The UK's Brexit security gambit

Blog post by Chief Economist Gregor Irwin, 17 May 2018

The UK and the EU have been staking out their positions on the future security partnership over the past week. This pillar of the Brexit negotiation matters in its own right; but it also has the potential to set precedents that could be important for the future economic partnership.

The UK's proposed framework for security calls for wide and deep collaboration to address shared threats. The UK argues no existing EU model for cooperation with third countries is adequate, meaning a new approach is required. Cooperation should be underpinned by strong governance and the exchange of both data and secondees.

Internal security cooperation would be backed by a treaty and largely based on the UK participating in "existing EU measures", meaning frameworks like the European arrest warrant and agencies like Europol. The approach should be adaptable and supported by a "strategic dialogue" so that the two sides can continue to exchange expertise and experience.

The UK wants to take a similar approach for external security, where cooperation should span foreign policy, sanctions, development, defence, military capabilities and space. There is an emphasis on reciprocal arrangements and respect for UK sovereignty and the EU legal order throughout.

In short, the UK wants: a bespoke model; to cherry pick where the UK and EU will collaborate in future; to take decisions together with the EU; to avoid getting tangled up in EU data rules that prevent the transfer of data; and even to get UK nationals into EU agencies.

It's a bold pitch. But it is not entirely incredible: the UK has capabilities and resources that the EU needs for both its internal and external security, and the negotiations are taking place at a time when the threats the EU faces are high and increasing. While the EU may have most of the leverage in the economic negotiation, things are more balanced on the security side.

The UK also wants to get cracking, to reach agreement as early as possible. The UK says they must not allow gaps in security collaboration to emerge which might, for example, increase the chances of a terrorist attack succeeding. But no doubt the UK also wants to set precedents which blur some of the EU's red lines that are proving problematic on the economic side of the negotiation.

Michel Barnier's response, in Brussels this week, suggests the European Commission understands what the UK is trying to do. He noted (once again) that the UK has chosen to become a third country, which has consequences. While the EU wants an ambitious security partnership and cooperates with many third countries, the UK can no longer have the same rights as member states. He specifically noted that the UK can no longer participate in EU decision making, which he described this as a "legal mechanic" consequence of Brexit.

But while Barnier is sticking to the established script for now, he may find it is hard to keep the European Council fully on board. The EU's political leaders may want to show more pragmatism towards the UK on the security issues, particularly as they will be held accountable by their

electorates for any security failures. You can be sure that Theresa May will be making this case directly to her EU counterparts.

While this looks like a good strategy for the UK, the British government may have made a tactical mistake. The UK paper identifies Galileo – and the controversy about the UK's exclusion from participation in the development of "security sensitive" parts of the system – as a test case for the security relationship. But this is an area where the lines between security and economic interests are hazy. Many EU governments will know that keeping the UK out could be good for business, as more lucrative procurement contracts still need to be awarded.