

# BULLETIN

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## The New UK-France Programme of Defence Collaboration

by Gareth Chappell

*At the start of November, the UK and France proclaimed a new programme of defence collaboration. Its content is pragmatic and largely unprecedented, whether it is fully implemented however, remains to be seen. Cooperation is taking place outside the EU, which arguably undermines the future development of military capabilities under European Security and Defence Policy. Still, the overall impact of the programme on the EU is likely to be limited and on NATO, positive.*

In military terms, the UK and France are the most potent in Europe. Contrary to other EU member states, they both have nuclear weapons, the capacity to independently undertake military operations at distance and both invest heavily in defence, together accounting for half of overall EU member state's defence spending and almost two thirds of research and development. Nonetheless their military stature is under threat due to the consequences of the financial crisis and the fact that their defence budgets were already overstretched, not to mention their militaries require re-configuring to confront the urgent challenges of today. Yet neither is willing to relinquish their stature just yet. The mutual desire to remain militarily relevant in the world amid forced cuts in defence expenditure has therefore driven the two countries to collaborate closer on defence.

**Main Assumptions of the Programme.** On 2 November 2010, the UK and France announced a new programme of defence collaboration, which is to be delivered through an overarching Defence Cooperation Treaty, a subordinate treaty relating to the shared use of two facilities for the testing of nuclear warheads, a letter of intent signed by Defence Ministers and a package of joint defence initiatives. The latter includes the creation of a non-standing, Combined Joint Expeditionary Force (CJEF) consisting of land, air and sea components suitable for a wide range of scenarios up to and including high-intensity operations, undertaken bilaterally or through NATO, the EU or other coalition arrangements; an integrated carrier strike group from around 2020 onwards; integrated support and joint training for the future A400M transport aircraft; coordination on equipment and technology for the next generation of nuclear submarines; military satellite communications; countermeasures for maritime mines; and, the possible dual use of the UK's Future Strategic Tanker Aircraft, depending on the cost.

The content of the programme is largely unprecedented. The notable exception is the CJEF, particularly the land component. Over the last couple of decades, UK and French troops have regularly operated alongside as well as under the command of allies, and in some cases each other. In contrast, the 'warhead' treaty is unique. For almost half a century, the UK and France have fiercely guarded their nuclear deterrents as symbols of the "special relationship" with the U.S. and supreme national sovereignty, respectively. Also unprecedented is an integrated carrier strike group as well as the embrace itself. The UK and France have long adopted different positions on European defence. The former has privileged the "special" relationship with the U.S. and thus, NATO. The latter has championed *l'Europe de la Défense*. The new programme of defence collaboration is certainly a sign that the "special" relationship is in transition and France is arguably less taken by the idea of *l'Europe de la Défense*. Still, it does not denote a major shift in their respective positions, not for the time being at least. The U.S. remains the UK's preeminent bilateral partner and NATO the bedrock of defence. Indeed, cooperation with France arguably serves to preserve the pre-eminence of the "special" relationship (e.g. by cooperating with France, the UK can maintain some capability and so remain militarily relevant) as well as strengthen NATO. Similarly, it is unlikely that France has

abandoned the idea of *l'Europe de la Défense* altogether, but is rather more realistic on what can be achieved, especially considering the failure to make any significant progress on CSDP during its presidency of the EU in 2008 as well as the negative experiences associated with the joint procurement of the A400M transport aircraft. If anything, the UK-France embrace is driven by pragmatism rather than a shift in ideology. Both countries realize that in order to maintain key capabilities, cross-Channel collaboration is the only real option. A choice made easier by the Atlanticist leanings of the incumbent French President and the return of France to NATO's integrated military structures in 2009.

**Prospects for Implementation.** Once the 'warhead' treaty enters into force, it will last 50 years and so, be immune to the inevitable ups and downs in relations over the coming decades. In contrast, the joint defence initiatives are of an indefinite duration, which raises question marks about their resilience. Looking ahead, there are a number of factors that could potentially derail them. London and Paris have often disagreed over when and where to use force. Indeed, discord over the 2003 Iraq War thwarted the last major agreement on defence. Another factor to consider is whether cooperation would survive a potential change in the *Palais de l'Élysée* in 2012. Old Gaullists and some on the French left oppose the programme on the grounds that it arguably undermines a common European defence. Yet there are a number of reasons to be more optimistic. Greater cooperation with Paris has broad political backing across the Channel and is supported by the heavyweights of the UK and French defence industries, BAE systems and Dassault respectively. Structural shifts in the international system are also another reason to be considered. In economic terms, the UK and France will continue to decline as power shifts South and East. Therefore, the need for cooperation will be greater over the coming decades. Further, the focus of the U.S. will track this trend, which will not only reinforce the need, but also pave the way for closer cooperation as the capitals of Europe, including London become less important to Washington.

**Consequences for the EU and NATO.** At the Saint-Malo summit in 1998, the UK and France agreed that the EU needed to be in a position to play its full role on the international stage and must have the capacity and capability to do so accordingly. The consensus between these two EU member states paved the way for the launch of the European Security and Defence Policy (the CSDP as renamed in the Lisbon Treaty) at the Cologne European Council summit in 1999. The new programme will not have the same effect, not directly at least. Cooperation is taking place outside the EU, which the UK government has been keen to stress. To quote the Defence Secretary directly, "this is not a repeat of [the] Saint-Malo summit that called for deeper military cooperation through the EU. Nor is this a push for the EU Army that we oppose ... It has always been my view that defence must be a sovereign and, therefore, an inter-governmental issue."

Critics argue that the new UK-France programme of defence collaboration undermines CSDP. This is partially true, specifically regarding the future development of military capabilities. Still, the overall impact on the EU will be rather limited. By cooperating closer on defence, both the UK and France can maintain key capabilities and so remain militarily relevant, which only serves to benefit the whole EU. A decisive factor going forward is the response of other member states. The new UK-France programme of defence collaboration could prompt them to either reduce costly capabilities, in particular expeditionary ones or pursue closer cooperation. The former will be particularly tempting in an age of austerity. A reduction is made even more attractive by the absence of a direct military threat to the European continent and the out-of-area fiasco in Afghanistan. As regards the latter, other members states could pursue closer cooperation either through or outside the EU. The latter is more likely given the difficulties in making significant headway with CSDP without, certainly the UK (the incumbent government is ardently opposed to the idea) and maybe even France, depending on the cost. Looking forward, one can imagine sets of member states coming together outside the EU (but with an aim to support both EU and NATO overall capability) in order to cooperate in areas of mutual interest and where significant progress can be achieved.

Regarding NATO, the impact is positive. Closer cooperation cuts costs in areas of the UK and French equipment programmes and thus, frees up funds to maintain key capabilities, which are typically expensive, but also significant to the fulfillment of NATO missions (e.g. expeditionary capabilities). The new programme also augments the deployability and interoperability of UK and French forces. Agreeing to coordinate the refit of their respective aircraft carriers after 2020 onwards, means that in theory an integrated carrier strike group will always be available for deployment as part of a NATO mission. Developing a CJEF will increase the effectiveness of NATO forces in theatre.