

Brexit unlikely to affect bilateral UK-France defence and security co-operation

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As Europe's major military and intelligence powers, France and the UK are keen to minimise the security effects of Brexit. *William Moray* examines the prospects for the bilateral security relationship as the UK's possible departure from the EU moves closer

Key Points

- Despite Brexit, Anglo-French bilateral defence and security co-operation remains crucially important to both countries, and also for the wider European continent and NATO.
- Meaningful security and intelligence co-operation takes place at a bilateral level, but Brexit's effects will be indirectly felt as a result of the UK's withdrawal from EU defence and security instruments and projects.
- Uniquely bilateral defence initiatives such as the CJEF will be largely unaffected by Brexit, as will intelligence sharing.

Paris-based French think-tank Institut Montaigne and the Policy Institute of King's College London on 8 November jointly published a report from an Anglo-French task force, chaired by former French prime minister Bernard Cazeneuve and former NATO secretary general Lord Robertson, entitled 'UK-France Defence and Security Cooperation'. Dr Benedict Wilkinson, a senior research fellow in the Policy Institute, co-authored the report, and told *Jane's* on 26 November that he had "wanted to know what the future of UK-France defence would look like, when the UK was out of the EU".

According to Wilkinson, the Policy Institute aimed to include practitioners with relevant experience. He said, "Thus, we came up with this idea of a task force, with people such as Lord Robertson and Bernard Cazeneuve. The idea was to have sessions, for which we would produce papers ready in advance. They would read those papers, and they would have a high-level discussion and work out whether they could agree areas of consensus and where we would go next."

Lancaster House Treaties

Arguably the most important elements of contemporary Anglo-French defence co-operation are the Lancaster House Treaties, which were signed on 2 November 2010 by then French president Nicolas Sarkozy and then UK prime minister David Cameron. Dr Ben Jones, a teaching fellow in European Foreign Policy at the Department of European & International Studies of King's College

London, told *Jane's* on 21 November that the treaties “were about co-operation for efficiency, rather than co-operation for strategic or diplomatic reasons”.

Several factors underpin the treaties: first, the close historical ties between the two countries, who have shared an alliance since the conclusion of the Entente Cordiale in 1904; second, public finances, with the treaties signed just two years after the 2008 financial crisis, at a time of budget austerity; third, the common will shared by the UK and France to maintain strategic autonomy (the ability to operate without US or NATO support if necessary). The French Ministry of the Armed Force’s Department of Information and Communication (Délégation à l’information et à la communication de la défense: DICOd) told *Jane's* on 3 December 2018 that the UK was “for France, a major and unparalleled defence partner in Europe”.



A Hercules C-130 aircraft performs a flypast during a ceremony to mark the 100th anniversary of the creation of the UK Royal Air Force at the aerodrome of Saint-Omer, northern France, on 20 September 2018. Bilateral military co-operation between the two countries is increasing, and will not be affected by Brexit. (Francois Lo Presti/AFP/Getty Images)

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Dr Alice Pannier, Assistant Professor of International Relations and European Studies at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), told *Jane's* on 27 November, “What is interesting is that the political dimension has significantly improved thanks to the

Lancaster House Treaties. For instance, the treaties have resulted in an institutionalisation process between both countries. A report on the co-operation must be published every year, and as a result, there is a real political pressure.”

As agreed in the treaties, Anglo-French defence co-operation takes place on three levels: operational, industrial, and nuclear. Nuclear co-operation is so specific that the relevant provisions were embodied in a separate treaty, involving the UK Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE) and the French Alternative Energies and Atomic Energy Commission (Commissariat à l'énergie atomique et aux énergies alternatives: CEA). Joint projects take place in facilities such as the Technology Development Centre in Aldermaston, UK, and a radiographic and hydrodynamics facility in Valduc, France. According to Wilkinson and Jones, the nuclear co-operation has been “hugely successful”.

One crucial example of operational co-operation that has resulted from the Lancaster House Treaties is the Combined Joint Expeditionary Force (CJEF). Jones also told *Jane's* , “The question with the CJEF has always been what it would ever be used for and will it ever be used. My understanding is that this force is quite scalable and that it could be structured in different ways to do different things, from a humanitarian crisis to war fighting. When and where will it be used, nobody knows.”

Although multinational forces could feasibly be deployed in territorial defence scenarios such as in the Baltic states, deploying an integrated binational military unit in a counter-insurgency theatre of operations – in scenarios akin to Libya or Syria – appears less likely. Such a scenario would imply a very high level of mutual dependence, with it becoming impossible in practice to extract forces without the consent of the other side.

Jones also noted, “Even if CJEF is not used, it is still useful because both sides are learning about each other and become more interoperable. The chances are, even if CJEF is not used, elements of it could well lead to France and the UK being on the ground somewhere together and working better. I think that would be a justification for doing it even if it is never used.”

Pannier echoed this view, telling *Jane's* , “The programme has already had positive effects in terms of strategic culture: the ties between the British and French armed forces have strengthened. Indeed, France’s closest partner hitherto was Germany. Now, thanks to CJEF, France conducts more bilateral exchanges with the UK than with the Bundeswehr.” She nevertheless conceded that there had been “few opportunities for the UK and France to deploy together in recent years”.

This paucity of actual deployments indicates how operational co-operation is deeply pragmatic and takes place at an ad hoc level. An example is UK support to the French counter-terrorism operation in Mali (part of the wider Operation Barkhane counter-insurgency project that spans various Sahel countries), which has been ongoing since August 2014 and in which the French Armed Forces are facing a range of Islamist militants.

However, UK support is strictly logistic: during a UK-France Summit in January 2018, at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, UK Prime Minister Theresa May announced the deployment of three

RAF Chinook transport helicopters. Minister of State for the Armed Forces Mark Lancaster confirmed in August that the helicopters, from RAF Odiham, had been deployed in Gao, northern Mali, with approximately 90 British personnel.

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