



FRANCO-BRITISH DEFENCE COOPERATION ROUNDTABLE

9 MARCH 2010, LONDON

Report

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INTRODUCTION

The Franco-British Council (FBC) and the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), with the support of the French Embassy in the United Kingdom, organised a roundtable on Franco-British defence cooperation on 9 March 2010.

The purpose of this meeting was twofold. Firstly, it aimed to extend the FBC's "Britain, France and Defence" initiative of October 2009, when it was clearly established that the moment was opportune to look into the Franco-British defence relationship once again. The particularly difficult international financial situation demands renewed reflection and encourages cooperation particularly on the basis of specifically industrial considerations, linked to the establishment of competitive military capabilities. This approach required a varied but complementary group of delegates to gather.

Secondly, ahead of a decisive period in British politics – the general election in May 2010, and the publication of the Strategic Defence Review in the fourth quarter of the same year – it seemed

important to resume discussions before the formation of a new government and a reassessment of British strategic priorities.

This event brought together a panel of seventy participants from professions that are key to Franco-British cooperation: The French Ambassador in the UK, the British minister for the armed forces, diplomats, senior civil servants, MPs, Lords, military officials, industrialists, researchers and journalists, from France and Britain, all closely involved in defence matters. There were two related sessions, one on the military and industrial aspects of the bilateral relationship, and another on the possible joint approaches to strategy and procurement. The afternoon's debates were brought together, and the event drawn to a close, with a working dinner at the residence of the French Ambassador to the United Kingdom.

2010: A KEY YEAR FOR A NECESSARY AND ANTICIPATED REVIVAL OF FRANCO-BRITISH ALIGNMENT ON DEFENCE MATTERS

A window of opportunity

The meeting opened on a point of consensus: it is time to revive Franco-British defence cooperation. The participants agreed that it was necessary, even urgent, to revitalise the stalling relationship. In the introduction to his comments, former NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson emphasised that *"There is force majeure for cooperation"*. Bill Rammell, the then British Armed Forces Minister, clearly felt that the United Kingdom *"views France as the key partner"* when it comes to developing European leadership for a common defence agenda. For his part, James Arbuthnot, Conservative MP and Chairman of the House of Commons Defence Select Committee at the time, urged participants to adopt a *"Let's make it happen"* attitude. Sir Menzies Campbell, former leader of the Liberal Democrat party, defended the idea of a *"more highly integrated"* rapprochement.

This position was supported by the French participants: *"What we need now is some kind of decisive push"* underlined the French Ambassador to the UK, SE Maurice Gourdault-Montagne. Michel Miraillet, Director of the Delegation for Strategic Affairs (DAS) for his part said, *"More than ever we are ready to cooperate with the UK"*. Etienne de Durand, researcher at IFRI, ended his speech by warning that *"if we don't find a way together we will fail separately"*. Rear Admiral Charles-Edouard de Coriolis, French Defence Attaché in the United Kingdom, also highlighted the opportunity which exists today to restart the Franco-British partnership.

The industrialists voiced similar expectations. Antoine Bouvier, the CEO of MBDA, argued in favour of a *"very solid grant for the Franco-British cooperation to grow"*, while Edgar Buckley, Senior Vice President at Thales, clearly stated that *"we should be very ambitious"*. Robin Southwell, CEO of EADS UK, concluded by saying that *"we are fully ready to help"*.

St Malo – the lack of achievements

What cooperation is being discussed?

From the outset, a critical assessment of the 1998 St Malo Agreement was made. The Agreement was signed before the Kosovo war, and it was recalled that it changed the debate on European Defence with France and Great Britain agreeing that the EU should have an autonomous crisis management capability, based on credible military forces. But the assessment is clear: in twelve years, few results have been achieved, and only insignificant advances made. In reality, the two signatories have given priority to their own strategic interests. France is for a European defence policy that is autonomous but complementary to NATO and the reinforcement of the political dimension of Europe, while the UK fears the growth of institutions in the EU.

As a result, the ambitious objectives designed to create these capabilities have not been fulfilled, nor have any military operations been launched. The Headline Goals have gone unheeded, the Battle Groups have never been deployed, and the European Defence Agency has continually fuelled the divisions between the French and the British. As for the Berlin Plus Agreement, which was promising and offered interesting prospects of sharing capabilities with the Alliance, it has in reality been parked to a side. Echoing this inertia, Lord Robertson

noted that ten years have been spent debating the same questions on NATO enlargement at the yearly Munich Security Conference. Michel Miraillet confirmed that no substantial cooperation in the field has occurred since the joint Franco-British involvement in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1995, as part of the Rapid Reaction Force. The Iraq War also did not help to strengthen the bilateral relationship.

Armaments cooperation: one of the keys to rapprochement

At the same time, the resumption of Franco-British armaments cooperation was an attempt to remedy the status quo. In 2006, on the initiative of Jacques Chirac and Tony Blair, the High Level Working Group (HLWG) was created with the aim of linking industry and governments in order to set in motion a cooperation between the two partners and to make sure that each has access to key defence technologies. As major contributors to European security, the French and British have, in effect, hoped to bank on reliable and high-performance industrial firms, capable of supporting technological advances and of guaranteeing credible participants. Edgar Buckley recalled the original composition of this small group: France is represented by the Delegate General for Armaments, Laurent Collet-Billon and the CEO of Thales, Luc Vigneron, while the United Kingdom by the Minister for Defence Equipment and Support, then Quentin Davies, and Guy Griffiths, Managing Director of BAE Systems. He also explained that the meetings are held two or three times per year, and are, amongst other things, about policy on access to markets, the sharing of technology and possible joint projects. They provide assessment criteria to many institutional groups who contribute to the bilateral relationship (R&D, testing, field trials).

What results have been identified? The French Ambassador referred as follows to the HLWG: *“This group is the right vehicle to propose joint projects, innovative solutions and foster dialogue to develop defence capabilities”*. The reality is that the gains are undeniable: MBDA has made significant advances in the area of complex weapons, while promising discussions are being held on projects on the future use of SatCom and unmanned vehicles. Agreements have been reached on the reciprocal use of testing methods, and in the context of R and D, the UK is now the primary partner of France and the commitment target of €50 million in mutual investments per year was exceeded in 2009. The agreement signed on 19 February 2010 on UORs (Urgent Operational Requirements) foreshadows beneficial joint work on the use of shared equipment in emergency situations. It still remains the case that the balance sheet can seem limited given the absence of a really major programme. The failure to cooperate over the PA2/CVF was a marked disappointment. In addition the French complained that the British did not demonstrate enough enthusiasm towards the HLGW, while the British in turn criticised the French for not sufficiently opening their market to the United Kingdom's defence industry.

The New Deal on defence

How can this situation be avoided?

It was noted that France and the United Kingdom have many essential points in common: the same perception of the threat, an almost identical defence budget, similar military capabilities and the same membership of NATO, the United Nations Security Council and the EU. Within Europe, the two countries represent 40% of the defence budget, almost 50% of the forces equipment

budget, and two thirds of spending on Research and Technology. James Arbuthnot, while apologising for condensing the previous hours of debate into a simple sentence, summarised: *“we are, in other words, roughly the same.”* By showing that the traditional barriers to Franco-British cooperation have been broken in the past five to ten years, Etienne de Durand went further and explained the new order of Franco-British collaboration: on one hand, the special relationship between the United Kingdom and America has had its day as the NATO/Europe logic of the Cold War no longer applies, American priorities having shifted towards Asia. On the other hand, by rejoining the Alliance’s integrated military structure and distancing itself from a German partner with divergent views on Defence questions, France has clarified its strategic choices. A new geopolitical reality has thus put an end to what he called “the Suez paradigm” – British Atlanticism versus French independence – and has opened the way for a renewal of the bilateral relationship because, he said, *“our two defence policies are weaker than they used to be so now we can cooperate for real.”*

Sir Menzies Campbell said the same thing when he brought out the substantial changes to the British-American relationship since the arrival of President Obama, who is notably anxious to improve America’s relations with China. Campbell said that it is no longer a case of wondering what the United States can do for Britain. Other participants commented on this new reality: Edgar Buckley asserted that *“Relying wholly on US technology is not an option”*, while Lord Wallace acknowledged that *“It’s now clear to all of us in Britain that we cannot afford to tie our defence strategy as closely to the United States as we have over the past 50-60 years.”* James de Waal from the MOD

underlined this point further, saying, *“On defence issues we have no closer relationship than with the French.”*

MILITARY CAPABILITIES AND SHARED LEADERSHIP: THE CATCHWORDS OF RENEWED FRANCO - BRITISH COOPERATION

Spotlight on military capabilities

It emerged from the various speeches that the current international context is favourable for a renewal of the Franco-British partnership. It was observed that it is a question of going further than the political approach, which is good but insufficient, and aiming for practical outcomes. France and the United Kingdom must move beyond declarations of intent and begin to share military capabilities, the missing link of bilateral cooperation. *“We need to be imaginative”*, according to Lord Robertson, for whom the solution is through a European defence based on pooling military capabilities. In a changing strategic context, governed by the constant adaptability of forces to crisis management, there were many participants who agreed that optimising the range of capabilities is the way forward. The importance of counter-insurgency operations - responding to roadside bombs, IEDs, in particular - requires the number of troops on the ground to be multiplied, tactical evacuation to be organised, and the use of specialised equipment.

The stance of the industrialists echoed this approach; anxious to respond to their clients’ expectations, large companies are seeking to maximise their military capabilities. MBDA’s Antoine Bouvier, recalling a Churchill quote – *“there is only one thing worse than working with partners and that is to have no partners”* -

subscribed to the idea of optimising resources between France and the United Kingdom through sharing. For Bouvier, the successful examples of Franco-British production of Scalp/Storm Shadow and Meteor missiles illustrated a dynamic cooperation on the basis of performance criteria that are linked to the division of work between the parties involved. Today he put forward the need for a new approach - a longer term and more comprehensive partnership between industry and governments. This, he said, is the next step as far as military capabilities are concerned.

Sharing: a key step in the defence industry

"Share it or lose it", suggested the industrialist Edgar Buckley, in conclusion to what is required in Franco-British cooperation on defence equipment, stressing the need for joint programmes to support the industry and making the case for a more systematic cooperation. In political terms, this idea, translatable by the notion of "shared leadership", was widely mentioned. MBDA felt that the notion presented the advantage of bringing about a sense of balance between the two countries in similar positions. Keen to explain the importance of shared leadership in terms of the technology of the future, Antoine Bouvier said that if the Franco-British missiles are to be replaced in twenty years time, then joint work between signatories, on the level of research, must start today.

The French General Armaments Directorate (DGA) supports this essential idea. For Jean-Pierre Devaux, Director of Strategy at the DGA, what matters now is moving, through partnership, from cooperation to mutual dependences. France and the United Kingdom cannot take the risk of losing their technologies and their operational sovereignty, and

have no other choice but to share, particularly when it comes to military capabilities, the vehicle for cooperation between the two countries. As such, he emphasised the responsibility of industrialists, as Franco-British cooperation does not stem solely from a government initiative. In his opinion, it will be beneficial when the industry agrees on economic approaches, when the link between high technology, investment and defence is made. Industry has a role to play in suggesting common solutions, not only country-specific ones. Devaux noted the importance of the HLWG as an essential tool for linking industries and governments: cooperation is a government-level question, while partnership is an industry-level question. He added that the recent signing of the agreement on UORs (19 February 2010), which followed on from the declaration of intent signed by Hervé Morin and Bob Ainsworth at the last Franco-British summit, is a first in terms of the will to converge, this type of agreement only having been reached with the United Kingdom. Valid for five years, pragmatic above anything else, it does not seek to produce interoperability, but aims to share resources on the ground and find rapid solutions to shared problems.

Beyond the isolated context of the financial crisis

To deliver value for money?

The impact of the financial situation on the need to renew Franco-British collaboration was widely recognised. It is clear that in the context of the economic crisis, it has become very difficult, even impossible, to expect today to be able to manage an autonomous military capability, and it was noted that public opinion will not support an increase in defence spending. At a time when armies

must do ever more with smaller and smaller budgets, the heavy constraints on defence budgets on either side of the Channel will be a push towards speeding up Franco-British cooperation.

However, James de Waal warned: if budgetary restrictions today pose a real problem on a national level and push us to collaborate with partners, they stem from an exceptional situation and risk generating limited, short-term projects. Thus, the financial crisis must not emerge as the leitmotiv of a revival of the Franco-British dimension; it is not a synonym for more intense cooperation. Sir Menzies Campbell, for his part, expressed the fear that concentrating on the short term is the wrong aim: nothing will come of identifying military capabilities based on the available finances, as the British risk finding themselves with an SDR on spending rather than a defence strategy.

THE TWO SENSITIVE BUT SURMOUNTABLE ASPECTS OF DEFENCE COLLABORATION

National Sovereignty: towards a better narrative

Sticking with the principal of shared leadership in terms of Franco-British defence collaboration touches on the question of identity: how far beyond their differences are the two countries prepared to go?

The cultural dimension lies at the heart of this question. James Arbuthnot recalled with humour the traditional feelings of suspicion that have marred the Franco-British partnership throughout history, and hoped that these inhibitions would be overcome in order to truly fulfil the entente cordiale. In general, it was acknowledged that in itself, sharing

technology is not a problem. However joint production is not enough - it must be accompanied by agreement on the use of equipment and it must happen in trust. In the naval sphere, for example, mutual dependence presents the problem of knowing whether it is acceptable for two teams of different cultures to share an aircraft carrier. Edgar Buckley was positive and offered the progress made within the HLWG as evidence. He explained how the French and British have learnt to work together by listening, and through mutual respect, one side always favouring an approach that moves from the general to the details, and the other very keen on pragmatism.

More generally, national sovereignty was a burning issue. It is about knowing what can be accepted on a political level to guarantee the sharing of military capabilities, which is expected on an economic and technological level. Sandy Johnston from the MoD wondered whether a shared sovereignty between the two allies to advance industrial cooperation could be envisaged. He underlined that the relationship with France is good, and the conversations numerous, leading to a convergence of views on key questions. The extraordinary courage of President Sarkozy, from the Gaullist tradition, to rejoin NATO's integrated military structure was an unprecedented gesture of confidence. But, he thought, the issue for the next stage is to find out whether France and the United Kingdom can go further by mutually committing even more. Lord Wallace of Saltaire is, himself, determined: in order to progress to the level of the supply chain, the key question of sovereignty must be addressed, and the public and Parliament informed via the media. He explained that this is a priority. One of the reasons for the failure of St Malo lies in the lack of transparency and

explanation of the issues of these agreements. Today, he continued, the old stereotypes of the cross-Channel rivalry and the threats to our sovereignty – such as misconceptions of a European Army - continue to stir up Parliamentary debates and feed the British press. There is no prospect of making progress if we do not take seriously the problem of informing people of the current process. It is time to tell the British people about their government's intentions and it is urgent that we "*educate our citizens*", he added.

James de Waal agreed and was concerned that the public were not aware of the gravity of the issue. It is difficult to explain that confronting complex threats can justify the prospect of sharing sovereignty on the basis of collaboration.

The fact remains that Franco-British cooperation must attempt to go beyond these difficulties. Sir Stephen Wall, a Franco-British Council Trustee, summarised the subject with the aid of a simple question: "*to have sovereignty over nothing or share sovereignty over something?*"

A variable dimension: bilateral versus multilateral?

Defining the framework of Franco-British cooperation was the object of contradictory debates between the French and British, but also across nationalities, between the political world and industrial society.

For Etienne de Durand, it was clear that shared leadership must take place on a bilateral basis in order for it to be pragmatic. This is, in his opinion, the only foreseeable option. James Arbuthnot took the same approach: armaments cooperation has been disappointing until now as it has met with serious failures as a

result of poorly managed budgets and cancelled programmes. The difficulty has often lain in aligning the requirements of different countries, with the complexity of distributing tasks, thus leading to multilateral projects with no future. The bilateral approach needs, therefore, to overcome numerous obstacles and to revitalise collaboration in the future, a notion with which Lord Wallace also agrees.

On the other hand, Michel Miraillet felt that the financial crisis does not permit us to plan a strictly bilateral cooperation. He set Franco-British rapprochement within the institutional context of NATO and the EU, and hoped that the value added by these two authorities would be studied without taboo. The French priority, whatever the make-up of the next British government, is to establish cooperation in a multilateral framework, he added. The then Minister Bill Rammell joined him in supporting the idea that the responsibility of the French and the British is to work together, effectively, within the EU and NATO, in support of collective security. Earlier in the day, Jean-Pierre Devaux had explained that reinforcing cooperation must involve an acknowledgement of the role of the European Defence Agency (EDA), which, he hoped, should benefit from the implementation of the Lisbon treaty. He felt that the multilateral cooperation that he favours can only be built on a hard core of leader nations, which France and the United Kingdom would be a part of. The industrialists – Thales, MBDA - also believed that mutual dependence should not be limited to the bilateral, but should form part of a plural participation, which would also benefit the European dimension.

"*Let's look at what does work*", suggested the British Robin Southwell, of EADS.

POINTS OF REFLECTION FOR THE ROADMAP OF THE FUTURE

From the Green Paper to the SDR

For now, on a politico-strategic level, there is a visible convergence of views on either side of the Channel. The British appreciated having been brought into the preparatory work for the French Defence White Paper in 2008. They drew inspiration from it for some major themes of their recent Green Paper, and the French were satisfied with their position as key partner, and were even enthusiastic about the idea of being able to contribute in turn to the current thinking in the United Kingdom on what will be, in Autumn 2010, the next Strategic Defence Review. Over the last ten to fifteen years it has been clearly established that France and the United Kingdom have at their disposal the tools to pave the way for a privileged partnership. This was underlined by the French Ambassador: *“the next SDR is an opportunity for us to work closely together. We cannot miss it.”*

The British recommendations in the Green Paper are unequivocally about the need to cooperate with European allies. The objective is to be more effective, more rational, and to make the armed forces more adaptable. The Armed Forces Minister confirmed that amongst other things, we need to highlight the importance of the Franco-British relationship, especially since France's return to the Alliance's integrated military structure. There are real opportunities to cooperate and to create new models, in the current environment in which flexibility, adaptability and the optimisation of resources are very important. In a world which may not have become more dangerous but has certainly become more unpredictable, it is no longer possible to act alone.

Specifically, James de Waal explained the reasons for the place given to France in this preliminary report; the United Kingdom is anxious to plan its major strategic lines beyond current considerations of the financial crisis, and would also like to invest in reliable partnerships that are resistant to a complex and changing world. In addition, the government has assessed the relative failure of multinational bodies and thus prefers to rely on specific relationships. Finally, the identical assessments of our two countries on international strategic developments led to the same questions: what role do we want to play in the world? What place is there for the armed forces? Is there an alternative to what we have done in the past? Michel Miraillet also touched on the similarity of approaches between France and the United Kingdom, particularly on the desire to balance the concepts of prevention and prediction: how to manage the threat remotely, what future role for the armies and their level of integration in military alliances, how should we anticipate conflicts? He also welcomed the willingness expressed in the Green Paper to interact collectively within the EU and NATO.

Afghanistan, an important military platform

The management of the Afghan crisis was considered a key platform for the launch of Franco-British cooperation. Admittedly, it was pointed out that France and the United Kingdom do not necessarily operate in the same theatre of operations, however the prospects for closer cooperation should be central to future thinking. Bill Rammell touched notably on the recent French participation in operation Mushtarak, launched in February 2010 where a team of seventy

French instructors, operating as part of an Operational Mentor and Liaison Team (OMLT,) joined Camp Bastion, the main British base in Afghanistan. Alongside the 1st Royal Welsh Battalion, they provided combat support for the Kandak 31 of the Afghan National Army. This, in his opinion, is a very encouraging example of Franco-British solidarity within ISAF.

James Arbuthnot also felt that bilateral collaboration would benefit from the situation in Afghanistan, where the French and British are fighting together in one of the most unstable regions in the world, where the risk of a nuclear threat is not unthinkable.

Options for future joint projects

On the industrial side, several participants discussed the possible paths to future armaments cooperation. The MBDA group explained that the current priority is a new lightweight anti-cruise missile, launched from a helicopter (French ANL, British FASGW). More generally, the market for unmanned vehicles was widely debated, examining prospects for the Watchkeeper and the Mantis programme in particular. During the seminar, attention was also given to military intelligence. Specifically, Michel Miraillet invited the British to join the French on the MUSIS project. R&T is another important area, which already benefits from good cooperation, but which must be addressed in long-term planning in order to allow the army to remain competitive. Opinions on the aircraft carrier project were divergent, with some participants considering that the issue is not yet closed. Lastly, the question of cooperation on a nuclear deterrent was mentioned, and Sir Menzies Campbell clearly set out the issue: *“Frankly I cannot see that our deterrence would not operate for France and vice versa. I am pretty sure the UK knows*

where French submarines are and I am pretty certain the French know where British submarines are. On that basis why is it not possible to conduct more highly integrated operations?”

CONCLUSION

This roundtable organised by the FBC and RUSI on 9 March was intended to seize a propitious moment in the relaunch of Franco-British cooperation in the defence field. The ambitious nature of the sessions dealing with military, industrial, strategic and procurement questions could be said to have resulted in too general a debate which some may have wished to have been more focused. However it meant that for the first time a diverse range of key people could be brought together, all anxious to address the issues in the current context, and consider the relationship which has been tested by several years of near stagnation, and dispel misunderstandings. The discussion was open and transparent, and provided insight into the British attitude to cooperation. Old taboos were openly discussed. There was a common desire to go beyond the rhetoric of the St Malo Agreement and confront the sensitive issue of sharing sovereignty. The industrial aspect emerged clearly as key to rapprochement in an international environment where the transatlantic relationship raised a whole new dimension.

The majority of participants showed a strong willingness to speed up the process of relaunching bilateral efforts, then acting quickly and working together in an improved structure. It was observed that the good co-operation that exists needed to be nurtured and encouraged to flourish. Care should be taken to support the momentum and seize the opportunities for collaboration. The

French Ambassador recalled a key passage from the St Malo Agreements: *“It is difficult to envisage a situation in which the vital interest of either of our two nations could be threatened without the vital interest of the other also being threatened”*.

The Franco-British Council and the Royal United Services Institute are collaborating in the organisation of another conference to be held in the autumn of 2010. The aim is to further develop these ideas focusing

on aspects of the politico-strategic relationship between France and the United Kingdom, the European dimension and the role of the two countries within the Alliance. The return of France into NATO, the establishment of the new British government and the prospect of the Strategic Defence Review will be crucial elements in the formulation of a renewed partnership.

ANNEXES

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