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Strategic Pretence or Strategic Defence?

Britain, France and the Common Security and Defence Policy after Libya

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Key Points

- The Libyan imbroglio demonstrated the best and the worst of both the Anglo-French entente and the European Union (EU). With genocide looming in Benghazi and the EU paralysed by internal division, London and Paris took the lead to build a coalition. However, coalitions are the antithesis of alliances and unions and the fact that Britain and France had to step outside both EU and NATO frameworks demonstrates the extent of the fragility of European strategic “consensus”.
- Only London and Paris can jointly re-establish a credible and affordable European military leadership core. Libya demonstrates the need for Europeans to operate in and around the Mediterranean Sea and Indian Ocean, the likely epicentres of future global power competition. The crisis also emphasises the critical influence of political legitimacy for which a functioning, responsive and capable CSDP is vital. European capability must be able to operate under several flags – NATO, UN or simply under Franco-British coalition leadership.
- There are still profound tensions in the Franco-British relationship. The British attitude towards post-Lisbon EU security and defence is that states lead, and institutions follow – with NATO first. The French view is that NATO remains essentially an Article 5 Collective Defence organisation and that in time CSDP must emerge as the centre of European strategic influence.
- Given the age of austerity, Europeans are first going to have to make better use of what they have and then better acquire together what they need to act both cost-effectively and strategically. Therefore, Anglo-French defence co-operation only makes real strategic sense as a joint commitment to future civilian and military effectiveness, which underpins the narrative for the cost-effective modernisation of European forces through both NATO and the EU.

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With British and French aircraft undertaking most of the air operations over Libya and some fifty-five years on from the Suez debacle, historical irony abounds. On November 2 2010, London and Paris agreed the Defence and Security Cooperation Treaty¹ (see box below). On the face of it the accord is by and large military-technical: to develop co-operation between British and French Armed Forces, to promote the sharing and pooling of materials and equipment including through mutual interdependence, and leading to the building of joint facilities. This it is hoped will promote mutual access to each other's defence markets, through the promotion of industrial and technological co-operation. But what has the treaty to do with the European Union (EU) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP)? Does the treaty mark the first step on the road to re-galvanising Europe's strategic defence or is it simply the strategic pretence of two aging, failing powers unable to accept a world that has moved on?

The Libyan imbroglio demonstrated the best and the worst of both the Anglo-French entente and the EU. With genocide looming in Benghazi and the EU paralysed by internal division, London and Paris together took the lead to build a coalition. However, coalitions are the antithesis of alliances and unions, and the fact that Britain and France had to step outside both EU and NATO frameworks demonstrates the extent of the fragility of European strategic "consensus", particularly in the European Union. Germany, in particular, remains implacably opposed to the use of force even to impose UN Security Council Resolution 1973 (2011) from which it pointedly abstained. NATO has since taken over command of Operation Odyssey Dawn (air operations are suffering as a result) and the EU has agreed that subject to UN approval it will launch a humanitarian mission in Libya, but the political solidarity underpinning operations remains weak. If Gaddafi survives, and well he might, he will have won and Europe will have once again demonstrated weakness rather than strength, this time in its own backyard. Libya has thus cast the Franco-British Treaty into sharp relief – a Europe that is too wealthy to hide from change; but too weak to influence change.

In a sense, Libya has simply revealed the extent of Europe's strategic malaise. Almost all the anchor points of traditional European strategy have now failed. There is a reason for this. For the first time in half a millennium, Europe is neither the centre of power or conflict in the world; American leadership, which for so long provided an alibi for European strategic indolence, is uncertain and in any case focused elsewhere; and Russia that other great driver of European "strategy" is a critical if complex energy partner, rather than critically dangerous. Moreover, most Europeans do not know where the nation-state ends and Europe's institutions begin, with "power" being lost in the strategic ether between Brussels and national capitals.

Furthermore, after a decade of Asian growth, the strengths of oriental competitors are routinely and wildly exaggerated, as are Europe's own weaknesses. With much of North Africa and the Middle East on fire and after twenty years of identity-sapping mass immigration, Europe's contemporary "security" appears on the face of it to have little to do with military firepower and much more to do with fractured and fractious societies. Indeed, the apparent inability of America's hyper-military to secure Afghanistan or Iraq has reinforced the sense that, for Europe, soft power is the only power worth having.

At the very least London and Paris must be congratulated for trying to arrest such delusion, even if the main impulse for the treaty was defence cost-reduction. The need was pressing. EU nations have a combined gross domestic product (GDP) of €12.5tr compared with the US GDP of €10tr or some 124% of the US total. However, the combined 2009 defence budgets of the EU totalled €188bn compared with the 2009 US defence budget of €503bn. The EU member states thus spend some 35% of the US expenditure on defence. Nineteen of the twenty-seven EU members spend less than €4bn per annum and much of it inefficiently, the ratios between personnel and equipment budgets particularly perverse, with too many bloated headquarters, top-heavy command chains and outdated formations. Between 2001 and 2008 EU member state's spending on defence fell from €255bn to €223bn (not adjusted for defence cost inflation).

Box: "UK–France Summit 2010 Declaration on Defence and Security Co-operation", 2 November 2010

"The UK and France are natural partners in security and defence. As permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, NATO Allies, European Union members, and Nuclear Weapons States, we share many common interests and responsibilities. [...]

We are determined to act as leaders in security and defence. Security and prosperity are indivisible. That is why, between us, we invest half of the defence budget of European nations and two thirds of the research and technology spending. We are among the most active contributors to operations in Afghanistan and in other crises areas around the world. We are equally among the few nations able and ready to fulfil the most demanding military missions. Today, we have reached a level of mutual confidence unprecedented in our history.

[...]

In addition, a threat to our vital interests could also emerge at any time. 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. Today, we have decided to intensify our co-operation still further. We want to enable our forces to operate together, to maximise our capabilities and to obtain greater value for money from our investment in defence. We plan to increase the range and ambition of our joint defence equipment programmes, and to foster closer industrial co-operation. We believe this co-operation will benefit all our Allies and contribute to the security of the Atlantic Alliance, the European Union and our friends overseas".

Furthermore, of that €188bn France and the UK together represent 43% or €80.6bn, whilst France, Germany and the UK represent 61% or €114.2bn and the so-called “big three” spend 88% of all defence research and development in NATO Europe. And here is the rub; over roughly the same period the US has increased its defence expenditure by 109%, China by 247%, Russia by 67% and Australia by 56%. Placed in that context the Franco-British treaty begins to make European strategic sense. Strategy and affordability are thus the twin mantras of co-operation between London and Paris and must be seen as such.

St-Malo Re-visited?

There have of course been many previous attempts by London and Paris to create a strategic axis since the two powers began to perceive the pace of their relative mutual decline one hundred years ago during the 1911 Agadir Crisis. More recently in 1998 Britain and France signed the St-Malo Declaration which a year later led to the EU's Helsinki Declaration and the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP).² However, that attempt, like so many before it, fell apart as the two countries took starkly different positions over the 2003 American-led invasion of Iraq. For the moment pragmatism reigns – after all, contemporary London would not know strategic vision if it slapped Whitehall squarely between the ears. Thankfully, the theological debates over NATO or EU first for the moment have been put to one side. Rather, London and Paris appear to want to jointly re-establish a foundation for a credible and affordable military leadership core. Critical over time will be the ability to operate together and with fellow Europeans in the so-called seams between land, air and sea and in and around the Mediterranean Sea and Indian Oceans, which will be the likely epicentres of future global power competition. It is military capability that will be designed to operate in a range of formats – NATO, UN or simply under Franco-British coalition leadership, but the implications for CSDP are profound.

That said, the emphasis remains firmly on coalitions of the willing and able. The 2010 British Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) called for “Greater sharing of military capabilities, technology and programmes and potentially more specialisation, working with key allies, including France, and based on appropriate formal guarantees where necessary”.³ Certainly, if Europeans can agree on little else they must surely see that the global context of Europe's contemporary security is becoming ever more complex and dangerous. Indeed, forces and resources that states are prepared to devote to defence (as opposed to security – see below) are becoming increasingly squeezed as defence expenditure becomes discretionary in an age of austerity.

Logically, a strategic partnership between the world's fifth and sixth largest economies and the second and third biggest cash spenders on defence makes sense. Moreover, such a partnership would appear to be a *sine qua non* for both a future CSDP and to help reinvigorate and rebalance a tired transatlantic relationship. The Franco-British Treaty thus represents an important departure from traditional strategic norms for both London and Paris.

However, whilst the financial case for a renewed and intensified partnership is clear, the political and strategic imperatives on both sides of the Channel are less so. There are those in London who remain wedded to an unconditional “followership” of America that accords with the never-to-be trusted French smack of heresy. And, in Paris the Gaullist wing of the French right balks at any structural co-operation with *la perfide Albion*. Furthermore, whilst the West (and Europe) is suffering from a crisis of solidarity, any Franco-British defence partnership must still necessarily accommodate Germany and avoid any suggestion that it seeks to exclude the United States.

Foreign Secretary Hague summed up the traditional and inherent pragmatism in London's position when talking last year of NATO and which is equally applicable to Franco-British co-operation: “We are working with NATO Allies to fashion a new Strategic Concept and to modernise the Alliance, understanding that in a world of intercontinental threats alliances and partnerships must be flexible and networked...”⁴ It is the emphasis on flexibility which is thus critical for the British. However, Anglo-French defence co-operation must focus as much on the instinctively global as the determinedly practical. If not, London will continue to make an imperfect contribution to CSDP matched by France's imperfect contribution to NATO, at the expense of the effective and affordable security and defence of both countries. This is so because in spite of the current preference for coalitions effective institutions remain critical for the influence of both Britain and France. Indeed, in spite of the savage and ill-considered cuts to its armed forces, Britain will remain at the core of European defence alongside France and it is only to be welcomed that pressure is growing on London to re-think its defence cuts, given the unexpected Libyan commitment. Certainly, so long as free-driving Germany does not wish to play a leadership role in the area of security and defence (as it should) the simple truism of Europe's defence will continue for the foreseeable future – no European defence is worthy of the name without Franco-British leadership.

So Far, So Good, But...

So far, so good. However, Britain and France still too often disagree over roles and priorities for both NATO and the EU, much to the detriment of both institutions (and each other), and Libya has again demonstrated how close to the surface such tensions remain. Indeed, there is a persistent danger that implicit competition between the two could intensify to the point that the treaty collapses. After all, the Alliance and the Union ultimately represent two very different views as how best to organise Europe's security and defence and indeed how to “do” it. Placed in a global context such rivalry would be as parochially pointless as it would be dangerous.

Given that tension, the British Government's attitude towards post-Lisbon EU security and defence can be thus summarised: states lead, institutions follow, a view which London believes Paris shares (at least for the moment). However, it is notable that in utterances by British ministers, references to the EU's CSDP are virtually non-existent. Indeed, whilst there is much British reference to the Europe 2020 strategy, the need to make Europe more competitive

in the global market, and some acknowledgement of the need for the EU to lead in the more esoteric areas of security, such as reducing carbon emissions, easing global poverty and more immediately dissuading Iran from its nuclear ambitions, for London CSDP seems unwanted, even toxic.

This is unfortunate given the political risk taken by President Sarkozy to move France back to the military core of NATO. Moreover, in a complex Europe residing in a complex neighbourhood in a complex world, the political identity of deployed armed force is almost as important as the forces and resources one deploys. The great strategic value of the EU beyond the legitimacy it confers upon European armed action is security and defence policy flexibility, which is critical in the face of complexity. What the EU does not offer yet is either security or defence effectiveness. Indeed, the opposite can be said to be true with Brussels only listening to those voices which reinforce the Potemkin village that is much of EU security and defence today. Those who point to the facade that is CSDP are too often accused of being heretics. Europe's strategic weakness is in danger of being presented as strength and that serves the interests of no-one.

And yet there is another paradox in the treaty; the more London and Paris step away from the Union to strengthen European security, the less likely it is that the EU will become an effective actor. Indeed, one has only to look at the Byzantine organisational scramble of the European External Action Service (EEAS) to reveal the extent to which representation continues to trump leadership. Equally, illusions in London that European security and defence can be focussed solely on NATO or that Defence Europe can either be ignored or established solely on bilateral ties will be dashed as any such stance is not just wrong in principle, but unacceptable to key partners, not least France... and rightly so. Ironically, the consequence of any such contention could well be the further weakening of a NATO already riven by divisions and inefficiencies. The Alliance is after all no Churchillian rock.

The narrowness of the British view can be explained to an extent by the current British commitment to Afghanistan, as the coalition enters a critical phase. However, such views are endemic to the British in general and the Conservatives in particular. As Europe Minister David Lidington said in a speech in Budapest on 15 July 2010: "We believe that giving the people of Britain a greater say in what happens in Europe and over the decisions taken by Ministers on their behalf is necessary to deal with the democratic disconnect that has developed between the people of my country and EU institutions in recent years... In the latest Euro-barometer results, collected in 2009, only 23% of the British public were prepared to say they trusted the EU and only 36%, just over one third, thought UK membership was a good thing".⁵ The Conservative leadership recognises the strategic importance of Europe, much as a Castlereagh or a Churchill understood, but they do not like the EU and never will.

Certainly if Britain continues to under-invest in Defence Europe it could well allow smaller EU member states, most of which lack any strategic culture (nor indeed desire one),

to further retreat from any form of effective EU external engagement. Nor are such fears limited to the Union. Close examination of NATO's 2010 Strategic Concept with its emphasis on missile defence, cyber-defence and critical infrastructure protection reveals an inherently defensive, defence posture being constructed in the wake of the disastrous adventures of the past decade by many Europeans. Something Washington has either missed or simply no longer cares about.

Moreover, neither Britain nor France is immune to such pressures. A close reading of the 2009 French *Livre blanc* or the appalling 2010 British Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) demonstrate that a profound switch has indeed taken place in the strategic postures of both countries. In effect, offensive armed forces are being sacrificed to fund the new but indefinable mantras of homeland security. This implies the retreat of Europe in general into itself with any pretence ended to an autonomous stabilisation role in or beyond its borders, be it civilian or military-led. As a consequence the EU's Neighbourhood Policy and the Barcelona Process, both important to France as a Mediterranean power, could well be adversely affected. Europe is thus in danger of retreating into a weak fortress Europe. Indeed, over time it is hard to see the very internal openness that defines modern Schengen Europe surviving if that is to be Europe's strategic fate.

Equally, the narrow French view that NATO remains simply an Article 5 Collective Defence organisation (and attempts to block development in other areas such as the Comprehensive Approach) are rightly seen by London as unhelpful and unrealistic. Libya has simply reinforced a dangerous sense that even in Europe's backyard only the Americans are able to both provide strategic defence architecture and generate and command expeditionary coalitions. Indeed, there is little appetite amongst other Europeans to follow London or Paris. That said, the Franco-British Treaty only makes political sense if it is seen as an attempt to kick-start Europe as a whole into considering its strategic future; and that will require a degree of political solidarity and consistency for which neither London nor Paris are renowned. The St-Malo Declaration led to ESDP, and thus to be truly relevant the Franco-British Treaty must lead to a vigorous new phase in CSDP development. Will it? The signs are not good – particularly in London where the number of people working on post-treaty implementation and development numbers precisely – one!

At the very least London must ensure with Paris that the EU delivers credibly on the expanded Petersberg Tasks explicit in the 2009 Lisbon Treaty. In a global context credible counter-terrorism, humanitarian operations, peacekeeping, peacemaking and the disarmament of parties to conflicts is no mean challenge. Therefore, London should match the (reasonably) constructive attitude toward NATO taken by post-Gaullist Paris and together both countries must develop a vision for the next phase of CSDP development. However, it would help if "other" Europeans helped end the profound cynicism on London's part that the words will finally be matched by action. It is cynicism not without cause and the easing of London's critical brow seems unlikely as the Eurozone crisis provides the perfect

alibi for many Europeans to further delay difficult and costly strategic choices.

In the absence of capability, political flexibility allied to political identity will thus be vital. Europe and the world beyond today are too complex for NATO alone to credibly manage critical but broad security challenges. There will be times when an EU flag atop an operation will afford a better chance of success than a NATO flag. In such circumstances NATO should be able and willing to play an enabling role. That in turn will demand in time the re-establishment of a credible link between political strategy, fighting and staying power, even in an age of austerity. Critically, for either the EU or NATO to play any wider military security role beyond Europe, the military stability and security of the European home base must remain central to NATO's mission. Strategic reassurance is the flip side of force projection.

Therefore, whether tardy improvements to the European defence effort take place under the umbrella of NATO or the EU misses the point. The majority of Europeans are in both organisations and the forces available to both are by and large the same. Certainly, the 2010 NATO Strategic Concept will lead to new capability goals and the EU's capabilities improvement process will doubtlessly proceed. The Runes are not good. As too often in the past, be it NATO's Defence Planning Questionnaire (DPQ) of the EU Headline Goals, the sorry result for the moment is likely to be another great work of European fiction, with Americans pretending to believe European capability commitments and Europeans pretending to honour them. Like it or not, critical to both the future purpose and role of both NATO and the EU is the generation and organisation of cost-effective military power. At the very least Britain and France can together lead by example towards better spending and the treaty reflects that.

The bottom-line is this: Europeans are first going to have to make better use of what they have and then better acquire together what they need to act both cost-effectively and strategically. For the British and French much of that should preferably be focussed on a new EU-NATO partnership. Politics will mean that the EU and NATO will never merge their respective efforts but efforts should be made by both London and Paris to promote convergence. Therefore, Anglo-French defence co-operation must reflect a realistic commitment to future civilian and military effectiveness that underpins the narrative for the cost-effective modernisation of European forces through both NATO and the EU.

Strategic Pretence or Strategic Defence?

At the start of this paper two questions were posed. What has the treaty to do with the EU and the CSDP? Does the treaty mark the first step on the road to re-galvanising Europe's strategic defence or is it simply the strategic pretence of two aging, failing powers unable to accept a world that has moved on? On the face of it the treaty has little to do with CSDP but only makes sense in the global, strategic context of CSDP. Indeed, Franco-British defence cooperation is thus not just vital for London and Paris but for a Europe that is dangerously and strategically adrift. Joint purpose and effectiveness must be reflected in the contemporary strategy of two old powers that, together and apart, have shaped Europe and the modern world for over 300 years. The alternative is stark. To paraphrase Neville Chamberlain, Britain and France are in danger of becoming small countries far away from the centre of power about which they know little, locked as they are too often in a parochial struggle for the leadership of a Europe that has declared itself to be dangerously irrelevant.

Strategic pretence or strategic defence? Only time will tell.

NB: The views expressed in this paper are entirely and solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the GCSP.

Endnotes

- 1 UK-France Summit 2010, Declaration on Defence and Security Co-operation, 2 November 2010.
 - 2 Renamed Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) in the Lisbon Treaty.
 - 3 British Prime Minister, "Strategic Defence and Security Review", London, 19 October, 2010, p. 14.
 - 4 "Britain's Foreign Policy in a Networked World", speech by the Rt Hon. William Hague MP, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, London, 1 July 2010.
 - 5 "UK Policy in Europe", speech at Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, by Rt Hon. David Lidington MP, Minister for Europe, 12 July 2010.
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