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RESEARCH PAPER
April 2016

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ISBN: 978-88-909073-1-9

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When speaking of the defense relationship between France and the United Kingdom, one tends to focus on the Lancaster House Treaty signed by the two countries in 2010, which has sealed a form of permanent structured cooperation under the terms of the Treaty of Lisbon, but which distinctiveness stems from the fact that it is bilateral.

The origins of the Lancaster House Treaty

The Franco-British relationship in the field of defense is older and more complex than one may think. Without going all the way back to the Suez Canal episode in 1956, when the French and the British launched, to no avail, a military operation aiming to regain control of the Suez Canal, which had just been nationalized by the Egyptian leader Nasser, one can observe that the two countries have always maintained a close relationship, although sometimes difficult, in the field of defense.

During the 90s, the Balkan wars provided the opportunity for French and British troops to work side by side in external operations. The French and the British then discovered that they had similar doctrines with regard to the use of armed forces, which would come to play a structuring role in future years. In parallel, from the early 90s, clearer cooperation themes were considered such as the possibility of making cross-purchases for arms procurement, or the possibility of coordinating the submarine patrols of the two countries that possess the nuclear weapon.

The first decision did not achieve any tangible result, as France did not purchase any more armament in the United Kingdom than the United Kingdom did in France. As regards the discussions over the military nuclear activities, if the dialogue on the doctrines of deterrence was intensive, no cooperation was possible in the area of nuclear submarine propulsion as a result of the agreements concluded between the United States and the United Kingdom in that field¹. It remains that these cooperation themes do not differ from what would eventually end up being a part of the Lancaster House Treaty.

At the same time, this favourable climate for the French-British defense coop-

¹ Bruno Tertrais, *Entente Nucleaire: Options for UK-French Nuclear Cooperation*, Discussion Paper 3 of the BASIC Trident Commission, 2012.

eration in the 90s did not prevent both countries from engaging in sparring matches over the need to develop an actual defense cooperation policy in the EU, which the French wanted to be autonomous and the British wanted to be included in NATO. The irreconcilable positions of the two countries would eventually converge at the Saint-Malo summit in 1998, for the European Union needed to acquire the necessary capacities to lead the operations provided for under the European security and defense policy –which had been sorely lacking during the Balkan wars, but the substantive divergences reappeared very soon. The divorce seemed to be consummated in 2003 when France, led by its president Chirac, refused to participate in the military operation in Iraq and voiced the idea of creating a military planning cell within the European Union, a proposal that London categorically refused since the British considered that it would be a useless duplication with regard to NATO.

One might have thought that from this moment the Franco-British relationship would be at its lowest point. If it was indeed the case from a political and diplomatic standpoint, it did not prevent military cooperation from continuing on a very pragmatic basis. The British and the French originated the European Union Battle-groups 1,500; they considered the possibility of jointly manufacturing an aircraft carrier in 2004; and most of all they set up a mixed dialogue structure between the ministry of Defense and the ministry of Industry: the High Level Working Group (HLWG), responsible for identifying the areas of cooperation in the field of armament, notably in terms of research. In some respects, one can consider that what would ultimately be at the heart of the Lancaster House Treaty was already established in 2006 with the HLWG.

The initiative of the Lancaster House Treaty, which was signed in 2010, came from the British, even though it could not have been signed if President Sarkozy had not been open to the British proposal. At that moment, the British were contemplating drastically reducing their defense budget, and they needed to cooperate more if they wanted to maintain their military capabilities.

Yet, if the “special relationship” with the United States seemed to weaken under Obama’s presidency, the situation was quite different with France, the French president Nicolas Sarkozy having just decided on the reintegration of France in NATO’s integrated military command, a historical stumbling block in the Franco-British defense relationship.

The French population’s concerns in terms of military capabilities, with a decreasing budget as well, a similar level of their arms industry, a convergence of views with regard to the use of armed force, advocated for such cooperation. In parallel, the Franco-German relationship in the field of defense was barely surviving, the Franco-British cooperation therefore appeared to be the right option: the treaty was signed on November 2nd, 2010.

The Lancaster House Treaty: fantasy and reality of the Franco-British cooperation in the field of defense

The brilliance or the mistake of the French and the British was to elevate the Lancaster House agreement to the level of a treaty. Yet, formally, the Lancaster House Treaty only covers a very specific agreement on military nuclear activities aiming at developing a common center dedicated to nuclear warheads safety tests. Furthermore, it was decided that there would be no information-sharing on the conditions under which those tests were carried out, to maintain secrecy about the characteristic features of each country's deterrent force.

This agreement was only accomplishing the discussions that had been undertaken in the 90s. In reality, the choice of a treaty was dictated by communication requirements. It was meant to give more weight to the Franco-British partnership. It was a British request willingly accepted by the French. On the British side, one can suspect that there was the willingness to show that cooperation with France in the field of defense was taking place outside of the European Union. For France, the objective was in a way completely opposite: the key was to prove that European cooperation in the field of defense was moving forward despite France reintegrating NATO's integrated military command. It did not matter that the cooperation was bilateral, it was in line with the Saint-Malo Franco-British summit of 1998, which had laid the foundations of the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP), and the United Kingdom was a member of the European Union.

The treaty was met with some distrust in a certain number of European countries, including Germany and Italy, which felt that France was turning its back on them and on the European Union. It was felt that the French and the British wanted to constitute a Franco-British Defense Union. The reality is more prosaic than that. In the content of the agreement regarding the conventional domain, the French and the British merely listed themes on which cooperation seemed possible, as some kind of road map for the future. Among those themes, many of them existed before the signature of the Lancaster House Treaty.

Thus, the Treaty mentions objectives in terms of common defense research that were already included in the HLWG since 2006. Likewise, the discussions meant to consolidate the position of the MBDA missile through an increased integration that had begun years before.

The Lancaster House Treaty has not therefore revolutionized anything, as some other members of the European Union, feeling left out, might have thought. It has nonetheless an advantage: the political impetus was very strong; it forced administrations and businesses into providing each year the deliverables put on the yearly Franco-British summits' agenda. It was in all likelihood the main contribution of the treaty.

But the treaty also had a drawback. It shut down, or gave the impression of shutting down, cooperation with other countries. In France, it was also a time when the lack of effectiveness in multilateral cooperation, symbolised by the woes of the Airbus A400M, was denounced.

Nevertheless, several cooperation subjects were meant to be dealt with at some point within a wider framework. One may have in mind MBDA Project One – a closer integration of the missile – or the intended cooperation on tactical drones, or the anti-mines demonstrator from a project developed within the European Defense Agency, including Germany as well.

Finally, one of the focuses of the Franco-British cooperation was the Combined Joint Expeditionary Force (CJEF). This project aimed at capitalizing on the *ad hoc* cooperation established in the field between French and British forces, taking into account the fact that both countries had a similar approach to the use of armed force. Since 2010, this cooperation has allowed the two countries to gain a better insight into the difficulties associated with an integrated operating of the Franco-British combined force, for instance the difficulty of enabling dialogue between communication systems, or of combining logistical support systems conceived differently in the two countries. The CJEF will therefore remain a unique laboratory for the integration of armed forces, the lessons of which will have to be extended at European level.

Over time, some of the Franco-British cooperation projects initially considered were abandoned. It is the case for common equipment and technologies that were contemplated for submarines. Some projects did not lead to anything. Thus, at the beginning of 2016, France decided to acquire Patroller tactical drones manufactured by Sagem, abandoning a project that had been once considered, consisting in procuring Watchkeeper drones in service in the British army. The British, for their part, have not followed up on the French proposal to equip their armed forces with armoured vehicles for infantry combat (“*Véhicules Blindés de Combat d’Infanterie*”, VBCI).

The cross-purchases projects have not succeeded any better than in the 90s. The MBDA Project One, which consisted in furthering the company’s integration process, has continued. France decided to secure the light anti-ship missile to consolidate a program already chosen by the United Kingdom. The MALE drone project, which featured in the initial list of the Franco-British bilateral cooperation, has now become a project that gathers France, Germany, Italy and Spain, thus proving that European cooperation in the field of armament could not be constrained in the Franco-British framework.

The project that has been pursued with the most determination for the past six years is that of the Future Combat Air System (FCAS), a forthcoming combat drone. At the Franco-British summit in March 2016, it was decided to entrust Das-

sault and Bae Systems with the task of building a demonstrator with an envelope of 2 billion. It must be emphasized that the FCAS project has led the two countries to engage in a dialogue on strategic technologies at stake in this project. This dialogue has taken place in a climate of mutual trust between the two States, which motivates them not to open the way to such cooperation with other partners too quickly, in order to preserve the efficiency of the cooperation.

Since the signature of the Lancaster House Treaty in 2010, the Franco-British relationship has evolved. The honeymoon between the two countries, inaugurated at the signature of the treaty, culminated during the military operation in Libya, in 2011. Since then, the dialogue has appeared to be more tenuous.

The new President of the Republic François Hollande wished to display the re-balancing of the relationship with Germany after his election in 2012. The British did not stand by France when Paris considered a military operation in Syria in September 2013, putting an end to the belief that the French and the British would fight every battle together.

Some rifts of a more traditional nature reappeared during the Ukrainian crisis. While France and Germany tried not to overly stigmatize Russia in order to find a diplomatic solution to the crisis, the United Kingdom adopted a very critical stance towards Russia, closer to that of central and Eastern Europe countries, as well as Baltic States.

Nowadays, if Lancaster House still exists, and it was found to be a useful cooperation format in the field of defense, the political impetus clearly appears to be less strong on each side of the Channel than it originally was.

Will the Brexit Announce the End of Lancaster House?

If it is quite obvious that the Brexit cannot have a positive effect on the Franco-British cooperation in the field of defense, it will certainly not mark the end of the Lancaster House Treaty and of Franco-British cooperation either.

First, it must be stated that none of the areas of cooperation between the two countries has any link, direct or indirect, with the functioning of the European institutions, whether it be the CSDP instruments for conducting military operations, the European Defense Agency, or the European Commission. The Franco-British cooperation will thus be able to continue in case of a Brexit. It is hard to see in particular how France could call into question a company such as MBDA, which is currently the European showcase in terms of industrial integration in defense, an example of a competitive European industrial champion on the global market, facing American companies.

A major disadvantage remains for France: the cooperation with the United King-

dom will no longer be classified as a European cooperation. It is a powerful symbol, as France has always sought to promote the emergence of the European Union as an important actor on the international stage. The Brexit could lead to a refocusing of France's cooperation policy in the field of defense towards other countries of the European Union. However, there is no denying either that France itself has turned away from the European Union, notably because its partners offered little support in external operations. An *ad hoc* cooperation policy, maintaining a special place for the United Kingdom might therefore emerge.

As a last factor to take into account, France has always advocated for the preservation of a strategic autonomy in the field of defense industry, and it wishes to incorporate the notion in a European framework. France will accordingly try to obtain serious guarantees from London on this subject in the event of the United Kingdom leaving the European Union.