

OPEX MEMORANDUM No. 151/2010

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Introduction

On 2nd November 2010, David Cameron and Nicholas Sarkozy signed two historic treaties aimed at fostering closer Franco-British military co-operation over the next fifty years. In many ways, this new agreement is more detailed than the St. Malo accords of 1998, insofar as it includes multiple concrete capability initiatives. The principal declarations of the two new treaties, the first regarding nuclear collaboration, and the second general military cooperation, include:

- Nuclear collaboration. Britain and France plan to work together in the design and testing of nuclear weapons. A new nuclear research centre will be built at Aldermaston in the United Kingdom, while France's hydrodynamics testing laboratory in Valduc will be expanded to test both countries' nuclear weapons. The two powers also intend to pursue the mutual development of technologies and systems for the next generation of nuclear submarines. Although the details are still unclear and many obstacles remain in the way, this is potentially the most far-reaching point of the declaration, for it could eventually lead to a common and independent Anglo-French nuclear deterrent.
- Establishment of a joint expeditionary force. This joint expeditionary force will include approximately 10,000 troops, with half coming from either country. It will not be a standing army, but will rather draw personnel from a designated pool of troops and equipment from the two powers. It will be commanded by a French or British officer, depending on the situation and task at hand. British and French troops will train together and English will be the exclusive means of communication.
- Co-ordination of aircraft carriers. Together, by 2020, Britain and France will have access to one large aircraft carrier and up to three super carriers (depending on whether France decides to acquire a second vessel). However, given that half of these might be placed in mothballs on extended readiness, the precise character of Franco-British carrier power – whether individually or jointly – remains uncertain. At the very least, Britain will rely on France's aircraft carrier when its own is in refit, and vice versa. In the short-term, this is particularly important for Britain given that the recent Strategic Defence and Security Review decided to retire HMS Ark Royal – the Royal Navy's flagship aircraft carrier – and retain HMS Illustrious exclusively as a helicopter landing platform, stripped of its fighter-bomber air squadron, until 2014 only. Until Britain's new super carriers come online, France's Charles de Gaulle will alone provide the means to project both powers' influence overseas. Due to Britain's recent decision to equip its future super carriers, HMS Queen Elizabeth and HMS Prince of Wales (expected to be operational in 2016 and 2019 respectively) with electro-magnetic catapults and arrestor wires and acquire the conventional variation of the Lightning II Joint Combat Aircraft, British and French warplanes will now also be able to fly from one another's carriers.

- Equipment, capabilities and technology. The two countries will share training, resources and maintenance of the new A400M military transport aircraft. They will also work together to develop new military units and technology to remain in the vanguard of global military innovation, including computer warfare technology, military-communication satellites, maritime mine countermeasures, and missile systems. Particularly significant is their decision to work together on the development of the next generation of unmanned and long endurance surveillance aircraft, which will result in a jointly-funded assessment programme from next year. Moreover, and significantly, France and Britain propose to undertake a joint research project from 2012 on unmanned combat air systems, potentially resulting in a new generation of unmanned fighter-bombers from 2030.

A renewed Franco-British bid for global power?

Underpinned by shared concerns, Britain and France's far-reaching military agreement aims to maintain their global military reach in the face of financial difficulties. This is particularly urgent for Britain, which runs a deficit of 11% of GDP and whose national debt is expected to surpass £1 billion in 2011. In the words of Britain's Defence Secretary, Liam Fox, co-operation with France makes 'perfect sense'. The two countries have much in common: they are both nuclear powers and permanent members of the United Nations Security Council; leading members of the European Union and the Atlantic Alliance; have a global vocation and a forward looking strategic culture; and together, they account for almost half of European military spending and nearly two thirds in the area of military research and development.

For all the potential and solemnity that surrounds it, the current agreement still needs to pass the test of time. As past Franco-British declarations have shown, moving from intention to action is not always easy. Different expectations and interpretations of the agreement might represent an obstacle to a smooth development. Arguably, the main source of disagreement between the two countries is the European Union, and its role in the area of security and defence in particular, which France supports vigorously. In this regard, the British might hope that greater bilateral military co-operation will pull the French away from the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). The French, for their part, might have an altogether different expectation: namely to suck Britain firmly into European structures and make London more comfortable with them.

Regardless of France's actual interest in shoring up bilateral relations with Britain for its own sake, such a move is indeed a brilliant tactical endeavour to push the European Union's other Member States into greater engagement with CSDP. Together with France's full return to the Atlantic Alliance, a strong bilateral relationship with Britain projects a very clear signal across the European continent: the French and the British will not wait infinitely and are increasingly impatient with the procrastination of their European partners on military matters. They are ready to continue to exert global influence in a changing geopolitical environment, whether bilaterally or together with the United States (when appropriate). All in all, the current Franco-British defence

agreement presents both challenges and opportunities for CSDP and for Spain in particular.

Consequences for European defence

At first sight, one is inclined to think that the bilateral nature of the deal represents a blow to CSDP. The British government has clearly said that this is a pragmatic bilateral initiative, making an effort to differentiate it from St. Malo and insisting that it has no place for the European Union. This is consistent with the Conservative Party's hostility to CSDP and its lack of enthusiasm for anything pertaining to the European enterprise. In spite of the presence of the Euro-friendly Liberal Democrats in the British government, the European Union remains a highly contentious and divisive issue within the Conservative Party. Numerous backbenchers, conservative voters, conservative leaning media as well as some prominent front benchers – not least the Chancellor, and the Foreign and Defence secretaries – remain notably Eurosceptic. Likewise, the French will devote much diplomatic energy and financial and military resources into renewed bilateral co-operation with Britain. This will, inevitably, take some heat off the French fixation with CSDP, with which there are already some signs of a French loss of interest.

After a more paused reflection, however, it is not hard to conclude that the Franco-British military agreements are in fact an opportunity for European defence and for Spain in particular. This is due to three main reasons: Firstly, at a political level, the notion of Franco-British bilateral co-operation outside the European Union is a powerful incentive for other Member States to take military power more seriously. There are some initial signals that some of the bigger Member States are already showing a renewed interest on CSDP, not least as a reaction to the spectrum of a Franco-British duopoly in European military policy. Particularly important in this regard are Germany and Poland: the former seems increasingly interested in making progress on CSDP, while the latter – whose Presidency of the Council of the European Union next year – is keen to bring important initiatives in the area of CSDP.

Secondly, the Franco-British agreement represents an important step forward in terms of European military capabilities. With defence spending soaring across Eurasia, Europe's capability gap with the rest of the world has continued to widen. The possession of highly developed military capabilities with global reach is a prerequisite for CSDP and, ultimately CFSP. In this regard, the current Franco-British agreement should be embraced and welcomed by all Europeans. The success of CSDP requires leadership, and Britain and France are exercising that leadership. Given that CSDP relies on national assets, the Franco-British agreement will make it possible for the European Union to secure theoretical availability of an aircraft carrier naval squadron, should the London and Paris give their blessing. Furthermore, the future Franco-British joint expeditionary force will be used in those cases in which the two countries have interests at stake and, consequently, will also be an available asset to the European Union. Similarly, their co-operation with the design and testing of nuclear weapons will ensure that Europeans are guarded by a nuclear umbrella.

Thirdly, there is nothing preventing other European Union Member States from individually plugging into a Franco-British military core at a later stage. Albeit some of the items are of specific concern to Britain and France only (i.e. nuclear co-operation), most others might be of interest to other European partners, and Spain in particular (aircraft carriers, combined joint expeditionary force, A400M support and training, mine countermeasures, satellite communications, air to air refuelling, unmanned air systems, armaments industry, research and technology and cyber security). Although the initiative has been bilateral, the treaties as such do not prevent future engagement from other partners, and private reports from Britain and France indicate that they will not be opposed to consider engagement from other countries should they add value. Furthermore, there is nothing in principle that prevents whatever progresses the Franco-British partnership might bring in terms of capabilities to be part of Permanent Structured Co-operation.

The ball is now in the court of other Member States, which need to prove why they should be included in a Franco-British military core. For many years, the British and the French have encouraged other European countries to improve their military capabilities, with very little results. Not least, their own differences over the EU and NATO played against those very demands, insofar as they allowed other Europeans (and Germany in particular) to hide behind those divisions. The spectrum of a bilateral alliance outside the European Union's structures seems a promising strategy for leveraging other Europeans into taking military power more seriously. It is now up to other Europeans to stand up and show their willingness to take part.

How does this affect Spain in particular?

The new Franco-British entente offers important opportunities for Spain, which, notwithstanding its reduced budgetary defence commitment relative to its population and economic weight, remains one of Europe's largest military powers –particularly in the area of research and development. Its shared history with Britain and France, its Western European perspective, its maritime orientation and its global vocation make Spain a natural partner for Britain and France. Not least, Spain is one of the few European states that has an aircraft carrier capability – together with Britain, France and Italy.

In the area of military policy, greater co-operation with Britain and France should help Spain get more punch for its euros. However, one cannot pretend that simple will from other Europeans will open the new Franco-British condominium. After all, important political obstacles remain to the British government's acquiescence. So the best way to convince the British is to take military capabilities far more seriously. Spain's 'soft' strategic culture and, relatedly, its very modest financial commitment to military capabilities – a lousy 1.3% of GDP – stands in the way of the realisation of a future partnership with Britain and France. The kind of structured bilateral co-operation Britain and France are engaging in entails the sharing of numerous secrets; implies a high

degree of political confidence; and a willingness to remain on the top table of world affairs. Not least, leaning on an additional country for a given capability has its costs in terms of autonomy of decision-making. Therefore, admitting other countries will be considered only if that country can bring to the table something of sufficient value. Spain is unlikely to bring much value with its current level of military expenditure. In this regard, Spain will need to 'harden' its strategic culture by seeking, in the short, term military spending efficiencies and, in the medium and longer terms, enhanced defence budgetary efforts to bring them up to the requirements of the Atlantic Alliance – provided the deficit has receded and the economy has taken off.

Some of the specific Franco-British initiatives concern Spain directly, particularly in relation to carrier co-operation and the A400M military transport aircraft. As one of only four European countries that maintain aircraft carrier capability, Spain – with the Principe de Asturias and the large and much praised internationally Juan Carlos I Strategic Projection Vessel – has the means to complement the Royal Navy and the Marine Nationale. Not only is an aircraft carrier a capital military capability and key deterrent against potential threats, it is also a great resource for aiding civilian emergencies (the disaster in Haiti being a good example of the way the United States can deploy its largest vessels for civilian purposes).

Conclusion and policy recommendations

In a world experiencing geopolitical flux, the Franco-British military treaties have the potential to produce two futures. The first would be one where Britain and France fuse together increasingly closely, but without other European partners. They would retain the military wherewithal necessary to engage on the top table of world affairs, at least for the next few decades. But beyond that, their integrated power would still probably not be sufficient to keep them alongside the continental giants of tomorrow. The second future is one where other European powers – like Spain – convince them, and the British government in particular, that other Europeans must be allowed on board. But either way, France and Britain must be allowed to lead this endeavour, but leadership requires clarity and good vision – and Spain should help provide some of that. Spain should therefore take up the following initiatives:

1) Press hard for the full realisation and expansion of the European Carrier Group Interoperability Initiative of December 2008, which would enlarge and 'Europeanise' the Franco-British carrier project by providing it with greater resources in terms of vessels. With Spanish (and Italian) input, the four European powers could then maintain at least three carriers at sea at any one time, with each navy potentially taking responsibility for a specific geographic area of concern.

2) As Europe's third largest contributor to military research and technology, Spain should develop a long-term partnership with Britain and France in this realm. It should also push firmly, as one of the leading partners in the A400M transport aircraft project,

to take part in Franco-British programmes for training, resources and maintenance. Additionally, it should seek collaboration in the provision of other capabilities, including mine countermeasures (an area in which Spain excels), satellite communications, air to air refuelling, unmanned air systems and cyber security.

3) Link up with the Franco-British expeditionary force, which would allow the Spanish military to upgrade its doctrine and capabilities to British or French standards, as well as foster a common European strategic culture and political confidence. Spain must also ensure that the European Union is not marginalised in this regard, and propose that the planned Franco-British expeditionary force be used to undergird the European Union's future Headline Goal, and derail the failed battle group concept. This would also help other Europeans to bring their doctrine up to Franco-British standards.

4) Finally, Madrid needs to propose that the European Defence Agency conducts research into the way the Franco-British treaties could operate as a framework for the other Member States and Permanent Structured Co-operation in particular.

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