The exclusion of foreign and security policy cooperation from the TCA reflected not only legal prudence, but also divergent strategic perceptions. For the EU, the UK's departure reinforced the need to consolidate its own strategic autonomy; for the UK, it symbolised the chance to pursue a "Global Britain" agenda free from EU constraints. The EU's negotiating directives (European Commission 2020), emphasised the preservation of decision-making independence, while the UK's negotiations mandate (UK Government 2020), as well as the ensuing Integrated Review (UK Government 2021), reframed the UK as a globally engaged actor centred on NATO, the United States, and the Indo-Pacific. Importantly, this perspective was generally supported by the 2025 Strategic Defence Review (UK Ministry of Defence 2025), albeit in a corrected, more Eurocentric form. The result was a vacuum of strategic trust: the EU regarded Britain's quest for sovereignty as a potential threat to its internal order, while the UK feared continued subordination to EU law (Biskup 2020).

The turning point came in the period 2022–2025, when situation in Ukraine exposed the interdependence of European security actors and demonstrated the limits of both their individual strategic autonomies and global hedging. The UK played a leading role in supporting Ukraine militarily and politically, often coordinating with EU Member States outside formal EU structures. The EU, meanwhile, mobilised the European Peace Facility and accelerated defence-industrial integration through EDIRPA and the Strategic Compass. These parallel efforts generated functional synergy without dedicated institutional framework, creating momentum for renewed dialogue. The *Windsor Framework* (UK Government 2023b), which resolved long-standing tensions surrounding the Northern Ireland Protocol, restored a minimal level of political trust and paved the way for the Security and Defence Partnership (Council of the European Union 2025c). These agreements institutionalised consultation on sanctions, crisis response, and foreign-policy coordination, marking the first formal recognition of a "strategic partnership" since Brexit.

For the EU, the 2025 framework complemented its pursuit of strategic autonomy by securing external flexibility, while for the UK, it restored access to European political coordination without compromising sovereignty. The rapprochement was driven by shared recognition of external threats.

However, when compared with the UK's other external frameworks negotiated in parallel, the 2025 EU–UK partnership appears modest in scope. The UK's engagement in AUKUS (2021) and the US–UK TPD reflect a deeper degree of strategic alignment, particularly in defence innovation, cybersecurity, and industrial policy, and regulation of emerging technologies. Accession to the CPTPP further demonstrates the UK's intention to diversify economic and security ties beyond Europe. By contrast, the EU–UK framework remains Eurocentric, focused on security dialogue and to regulatory cooperation in some legacy fields, such as sanitary and phytosanitary standards. This asymmetry reveals the continuing imbalance between the UK's global orientation and the EU's continental integration strategy. For the EU, cooperation with the UK serves as an external complement to its internal strategic autonomy agenda; while for the UK, it represents a useful but supplementary dimension of its broader foreign policy network (Biskup, Markiewicz 2025; US Government 2025).

The empirical evidence indicates that between 2019 and 2020 neither the EU, nor the UK regarded each other as a strategic partner, but their perceptions shifted as geopolitical pressure mounted after 2022. The 2025 SDP signifies a partial rebuilding of the strategic approach, which is limited in institutional depth, but significant symbolically. It reflects mutual recognition of strategic interdependence in a present international environment despite persistent differences in interests and potentials. The UK continues to define its strategic identity in Transatlantic and Indo-Pacific terms, whereas the EU anchors its autonomy in increasing internal cohesion and collective defence.

Discussion

The evolution of the relationship between the European Union and the United Kingdom since 2019 reveals a gradual yet significant transformation from institutional separation to selective strategic convergence. The findings confirm the central hypothesis of this study: that the EU–UK relationship was not initially perceived as strategic during the withdrawal and early post-Brexit phases, but has since evolved into a pragmatic form of cooperation driven by external pressures. This transformation was neither linear nor intentional; rather it emerged from the reconfiguration of security and political realities in Europe after the year 2022.

During the negotiation and implementation of the *Withdrawal Agreement* and the *Trade and Cooperation Agreement*, both actors prioritised autonomy over interdependence. For the EU, the principal concern was institutional integrity – the need to safeguard the internal market and the coherence of the *acquis communautaire*. The EU's negotiating directives, official communications, and political statements framed the United Kingdom as a “third country” to be managed within the Union's external relations framework rather

than as a strategic ally (European Commission 2020). This positioning reflected the logic of strategic autonomy, a concept that gained increasing prominence after Brexit as the EU sought to demonstrate its capacity for independent global action (Fiott 2018: p. 2). The United Kingdom, in turn, reinterpreted autonomy as sovereignty. The rhetoric of the Johnson government, expressed through the "Global Britain" agenda, elevated the restoration of sovereign control to the status of a national credo. Britain's foreign policy elite reframed the country's global role through issue-based, flexible alliances rather than hierarchical institutional arrangements (Biskup 2021). Both sides therefore operated within self-reinforcing logics of independence: the EU defending its institutional unity, the UK asserting its national freedom. The result was a mutual underestimation of long-term strategic costs. The EU lost a major military and diplomatic power, while the UK forfeited privileged access to the Union's vast regulatory and political networks. The TCA's exclusion of structured dialogue in foreign and security affairs effectively codified this estrangement, turning what had once been a strategic partnership into a managed relationship of coordination without strategic depth (Biskup 2018a, 2018b, 2020, 2021).

The UK sought to expand its influence through the AUKUS security pact (2021), accession to the CPTPP (2023), and the creation of the US-UK Technology and Prosperity Dialogue (2023). This hedging strategy allowed Britain to preserve flexibility and maintain its middle-power agency while reducing overdependence on any single partner (Rees 2023). However, the geopolitical shock of February 2022 reaffirmed that Europe remained the primary arena of British strategic interest. The UK's rapid military assistance to Ukraine, coordination of sanctions with EU Member States, and intensified cooperation within the Joint Expeditionary Force all revealed that its security posture was still embedded in the European system (Biskup, Piechowska, 2025).

For the EU, hedging took a different form. The Union sought to balance its pursuit of open strategic autonomy with a network of partnerships designed to mitigate external risks. The adoption of the Strategic Compass, the implementation of the European Peace Facility, and the launch of the Global Gateway all exemplify this strategy of diversified interdependence. In this context, the 2025 SDP with Britain can be understood as an act of pragmatic hedging: a re-engagement that enhances Europe's security resilience without undermining the EU's institutional sovereignty (European Union 2021).

The re-emergence of structured cooperation after 2022 marked a transition from what may be termed managed disengagement to selective convergence. This transformation was not the product of renewed political enthusiasm, but of strategic necessity. The war in Ukraine exposed the limits of unilateralism and demonstrated that neither autonomy nor sovereignty could ensure security in isolation. The ensuing cooperation between the EU and the UK developed in a pragmatic, bottom-up manner, relying on ad hoc coordination and functional alignment rather than institutional integration. The subsequent codification of this cooperation in the 2025 SDP formalised what had already been taking shape informally since 2022: a model of strategic coordination that allows both actors to act jointly without surrendering autonomy. This type of arrangement can be described as functional strategic convergence: a limited but meaningful form of alignment designed to ensure

operational coordination in crisis management, sanctions policy, and defence-industrial cooperation while preserving flexibility in political and institutional terms (Biskup 2024).

Such convergence is compatible with the self-perceptions of both actors. The EU can maintain its narrative of open strategic autonomy while cooperating with the United Kingdom as a capable external partner. Meanwhile, the UK can participate in European initiatives without compromising its sovereignty. The outcome is a hybrid model of interaction that reconciles autonomy with interdependence and flexibility with predictability. However, as such hybrid arrangements are inherently fragile, as they depend on the continued convergence of interests rather than on institutional guarantees (Biskup 2024). The durability of the current strategic alignment thus remains contingent on the persistence of external pressures and on political stability within both entities.

Despite the restoration of limited strategic dialogue, asymmetry remains the defining characteristic of the EU–UK relationship. The UK continues to derive its strategic identity primarily from Transatlantic and Indo-Pacific frameworks, while the EU's identity rests on its internal consolidation as a continental actor. These two trajectories are not incompatible but operate on different scales and logics. The UK's engagement in AUKUS and its leadership in emerging technologies underline its global orientation, while the EU's efforts through the EDF and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) highlight its commitment to deepening intra-European capabilities. For the UK, cooperation with the United States and Australia provides access to advanced defence innovation and global markets; for the EU, enhanced internal cohesion offers security and resilience. Their partnership, therefore, is better described as a strategic interface – a flexible mechanism enabling coordination where interests align and autonomy where they diverge.

From a theoretical perspective, the evolution of the EU–UK relationship confirms Freedman's (2013) conception of strategy as an adaptive process shaped by changing context rather than by a predetermined plan. Both actors have recalibrated their strategic postures in response to external shocks, shifting perceptions, and domestic political constraints. The current form of cooperation, although limited, demonstrates the capacity of both sides to adapt to geopolitical turbulence while preserving their core identities. It represents a balance between autonomy, necessity, and mutual recognition—a form of partnership that is strategic in intent, if not yet in substance.

Ultimately, the EU–UK partnership highlights a broader phenomenon in international relations: as the global order becomes more multipolar and fragmented, strategic partnerships are increasingly defined by pragmatism and flexibility rather than by formal institutionalisation (Grevi 2009). In this sense, the post-2025 EU–UK framework exemplifies the adaptation of European actors to an environment where strategy must be continually renegotiated considering new realities rather than inherited from established integration structures.

Conclusions

Five years after the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union, the bilateral relationship has stabilised into a form of strategic coexistence that is functional,

pragmatic, and asymmetrical. The findings of this study confirm the hypothesis that the EU–UK relationship was not perceived as strategic during the withdrawal and early post-Brexit phases, but that this perception has gradually evolved under the pressure of geopolitical change. Between 2019 and 2020, both sides approached their separation as an exercise in autonomy rather than as an opportunity for renewed strategic partnership. For the EU, Brexit was primarily a test of institutional resilience and legal integrity; for the UK, it was an act of reclaiming sovereignty and global flexibility. Strategic cooperation was neither a policy priority nor an analytical category embedded in the early post-Brexit framework.

The transformation of the European and global security environment after 2022, when situation in Ukraine created conditions for a partial rebuilding of strategic relations. Confronted with renewed external threats, both actors recognised the limits of unilateralism and rediscovered the necessity of coordination. The 2025 SDP did not recreate the dense institutional structures of the pre-Brexit era yet contributed to establishing new mechanisms for strategic consultation. These agreements marked a shift from crisis management and damage limitation to the new phase of cooperation.

This pattern of asymmetric interdependence is likely to persist. The UK's engagement in global security and technological partnerships provides reach and agility, whereas the EU's emphasis on continental integration offers stability and depth. Together they form an equilibrium, in which strategic cooperation coexists with political divergence. The asymmetry of engagement does not necessarily imply imbalance; rather, it reflects the structural diversity of their roles in the international system. Britain functions as a globally dispersed actor embedded in Transatlantic and Indo-Pacific networks, while the EU consolidates as a regional power centre with expanding global outreach. The interaction between these two levels of agency generates a flexible form of European strategic pluralism.

In practical terms, the 2025 Strategic Partnership represents a limited yet meaningful step towards rebuilding trust and predictability. It institutionalises consultation in security and defence policy, provides mechanisms for coordination on sanctions and crisis management, and reaffirms shared commitment to democratic values, multilateralism, and the rules-based order. While its scope remains modest, its significance lies in its demonstration that cooperation between the EU and the UK can be restored and sustained based on mutual respect for autonomy. Its long-term success, however, will depend on whether this pragmatic coordination can be maintained once the immediate pressures of the Ukraine conflict and transatlantic tensions subside.

Looking forward, three broad trajectories can be envisaged. The first is consolidation, in which the partnership gradually deepens through the institutionalisation of consultation mechanisms and the alignment of strategic priorities in security, technology, and climate policy. The second is parallelism, in which cooperation remains limited to ad hoc coordination in times of crisis, while both actors continue to pursue distinct strategic agendas. The third, less desirable scenario is divergence, which could result from domestic political change, renewed economic disputes, or differing approaches to the transatlantic relation-

ship and global order. The trajectory ultimately chosen will depend on how both sides balance the logic of autonomy with the imperatives of interdependence.

In conclusion, the EU–UK relationship after Brexit exemplifies a new model of post-integration strategic partnership: one that is adaptive, issue-based, and resilient in the face of uncertainty. The evolution from institutional estrangement to selective convergence reveals the capacity of European actors to reconstruct strategic relations without returning to hierarchical integration. It also reflects a broader transformation in global governance, where partnerships are increasingly contingent and pragmatic. As Europe continues to navigate an era of multipolar competition and geopolitical instability, the experience of the EU and the United Kingdom demonstrates that strategic coexistence – anchored in shared interests, but sustained through flexibility – may become the prevailing form of cooperation among advanced democratic actors in the twenty-first century.

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