

Britain and France

Bringing strategic sanity back to Europe?

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“Il n’y a pas de liberté, il n’y a pas d’égalité, il n’y a pas de fraternité sans sécurité.”

President Nicolas Sarkozy, 2008¹

The one hundredth anniversary of the 1911 Agadir Crisis in which Britain and France together faced down a challenge by Wilhelmine Germany also marks a century of complex but by and large consistent strategic cooperation between Europe’s only true world powers. On November 2, 2010 London and Paris agreed the Defence and Security Cooperation Treaty. On the face of it the accord is by and large military-technical: to develop cooperation between British and French Armed Forces, to promote the sharing and pooling of materials and equipment including through mutual interdependence, leading to the building of joint facilities, together with mutual access to each other’s defence markets, through the promotion of industrial and technological cooperation. However, as with all things Franco-British the devil is in the strategy. This accord, like so many that has gone before, is really about the need to lead Europe back to strategy sanity.

It will not be easy. Almost all the anchor points of traditional European strategy have failed. For the first time in half a millennium Europe is neither the centre of power or conflict in the world; American leadership which for so long provided an alibi for European strategic indolence is uncertain and focused elsewhere; Russia is a critical energy partner rather than critically dangerous and most Europeans do not know where the state ends and Europe’s institutions begin. Furthermore, after a decade of Asian growth the strengths of oriental competitors are routinely and wildly exaggerated, whilst Europe’s own weaknesses and introspection are equally ‘fashionable.’ With much of North Africa and the Middle East on fire and after twenty years of identity-sapping mass immigration Europe’s contemporary ‘security’ appears on the face of it to have little to do with military firepower. Indeed, the apparent inability of America’s hyper-military to secure Afghanistan or Iraq has reinforced the sense that for Europe much of its security is as ‘soft’ as the form of power Europeans contemporaneously champion.

Europe’s woolly power

The retreat into what might be perhaps called ‘woolly power’ is supported by the facts. NATO’s European nations have a combined gross domestic product (GDP) of €12.5 trillion compared with the U.S. GDP of €10 trillion or some 124 per cent of the U.S. total. However, the combined 2009 defence budgets of European NATO members totalled €188 billion compared with the 2009 U.S. defence budget of €503 billion. NATO Europe thus spends some 37 per cent of the U.S. expenditure on defence. Sixteen of the twenty-six European NATO members spend less than €4 billion per annum and much of it inefficiently with the ratios between personnel and equipment budgets particularly perverse, with too many bloated headquarters, top-heavy command chains and out-dated formations. Between 2001

and 2008 NATO Europe spending on defence fell from €255 to €223 billion (not adjusted for defence cost inflation).

However, of that €188 billion France and the UK together represent 43 per cent or €80.6 billion, whilst France, Germany and the UK represent 61 per cent or €114.2 billion and the so-called 'big three' spend 88 per cent of all defence research and development in NATO Europe. And here's the rub: over roughly the same period the U.S. has increased its defence expenditure by 109 per cent, China by 247 per cent, Russia by 67 per cent and Australia by 56 per cent. In other words, Europeans might have been trying to talk themselves out of the more dangerous trade in power, but the rest of the world seems to have missed the point. Therefore, one defining feature of the hyper-competitive contemporary multi-polar, globalised world of the twenty-first century is the belief on the part of non-Europeans that credible and capable militaries remain a fundamental currency for power and influence.

Placed in that context the Franco-British treaty begins to make European strategic sense. There is of course an added twist: Britain and France, like so many Europeans (although with the notable exception of Germany) are facing severe financial pressures. Strategy and affordability are thus the twin mantras of cooperation between London and Paris and must be seen as such. There are two further factors driving London and Paris together. First, after ten years of following American leadership slavishly Britain today is a less secure place than it was on 10 September, 2001. It is a loss of faith reinforced by an Obama administration that is as unfriendly and uncommitted to the Special Relationship as any post-war American administration. Second, after twenty post-Cold War years trying to build a strategic defence partnership with Germany at the heart of European union, Paris is now profoundly concerned at both the pacifism and increasingly self-interested nature of Berlin's foreign and security policy.

Back to the future

Britain and France are going back to state-centric power basics. Gone are the theological debates over NATO or EU first. Rather, London and Paris want to re-establish a foundation for a new European military capability that in time will be able to operate where it will really matter – in the seams between land and sea and in and around the Mediterranean Sea and Indian Ocean which will be the epicentres of global power competition and European stability. It is military capability that will be designed to operate in a range of formats – EU, NATO, UN or simply under Franco-British coalition leadership. To that end, the 2010 British Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) calls for

“Greater sharing of military capabilities, technology and programmes and potentially more specialisation, working with key allies, including France, and based on appropriate formal guarantees where necessary.”²

Put simply, given the global context of Europe's contemporary security the security challenges faced by all Europeans are becoming ever more complex, while the forces and resources that can be devoted to security are increasingly squeezed as defence expenditure becomes discretionary in an age of austerity.

Therefore, only a true strategic partnership between the world's fifth and sixth largest economies and the second and third biggest cash spenders on defence stands any chance of

finally creating a European pole of security and defence power. This could in turn help reinvigorate and rebalance a tired transatlantic relationship. The Franco-British Treaty thus represents a revolutionary departure from traditional strategic norms for both London and Paris.

Equally, there is little nostalgic attachment (nor can there be) to past structures and relationships in the pursuit of influence in a world that is changing fast. Here those driving Britain and France to closer cooperation will meet institutional and political barriers. While the financial case for a renewed and intensified partnership is clear, the political and strategic imperatives on both sides of the Channel are less so. There are those in London who are so wedded to the unconditional 'followership' of America that accords with the never-to-be trusted French smack of heresy. In Paris the Gaullist wing of the French right balk at any structural cooperation with *l'albion perfide*.

Furthermore, whilst the West (and Europe) is suffering from a crisis of solidarity any Franco-British defence partnership must still necessarily accommodate Germany and avoid any suggestion that it seeks to exclude the United States. Moreover, institutions remain important levers of influence for both countries be it the EU, NATO, OSCE or the UN. However, what is clear from the accord is that such institutions are no longer ends in themselves and must be judged by their competence and utility as levers of influence. Lord Ismay's crisp objectives for NATO in the 1950's still resonate: NATO's purpose was to keep the Americans in, the Germans down and the Russians out.

Today Ismay would confirm the need to keep the United States constructively engaged with Europeans, to encourage the Germans to act and engage responsibly across the security spectrum, and to ensure that an apparatus is in place to deal with major rising and revisionist powers, such as India, China, Russia, and Brazil. Therefore, in an age of austerity whilst the affordability of defence will necessarily be at the heart of Anglo-French defence cooperation, such a relationship must reflect a realignment of respective national strategies.

Creating leadership hubs

Certainly the treaty takes at best tentative steps towards meaningful defence cooperation with much of the emphasis on the military tail rather than military teeth. However, it is noticeable that the treaty focuses not only on areas vital to the respective national influence of both countries, but also on those areas likely to create Franco-British leadership hubs.

These include easing the cost of strategic nuclear sovereignty, promoting naval strike cooperation as a step on the road to a European carrier battle group, creating a combined joint expeditionary force, better sharing of strategic intelligence, as well as defence-industrial convergence, specific project cooperation over 'big ticket' items such as strategic air lift and air-to-air refuelling and joint training.

Conclusion

Clearly, both countries have invested significant strategic ambition in an audacious political *démarche*. Why? Because ultimately both Britain and France understand fully that they are in relative and parallel decline, just as they implicitly recognised such decline back in 1911 and showed a radical willingness to combat such decline. Thus only through strong

partnerships can both London and Paris re-establish the prerequisite for influence vital to security. Franco-British defence cooperation is thus not just vital for London and Paris but for a Europe that is dangerously and strategically adrift. Indeed, joint purpose and effectiveness must be reflected in the contemporary strategy of two old powers that, together and apart, have shaped Europe and the modern world for over 300 years.

The alternative is stark. To paraphrase Neville Chamberlain, Britain and France are in danger of becoming small countries far away from the centre of power about which they know little, locked as they are too often in a parochial struggle for the leadership of a Europe that has declared itself to be dangerously irrelevant.

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1. Defense Industry Daily (2008).
2. Strategic Defence and Security Review, 19 October, 2010, p. 14. See www.direct.gov.uk.