

UK and France forge military alliance

Julie Hyland

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French President Nicolas Sarkozy and British Prime Minister David Cameron have signed treaties on defence and nuclear co-operation, in what was described as a “new chapter” in military relations between the two nations.

The framework agreements include:

- Plans for a combined joint expeditionary force of 5,000 soldiers from each country, for training and possible operations
- Sharing aircraft carriers with the view to the future establishment of an “integrated strike force,” for use in jointly agreed operations
- Greater co-operation on cyber-attacks and developing unmanned aerial drones
- Shared resources on training, maintenance and logistics of A400M transport aircraft

The commitment to increase co-operation on nuclear safety and testing over the next 50 years will see the establishment of a UK centre to develop testing technology and another in France to conduct the testing.

The agreements have been hailed as “unprecedented” and “historic”. Nuclear co-operation is seen as hugely significant, given longstanding antagonisms between the two countries, particularly over the political and economic direction of Europe, the Franco-German alliance and the UK’s “special relationship” with the United States. In the 1960s, France began developing its own independent nuclear deterrent and withdrew from NATO under President Charles de Gaulle.

The treaties are almost universally described as the outcome of hard-headed pragmatism at a time of austerity. Senior defence officials are reported to have dubbed the agreements an “Entente Frugale”, as both countries seek to slash public spending. Britain’s Ministry of Defence said that, “The UK and France are facing the realities of the tough financial climate and it is in our best interests to work together to deliver the capabilities that both our nations need.”

Defence spending in France is to rise by just 1 percent in real terms between 2012 and 2025. Britain’s Conservative/Liberal Democrat government recently released a Strategic Defence and Security Review containing 8 percent spending reductions including the loss of 17,000 military personnel.

As a consequence, Paris and London will have just one operational aircraft carrier each—the *Charles de Gaulle* and the *Queen Elizabeth*—by the end of the decade. The *Queen Elizabeth* is to be sold off or decommissioned by 2020, when it

is replaced by a new carrier, the HMS *Prince of Wales*. The UK is expected to have no carrier strike capability for a decade due to the decision to scrap the Harrier attack aircraft.

The two countries have agreed to “inter-operability”—a scenario in which a British carrier could be used in operations in the Falklands, for example, while a French carrier could operate off the coast of Africa. The idea is that the two countries will be able to guarantee to NATO, the United Nations and the European Union that one carrier will be available when the other is out of action.

The HMS *Prince of Wales* is due to enter service by 2020, when the HMS *Queen Elizabeth* will be mothballed or sold off. The *Queen Elizabeth* carrier is to be reconfigured with cheaper “cat and trap” planes, currently used by both the French and US navies. This will enable the British carrier to launch France’s Rafale jets.

In addition to a deal whereby France could sublet Britain’s planned new A330 air tankers, Paris is also considering reconfiguring the *Charles de Gaulle* so that it will be able to use the new Joint Strike Fighter jets that the UK is to obtain by 2010. Paris has offered the use of its Bréguet Atlantique maritime patrol aircraft, to fill the gap left by the UK’s decision to scrap its Nimrod patrol aircraft.

There is no question that financial constraints have played a big role in bringing the two countries together, even though the reductions in military spending are as nothing in comparison to the onslaught on jobs, wages, pensions and public services being implemented in the UK and France.

But budgetary constraints notwithstanding, the aim of London and Paris is to preserve their ability to continue military involvements in Afghanistan, where they supply the second and fourth largest military contingents respectively, and throughout the world. Their intent is to combine forces in order to secure their global predatory ambitions.

The UK’s defence review commits to “procuring a fleet of the most capable, nuclear powered hunter-killer submarines anywhere in the world. They are able to operate in secret across the world’s oceans, fire Tomahawk cruise missiles at targets on land, detect and attack other submarines and ships to keep the sea lanes open, protect the nuclear deterrent and feed strategic intelligence back to the UK and our military forces across the world”.

Both Paris and London are acutely conscious of their

diminished military capabilities not only as against the US, but also emerging powers such as China. More broadly, the issue is how medium-sized countries can finance military spending in any way commensurate with their still-considerable imperialist appetites, without popular revolt.

Greater co-operation is seen as a step in this direction. The UK and France are the only countries in Europe with nuclear weapons, who have permanent seats on the UN Security Council and who allocate more than 2 percent of national spending on defence. Britain and France account for 45 percent of all military spending in the European Union, 70 percent of its military research and development and half the total number of armed forces.

British and French defence companies have been pressing for such an agreement, warning that without it they could lose out to other countries and corporations—particularly in the field of unmanned systems. Ahead of Tuesday’s summit, BAE Systems of the UK and Dassault Aviation of France wrote a letter to Cameron and Sarkozy in which they warned:

“The development of a Male [medium altitude long range] and then an unmanned combat air vehicle is crucial to the two countries to remain real players in this strategic sector.”

The concerns are that spending cuts would see European governments buying equipment from the US, rather than from European firms. The *Financial Times* cites one unnamed defence figure as stating, “We know we will one day face the huge challenge of replacing France’s Rafale and the Eurofighter Typhoon. Either there will be a new American plane or something created in Europe. So we have to organise options we give to governments.”

During their summit Sarkozy and Cameron were nevertheless at pains to insist that there would be no diminishing of “national sovereignty” or “sharing” weapons systems. French Defence Minister Hervé Morin, said Britain and France would not be able to demand the use of the other nation’s aircraft carrier “in the case of a conflict or crisis where our respective interests diverged”. Cameron said there would have to be “political agreement” for the joint taskforce to be deployed.

The deal has been signed under the Conservatives, traditionally the most “euro-sceptic” of Britain’s official parties. Leading Tories have come forward to defend the agreement as in Britain’s “national interests”.

The major change is France’s decision to re-enter NATO. In 1998, former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair and ex-French president Jacques Chirac had announced a commitment to Anglo-French military co-operation. But divisions remained over whether this should be as part of a European Defence Initiative, or more firmly tied in with Washington. The UK’s decision to support the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 ultimately halted such co-operation.

With Sarkozy oriented more towards the US and having brought France back into NATO, London clearly sees an opportunity to create distance between Paris and Berlin. The

Strategic Defence Review describes France as an additional critical pillar in its pro-Atlanticist military strategy.

Writing in the *Telegraph*, Defence Secretary Liam Fox praised Sarkozy’s efforts “to bring France deeper into Nato”, and stipulated that the agreement had nothing to do with “deeper military co-operation through the EU. Nor is it a push for an EU army, which we oppose. This is about achieving real capability and tangible results—and proving that co-operation in Europe doesn’t always have to be on an EU level, but can be on a state-to-state basis.”

Washington is said to support the agreement. US officials had made vocal warnings against too severe cuts to Britain’s military budgets that could undermine the NATO alliance. This is said to have caused anxiety in Britain’s ruling circles that Washington may be persuaded to “disengage” from Europe, sidelining the UK in the process.

As for France, long-held ambitions for a pan-European defence strategy have come to nothing. The *Financial Times* quoted Etienne de Durand of the Institut Français des Relations Internationales in Paris stating, “France is also coming to terms with Germany’s unwillingness to spend more on military capabilities. France is therefore recognising that, for now, pan-European defence structures are unlikely to do more than short-term crisis management.”

Britain and France, he continued, “just do not have the size to be players in the defence field on their own. The challenge is simple. It is entente or oblivion.”

Notwithstanding the air of celebration, however, divisions remain between France and Britain over a number of key issues. Their global ambitions have, more often than not, proved to be a source of rivalry rather than unity.

The signing of a bilateral agreement between Britain and France over defence points to growing strains in Europe and internationally. No reference has been made to any consultation at an EU level over the agreement, nor with Germany—although Cameron made play of the fact that he had entertained Chancellor Angela Merkel the previous week.

Under conditions in which tensions are already leading to the emergence of “beggar thy neighbour” economic policies, the Anglo-French treaty is an indicator of what is to come in military policy with all its possible ramifications.



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