FRANCO-BRITISH DEFENCE COOPERATION

It is often said, most recently at the time of the UK-French "Defence Treaty" in 2010, that the United Kingdom and France are natural defence partners. It is argued that they have a long history in common, are both nuclear powers and permanent members of the Security Council, and are both former imperial powers with links to Africa. Moreover, both have capable armed forces and public opinions ready to accept overseas deployments.

All of this is true, but in practice most of it is superficial. And even the apparent surface similarities can conceal great practical differences. Thus, the origins, nature and afterlife of the French presence in Africa, as well as the origin and purpose of the French nuclear programme, are entirely different from their British equivalents.

The reality is that any form of defence cooperation beyond a superficial level is only possible when there is a shared sense of fundamental strategic interest between those involved. It is the lack of this shared sense that has made attempted cooperation between the two countries such an exasperating process for those who have been engaged in it.

The origins of Franco-British defence cooperation arguably go back to the Crimean War, where the two countries had an overlapping (but not identical) desire to contain Russian expansion towards the South. But the first real practical cooperation was the military talks that followed the signing of the *Entente Cordiale* in 1904, itself largely concerned with dampening imperial rivalries. Both sides were seeking allies against a rising Germany, but whereas the French were worried primarily about their frontiers, the British were much more concerned about preventing German access to the Channel Ports. The considerable practical military integration brought about by the First World War was only temporary, and political divergences arose almost immediately afterwards. The French were determined to weaken Germany so it could never again be a threat: the British were at least as concerned about the new threat they discerned in the Soviet Union, and did not want to leave a vacuum in central Europe.

Ever since, Franco-British defence cooperation has essentially followed the same logic. Cooperation on practical issues has often been easy, and frequently effective, but is always a hostage to underlying strategic differences. Since the Second World War, the close British relationship with the United States has been the main factor dividing the two countries. For the British, the American link has been a means to retain great power status, influence within NATO, and access to certain sensitive strategic technologies. The post-1945 dispensation, which the British did so much to fashion, suited them very well, and still does. No conceivable European-based alternative can give them as much influence in the world, and so they see French moves to create European defence institutions as a threat to NATO and to US primacy, and thus a threat to their own strategic interests. Bilateral cooperation with France, whilst it may produce pragmatic benefits, must therefore never be allowed to lead to wider European integration. Rather, every attempt must be made preserve as many elements of the post-1945 world for as long as possible.

The French, not major actors in the organisation of post-1945 security, and never able to exercise remotely the same influence over the US as the British could, have always seen European integration as important for their security, as well as essential for its own sake. However, the paradox is that the development of European defence, and even of effective bilateral defence cooperation in Europe, depends overwhelmingly on cultivating a closer relationship with the one European country they feel they cannot trust.

If the British fear that bilateral cooperation with France will subsequently enmesh them in unwelcome European initiatives, the French are wary of cooperation with a state they believe is dedicated to obstructing, if not actually destroying, the defence integration which is the major component of their security policy. The French believe that the UK is not a fully independent actor, but an acolyte of the United States with limited freedom of action. Rightly or wrongly, they therefore see limited value in engaging the UK directly on major strategic issues, since they consider the US will have the final say. ("Why talk to the monkey" as one senior French defence official said to the author "when you can talk to the organ grinder?"). Understandably, the British indignantly reject this interpretation, but nonetheless, as a consequence of it, the French have developed their own surprisingly close relationship with the US, based on an unashamedly ruthless pursuit of respective national interests.

Yet strategic logic requires ultimately that the French and the British should cooperate on defence issues: neither has any other plausible European partner and they have common issues (nuclear weapons, for example) where their interests are closely aligned. So for more than two decades there has been a repeated dance of attraction and repulsion, as strategic logic leads inevitably to proposals for cooperation, which work for a while but then founder on underlying political divergences. After a decent interval, the dance begins again. Whilst it is fair to say that the net result is a much higher level of practical cooperation than was the case twenty years ago, it is not obvious that there is any more underlying strategic commonality of view than there was then. Indeed, from the early 1990s both sides have made assumptions about the other which have been consistently falsified. Mistaking strategy for tactics, the British, at regular intervals, have believed that the French were about repent of Gaullism and follow the British back into a closer relationship with the US and NATO. Mistaking tactics for strategy, the French have seen more in reluctant British acceptance of European initiatives than is really there. In particular, the consistent French view that a US involvement in European security is helpful and should be encouraged has been discovered afresh every few years by the British, who see each repetition of it as a major change of direction by the French.

It is in this context that we should see the two major defence agreements, of the last twenty years: the 1998 St Malo agreement and the 2010 "Defence Treaty." The former, in fact, was not one document but two. The first, never published, was an agreement to cooperate more closely on African issues, and to de-conflict their activities there: an ironic, if probably unintentional, reminiscence of the 1904 *Entente Cordiale.* The second, a Joint Declaration on European Defence, revealed how far the British had come rhetorically since Maastricht, but was, in fact, carefully drafted to avoid committing either party to any concrete actions at all. For this reason, disappointment with the limited progress since St Malo, whilst largely justified, is slightly beside the point. From the British

perspective, at least, it was not intended that there should be any significant real changes, since they could only be inimical to British interests.

Everything goes in cycles, and the 2010 "Defence Treaty" was greeted with much the same excitement and will, in the end, give rise to much the same disappointments. In reality, it is a somewhat heterogeneous list of joint defence activities, some of which already exist, others of which were already planned, and many of which are simply aspirations, requiring much more work before it becomes clear whether they are feasible or not. No joint or standing forces are actually being created, and phrases like "wherever possible" are carefully scattered throughout the document.

To say this is not to mock. Given the domestic political sensitivities, especially in the UK, it is hard to see that more could have been agreed at this stage. And there is no reason to doubt the sincerity and commitment of those involved. But, like all similar initiatives, its effect can at best be a further incremental narrowing of the Channel, unless and until the underlying strategic differences are resolved. Even if this process begins (and at present there is no sign of it) serious practical issues will remain, some as banal as language. An entire generation of French officers never learned English, and hardly anyone in the British system speaks French to an acceptable level. And mutual ignorance of each other's cultural and historical defence heritage is almost total.

There are more subtle problems as well: two large, powerful and expert military powers, with equally strong but very different administrative traditions, and a long histories of foreign engagement, often find the mental leap to understanding the other's point of view impossible. For busy senior officials, especially, the temptation to believe that the other side is not serious, has misunderstood or is not really interested can be irresistible.

The general rule in international politics is that if interests are clearly aligned, then practical arrangements follow swiftly, but if interests are not aligned, no amount of pragmatic furniture-moving will actually produce much progress. The history of Franco-British defence cooperation so far is of a great deal of surface activity, but much less underlying strategic rapprochement

RÉSUME EN FRANÇAIS

Toute coopération sérieuse en matière de défense devrait passer par un alignement d'intérêts stratégiques, si elle se veut efficace et durable. Le couple franco-britannique manifeste à la fois, et paradoxalement, une volonté commune très marquée vers une coopération au niveau pratique et opérationnel, pour autant accompagnée d'une mécompréhension et d'une méfiance considérables, au niveau stratégique.

Si à première vue les deux pays doivent être des partenaires naturels en matière de défense, (histoire, capacités militaires, arme nucléaire, membres du P5…) force est de constater que, au niveau stratégique, il y a plusieurs facteurs qui les divisent gravement. Le plus grand obstacle, c'est l'étroite collaboration entre le Royaume-Uni et les Etats-Unis, qui amène le premier à vouloir préserver au maximum le cadre politique de l'après-1945 (influence américaine, OTAN puissante) et à voir l'intégration européenne, en matière de défense, comme une menace. Ceci incite la France à se méfier des objectifs stratégiques britanniques, qu'elle considère téléguidées depuis Washington.

Si les initiatives vers une coopération plus approfondie se sont succédées depuis la fin de la guerre froide, le bilan est modeste, et le restera jusqu'au moment ou un vrai alignement stratégique des deux pays apparaitra. Cela n'est pas pour demain.