

## The UK-France defence relationship

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**Neighbours and traditional military partners, with similar ambitions and responsibilities, France and the United Kingdom are subject to strategic constraints that bring them close together. The author argues in favour of a Franco-British response to twenty-first century conflict through the building of a new core of defence cooperation to which their European neighbours would surely be drawn.**

**As part of its strategy of geopolitical synergy, *diploweb.com* is pleased to present this article, which first appeared in *Revue Défense Nationale*, May 2010.**

THOSE charged with managing the defence enterprise throughout Western Europe find themselves facing a perfect storm of challenges. They must negotiate a myriad range of threats and seize fleeting strategic opportunities. Otherwise they run the risk of being sidelined as the new world structures are written by forces that may at best bypass them, at worst trample them underfoot.

All this must be carried through in a political environment of popular distrust of institutions, disengagement with political parties and overwhelming fiscal tightening.

## **The United Kingdom and France—similar views of an uncertain world**

The two leading defence powers in the region, the United Kingdom and France, have both recently addressed the nature of the threat, and have gone some way towards setting a course to meet it. Their individual positions are characterised by a mix of fundamental certainties and uncertainties.

The French White Paper on defence and national security and the UK's Green Paper 'Issues for the Strategic Defence Review' both describe the complex strategic environment. They paint a picture of a Western Europe that is uncertain of its place in the world and unclear of how to manage its relative decline :

- . Certain that the current range of global institutions, set in place very much by the Europeans alongside their US ally, are insufficient in themselves for the changed nature of global interactions but uncertain of how to influence the transformation of those models of global governance.
- . Certain that the traditional tools of influence (such as military power, economic preferment and government sponsored cultural links) should be augmented by new levers (such as tertiary education provision, the strength of their civil society structures) ; but uncertain as to how to marshal these behind a meaningful, centrally directed plan.
- . And most of all, certain that the old systems of friends and alliances is not sufficient to carry through into the new regime, but uncertain as to where, how, and at what price, to reach out to form new relationships, and to develop anew old ones.

Both the French White Paper and the UK MoD's Green Paper are fine examples of what the defence and security thinkers in each country can produce. There is not much to argue with in

their description of the nature of the world and the threat environment in which the two nations find themselves. I would not want to add to their analysis, but rather to synthesise from both these reports as well as the many others including the recent Institute for Public Policy Research report for which I was the co-chair.

## **Defence and security and the three angles on global transformation**

‘Defence’ used to be a relatively simple challenge—even if, in the ages of mutually assured destruction, the stakes were existentially high. The enemy was safely outside the gates—and all we needed were strong walls, powerful armed forces and good allies to keep him there. We had a simplified set of opponents, with symmetrical aims and capabilities. Campaigns in which French or British service personnel lost their lives, such as Northern Ireland, Malaysia or Algeria, were sideshows and we managed our military engagements whilst still focusing on the main effort of preventing a Soviet occupation of West Germany.

Defence was a distinct and separate part of government. Defence civil servants viewed themselves as different their ‘civil’ government colleagues. In the UK MoD there was even an acronym—OGD for ‘Other Government Departments’—emphasising that defence was different. Defence ministries and armed forces contended with the need to reform, to become more efficient, to balance the preservation of military effectiveness and élan against the need to develop value for money. Above all ‘defence’ was virtually synonymous with ‘security’. This is no longer the case.

Finance and foreign ministries were the first to encroach into defence business, either to control expenditure or to manage withdrawal from empires and retain leverage over the new ex-colonies. The paradigm was still one in which security was centred on the nation-state and its territorial integrity. Now, we have moved to a world where the focus for security is no longer the state, but has become the citizen. The role of the state within security has become that of an enabler, facilitating its citizens as they go about their lives and business free from threats. This takes responsibility for security within government away from being solely—or even primarily—a defence ministry business and draws in other departments of state : interior, international development, health, transport, even agriculture and education and so on.

I have characterised these changes by looking at three domains in which the world is transforming. Loosely, they are : the vertical distribution of power, the horizontal distribution of power and the interconnectedness of events.

The vertical distribution of power is about what shapes, controls and influences the sense of security of our citizens. In the old paradigm, security came from decisions made in Whitehall or the City of Light. National governments held most of the levers. Those they did not hold directly, they negotiated for on our collective behalf at international conferences, in treaty-based institutions or in discussion with public service providing industries in which they often held golden shares, or exerted direct control. Local government, tied by the codes of party loyalty, implemented central government direction to ensure policing, education and social cohesion conformed to the central plan.

This world of the all-powerful central government has been replaced. Power has leached

upwards to supranational structures. Power has leached downwards to the Internet empowered individual and the intermediary institutions that sit between him and her and state government such as local and regional government. And power has leached upwards and downwards to shareholder owned companies that are providers of services vital to every individual's way of life.

Power is also shifting horizontally. By this I mean the centre of gravity of world events is moving inexorably away from the North Atlantic coast—where it has resided for at least the last 200 years, and arguably the last 500 years. This is not just about the economic power of the BRICs—or rather the BICs since I would not count Russia in the same category as Brazil, India and China. Nor is it simply a reflection of the G20, or even the G2. It is about the cultural influence of Bollywood ; it is about Korea as a high-tech innovation centre ; it is about Dubai as a financial hub (if severely weakened) ; it is about South African leadership of the African Union.

Global governance is no longer a situation in which the North Atlantic powers—of which the principal ones are of course the United States, France and the United Kingdom—are able to write the rules of the game and then insist that everyone else follows them. As the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trades morphed into the World Trade Organisation, so the balance of membership shifted from the Atlantic nations (and their colonies) that were the founders of GATT. The others, variously described as 'The Third World', 'The Developing World' or 'Less Developed Countries', set up their own arrangements, and lobbied from the sidelines through pressure groups and reports such as the Brandt Report. Now India and China, and Indonesia and Nigeria, are at the heart of the affairs in their regions, and increasingly globally as well.

The final change dimension is one of interconnectedness. In some ways this emerges from my observations about the vertical and horizontal distributions of power.

When power was focused at the nation-state level, and the Western nation-state at that, there was a simplicity to the interaction between citizens and their state. The range of opinions and views they were exposed to was limited by what could be printed in ink and distributed by horse or train. The businesses that employed them were generally limited in their ownership by rules restricting the flow of capital. Trade, often conducted on terms dictated by the Western powers, was a simple set of transfers of finished goods and raw materials—accompanied by gold to balance payments.

And, to paraphrase Neville Chamberlain, most of the troubles in the world could be dismissed as 'a quarrel in a far-away country between people of whom we know nothing'. This is most dramatically no longer the case.

The combined impact of these three domains is to upset the concept of a world split into status quo powers and revisionist powers. Status quo is no longer an option, and all powers must accept a transformation of the way of working in the world.

## **Shared national interests ?**

For the men and women of Westminster, Whitehall, the Assemblée Nationale and the Paris ministries these are the characteristics of the world through which they must navigate their

often reluctant and mistrusting nations. To pursue their national interests, they must negotiate a path of compromise and trading, with new allies, each with different, often contradictory goals.

We are moving away from an era dominated by the fixed points of great alliances, and into one in which foreign policy will be characterised by a much more subtle, shifting pattern of alliances and relationships—far more like the Europe of Talleyrand, Metternich and Canning of the nineteenth century than the mono-polar world of the last fifty years of the twentieth.

What might those ‘national interests’ of France and the United Kingdom be? Beyond the immediate tactical decisions around specific issues, the needs of the two nations are dominated by the need for free access around the world; by the need to see the Four Freedoms that underpin the European Union (the free movement of goods, capital, services and people) operating at a global level. Other European allies may be focused on all of those freedoms at a regional level—such as the Euro-Mediterranean for the challenges posed by the movement of people—or a few of the freedoms at global level—such as Germany with its need for the free movement of goods and services globally and its search for energy security. But in Europe only the United Kingdom and France must be able to meet all the challenges across the whole globe.

Just as the national interests align, so too do the capabilities that the nations have developed to push forward these interests.

The spread of their diplomatic missions is unparalleled by other EU partners.

The coverage of their media outlets—such as the BBC or France24—is way beyond those of Germany or Spain or Italy.

The cultural ties from old empires—the Commonwealth, the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie—dwarf similar establishments in Spain or Portugal or the Netherlands.

And the military capabilities, expressed in terms of investment in defence, use of defence assets to influence world events, and sheer military reputation and élan leave the rest of Europe trailing in their wake. They are also the only nuclear-capable West European states.

There are strong parallels internally between the United Kingdom and France. Parallels in how they have grappled with maintaining strategic reach whilst social security and other public goods have taken larger and larger shares of the national revenue. Similarities in how the machinery of government has grappled with—and largely failed to meet—the challenge of a world no longer neatly matched by government departments. And strong correlations between the challenges faced in delivering efficient military capability from both the Armed Forces and the industrial capacity behind them.

In my judgement, both countries could come out stronger and more effective at shaping the world if they were to work more closely across the full spectrum of security. And if they fail to operate together, then individually they will not be able to make the impact that they need in order to advance their individual mutual interests.

## Competing relationships

A closer UK-France defence and security relationship is often portrayed as being at the expense of the other alliances that the two nations have developed. The United Kingdom is often portrayed as having to choose between the United States and Europe. France is characterised from having committed itself to a Franco-German alliance to shape continental Europe. And in the search for new allies in the complex world of the twentieth century, would not the two nations be better to search out allies that represent the future—India for the United Kingdom, Brazil or the Gulf States for France. I think these are false choices that are created in order to shut down argument.

The United Kingdom and France can be both effective partners to each other and a better partner to the United States—indeed it is now very clear that that is the way the new Administration sees it too. I have argued elsewhere that Britain's influence in Washington will only work if it is strengthened with other European voices—of which France is the most vital in defence and security. The United States, particularly under President Obama's team, is deeply practical and deeply unsentimental about Europe. They will look to all potential partners and judge them by what they can bring to the party. Their judgements about Europe—a continent on which there are still 24,000 US soldiers doing what arguably ought to be done by the hosts—are potentially damning.

As for the new allies, or reinvigorated old allies, again I do not see these as binary choices. Both the United Kingdom and France must invest in strengthening relationships with India—this is not some reincarnation of the Seven Years War or the Fashoda incident in which the two nations compete to gain control over the local rulers. Nor, with the exception of a few totemic issues, is this a zero-sum game. Both the United Kingdom and France have an interest in ensuring that India, and the other transition states, take a full and balanced role in shaping the new structures of global governance, in line with the national interests set out above—the global Four Freedoms.

## Dreams into reality

Before I examine how a UK-France response could be developed, I would like to set out the limits of what I am proposing, and what I do not foresee. I do not argue for a single UK-France military capability—a single aircraft carrier that alternately flies the White Ensign and the Tricolour. I am not arguing for a solution in which the two nations develop separate capabilities that can only operate together. Either of these would require the agreement of both governments at the moment of decision on the use of force, and agreement for the duration of the force deployment. Both the United Kingdom and France have, quite rightly, reserved the right to act independently where necessary.

I am not pressing for an immediate enhanced role for the institutions of the European Union. I do not believe this is likely to be achieved by ex cathedra dictates from Brussels. It is far more likely to be successful if it grows organically through practical cooperation between Europe's most important defence players. By forming a new 'St-Malo plus' magnetic core on defence cooperation, other European nations—even the most powerful ones—will not be able to ignore the lead set by the United Kingdom and France, and will see it in their interest to join.

I write this on the day the UK general election has been called. Were Britain to elect a Conservative government, it would, I believe, be interested in a Franco-British axis on defence but as an alternative to a Brussels dimension—not as a better means of getting to one. That, I think, would be to diminish hugely the strategic potential of the kind of relationship I envisage.

The EU has excelled itself in developing and expanding a free market which has been beneficial to all its members. It has allowed a sense of freedom and unity that have never been seen before on a Continent-wide scale. But it is not structured for defence, and to do so would require such a radical rewiring that it is unlikely to happen in my lifetime. The 27 members simply do not have a sufficiently shared view of their place in the world for the EU to be an effective interlocutor.

Various EU institutions have attempted to carve out a defence and security role—the most notable of these are under the banner of European Security and Defence Policy and its various incarnations, such as the European Defence Agency. Too often hampered by the reluctance of member states, including the United Kingdom, to support them, these institutions have struggled to survive, let alone influence or shape the defence enterprise. And if success is measured in terms of deployability of European capability under the umbrella of the EU, then I do not think ESDP can be judged favourably.

The approaches attempted so far have failed, but the underlying challenge of how to get military utility from the combined action of the individual member states remains.

So what would a UK-France alignment look like, and how could it be made to work? I believe the answer lies in a combination of small steps, based around shared needs and shared agendas. And the answer lies in political leadership. I will look at each in turn.

The French talk about 'knowledge and anticipation' as a strategic function and have grappled with how to organise their collection and assessment agencies and then link with the policy-makers and decision-takers. Similar problems can be found in the United Kingdom, with the additional challenge of dealing with the aftermath of the Iraq war and perception of the politicisation of intelligence.

Contacts between the collection agencies, particularly on the protective security elements (epitomised by the Security Service MI5 in the United Kingdom), are also strong. Intelligence, especially human intelligence, is by its nature a matter of cultural affinity and trust. Given the colonial legacies of the United Kingdom and France, their liaisons and access to foreign agencies are often complementary.

Whilst sharing of covert sources and techniques may well be a step too far, better awareness of each others' open-source information, coupled with sharing of assessments and a culture of 'UK-FR Eyes Only' would provide richer sources for both sides and provide another opportunity to challenge the perceived wisdom within each intelligence community.

Within the military sphere there is opportunity for more overt cooperation. There may well be a challenge in matching approaches—there is much truth in the caricature of the British as overly pragmatic, willing to do things without understanding the direction of travel, whereas the French need to know the end point before deciding on the steps to be taken to get there. But the military sphere provides a space in which combinations of equipment, people and

processes—the UK doctrinal triad of physical, conceptual and moral components of fighting power—can each be examined for improved ways of achieving an impact.

A first base would be supporting the equipment capability baseline. The United Kingdom has developed a number of approaches that have resonance for the French. The development of a joint logistics capability, both in peacetime and on operations, has enabled the UK MoD to make significant savings. Similarly, bringing financial discipline and complex modelling to the support required for individual platforms has also provided very quick dividends. Sharing this level of expertise ought to be already under way. A closer alignment between the United Kingdom and France would enable the next steps in terms of identifying how a joint supply chain, in which the combined assets of both nations' armies were managed, might function. Again, the potential savings would be significant.

Equipment itself is often seen as an important source of savings that could be taken. Often the focus is on either sharing a platform (such as the carrier) or having a common platform (such as armoured vehicles). Critics point to the high-profile failures of multilateral procurement. The failures are too common, as success requires the alignment of three crucial elements : capability need, financial resources and national industrial capacity. Standards and commonality are set at NATO level and no further thought is given to interoperability during the concept and assessment phases. However, opportunities do exist.

If we begin to insist on UK-FR interoperability, starting at component level, and as part of mid-life upgrade plans, then we can transition to a situation where UK and French equipment fleets will not be fully common, but will have a high degree of commonality of parts. Couple that with a similar approach to support, including use of contractors on deployed operations, and you enter a world where a UK armoured fighting vehicle could pull into a French Army base in Afghanistan and receive a complete in-theatre overhaul. I would like to see this being part of the mind-set of the British Future Rapid Effects System and French VBCI wheeled armoured infantry fighting vehicle programmes.

On the carrier programme, I think the United Kingdom is going to find it very difficult to sufficiently prioritise the resources necessary to keep two fully fitted carriers. Some form of lower cost, compromise option will need to be explored by the UK MoD and the supplier fairly soon. This may lead to a modular approach, in which the hulls are the same, but they can be reconfigured for different roles (aircraft carrier, helicopter carrier, command vessel) at certain levels of readiness. The savings that could be achieved by doing this for the United Kingdom are potentially large. The savings that could be achieved by taking the same approach to a second French carrier, perhaps even a level of commonality of modules, would be even greater.

Such an approach leads me to discuss the industrial steps that could be taken, and the benefits. Both countries have significant defence industrial sectors—significant both in terms of the percentage of their national defence equipment manufactured on shore, but also significant as exporters, and therefore supporting the promotion of their respective national interests. The overcapacity of the European defence sector is a well-aided argument, as are the calls for a European equivalent of the famous 'Night of the Long Knives' in the United States under Bill Clinton, which led to a major rationalisation of the US industrial base. The simple maths of the declining European defence spend, coupled with the entry into the global market

of cheaper exporters (such as Mahindra from India or Singapore Technologies Kinetics) will mean that the European industrial base will have to change. Both the United Kingdom and France will want to manage that change in order to do the best for their respective industries. This could be seen as driving a competitive approach—epitomised by the Eurofighter *Typhoon* v *Rafale* export battles.

As the only two big spenders on defence, the United Kingdom and France have the opportunity to set the conditions for the whole of the European defence industrial base. By beginning discussions on the relative areas of strength (research, technology, manufacturing expertise) as well as open discussions on the need for sovereignty, they will be able to provide a clear set of signals to the defence industry on the areas for future growth, investment priorities. They will also provide a level of clarity on the role that the two governments are likely to want to play in the future shaping of the market. Crucially, this must reach beyond the major defence primes and 'national champions' and provide direction and support for the small and medium-sized enterprises that are clearly vital to the supply chains, and often the source of much innovation. As a long-term aspiration, there should be a UK-France Defence Industrial Strategy, covering all the issues that the UK DIS of 2005 so ably tackled.

## **Conclusion—the need for political investment**

The examples above are concrete steps, but they do require management and direction. In particular they require political direction. Mechanisms for UK-French political alignment, such as the current ministerial High-Level Working Group, have too often symbolised the mismatch. The French invest time and effort and political heavyweights. The United Kingdom regards it as an encumbrance and directs a junior minister who is not long for the defence department to represent it, with a clear measure of success being 'no commitments entered into'. This must change.

Both governments are under pressure at present. By the time this article is published the United Kingdom may well have a new Prime Minister. So might France. Both countries are facing budget challenges, with calls for cuts in government spending especially loud north of the Channel.

A renewed British government, of whatever colour or combination of colours, will need to re-examine defence and security, and take forward the concept of partnerships.

That will require investing political capital and time. It will require the identification of politicians and officials who will develop and champion the agenda. It will require a living programme of near-term targets, setting out what success looks like for the no doubt sceptical (or even hostile) elements of the political and media landscape. And it will require—as really big things nearly always do—a lot of luck !

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## P.-S.

Lord Paddy Ashdown has been a Royal Marine, diplomat, statesman and writer. He was the leader of the UK Liberal Democrats from 1988 to 1999 and High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina from 2002 to 2006. He continues to be actively engaged in debates and policies in the field of international relations, security and defence. He is an adviser to the strategic advisory firm Defence Strategy and Solutions, with whom he has been working on the themes developed in this essay.