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FORUM

The Anglo-French defence partnership after the “Brexit” vote: new incentives and new dilemmas

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Since the signing of the Lancaster House Treaties in 2010, the bilateral partnership between Paris and London has been a key axis for both countries' involvement in Europe's security and defence affairs. What impact can the result of the “Brexit” vote have on this rising partnership? This contribution argues that while the partnership will undoubtedly remain central in Europe, the two parties will in the future both face contradictory incentives. While London will have new incentives to invest in its relationship with Paris, it might also try to discourage further defence integration in the EU. On the contrary, France – which had been more forward leaning, and concerned with Britain's lack of commitment to a bilateral relationship they considered central – will be tempted to look elsewhere. Indeed, the ambition for a militarily active European Union with a strong defence industrial base may prove contradictory with an investment in the bilateral partnership with London.

Keywords: BREXIT; Defence; EU; France; UK

Introduction

Since the signing of the Lancaster House Treaties in 2010, the bilateral partnership between Paris and London has been a key axis for both countries' involvement in Europe's security and defence affairs. What impact can the result of the “Brexit” vote have on this rising partnership? This contribution first reviews the two countries' achievements since the treaties were signed, thus assessing the robustness and fragilities of their partnership, before moving on to the likely consequences of the “Brexit” vote. This contribution argues that while the partnership will undoubtedly remain central in Europe, the two parties will in the future both face contradictory incentives. While London will have new incentives to invest in its relationship with Paris, it might also try to discourage further defence integration in the EU. On the contrary, France – which had been more forward leaning, and concerned with Britain's lack of commitment to a bilateral relationship they considered central – will be tempted to look elsewhere. Indeed, the ambition for a militarily active European Union with a strong defence industrial base may prove contradictory with an investment in the bilateral partnership with London.

A more robust partnership: the foundations of Lancaster House

French and British rationales behind the 2010 Lancaster House Treaties

Recalling the rationales behind the signature of the Lancaster House treaties help us understand if and how the Franco-British defence and security partnership will resist “Brexit” (whatever this

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implies in practice). Some of these rationales were shared by the two parties at the time: economic constraints, and the need to do cooperation more efficiently than through the EU. Others were the not necessarily officialized national underlying intentions.

Diminishing economic resources were a key shared constraint that motivated governments to pursue defence cooperation. Both France and Britain had faced defence spending cuts since the end of the Cold War, which accelerated with the Economic crisis starting in 2008. This was especially the case on the British side: over the 1990s, defence spending had been cut by over 20% (Freedman, 2007, p. 618), while military forces were cut by one third (Chareyron, 2010, p. 9), and the 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review planned overall budget decrease of 8% by 2014 (Mölling & Brune, 2011, p. 37). In this context, bilateral cooperation was thought as a way to make savings, especially on new armament programmes and the pooling of existing equipment and of support resources, and the sharing of training infrastructures. To many observers, the economic rationale was so key in prompting the Lancaster House Treaties, that the agreements were said of sealing a new “Entente frugale” (*Financial Times*, 2010, p. 10).

The 2010 Lancaster House Treaties¹ also stemmed from disaffection with previous Anglo-French attempts at enhancing defence cooperation at the European level. The Saint Malo declaration of 1998 was key in the institutionalization of a European foreign and security (and eventually defence) policy. In the capability realm, Paris and London had instigated the OCCAr in 1996, the Helsinki Headline Goal in 1999, and the EDA in 2004. Thus, the Anglo-French axis was central, to such an extent that Schnapper wrote in 2010, “without that firm intention, the European defence identity could not have developed the way it has since the beginning of the 2000s” (Schnapper, 2010, p. 137). Gradually, however, the absence of support from other EU member states, diverging strategic priorities, unresolvable political-institutional deadlocks – including from the UK – created a general frustration, notably in France, about the CSDP.

Other arguments in favour of UK-French bilateral cooperation stemmed from rather national considerations. Indeed, a key rationale for the British government was to develop regional defence ties *outside the EU*. This was clearly the argument defended by Liam Fox, who was Shadow- and then Secretary of State for Defence during the period when the Lancaster House treaties were negotiated. The Conservatives argued that bilateral partnership with France could easily be de-correlated from “European defence”, or, as Fox put it: there was a possibility to have “defence cooperation with a country inside continental Europe that had nothing to do with the EU” (Liam Fox, personal communication, 12 March 2014). Quite opposite the idea of EU defence cooperation, the idea among Conservatives was to “tie France to a transatlantic view” via a partnership with London (Liam Fox, personal communication, 12 March 2014). Indeed, British governments had been gradually disengaging from the CSDP (especially CSDP operations and the EDA) since the mid-2000s, while at the same time constantly recalling the centrality of NATO and the “Special Relationship” with Washington as the cornerstones of the UK’s security. From that perspective, France’s reintegration of NATO’s integrated structures in 2009 thus lifted a previous – chiefly symbolic – stumbling block.

Another rationale was the French government’s desire to keep Europe’s other nuclear power alive and well. With the decreases in defence budgets mentioned above, and in the context of the 2010 General Election campaign, political parties in Britain were debating whether to renew the nuclear deterrent in its present form (*Trident* missiles) and maintain continuous-at-sea-deterrence, or to downsize it (Secretary of State for Defence & Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, 2006, p. 26). The re-assessment of Britain’s nuclear policy occurred at the same time as a resurfacing of international calls for nuclear disarmament – an initiative supported by US President Barack Obama in a speech he made in Prague in April 2009, calling for a world free of nuclear weapons (The White House, 2009). A UN Resolution was passed in that sense in September 2009. In this context, there was fear in France that, in the longer term, the UK may no longer

be a nuclear power, which would leave France isolated and more vulnerable to similar calls for nuclear disarmament (Bell, 2010; Borger & Norton-Taylor, 2010).

Achievements since 2010 – and limits

The UK and France have achieved significant results in cooperation since 2010: in armaments, nuclear cooperation and operational cooperation. However, armament projects have been running out since the 2014 summit, while recent international crises have revealed some strategic divergences between France and the UK.

In the field of armaments, cooperation has been thriving in the missile sector. The French and British governments developed a strategy to integrate their missile industries around the already half-integrated firm MBDA (this project is called One Complex Weapons). The goal was to rationalize the sector to make savings and to have a “single European prime contractor” (Cameron & Sarkozy, 2010) for the sector. In particular, the implementation of the strategy involves the creation of Centres of Excellence, which will eventually be 12. These will create different levels of industrial interdependences, between the domains that will be fully pooled and those where France and Britain will retain competences for reasons of sensitivity, or in areas shared with other countries (e.g. between the UK and the US). In order to give flesh to the industrial strategy, Paris and London agreed in 2014 to launch a first programme, the FASGW-H/ANL anti-ship programme (also called *Sea Venom*). Other projects down the line include the renovation of the Scalp-EG/*Storm Shadow* and, in the longer term, the Future Cruise Missile.

Another key industrial sector for Anglo-French cooperation has been unmanned aerial vehicles, around the Future Combat Air System (FCAS) programme. The project involves France and Britain’s main industrial actors in the sector: Dassault and BAE. A feasibility study contract was signed in November 2014, followed by a statement of intent to invest two billion Euros in 2017, announced at the March 2016 Summit (Cameron & Hollande, 2016a). Cooperation on other programmes, such as the MALE UAV, however, was not confirmed. Franco-British ambitions in the air-naval domain were also greatly reduced with David Cameron’s choice for the B version of the F-35, not equivalent to the French *Rafale* on-board the Charles de Gaulle, which limits interoperability and thus ambitions for future military interventions involving France and the UK.

France and the UK have also developed on Maritime Mine Countermeasures, consisting of an unmanned underwater vehicle. After a competition was open in May 2011 for the development of a prototype, a joint UK-French team was created at the OCCAr in early 2012. A contract was finally placed with Thales (France), in collaboration with BAE Systems to develop and build two prototype off-board systems due for delivery in 2019.

In the nuclear domain, cooperation in the nuclear field has been on the rise since 2010, as part of the specific relating to Joint Radiographic/Hydrodynamics Facilities. On the one hand, the treaty provided for the construction of joint facilities as part of the TEUTATES project. The EPURE facility (x-ray radiography) is being built at the French *Commissariat à l’énergie atomique* in Valduc, and a complementary technology development centre was commissioned in 2014 and is under construction at the British Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston (Tertrais, 2012, p. 15). The 2014 Summit reported “excellent progress”, with the approval of national investments in the TEUTATES programme and the identification of further areas of cooperation, including a plan to conduct joint research at their respective laser facilities (Cameron & Hollande, 2014).

On the operational side, France and the UK have been cooperating over the development of a non-permanent Combined Joint Expeditionary Force (CJEF) as well as during recent military

interventions. At the 2010 Summit, Cameron and Sarkozy announced their project for a force “suitable for a wide range of scenarios, up to and including high intensity operations”, to be operational in 2016 (Cameron & Sarkozy, 2010). The CJEF rapidly became the flagship project for cooperation between French and British armed forces. The CJEF was thought from the outset to be non-permanent: instead of having assigned forces, it would make use of national high-readiness forces if called for deployment. Its characteristics, resulting from five years of collaboration, are: a non-permanent, primarily amphibious first-entry force involving the three services (with an overall number of maximally 10,000 men), with command based on the NATO ‘Lead Nation’ concept, coordinated at strategic and operational command levels and integrated at task force headquarters level on theatre. The force was eventually validated through an exercise in April 2016. The development of the CJEF has gone hand in hand with the densification of institutional links, as there are now 50 Exchange Officers of each country swapping positions every year, which is more than the number of Exchange Officers between France and Germany (French Ministry of Defence, personal communication 31 August 2016), and there will now be a similar exchange between two Generals, which is a first (Barluet, 2016).

There are, however, already doubts on whether, how and when the bilateral force will be deployed. Indeed, France and the UK have cooperated over the course of recent interventions, but these have also underlined some strategic disagreement between the two countries, as well as a mismatch between France’s interventionist behaviour and Britain’s current restraint. In 2011, Nicolas Sarkozy and David Cameron took the lead on the intervention in Libya. They led the international response at the UN and the EU, and they were the main military actors behind the United States. However, their cooperation on the ground was limited, due to different command channels and different rules of engagement. Besides, they failed to coordinate their action in the post-Gadhafi Libya (House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 2016). France and the UK then cooperated in the French-led interventions in Mali and in the CAR, and in airstrikes over Syria/Iraq, albeit in a more limited manner: the UK provided transport and Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance assets, and a limited number of military personnel for training missions (Codner, 2013; Lasserre & Oberlé, 2013, p. 225). In Mali and the CAR, the French considered publicly the scope of British support as sufficient (Commission nationale de la défense et des forces armées, 2013, p. 60). Yet in reality, the French have been clearly worried of the diverging strategic priorities that this small support-role revealed, as they have felt a widening gap between France and the UK in the face of international crises (French diplomats and high-ranking military officers, French Embassy, London and NATO Headquarters, Brussels, personal communications, 2014). The House of Commons’ vote on 31 August 2013, which denied David Cameron support for engaging in an intervention against Bashar Al-Assad set a constraining precedent for British governments (Mills, 2014), which is unlikely to improve with the recent reports resulting from the Chilcot Enquiry on Britain’s engagement in the invasion of Iraq (Committee of Privy Counsellors, 2016) and that on the intervention in Libya (House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 2016). What is more, in a broader perspective, the UK since the start of the Brexit debate in 2014 has been facing inward rather than outward thus undermining its position as a strategic actor on the international scene (Menon, 2015, p. 96).

UK-French defence cooperation in the post-Brexit EU: new centrality and new constraints

Arguably, the “Brexit” vote provides a new centrality to Britain’s bilateral defence and security links with European countries, including France. However, changes to the legal-institutional context of their relationship may complicate their cooperation.

Various factors point towards maintenance, or even a regained centrality, of the Anglo-French partnership in the context of “Brexit”. Firstly, going back to the origins and shape of the partnership, we find that in its design and in its effects, Franco-British defence cooperation is de-correlated from EU affairs: it is not Permanent Structured Cooperation; operational cooperation uses NATO rather than EU norms; nuclear cooperation is clearly a state matter and the contribution of this partnership to the wider EU has never been clearly spelt out, nor has it had obvious effects. It has even been argued that the Anglo-French partnership is so “pragmatic” as to be “politics-proof”: it would “weather any cabinet reshuffles, elections, or other changes in political circumstances in either country” (Tigner & Gomis, 2016).

Secondly, the bilateral partnership seems to have been unaffected by the debates ahead of the June vote. The possible consequences of a withdrawal from the EU were not addressed in public declarations and “Brexit” was considered on the French side to be very unlikely (French Ministry of Defence, personal communication, 31 August 2016). While the partnership slowed down – as bilateral relations usually do when national votes get near – prior to the 2015 elections and during the referendum campaign, the two countries were also expanding their cooperation to new areas, especially in the counter-terrorism domain. The March 2016 summit indeed announced, aside from the €2 billion pledge for the FCAS, increased collaboration in intelligence, policing, radicalization, border control and arms control (Cameron & Hollande, 2016a, 2016b).

Thirdly, after the vote to leave the European Union, both capitals have insisted that the partnership will be preserved, or even reinforced. As early as 24 June 2016, François Hollande declared: “France, for itself and for Great Britain will continue to work with this big friend country (...) our close relations in the defence field will be preserved” (Hollande, 2016a). In July, Theresa May confirmed during her visit in Paris

The intelligence and security co-operation between our countries is something that will always endure – even after Britain has left the European Union (...). That means, in addition to our growing co-operation on counter-terrorism, we will strengthen the wider strategic defence partnership between our two countries. (May, 2016)

Shortly after coming taking office, Theresa May confirmed the renewal of the nuclear deterrent, which was backed by the vote of the House of Commons on 18 July, thus putting an end to a period of doubts for the British and French nuclear communities.

Another factor pointing towards maintenance of the partnership is put forward by Giovanni Briganti who bets on mutual understanding between Paris and London when it comes to seeking to escape the constraints of multinational institutions (De Briganti, 2016). More precisely, Briganti draws a parallel between “Brexit” and France’s withdrawal from NATO’s integrated structures in 1966. This precedent, Briganti argues, reflect “a strong streak of national individualism” and “the refusal to submit national interests to collective decisions” on both sides of the Channel (De Briganti, 2016). According to him, a feeling of understanding and solidarity could develop in France – despite French governments’ traditional Europeanism – resulting in a French endeavour to keep strong links with London.

Despite all the good intentions, however, the changes in the context of this cooperation will necessarily affect the partnership. Armament collaboration is the main domain likely to be impacted by the UK’s withdrawal from the EU. Collaboration in armaments with EU member states supposes the transfer or export of military equipment or parts thereof, which is regulated by specific legislation at the EU level, notably the Directive 2009/48/EC of the Treaty on the European Union that liberalizes defence procurement and facilitates the transfer of weapons or parts within the EU internal market. In order to facilitate this and circumvent bureaucratic constraints and legal restrictions to transfers of defence equipment, France and Britain signed in

September 2015 an intergovernmental agreement under the framework of the Defence and Security Treaty (Government of the United Kingdom and Government of the French Republic, 2015). This agreement, ruled by EU law *and* the two parties' national laws, includes the attribution of a global licence to MBDA for the transfer of missiles and parts of missiles between the two countries. It remains to be seen what arrangement the UK and the EU will negotiate with regard to the ICT Directive, and how it could affect other collaborative weapons programmes that are not covered by a similar Intergovernmental Agreement. Mark Bromley estimates that British defence companies have benefited from the freedom of transfers and are unlikely to relinquish it (Bromley, 2016). Bromley points out, however, that companies from other EU member states could "face increased controls when supplying goods to the UK" (Bromley, 2016).

Looking to the future: changing national incentives and new dilemmas

Despite the arguments that point towards a maintenance or even a regained centrality of the bilateral partnership, it is necessary to consider what may drive France and the UK, individually, in opposite directions, as the two governments try to make the most of the situation for themselves.

Britain's inclinations: let the CSDP fail?

According to Malcolm Chalmers, the "Brexit" necessarily represents a significant shift in national strategy of historical importance, not unlike the end of the British Empire in the 1960s. This shift should be reappraised in a new SDSR which, Chalmers points, could lead either to a global reorientation towards Asia and the Commonwealth or to a reinforcement of London's commitment in Europe to reaffirm trust in NATO and keep good relationships with Europe (Chalmers, 2016). Indeed, a commitment to defence cooperation could be used as leverage for negotiating good terms for the trade deal. More prosaically, the diminishing resources that could result from "Brexit" would make the case for international defence cooperation to be even stronger. Now, the British government may well remain committed to a defence spending equivalent to 2% of GDP, if that GDP decreases it will not be able to meet the commitments "predicated on the assumption of healthy economic growth through to the end of the decade" (Chalmers, 2016, p. 2).

The next area of negotiation will be that of the UK's participation in the CSDP. The UK has a significant defence budget, including sizeable personnel and near-full spectrum capabilities. Thus on paper, the EU will lose a significant military power and possible defence contributor. Yet, in practice, a CEPS report rightly notes that the UK, while being a significant "shareholder", also at the origin of the CSDP, has more often than not acted as a "veto player", especially vis-à-vis the EDA, Permanent Structured Cooperation and the creation of a permanent Operational Headquarters in Brussels (Faleg, 2016). When it has not blocked, it has contributed little. Illustratively, the UK's contribution to EU operations has gone from 1450 personnel in 2005, going down to 590 in 2007, to 21 in 2008 and further down to 16 in 2009 (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2009). The UK currently provides headquarters and the command for EUNAVFOR Atalanta off the coasts of Somalia and two dozen officers in EUTM Mali.

This situation could seem reassuring to EU Member States who could go for a "business as usual" approach, with the UK participating to EU operations on an ad hoc basis. Yet on the other hand, Pierre Razoux points to the risk that the UK may be tempted to "torpedo" what remains of the CSDP and try and influence other EUMS to invest in NATO (wherefrom many of the EU's military asset come, through the "Berlin+" agreement), so as not to be side-lined (Razoux, 2016). It is indeed a risk. For instance, the British Secretary of State for Defence declared he would "veto" any attempt at creating a "European Defence Union" so long as the UK remains a member (Rettman, 2016). This could prove unnecessary: the divisions revealed during the

latest EU Summit in Bratislava – the first where the UK was absent – indicated an atmosphere of stark division on security issues.

What is more, the UK's recent cooperative initiative, either with France under the Lancaster House Treaties and in the context of the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) under development with Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Norway, have been taking place outside the EU. Instead, the UK-led JEF was turned into a NATO "Framework Nation" initiative at the 2014 Summit in Wales (NATO, 2014). Thus, as a result of leaving the EU, the UK is likely to invest even more in NATO and with France, with whom it is tied on the most strategic domains of nuclear deterrence, armament, counter-terrorism and border management.

Despite all of the above, recent, discrete moves by the British in Brussels show that on certain aspects, the May government may seek to overcompensate the effects of "Brexit" on EU defence and security cooperation: in November 2016, Britain has opted into a new Europol programme and accepted for the first time in six years to raise the EDA's budget (Barber, 2016).

France: sitting on the fence of European defence

Several commentators have pointed to the opportunities that will come with France's unique position in Europe's defence and security following "Brexit". As the EU's sole nuclear power, and the Union's sole member of the UNSC, and with its "Entente supérieure" with London (Fallon, 2016), France will enjoy a central position in the European security architecture, and will logically be awarded the seat of bridge-builder or "pivot" (Heisbourg, 2016, p. 17). Now, British voters' decision to leave the European Union creates both new opportunities and new problems for the French government, who will face new dilemmas: should they invest their efforts at defence cooperation with the EU, or with the UK? The two had seemed until now to be reconcilable. Investing in the relationship with London did, in turn, keep some of the British cooperative efforts within a EU framework, while cooperating with British industries contributed to preserve the EDTIB amidst global competition in the defence industrial sector. Then, on the operational side, the Franco-British Treaties of 2010 could also almost be said to contribute, albeit indirectly, to the CSDP (Jones, 2011). At least, Anglo-French military cooperation had a neutral effect on the CSDP.

Now, France will have to make choices, at any given time, between nurturing an exclusive – or at least clearly NATO-oriented – partnership with the UK, and contributing to the historical goal of EU integration in defence. In the French administrations, many task forces are currently charged with defining the French position on CSDP and the ETDB and on the Anglo-French relationship, in a way that makes the most of each, and still maintains French interests first (French Ministry of Defence, personal communication 31 August 2016). We are already starting to watch the signs of the dilemmas in public declarations: after the French government's declarations on the maintenance of the Anglo-French defence relation, came new propositions for reviving "European defence" under the EU and with Germany. François Hollande indeed declared in a foreign policy speech on 30 August:

The second proposal involves European defence. This issue is as old as Europe, but it turns out that, historically, we did not begin by addressing defence but rather the economy and then our currency. Now it is probably time to reverse this process [...]. So Europe must build up the necessary military capabilities and industrial resources to create its strategic independence, and I propose that a European security and defence fund be created. And then, eventually, states which want to set more ambitious targets can set up permanent structured cooperation, as is provided for in the treaties. (Hollande, 2016b)

This is especially good timing for new attempts as European defence and security integration as other EU Member States have, since 2015, become more aware of the threat posed by terrorism. The most recent German Defence White Paper shows that this has just become a top priority for

the Merkel government (German Federal Government, 2016). And the UK will not always be able to block European attempts at creating a Permanent Operational Headquarter in Brussels for CSDP operations.

France's defence resources are limited and the country is currently nearly facing a military overstretch. France will thus need to continue cooperating as much as possible with her allies, but it will not be able to invest equally in the EU and with the UK. Now, the UK could lose some of its appeal as a privileged partner, both through its diminished position and its hostility vis-à-vis European defence efforts. Now, France's new centrality in European defence and security architecture meets with another new central axis which is that developed with Washington over the course of recent military and counter-terrorism operations in Africa and the Middle East (Haïne, 2016). In this context, if London wants to maintain a fruitful relationship and thriving defence partnership with Paris, the UK should – indeed – be wary of “torpedoing” EU-level defence and security initiatives. On the other hand, France would better not play the game of the *best pupil* vis-à-vis Washington and NATO, or it would also risk alienate its most precious defence and security partner in Europe (Haynes, 2017).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Note

1. Comprising of a Treaty for Defence and Security Cooperation and a Treaty relating to Joint Radiographic/Hydrodynamics Facilities.

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