



The French-British Defense Treaty: Setting History Aside?

Britain and France have a shared history through two World Wars. Our brave troops are fighting together every day in Afghanistan. But . . . this is a treaty based on pragmatism, not just sentiment.

British Prime Minister David Cameron¹

This is a decision which is unprecedented and shows a level of trust and confidence between our two nations which is unequalled in history.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy²

Introduction

On 2 November 2010, France and Britain signed a defense treaty—the “Declaration on Defence and Security Co-operation”—that may pave the way to a new level of cooperation surpassing anything previously achieved between the two countries on a bilateral basis. The agreement included the creation of a joint expeditionary force, shared use of aircraft carriers and close cooperation on nuclear weapons.

Background

Contributing to the weight of this agreement is the historically complex defense relationship between France and Britain. Although the 1904 Entente Cordiale ended a centuries-long enmity between the two countries and turned them into allies, Franco-British relations remained double-edged, as was most recently evident in the split over the 2003 invasion of Iraq. In addition to classic issues of continental versus maritime defense orientation and competing overseas interests, one source of disagreement

since World War II has been political divergence on prioritizing transatlantic versus inter-European relations. Since 1940 Britain has consistently sought to maintain close ties with the United States, and France has insisted on European integration as the way forward. Britain has thus been wary that France would try to inhibit its national sovereignty by tying it down at the European level, while France has remained suspicious of Britain’s “special relationship” with the United States.

Despite these differences, France and Britain have similarly aspired to place themselves at the strategic forefront of Europe. The two countries are respectively the third- and fourth-largest military spenders in the world and view themselves as global powers, ready to project force independently when necessary. Within Europe, France and Britain together make up half of the defense budget. Given these similarities in objectives and capabilities, France and Britain are well matched to cooperate on defense as equal partners. Moreover, France’s recent reintegration into the NATO integrated military command structure has gone far

¹ Number10.gov.uk (the official website of the British Prime Minister’s office), “UK and France open ‘new chapter’ on defence cooperation,” 2 November 2010, <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/latest-news/2010/11/pm-welcomes-president-of-france-for-uk-france-summit-56505>.

² *Ibid.*



toward reassuring British defense decisionmakers about French willingness to engage in genuinely cooperative combined defense arrangements.

As the result of tightening defense budgets, even countries such as France and Britain, who lead the way with strong defense capabilities, have been forced to reexamine how critical capability gaps will be bridged. With dwindling resources available, France and Britain found it necessary to choose between either continuing on their own independent paths and losing importance as strategic powers on the world stage or combining resources to maintain a decisive edge in the defense arena. Faced with this decision, both countries have chosen to set aside lingering suspicions and rivalries to cooperate in a number of areas.

Current Situation

In its opening, the 2010 French-British declaration addressed past disagreements by looking toward a common future, stating, “We do not see situations arising in which the vital interests of either nation could be threatened without the vital interests of the other also being threatened.”³ This is the foundation upon which cooperation between the two countries rests. The agreement takes a pragmatic and incremental approach toward cooperation, laying it out in a number of steps that will rely on commonality of policy and objectives. In general, joint initiatives are planned primarily in the areas of operations and training, equipment and capabilities, unmanned air systems, defense industry, research and technology, cyber security, counterterrorism, NATO, the European Union, counterproliferation and countries of strategic interest, including Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Among these initiatives, emphasis is placed on the pooling of equipment, materials, facilities and manpower, and on joint work toward increasing the safety and effectiveness of nuclear weapons. The benefits and potential complications to cooperation in these areas have been the focus of scrutiny in both France and Britain.

The agreement calls for the development of a Combined Joint Expeditionary Force (CJEF) that will incorporate land, maritime and air components to deploy in a variety of cross-spectrum operations. Contrary to skeptics’ beliefs, the CJEF is not an attempt to re-forge the previously failed pan-European military, which was

a product of the 1998 San Malo agreement. Instead, as British Prime Minister David Cameron stated, “This is not about a European army. . . . Britain and France are and will always remain sovereign nations able to deploy our armed forces independently and in our national interests when we choose to do so.”⁴ Instead, French and British forces will conduct joint training exercises, which make it easier for them to deploy quickly on joint operations while still allowing them to maintain the ability to deploy separately if necessary.

Shared use of aircraft carriers will allow both governments to cut costs yet retain their ability to deploy sea-based air power. In October 2010 Prime Minister David Cameron announced that Britain would retire the *Invincible*-class aircraft carrier and proceed with building two new *Queen Elizabeth*-class carriers, which are planned to be ready for service in 2020. Yet British carrier strike capability will be “based around a single new operational carrier with the second planned to be kept at extended readiness.”⁵ The operational carrier will be redesigned to accommodate the catapult and arrestor gear necessary for greater interoperability with U.S. and French carriers and naval jets. Cooperation will be structured around the French aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle*, with a goal of reaching the ability to deploy an integrated French-British carrier strike group by the early 2020s.

With French and British plans to maintain only one aircraft carrier each, British critics have raised warning bells at the possibility that military operations requiring carrier-borne aircraft could be jeopardized. Cooperation on defense does not preclude each country from autonomous obligations that may not be of interest to the other nation. The examples cited are the intervention of the British Royal Marines in Sierra Leone in 2000 and France’s opposition to Britain’s engagement in the 1982 Falklands war. If a similar incident were to occur that would require British use of a French aircraft carrier or vice versa, the question remains as to whether this would be possible. The Falklands and Sierra Leone represent the only independent operations conducted by Britain in nearly 30 years, with the majority of British military action taken with allies. Addressing British skepticism, French President Nicolas Sarkozy also asked, “[I]f you, my British friends, had to face a major crisis, could you imagine France simply sitting there, its arms crossed and

³ “UK-France Summit 2010 Declaration on Defence and Security Co-operation,” <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/statements-and-articles/2010/11/uk%E2%80%93france-summit-2010-declaration-on-defence-and-security-co-operation-56519>.

⁴ British Prime Minister David Cameron, UK-France Summit press conference, <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/speeches-and-transcripts/2010/11/uk-france-summit-press-conference-56551>.

⁵ “Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review,” http://www.direct.gov.uk/prod_consum_dg/groups/dg_digitalassets/@dg/@en/documents/digitalasset/dg_191634.pdf, p. 21.

Defense Capabilities

	Britain	France
Budget (2009)	\$58.3 billion	\$63.9 billion
Total servicemembers	178,000	250,000
Aircraft carriers	2	1
Destroyers	6	11
Frigates	17	20
Submarines	7	6
Fast jets	300	360
Attack helicopters	233	246
Battle tanks	357	637
Nuclear submarines	4	4

Source: "Divided We Fall," *The Economist*, 4 November 2010, <http://www.economist.com/node/17422499>

saying, 'This is none of our business'?"⁶ Sarkozy stated that the first order of business would be to review options to help France's ally. And logistic support above all other forms of contribution may be more easily provided in the case where no shared national interest exists. On the other hand, should an incident arise which necessitates a discretionary intervention, constraints that force the intervening nation to rethink its actions may prove beneficial.

Another major facet of the agreement is nuclear cooperation, where the joint declaration calls for collaboration on "nuclear stockpile stewardship," in compliance with international obligations. Through joint test and research facilities in France and Britain, both countries intend to collaborate on technology development to ensure long-term viability, security and safety of nuclear warheads and materials. In the declaration, France and Britain state their support for maintaining NATO as a nuclear alliance "as long as nuclear weapons exist."⁷

Implications for the United States

In lieu of the economic recession, individual governments—including the United States—have had to reallocate increasingly scarce defense resources. As

demonstrated by the French-British defense treaty, financial strains have become a catalyst for promoting collaboration between allied nations seeking to cut spending but maintain robust military strength. Given these considerations and its own goals to reduce defense costs, the United States has viewed cooperation between France and Britain positively. Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Michèle Flournoy noted, "The U.S. fully supports this cooperation between two of our staunchest and most capable military allies" and commended the treaty as "but one example of countries finding creative ways to pool resources and capabilities."⁸ Flournoy also encouraged other allies to "seek similar opportunities where appropriate."⁹

There are critics in both France and Britain who express concerns about the impact on each nation's traditional approaches to defense. British Atlanticists are wary that closer defense cooperation with France will harm the "special relationship" between Britain and the United States and draw Britain into greater European integration on defense. In France fears linger that such cooperation with Britain will lead France down an increasingly Atlanticist path on defense. Although both countries share the primary goal of maintaining global military power projection, prior to the actual implementation of the French-British agreement, such secondary questions and concerns remain as yet unanswered.

Looking to the Future

The signing of the French-British defense treaty is a promising first step toward preserving French and British defense capacity and may well improve inter-European and transatlantic relations. As the treaty moves forward into implementation, each country's sincerity will be tested. Motivated by financial shortcomings and the shared goal of maintaining their positions as strategic powers in Europe and the world, France and Britain are well poised to exploit the current window of opportunity to substantially enhance defense cooperation. If successful, the treaty could serve the additional purposes of strengthening defense ties between the United States and France and of bringing Britain closer to its European neighbors.

⁶ "UK-France Summit 2010 Declaration on Defence and Security Co-operation."

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Michèle Flournoy, Luncheon Keynote Speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, "NATO Beyond the Lisbon Summit," <http://csis.org/multimedia/audio-nato-beyond-lisbon-summit-luncheon-keynote-honorable-michele-flournoy>.

⁹ *Ibid.*

Key Points

- Tightening defense budgets have forced countries with traditionally strong defense capabilities to reexamine how critical capability gaps will be bridged.
- Given the similarities in national objectives and capabilities, France and Britain are well matched to cooperate on defense as equal partners.
- The agreement takes a pragmatic and incremental approach toward cooperation by laying out a number of steps that will rely on commonality of policy and objectives.
- The French-British defense treaty may pave the way to a new level of cooperation surpassing anything achieved between the two countries on a bilateral basis in the past.



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