

The Government has issued an inadequate response to a petition about its plans to align with EU defence rules and policies.

The Government was obliged to give an answer to a petition which stated, 'Hold a UK referendum before joining any defence and security pact with the EU'. It went on to say, 'The UK Government is seeking a UK-EU security pact. We are concerned that such a decision could affect UK sovereignty and should be subject to a vote of the whole country before it can be implemented.'

The response from the Government which was several weeks late according to statutory requirements, is outlined below in red, followed by comments.

Although the response was labelled 'Ministry of Defence' it has not come from the UK Armed Forces. Instead, all answers relating this matter are drafted by civil servants in the 'Euro-Atlantic Policy Unit', which is located at the Foreign Office (FCDO) and has powers to speak on behalf of the Ministry of Defence.

#### Government responded:

The UK and the EU agreed a Security and Defence Partnership at the UK-EU Summit to strengthen our continent's security. The UK retains full sovereign control over how it engages with EU initiatives.

They can say this now because the UK retains full sovereign control at present – until it joins the second deal they are planning for later this year. At that point, engagement means the UK is under EU rules and is not in full sovereign control.

The UK civil servants may also claim that the UK 'retains control' even after joining EU rules, because the UK would technically retain a right to leave those rules. However, this right would be difficult to use because of penalties the EU will be able to impose by using the agreement's links to other parts of the EU-UK agreement.

The Government would like to thank the members of the public that have engaged with this issue at this once-in-a-generation moment for the collective security of our country and continent.

Are they referring to a 'once-in-a-generation' chance to accept EU rules? Efforts to align the UK with EU rules seem to happen on an annual basis.

Global instability, Russian aggression, climate change and rapid technological disruption are all contributing to a more challenging security landscape that requires all of Europe to work cooperatively to safeguard our security.

The UK already works with European partners via NATO, so this is a non-argument for taking EU rules.

NATO is, and will remain, the cornerstone of Europe's collective defence. But the European Union (EU) has an important role to play.

This line, 'the EU has an important role to play', provides a crucial insight into civil servants' world view. However, they do not explain why they think the EU has a role in defence or what role they think that is. They offer no further information on this point.

The Government has been committed since coming to power to strengthening the UK's security and defence relationship with the European Union, as part of the wider EU 'Reset' which was set out in its election manifesto.

This is not accurate, for several reasons. Firstly, the Labour manifesto featured one line, as follows, mentioning 'security' but not 'defence':

*Labour will seek an ambitious new UK-EU security pact to strengthen co-operation on the threats we face.*

Secondly, the Labour manifesto did not say that this pact would be 'part of the wider EU Reset'. The manifesto does not describe the pact as being linked to wider legal arrangements at all, so there is no manifesto mandate to do so. This is an important point because the Government's decision to link the defence pact to the wider EU-UK agreement provides the EU with powers to enforce and retain the defence pact on their terms. This makes the UK's right to exit the pact much more difficult to use.

As a first step in strengthening our security and defence relationship, the UK and the EU agreed a Security and Defence Partnership (SDP) at the UK-EU Summit on 19 May in London.

This is an honest line revealing that the so-called 'Security and Defence Partnership' is only a 'first step' – therefore, it is not the major moment that the PM and ministers had been heralding.

The civil servants use the term SDP and choose not to use the formal name for this type of agreement, which the EU has been using: a 'Security and Defence NBI'. The EU's rules reveal the purpose of an NBI, which is that it 'provides for the possibility for third countries (non-EU countries) to participate in common procurements under its framework'. Under its framework relates to the framework of rules governing a part of EU defence procurement and EU loans. In other words, the NBI allows for the EU to impose (and for the UK to accept) a bigger agreement later to accept EU rules.

The SDP sets the framework for a new era of cooperation between the UK and the EU across a broad range of issues that were not covered by the UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement. The Government looks forward to working closely with EU partners to implement the SDP in ways that strengthen our long-term security and prosperity. The SDP has been designed to complement our core bilateral security partnerships and to support the Government's NATO First policy, recognising that NATO remains the cornerstone of Euro-Atlantic Security.

These assertions are made without any justification or explanation.

Aside from this, the assertions are also inaccurate. The NBI does nothing to support a NATO-first approach, in fact it takes the UK in the opposite direction, by preparing the UK to accept rules and decision-making at an EU level rather than independently in the UK and via our strong, UK-owned presence in NATO.

A renewed defence and security relationship between the UK and the EU makes Europe safer and ensures the interests of the British people and British industry continue to be represented at the highest level across our continent, through increased regular engagement with EU leaders.

An independent UK which places much of its defence and defence industrial decision-making with the EU does not make itself stronger or better represented – instead the UK places itself under the direction of the EU.

While the SDP is ambitious and creates a strong basis for strengthening UK-EU cooperation, the UK retains full sovereign control over where and how it engages with EU initiatives and how it brings the EU into our national activities. The EU, similarly, has full control over its decision-making. All future cooperation enabled by the SDP will be in-line with our respective decision-making processes whilst strengthening the security of our shared continent at this generational moment for our collective security.

There's that line 'retains full sovereign' control again.

However, it is followed by another honest line, 'it brings the EU into our national activities'. This reversal of the UK's self-governance requires a specific mandate from the electorate and that is why the petition called for a referendum on the issue of the EU-UK defence relationship.

In conclusion, this Government response:

- a. does not provide the full details of what they are doing, details which even the EU is providing.
- b. does not provide justifications for joining EU arrangements and rules.
- c. does not answer the question of whether the public will have any say in the matter.
- d. does not indicate whether the public will be told the full details and consequences at all.
- e. does not indicate whether the Houses of Parliament will be provided full details and consequences or whether such information will be subject to a debate or vote.

The concealment evident in this response indicates that, just like in 2019, senior civil servants have no appetite to disclose their plans for EU alignment on defence.