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Impact of the Libyan Crisis on the UK-France Defence Programme

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In November 2010, Britain and France agreed an unprecedented programme of defence collaboration. The current crisis in Libya has provided a test-case for the agreement. Britain and France have thus far adopted a comparable policy and appear to have managed minor discrepancies amicably. Still, it is debatable whether their similar stance vindicates the agreement since domestic issues and not strategic interests per se appear to lie at the heart of their policy. How the military operation plays out could have a decisive impact on the programme's future.

Britain and France have been at the forefront of the international response to the crisis in Libya, which followed a wave of revolutions in the Arab world. Separately and often in tandem, they have lobbied for a stronger international response to the Gaddafi regime's repression of the Libyan revolt, which has involved the use of air power. Franco-British lobbying has occurred within a multitude of international fora ranging from NATO through the EU and the UN to the G8, and has sought international support for all possible contingencies, including a no-fly zone. In the end, their diplomatic endeavours bore UNSC Resolution 1973, which authorizes the international community to take all necessary measures, short of an occupation, to protect Libyan civilians. British and French forces assumed a leading role in the subsequent military action and continue to be heavily involved as part of a wider coalition under NATO command.

Impact on the UK-France Defence Programme. Franco-British cooperation on Libya follows an unprecedented agreement reached in November 2010, which sets out closer bilateral collaboration in the field of security and defence.¹ The comparable British and French stance to the crisis in Libya is likely to vindicate the agreement in the minds of the political elite, at least for the time being. It may also quiet the critics that at the time cast doubt over its workability due to the fact that Britain and France had often disagreed over when and where to use force in the past.

Still, two points should be added. First, domestic factors played a significant role in shaping both the British and the French policy towards Libya. London's course of action was in part driven by the need to appear in control of the situation after a series of mistakes raised question marks over the government's competence and cross-party concerns over the commitment of the foreign minister. Embarrassment over the country's earlier involvement with the Gaddafi regime may also have informed British policy, particularly an alleged deal linking the release of the Lockerbie bomber, Abdelbaset al-Megrahi to progress on an oil and gas exploration deal signed by British energy major BP. Paris' course of action was also guided by prior missteps, particularly with respect to the revolt in Tunisia, which had culminated in domestic criticism and, ultimately, the dismissal of the foreign minister. The forthcoming French presidential election in May 2012 is also likely to have played a role. According to opinion polls, the incumbent Nicolas Sarkozy is set for a humiliating defeat and thus may hope that grandstanding on the international stage may lift his popularity. Hence, it could be said that if the domestic situation in each country had been different, then their overall response to the Libyan crisis could quite easily have diverged.

Second, while their overall policy was comparable, the details differed on several scores in the run up to the UN vote and have continued to do so since. Further, the execution of their policy has on occasions appeared uncoordinated. France unilaterally recognized the Interim Transitional National

¹ G. Chappell, *The New UK-France Programme of Defence Collaboration*, "Bulletin" PISM, no. 135 (211) of 25 November 2010.

Council on 10 March 2011 as the official representatives of the Libyan people, in contrast to Britain, which adopted a more cautious approach. In addition, Paris appeared to adopt a more belligerent stance to the crisis, reportedly advocating direct strikes on strategic military sites controlled by the Gaddafi regime, while London sought to play down the use of force to facilitate a no-fly zone. Their policy has continued to diverge since Resolution 1973 was adopted on 17 March 2011. The two parties disagreed over who should lead the military operation in the long-term. France opposed Britain's preference for NATO, while Britain reportedly rejected a French proposal for a united Franco-British command. Their initial military action was also out of sync as France appeared to launch the first attack unilaterally, and when they did strike in unison, it was done separately. Britain opted to launch military action alongside the U.S. rather than flying air sorties with France. Additionally, both examples allude to the primacy of the "special" relationship in London, which is likely to have led to some cynicism in Paris.

How the military operation in Libya plays out will also have a decisive impact on the future trajectory of the Franco-British defence programme. Clearly, the future course of the operation has the potential to bolster the initiative by providing the opportunity for closer contact between their armed forces and by vindicating their overall policy towards Libya, if the military endeavour is brought to a swift and successful end. That said, the danger of discord lies ahead, especially if the Gaddafi regime outlasts the initial hostilities. This raises a number of potentially divisive issues, including whether Resolution 1973 authorizes targeted action against Gaddafi himself in addition to the legality and wisdom of supplying arms to the rebels. On the first issue, they appear to diverge. Britain seems to believe that Gaddafi could be a legitimate target, for having almost certainly ordered attacks on Libyan civilians. On the contrary, French officials have said that even if the whereabouts of Gaddafi were known, he would not be targeted. On the second issue, their positions also seem to vary at present. The British foreign minister has said that Britain is not currently planning to arm the rebels, though he suggested that such a venture would be in line with Resolution 1973. In contrast, his French counterpart has indicated that France would support such a move, though he insisted that doing so would be illegal and would require a new UNSC resolution.

Consequences for CSDP. Given the difficulty in calculating the consequences for CSDP of the UK-France defence programme itself, it is hard to deduce what repercussions the impact of the Libyan crisis on the initiative may be for CSDP, irrespective of whether it serves to strengthen or weaken the programme. Still, one general observation can be made. Europe's response to the Libyan crisis may reinforce current thinking in Britain and France regarding the EU's potential in the sphere of security and defence. The incumbent British government appears to take an antipathetic stance towards the growth of CSDP. It justifies its position by pointing to the lack of political will in Europe to adequately invest in military capabilities and deploy them when necessary (such a justification hides an ideological preference for NATO, as the same could also apply to the Alliance). Therefore, the lack of political resolve shown in some EU member states to consider military action in response to the crisis is likely to reinforce the government's position and prove that France is the only European country to be taken seriously in matters of security and defence. France has traditionally championed the CSDP cause. However the failure to make any real progress in recent years has contributed to a more pragmatic stance.² The EU's failure thus far to agree on a military response to the crisis in Libya, which France reportedly proposed with respect to the enforcement of the UN arms embargo, may foster further disillusionment regarding the EU's potential and give impetus to the re-evaluation process.

Conclusion. The Libyan crisis has and will continue to provide a test-case for the UK-France defence programme, agreed last November. To date Britain and France appear to have plotted a similar course and managed minor policy disputes amicably. Still, it is questionable whether their broadly comparable policy vindicates the agreement as domestic issues and not strategic interests *per se* appear to lie at the core of their policy. How the military operation plays out will have a decisive impact on the confluence. It is still too early to tell what consequences the impact of the Libyan crisis on the Franco-British programme may be for CSDP. The fact that the EU was sidelined in the implementation of Resolution 1973 illuminates current thinking on CSDP, namely that it is now considered an inappropriate instrument for high-intensity interventions and more suited to post-conflict situations.

² D. Liszczyk, *France's Current Approach to the EU's Security and Defence Policy*, "Bulletin" PISM, no. 6 (223) of 24 January 2011.