

The Sovereignty Test

What this paper argues is straightforward. That the case for deeper UK-EU coordination is not about Europe. It's about power. The ability to control what happens at our borders. To secure our energy. To shape our defence posture. To protect the integrity of our democracy.

That power cannot be restored by going it alone. Because these are shared challenges and Britain is a small country; pretending otherwise is not a serious strategy.

The Sovereignty Test captures the strategic reality taking shape across the continent. In defence, energy, borders and information, Europe is beginning to act like a bloc. Not always coordinated. Not always tidy. But increasingly aligned around shared threats and collective capability.

Its framing offers both political cover and a clear narrative - speaking to those who want Britain to be strong, secure, and in charge of its own future, yet still fear that cooperation means giving something up - whilst offering a practical path forward for those who already believe cooperation with Europe is in our best interests.

A reset of our relationship with Europe isn't about retracing old steps, but on Britain deciding whether it wants to help shape the systems that are emerging, or be shaped by them.

This framing paper therefore sets out how the UK can regain control over its future by working much more closely with Europe on the four defining tests of modern sovereignty:

- **Defence:** where fragmentation weakens deterrence
- **Migration:** where upstream cooperation is essential
- **Energy:** where going it alone raises costs and weakens resilience
- **Disinformation:** where isolation makes us vulnerable

Defence: Real sovereignty requires collective capability

The UK cannot defend its interests in Europe, or project credible deterrence globally, on its own. In an era of grave threat levels and unprecedented volatility - sovereignty can no longer be about going it alone. Real sovereignty in today's world requires collective capability - which means whether your systems, forces and strategies work *alongside* allies.

But Europe's defence landscape is deeply fragmented. This is best illustrated by the fact that European countries operate 12 different main battle tanks, while the US has one.¹

Europe is also highly dependent on the US. In the period 2020 - 2024 the US supplied 64% of European NATO members' military equipment.² And in the 15 months after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, 78% of the EU's defence procurement came from non-EU suppliers - leaving most of the increased spending outside the bloc's own economies.³

Even when defence procurement happens *within* Europe, it is rarely cross-border. Most major EU member states buy from their own national defence industries. This home bias limits competition, inflates costs, and weakens Europe's ability to scale production or standardise equipment.⁴

This fragmentation is not just inefficient - it is expensive. According to Bruegel, pooling procurement and building a more integrated defence market could reduce unit costs by **50 to 90%**, thanks to economies of scale and reduced duplication.⁵ Without reform, rising defence budgets will deliver poor value and leave capability gaps unaddressed.

With tentative co-operation with the UK, that reform is now underway.⁶ The EU's SAFE initiative (Security Action for Europe) aims to coordinate procurement and unlock large-scale joint financing.⁷ The UK has signalled willingness to cooperate but political obstacles remain, particularly from France. The expected signing of a Defence and Security Pact on May 19 is likely to "not be sufficient" on its own to grant access to joint procurement and access to SAFE.⁸

Defence integration across Europe is no longer theoretical - it's political, urgent, and in motion.

And for Britain on defence, real sovereignty today means collective capability, not heroic isolation.

Migration: When small boats hit the channel, it's already too late

Small boat crossings in the Channel have become a visceral symbol of a migration system that doesn't work. In 2024, over **36,000 people**⁹ arrived by small boat, and asylum applications exceeded **108,000**¹⁰ which is the highest number since 2002.

The UK is not alone in facing these challenges. Across Europe, irregular migration has strained borders, inflamed politics, and exposed the limits of existing systems. But since leaving the EU, the UK has lost access to key tools to tackle migration like **Eurodac** (the asylum fingerprint database) or **Dublin III** (which governed returns to EU countries).¹¹ While the 2024 UK-Frontex working arrangement provides a channel for technical cooperation, it falls well short of operational membership. This means the UK cannot participate in joint deployments, access shared data, or influence strategic planning.¹²

The EU response is far from perfect. But it is moving. Under its new Migration Pact, **Frontex is expanding and has broadly been seen to be a success** by coordinating upstream management in Tunisia and Egypt, strengthening external borders, and increasing joint return efforts.¹³ The UK is not part of that effort.

This matters politically as well as operationally. **Because left unmanaged, migration becomes a standing narrative of grievance** - and one that is actively exploited by populist movements across Europe, including in Britain. For parties like Reform UK, the small boats crisis is not just a problem - it's a platform. It provides a continuous story of dysfunction, which they use to frame the UK as out of control and disconnected.

That narrative won't be broken by one-off deals or symbolic deterrents. It requires **rebuilding strategic capability** in a meaningful way: as an operational partner with access, presence, and influence. This isn't about rejoining the EU. But it is about having the tools to manage a transnational challenge, and the means to deal with it credibly.

Because by the time small boats reach the Channel, it's already too late. Managing migration means acting upstream, at the source, at the borders, and through coordinated returns. That means: serious countries, facing serious problems, regain control not through isolation but through coordination that delivers.

Energy: Self-sufficiency is a dream - resilience through cooperation is the reality

In the current political climate, the appeal of energy self-sufficiency is easy to understand. Faced with volatile prices and geopolitical shocks, many voters and arguably some politicians would like a return to something simpler: drilling in the North Sea, reopening coal mines, burning what we can extract. At least that way, the thinking goes, we wouldn't be dependent on anyone else.

But the reality is less comforting. The fossil fuel era is not ending because of ideology. It is ending because of hard economics. The UK is now a net importer of gas.¹⁴ Domestic production in the North Sea is declining.¹⁵ New drilling would only make a difference to gas production 'around the edges.'¹⁶ Even amid war in Ukraine and a Trump presidency, global capital is moving out of hydrocarbons and into clean energy.¹⁷

Burning more is not the answer. At best, domestic fossil fuels might soften short-term volatility. But they will not deliver energy security in a structurally unstable market, nor will they make the UK competitive in the global energy economy that is now emerging. And whilst a just transition will be essential, the transition is coming and we need to be prepared.

Because the future lies in building a clean energy system - from nuclear to renewables - that is stable, scalable, and shielded from global disruption. That means renewables and the infrastructure to support it: storage, grids and critical materials. These are complex systems, and no country - not even the largest - has the scale or financial clout to build them alone.

The UK is already losing out by going it alone. Unless the UK moves toward closer cooperation with the EU on energy and climate, it's estimated that it will lead to additional costs of up to "£10bn this Parliament through higher energy bills and lower Treasury revenues."¹⁸

And this is where Europe matters. Following the invasion of Ukraine and changes to America's relationship with the world, the EU has recognised that energy is no longer just an environmental issue but also a question of strategic autonomy. It is investing in shared infrastructure, coordinating clean tech supply chains, and building resilience through scale.¹⁹ The UK, for now, is outside that system.

Britain of course has assets: offshore wind, innovation, finance, and industrial capability.²⁰ But these aren't just domestic strengths - they're **bargaining chips**. Europe's energy system benefits from UK participation just as much as the UK benefits from scale. But to unlock their full potential, they must connect into something bigger.

This is the logic: Not a choice between green and secure, but a choice between participating in a stable, clean, and modern energy system - or betting on a declining fossil economy that no longer delivers security, affordability, or control.

Disinformation: The silent erosion of sovereignty

Over the past decade, the manipulation of public opinion through false or misleading narratives has become a routine feature of geopolitics. The aim is not necessarily to convince, but to confuse; to undermine trust in democratic institutions, fracture the political centre, and destabilise electoral systems from within.

This is not a uniquely British problem. Disinformation campaigns have targeted elections²¹ in the United States, referendums in Europe, and public health efforts around the world.²²

In this environment, the UK finds itself exposed. Populist narratives around migration, cost of living, and political legitimacy thrive in this atmosphere - not because they are always based on falsehoods, but because they are amplified by systems that reward outrage, repetition, and polarisation.

Disinformation is not simply a matter of misleading content. It is a challenge to national coherence. And at times, it serves foreign policy objectives. Russia, in particular, has used cyber warfare as a tool of statecraft - seeking not to win arguments, but to delegitimise democratic processes themselves.²³ China is equally becoming 'increasingly assertive' in this space.²⁴ The emergence of generative AI only accelerates this dynamic, making credible disinformation cheap, fast, and difficult to contain.

In this context, the idea that the UK can defend its informational sovereignty alone is increasingly outdated. European countries have begun to coordinate responses - developing early warning systems, election protection protocols, and platform accountability measures. The EU's Digital Services Act (for all its imperfections) reflects an understanding that the information environment is now part of national infrastructure²⁵ and that in confronting cyber challenges, partnership is not a weakness. It is the precondition of strength.

The UK, however, sits on the edge of these developments. It is not part of shared warning networks. It does not yet coordinate systematically on platform regulation. And while it retains strong capabilities in cybersecurity, they are deployed in relative isolation.

This gap matters. The distinction between internal and external threats is eroding. A domestic grievance amplified by a foreign network can generate as much disruption as a state-backed assault on public services or the energy grid.

And so if our new relationship with Europe is to be serious about protecting sovereignty, it has to include the space where that sovereignty is now most easily undermined.

Where Britain Stands: The Four Tests of Sovereignty

Scores reflect the UK's current and expected ability to protect its interests through cooperation with the EU (1 = exposed and isolated, 5 = real influence and full benefit of collective strength).

Policy area	Current UK–EU strategic coordination		Movement expected at the Summit	
Defence	Minimal structured cooperation. The UK is outside EU defence planning, procurement, and funding mechanisms like the €150bn ReArm Europe plan and SAFE initiative. Existing engagement limited to ad hoc coordination and dialogue under the TCA.	2/5	A new Defence and Security Pact is expected on Monday, but it is not yet expected to include UK access to the SAFE initiative - which would allow pooled procurement and coordinated defence investment - due to ongoing objections from France, linked to unresolved issues such as post-Brexit fishing rights.	3/5
Migration	The UK is no longer part of key EU systems including Eurodac (fingerprint database), the Schengen Information System (SIS), and the Dublin III Regulation, which previously enabled returns to the first EU country of entry. While a working arrangement with Frontex exists, it is purely technical - no joint deployments or data sharing. UK responses remain reactive and isolated.	1/5	The UK has asked to re-establish access to core EU databases like Eurodac and SIS, but this has been rejected. Talks are ongoing around a youth mobility scheme, but that is unlikely to progress without reciprocal movement on border systems. Bilateral deals on “return hubs” being explored with Albania, North Macedonia, and others. Useful step upstream, but no movement on core data-sharing systems. UK still outside the architecture that enables early identification, tracking, and returns. Risks duplicating effort without gaining full strategic capability meaning the UK remains outside the infrastructure that manages migration before it reaches the Channel.	2/5
Energy	The UK is no longer part of the EU's Internal Energy Market. Electricity trading is less efficient, and energy systems are poorly coordinated.	2/5	The UK and EU are expected to commit to relinking their ETS, which would improve investment certainty and remove the risk of carbon border levies. Ongoing cooperation exists on electricity interconnection and gas security, but no formal integration.	3/5

Disinformation	The UK is outside EU frameworks like the Digital Services Act, has no access to early warning systems, and doesn't systematically coordinate on platform regulation or election protection. Whilst the UK's cybersecurity capacity is strong, it is deployed in isolation.	1/5	No formal proposals expected, but there is growing urgency around platform regulation and election protection. The UK risks becoming a weak link in Europe's informational defence unless cooperation frameworks on cyber and disinformation are developed. As threats grow, isolation here makes the UK slower to detect and easier to target.	1/5
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A sovereign strategy for a fragmented world

The world Britain faces today is not one of stable alliances, predictable threats, or clear-cut choices. It is fragmented, fast-moving, and defined by interlocking pressures - from migration to energy insecurity, from cyber manipulation to the return of war in Europe. In this world, the old story of self-reliance - appealing though it remains - no longer stacks up.

What this paper argues is not that the UK must rejoin the European Union. It is that **Britain must step up as a serious power again** - by recognising that control, in this era, comes not from standing apart, but from helping shape the systems around and about us.

This is not a retreat. It is a strategic response to fragmentation.

Some of the public may still be sceptical of "Europe." But they're not sceptical of control, security, stability, or sovereignty. **This case offers the framework through which those goals should now be pursued.** And Britain should shape it from within, not watch it take shape without us.

On *defence*, it means stepping up to shape the systems that will increasingly define Britain's own security and help Europe as a whole to become a credible military actor, able to deter threats without over-reliance on the United States, restoring presence in operational cooperation on borders and aligning procurement rules.

On *migration*, it means being part of the systems that track, process, and return people before they reach the UK, rather than firefighting a crisis at Dover that started a thousand miles away.

On *energy*, it means recognising that resilience now lies in scale: shared grids, shared supply chains, shared investment as well as speaking the language of security when talking about energy.

And on *disinformation*, it means realising that in today's connected world, public trust, political legitimacy and national resilience are all shaped online - and defending it will require alliances as robust as those built for physical threats.

The political choice facing Britain is not between Europe and independence. It is between **relevance and retreat**. Between leading the next phase of European cooperation - or living with the consequences of its direction, defined by others.

There is no return to a world before war in Europe and a changed United States because that world no longer exists. But there is a path forward. It is one built not on nostalgia, but on a sober reading of power: how it moves, who shapes it, and what happens to countries that fall out of its current. That is the case for a new kind of UK-EU partnership. Not sentimental. Not institutional. Strategic.

Footnotes

- ¹ <https://www.bruegel.org/policy-brief/governance-and-funding-european-rearmament>
- ² <https://www.politico.eu/article/us-dominates-european-weapons-purchases-report/>
- ³ <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/news/article/a-fragmented-defence-industrial-base-is-holding-back-eu-armament>
- ⁴ <https://www.bruegel.org/policy-brief/governance-and-funding-european-rearmament>
- ⁵ <https://www.bruegel.org/policy-brief/governance-and-funding-european-rearmament>
- ⁶ <https://www.ft.com/content/08a57b8f-2965-41c9-b39e-3cdb9723786c>
- ⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_25_793
- ⁸ <https://www.ft.com/content/08a57b8f-2965-41c9-b39e-3cdb9723786c>
- ⁹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c5y45dmq2pjo>
- ¹⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-december-2024/how-many-people-claim-asylum-in-the-uk>
- ¹¹ https://www.epc.eu/content/PDF/2022/EU-UK_post_Brexit_DP_v4.pdf?
- ¹² https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65d768b454f1e70011165897/Frontex-UK_WA_-_Final_version_2_.pdf
- ¹³ <https://www.politico.eu/article/european-commission-vice-president-margaritis-schinas-defends-frontex-migration-asylum-strategy/>
- ¹⁴ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66a7aeb0fc8e12ac3edb0646/DUKES_2024_Chapter_4.pdf
- ¹⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/fall-uk-north-sea-oil-rise-offshore-wind-2025-01-03/>
- ¹⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/article/2024/jul/01/north-sea-oil-transition-plan>
- ¹⁷ <https://www.iea.org/reports/world-energy-investment-2024/overview-and-key-findings>
- ¹⁸ <https://www.energy-uk.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Energy-UK-Explains-The-cost-of-inaction-on-Europe-October-2024.pdf>
- ¹⁹ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/747465/EPRS_BRI%282023%29747465_EN.pdf
- ²⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/invest-2035-the-uks-modern-industrial-strategy/invest-2035-the-uks-modern-industrial-strategy>
- ²¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/02/20/only-surefire-way-stop-foreign-interference-our-elections/>
- ²² <https://nypost.com/2020/10/16/russia-disinformation-says-uk-covid-vaccine-turns-people-into-monkeys/>
- ²³ <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russias-evolving-information-war-poses-a-growing-threat-to-the-west/>
- ²⁴ <https://www.gchq.gov.uk/news/cyberuk-2024>
- ²⁵ https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/digital-services-act_en

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