The Trinity House Trap: The Structural Limits of Anglo-German Defence Bilateralism

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1.0 Executive Summary:

This paper contends that the UK-Germany bilateral security relationship, as formalised in the Trinity House Agreement (2024) and built on by subsequent treaty commitments, functions predominantly as an instrument of political signalling. It finds that the agreement fails to establish the institutional foundations necessary for durable military cooperation. This shortcoming can be explained by three primary structural roadblocks. Firstly, the UK and Germany have quite different military doctrines. This creates friction wherever joint development is attempted. Secondly, what they can actually do together is constrained because their defence industries are organised around different political and economic priorities. Finally, the absence of formal links between bilateral commitments and EU capability planning risks producing fragmentation rather than consolidation in European defence. This paper seeks to present three policy options based on these findings. Each will be assessed for its political feasibility, military value, and compatibility with broader European security structures.

2.0 Introduction: The 2026 Security Landscape

The signing of the Trinity House Agreement in October 2024 represented a significant paradigm shift in European security, described by both the UK and German governments as an unprecedented bilateral defence pact (Ministry of Defence and Healey, 2024a; Felstead, 2024). The agreement committed both countries to deeper collaboration across all domains, explicitly committing to 'rapidly develop extended Deep Precision Strike capabilities to provide a conventional deterrent in Europe' and '[f]ostering a deep Industrial Partnership' (Ministry of Defence and Healey, 2024b). The political intention was to demonstrate that a post-Brexit Britain could maintain a serious

role in European security (Sus and Martill, 2024) and that Germany's increased defence spending could be channelled into meaningful joint projects (Bunde, 2022; Burilkov, 2022). However, this paper contends that the realisation of these ambitions is hindered not by a deficit of political will, but by deep-seated structural divergences that remain unaddressed within the current framework.

Despite converging threat assessments, shared commitments to Ukraine's defence (Ministry of Defence and Healey, 2025), and now a formal bilateral treaty, both countries have consistently struggled to translate these ambitions into capabilities (Zandee, 2020). Why do two states with so much in common continue to produce capability integration that falls short of stated ambitions? The root of this disparity lies at the points where joint development is most needed, and where the UK's and Germany's diverging procurement cycles, budgetary frameworks, and strategic cultures impede substantive integration (Scazzieri, 2023; Bunde, 2025). The following analysis investigates these doctrinal frictions, evaluates the risk of European security fragmentation, and proposes a strategic roadmap for institutional reform.

3.0 Different Militaries, Different Industries

3.1 The UK's Approach to Modern Warfare

The UK's 2025 SDR sets out a model of modern warfare, with an aim to link sensors, data systems, and weapons so that information flows quickly from detection to action (Ministry of Defence, 2025). The SDR commits the UK to buying equipment that can be updated through software as threats evolve, rather than investing just in large numbers of traditional military platforms (ibid.). Moreover, it rejects slow procurement cycles in favour of rapid testing (ibid.) and breaks with older ways of organising a military force.

The model has significant implications for working with partners because it only functions well if allies share compatible systems, standards, command processes, and communication protocols. The SDR describes this as a 'digital targeting web' connecting sensors, deciders, and effectors to achieve machine-speed decision-making (Ministry of Defence, 2025). As Watling and Reynolds (2023)

demonstrate in their analysis of Ukraine operations, modern strike effectiveness depends on a 'Reconnaissance Fires Complex' in which long-range precision weapons and interconnected UAVs function as an integrated system. Integrating with partners who lack this rapid, interconnected architecture will therefore produce friction at the operational level. The UK's preferences were further reinforced by the UK's supply of Storm Shadow missiles to Ukraine, which were integrated onto Ukrainian platforms (Wright, 2023).

3.2 Germany's Different Priorities

In the wake of Chancellor Scholz's *Zeitenwende* speech in February 2022, the government pledged 100 billion euros for the Bundeswehr (Möckel, 2022). However, the intended effect of this fund as a catalyst for military modernisation is being progressively undermined. The bulk of the money is increasingly mutating into the financing of 'normal' projects transferred from the core budget, with only a few genuinely new projects like the F-35 fighter jet and heavy transport helicopters (Heiming, 2024). These programmes are organised by Germany's defence procurement agency, the Bundesamt für Ausrüstung, Informationstechnik und Nutzung der Bundeswehr (BAAINBw). The agency's processes are shaped by decades of cost-control pressures (Burilkov, 2022), institutional inertia (Burilkov, 2022), and parliamentary oversight requirements that do not lend themselves to the rapid acquisition necessitated by the UK's Integrated Force model (Heiming, 2024; Burilkov, 2022; Ministry of Defence, 2025).

The marginal impact of the *Zeitenwende* on Germany's foundational institutional culture is documented in detail by Bunde (2022;2025). Bunde (2025) characterises Germany's response as a 'foreign policy identity crisis', noting that the logic of rapid military deterrence remains 'alien to many policymakers and the public'. Consequently, German procurement timelines continue to be hampered by a risk-averse bureaucracy, lengthy lawsuits, and cost overruns (Burilkov, 2022). The UK's 2025 SDR, however, stands in direct contrast to this, demanding 'rapid commercial exploitation' where digital software and uncrewed systems are contracted within just three months (Ministry of Defence, 2025). More than just a bureaucratic problem, Germany's reluctance reflects a

deeper reality in which defence decisions are weighed down by institutional and cultural inertia (Burilkov, 2022), as well as vested economic interests (Bunde, 2022). The result is a limited speed of reformation,

particularly as turning to faster, potentially foreign-sourced or off-the-shelf digital platforms clashes with the traditional innovation scepticism of the domestic procurement system (Burilkov, 2022).

3.3 The Deep Precision Strike Programme

The DPS programme, agreed in principle at Trinity House (Ministry of Defence and Healey, 2024b), illustrates the structural tension between the two systems. Where the UK wants a mobile, network connected long-range strike capability that can evolve with the threat environment (Ministry of Defence, 2025), German priorities are different. Germany is constrained by the necessity of industrial participation guarantees for its defence manufacturers, and by constitutional and historical constraints on the use of force, which require layered political oversight of weapons release (Bunde, 2022; Bunde, 2025; Burilkov, 2022). These positions are difficult to reconcile without dedicated institutional negotiation, the kind of which bilateral summits cannot substitute for. As a result, the May 2025 joint statement offered only encouragement to 'accelerate progress' within the European Long Range Strike Approach, without concrete governance mechanisms (Ministry of Defence and Healey, 2025). Without a dedicated joint office with clear governance arrangements, DPS risks stalling.

4.0 The Risk of Fragmentation

From a structural perspective, these arrangements pose a risk of substituting for rather than complementing wider institutional coordination (Scazzieri, 2023). The coherent and unified participation of major European states forms the foundation of the EU's European Defence Fund (EDF) and the European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS) (European Commission, 2024), which can be threatened by bilateralism. Germany is entangled in overlapping and occasionally competing commitments. It has aligned with the UK on DPS (Ministry of Defence and Healey,

2024b), with France, Italy, and Spain on the Eurodrone (Zandee, 2020), and with France on the Main Ground Combat System (Maulny, 2020). The results of this web of bilateralism are conflicting industrial and doctrinal pressures that undermine broader continental cohesion (Scazzieri, 2023).

The UK's exclusion from formal EU frameworks after Brexit further exacerbates this structural tension. As Sus and Martill (2024) demonstrate, post-Brexit security cooperation 'remains informal and ad hoc in ways that diverge from theoretical expectations'. The Trinity House Agreement provides the UK with no institutional mechanism to align its bilateral objectives with EU capability planning, as it lacks decision-making authority in PESCO (Council of the European Union, 2020) and access to the EDF (Scazzieri, 2023). While official communiqués point to the creation of a Defence Ministerial Council, a defence industrial forum, and a new Rheinmetall artillery factory in the UK as proof of institutional delivery (Ministry of Defence and Healey, 2024a; Ministry of Defence and Healey, 2025), these remain transactional. Ultimately, without formal integration into wider EU frameworks or binding procurement authority, these bilateral forums serve primarily as venues for political signalling rather than durable institutions capable of overriding deeply entrenched doctrinal friction.

5.0 Policy Options

The following section aims to address these structural limitations through three policy options. They will be assessed for their political viability, military utility, and institutional compatibility.

5.1 Option 1: A Stronger Bilateral Structure

The most politically accessible option is to institutionalise the Trinity House framework through a standing joint body with a dedicated secretariat, as was done for the UK-France Combined Joint Expeditionary Force under the Lancaster House Treaties. The May 2025 joint statement established a potential foundation for this, proposing a 'defence industrial forum' and highlighting 'digital transformation' (Ministry of Defence and Healey, 2025). Translating this into reality, however, requires a joint programme office for the DPS, unified procurement standards, and

mandated ministerial reviews at the very least. In practice, this would require the joint programme office to hold delegated authority to commit expenditure below a defined threshold, explicitly authorised under German parliamentary budget law, given the Bundestag budget committee's constitutional oversight role. As it requires no complex treaty changes with the EU or NATO, this is highly feasible politically. The discursive groundwork is already in place thanks to the framing of the pact by the German Defence Minister and the UK Defence Secretary as closing 'critical capability gaps' and delivering

'unprecedented levels of new cooperation' (Ministry of Defence and Healey, 2024a). Structurally, this option is severely limited, however, because it deepens bilateralism while ignoring the issue of wider European integration. As Major and Mölling (2020) note, European defence initiatives have historically suffered from ambitious political statements that lack the actual willingness to pool and share capabilities. A siloed Anglo-German secretariat risks creating a two-tier system, actively fragmenting EDIS objectives (European Commission, 2024). For the same reasons, the military value is limited.

5.2 Option 2: Formalising the E3 Format

Formalising the E3 (the UK, France, Germany) as a permanent coordination mechanism to bridge NATO and EU defence structures is a more structurally ambitious option. It would be necessary to develop a unified digital standards framework covering sensor architecture and communications protocols, analogous to NATO's Link 16 protocol, but software-defined and upgradeable. The most accessible first step would be a joint UK-France-Germany ministerial declaration, convened at an existing NATO or European Council gathering, formally constituting the E3 as a standing defence coordination body with a working group behind it tasked with developing common data exchange standards. Informal expansion in this direction is already visible, with the UK's 2025 Strategic Defence Review explicitly committing to minilateral activity through both the E3 and E5 formats (Ministry of Defence, 2025). But the political side of this is complex, as it would require the participation of France, a state that is fiercely protective of its strategic autonomy and independence (Maulny, 2020). French participation would likely require explicit

guarantees that the framework excludes nuclear doctrine and out-of-area operations from standardisation requirements, but this would come at no material cost to the programme's core objectives. And yet, the E3 format possesses a proven institutional precedent. Regarding the Iran nuclear file, Alcaro (2021) demonstrates that the E3 successfully maintained a unified diplomatic stance and managed divergence over the long term. This ability to sustain common positions is a vital prerequisite for long-term industrial coordination (European Commission, 2024). The logical first deliverable would be a common data exchange protocol for the DPS programme itself, converting an existing bilateral commitment into a trilateral
technical standard and giving the E3 framework an immediate operational purpose rather than existing in parallel with it. The military and structural value of this option is exceptionally high because an E3 digital standards framework would establish continental military cooperation for a generation. As such, it would successfully balance the high ambition of the Trinity House Agreement with near-term political feasibility.

5.3 Option 3: UK Association with PESCO

A formal associate relationship between the UK and PESCO is a structurally durable solution. It would create a legally binding link between the bilateral ambitions and EU capability planning (Mills, 2022). From a legal perspective, it is viable to have third-country participation under Council Decision (CFSP) 2020/1639 (Council of the European Union, 2020). This would resolve the institutional gap currently limiting UK-EU security relations to ad hoc channels (Sus and Martill, 2024). While this does not automatically grant UK industry access to EDF-funded programmes (Council of the European Union, 2020), it could potentially pave the way for closer involvement provided the UK makes a sizeable financial contribution (Scazzieri, 2023). Implementation would require three steps. First, a framework MOU between the UK and a coalition of supportive member states setting out standard terms for UK project participation to avoid requiring unanimous approval from scratch each time. Second, demonstrated UK regulatory alignment with EDIS supply chain requirements, the political concession that previous governments were unwilling to make. Third, a co investment mechanism under which UK industry participates

through bilateral treaty funding rather than direct EDF grants. However, the Council Decision requires unanimous project-by-project approval, and there have historically been differences of opinion among member states over how inclusive the mechanism should be (Mills, 2022), therefore keeping political friction high. Furthermore, as Sus and Martill (2024) argue, 'path-dependent dynamics stemming from the Brexit process' continue to inhibit structural re-engagement, even when strategic logic demands it. As Scazzieri (2023) notes, establishing this integration remains politically difficult due to domestic scepticism over EU defence initiatives. Regardless, this remains the superior long-term institutional solution because it addresses the core structural deficit rather than merely managing its symptoms.

5.4 The Verdict

These options are sequential rather than mutually exclusive. Option 1 is a near-term step but insufficient on its own, while Option 2 is the recommended first step, offering the highest ratio of military value to political achievability. This would set the institutional conditions that make Option 3 more viable over time. Option 3 remains the optimal long-term solution, but it depends on a level of political re-engagement with EU frameworks that the current trajectory makes hard to predict. The appropriate ambition is therefore to pursue Options 1 and 2 now while keeping Option 3 as the explicit long-term horizon.

6.0 Conclusion

Despite the promise of the Trinity House Agreement, Anglo-German bilateralism remains constrained by structural roadblocks that limit its operational utility. Friction emerges from their divergent military doctrines and procurement cultures during joint capability development (Bunde, 2022; Bunde, 2025; Ministry of Defence, 2025; Burilkov, 2022). All the while, the absence of formal links to EU capability planning risks a fragmentation of the wider European defence architecture (Scazzieri, 2023; Major and Mölling, 2020). Given this, the formalisation of the E3 format offers the most viable near term policy option. The option balances military utility with EU compatibility. That being said, the UK's association with PESCO remains an optimal long-term fix. However, it cannot

be ignored that the path-dependent legacies of Brexit currently make this highly improbable (Sus and Martill, 2024). Ultimately, the Trinity House Agreement will be judged not by the ambition of its declarations but by the durability of the institutions it produces. Without a formal architecture that bridges doctrinal, industrial, and institutional divides, it risks becoming precisely the kind of high-visibility political commitment that European defence has historically produced in abundance and converted into operational capability far too rarely.

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