In some of my publications that are available online\(^1\), I have covered in some details the achievements and limits of the Lancaster House treaties since 2010. Hence, instead of going over what France and the UK have been doing, I want to take the opportunity of this Written evidence to have a closer look at current trends, and future prospects for the bilateral defence relationship in the context of Brexit.

**Has Britain lost centrality as France’s main European partner in defence and security?**

When she came to DC to talk about the recently released French Defence and Security Strategy (thereafter referred to as “the Strategy”), Minister for the armed forces Florence Parly did not mention the UK once. She referred to the US – of course, she was in D. C., and the US is indeed one of France’s closest partners when it comes to the fight against terrorism in Africa – but instead of also mentioning the UK, she said that Italy, Germany and Spain were France’s “best supporters in Europe to try and build the initiative we are trying to promote”\(^2\). This is also exemplified in the Strategy, in which the UK has been “downgraded”, compared to the previous two Livres Blancs, as it comes up only after Germany. Also, the Strategy restates the projects that are ongoing with the UK (The CJEF, the FCAS, One MBDA and nuclear cooperation) but it does not propose new plans for the future, except for enhanced trilateral cooperation on intelligence with Germany.

It is thus fair to ask: Has Britain lost centrality as France’s main European partner in defence and security? The answer is: partly. There are three main reasons for that, and Brexit is just a part of them.

Firstly, there has been the perception since 2013 (and especially the summer episode Bashar Al-Assad’s use of chemical weapons and David Cameron’s call for a vote of the Commons prior to a possible military intervention) that the UK is retreating from the international stage. The decisions made in the 2010 SDSR, as well as the Chilcot Report of 2011 were already signs that there was a change in the UK’s own role conception and behaviour in the world, with diminished capabilities and new institutional constraints on the government’s decision-making. This has also been visible in the low public support to Britain’s military interventions in the present decade, evident in opinion polls. And current trends showing that British armed forces are struggling to recruit further indicate that the UK may be undergoing significant changes in its strategic behaviour. These changes might well be temporary, and it can be expected that the UK will recover greater capabilities and regain appetite as a significant strategic player in the next decade. Nonetheless, in the short term, all these factors have led some among French officials to

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\(^1\) E.g. Alice Pannier, “The Anglo-French defence partnership after the “Brexit” vote: new incentives and new dilemmas”, *Global Affairs*, 2017, available at: https://www.academia.edu/31631611/The_Anglo-French_defence_partnership_after_the_Brexit_vote_new_incentives_and_new_dilemmas

\(^2\) The video recording of the conference is available at: https://www.csis.org/events/global-leaders-forum-he-florence-parly-minister-armed-forces-france
wonder whether Britain is indeed as “willing and able” as it has been or as it has been perceived to be.

Secondly, one has to take into account the trends – past and current – in Britain’s and France’s diplomatic orientations. Nicolas Sarkozy and Francois Hollande’s turn towards the UK, the US and NATO had been going against a previous durable tendency to favour engagement Germany and/or the EU (the two often being conceived as the same thing). And it is well known that the 1998 Saint Malo declaration was largely a loose compromise that built on different understandings of Europe’s “autonomy” and the type of NATO-EU relationship that France and the UK were pursuing.

So, while Britain and France have been at the forefront of the development of CSDP, disagreements about the scope of the EU’s role in defence and security soon surfaced. As a result, the UK gradually disengaged from EU operations: from 1,450 deployed personnel on EU operations in 2005, the British participation went down to 590 in 2007, and shrunk to 16 in 2009. The UK’s attitude towards CSDP – as well as lack of engagement from other EU member states, including Germany – fuelled frustration among French policy-makers and are party attributable to the turn, initiated in 2008, towards more French engagement in NATO, and bilaterally with the UK and the US.

Now, that turn was mostly driven by the preferences of Presidents Sarkozy and Hollande, and over the period from 2008 to 2016 there remained strong pro-EU and pro-German feelings among the French foreign policy establishment. As a result of both Brexit, the election of Donald Trump and President Macron’s own inclinations towards the EU, it is only “natural” for French decision-makers to turn again to Germany and advocate for the Paris-Berlin “European engine” (in the same fashion as it is “natural” – although quite uncomfortable in the present context – for the UK to fall back on the “Special relationship” with the US as its relations to European neighbours are under stress). It is all the more understandable as France is trying to gather support for its interventions in Africa and to get Europeans to be more engaged on that front.

Thirdly, of course: Brexit. The perception of it is linked to the two previous points: 1) it reinforces the perception of a UK in retreat and 2) it goes against Macron’s keen interest in advancing EU integration. And, just the same way as the UK cannot both exit the EU and wish to have exactly the same rights and duties as it used to as a member, Macron cannot at the same time seek a revival of the European project and put its defence eggs only in the British basket.

Whither Britain’s defence relations with Europe and France post-Brexit?

Despite this grim picture, it is in the interest of neither Britain, France, or Europe in general, that there be less cooperation in the field of defence and security in the future. The UK has showed a good sense of commitment to having a deep and well-functioning partnership with the EU – and with France bilaterally – post-Brexit and there will be few arguments, on either side of the Channel, against that occurring. Besides, defence is a sector were specific arrangements are always possible, regardless of European policies. And the extent of European defence policies that will indeed fall under Community rules – as opposed to intergovernmental ones – is to remain quite limited, even with the recent initiatives (EDF, PESCO, etc.).
As I understand it, French officials are very keen to facilitate a British participation in the European Defence Fund and the EDA. That will be the main part for the UK to negotiate with the EU, as there will be the matter of Britain’s access to the single “defence market” as well as its financial contribution. As for PESCO, as I understood it, French officials believe that there is not British interest in joining it altogether, but the recent agreement signed among 23 EU Member States makes room for Third Country participation in specific projects. So, I would argue that if PESCO and the other current EU projects indeed do “deliver”, Brexit might have the paradoxical effect of enticing the UK to get more involved in the CSDP.

At the bilateral level, there are (still) compelling arguments for a persistent, robust and deep bilateral partnership between France and the UK, with, unfortunately, new caveats stemming from Brexit (or at least the perception of the effects Brexit will have in the future, which is what inform decisions that are being made today). For more than 40 years (but indeed especially from the 1990s on), Britain and France have cooperated bilaterally instead of within NATO, because France had withdrawn from the Alliance’s integrated military structures in 1966. While it has been argued that France’s reintegration into NATO structures in 2009 was a necessary step before the signing of the Lancaster House Treaties in 2010, in fact the two countries have taken little, if any, joint leadership within NATO since 2010, and their cooperation has remained essentially bilateral (although the CJEF relies largely on NATO doctrines). In other words: the two countries are used to not being positively embedded in those regional organisations, as most of the time, there has been one of them who was not a member of that very organisation which appears as so important to the other. A 1991 Report from the House of Commons Defence Committee pointed: “France’s withdrawal from NATO’s integrated military structure in 1966 has meant that defence cooperation has come to depend to a far greater extent that with our other allies on bilateral arrangements. Many such arrangements do exist; they are relatively unknown and perhaps undervalued”

This is arguably good food for thought in the current context.

In all likelihood, capability projects are going to sustain the largest losses in the post-Brexit bilateral partnership. This is for several reasons. Firstly, there are doubts about whether the UK will favour buying American equipment off-the-shelf or procure as a junior partner from the US (e.g. the x-47 drone). Secondly, there have been projects on the way among European partners that simply could receive a new political push due to Brexit and the first reason I have just spelled out. In the area of drones, again, several projects have been under development, both bilaterally between France and the UK (Future Combat Air System, FCAS) and between France other European partners (Eurodrone, Euromale, NEURon). Recently, France and Germany have announced plans for a “Future Combat Air System” (“FCAS”!), also involving Dassault, that could come in two versions: one manned (unlike the Franco-British version), and one unmanned (like the Franco-British version). While the Franco-British FCAS has been re-stated in the French Defence and Security Strategy as a project to be taken forward, how many similar projects France can undertake at the same time is questionable, and there will be a need for France and the UK to clarify their intention, and explore the potential for trilateral cooperation on FCAS and “FCAS”.

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The good news is: none of the above will take away the existing proximity between French and British armed forces. In the recent French Strategy, the President has welcomed the “useful contribution” that cooperation arrangements occurring outside of NATO and the EU make to European security, referring – among others – to the CJEF. This is a good sign for the future of Franco-British military relations. However, I believe that new ambitious objectives and milestones will be necessary for the two countries’ armed forces to maintain the same level of interoperability as they have achieved over the 5 years ahead of the CJEF validation.

Aside from the CJEF, two frameworks should allow French and British forces to maintain a close relationship. The first is obviously NATO, especially as part of Enhanced Forward Presence, for which France and Britain have been deployed together in Estonia. The second will be the “European Intervention Initiative” – if it is to indeed come to be. In the Strategy, and in his speech at the Sorbonne on 26 September, Macron outlined a new idea for a European Intervention Initiative, the contours of which are still vague at that stage. In a recent address in D.C., Parly specified that France was aiming to foster the convergence of European strategic cultures and military doctrines, so that Europeans would be able to collectively conduct operations such as the one in Mali. The review indicates that France will focus on those “most willing and able” to join Paris around the Initiative. The initiative is not conceived as an alternative to NATO; instead, as Parly suggested, it would be a way for Europeans to “contribute more” to the alliance and could in fact be “combined” with NATO (although the specifics remain to be spelled out, including how such an initiative could be funded). It should be underlined that neither in the Strategy nor in Parly’s speech is there a reference to the Initiative being an EU object – rather, it refers to “Europe” and “Europeans”. Arguably, it makes even more sense for France to go for (ad hoc) cooperation in small groups (outside the EU, or double-hated EU-NATO) given that the more inclusive, looser version of PESCO is what European Member States have signed up for – as opposed to a smaller and version around a core number of Member States. There are thus many reasons to hope that the UK could be involved in such an initiative, especially as France and the UK could build on the work done together as part of the CJEF, and the UK could bring in its experience with the JEF, too.

Regardless of the President’s Europeanist inclinations, the French are going to look out for the UK to remain engaged bilaterally, as well as through multilateral channels. More generally, they will look for signs and evidence that the UK is not retreating from the world stage and still constitutes its most capable ally in Europe. Hopefully, the proximity built since 1998, and even more so since 2010, between the two countries’ strategic communities will allow fruitful exchanges to take place and will preserve the defence and security partnership from the hazards of the Brexit negotiations. The precedent of France’s non-participation in NATO’s integrated military structure is an example to look at when it comes to circumventing institutional affiliations in the conduct bilateral cooperation.

November 2017