
Franco-British Council Defence Conference

2023

Franco-British defence:

How France and the UK contribute to the
security of Europe



Executive Summary



The ninth edition of the Franco-British Defence Conference organised by the Franco-British Council took place on 20th-21st November 2023 at the French Ambassador's Residence in London with the title, "How France and the UK contribute to the security of Europe".

The Conference was held following the successful UK-France Summit which had been held in March 2023. It was the first in-person conference since 2018 and was held against a background of much closer cooperation between Europe's two nuclear powers and permanent members of the UN Security Council, as a result in particular of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule except for the introduction speeches by the UK Secretary of State for Defence, The Rt Hon Grant Shapps MP, and the French Minister for the Armed Forces, Sébastien Lecornu, and this report summarises the key discussions held on:

- 'How can the UK and France work together to influence NATO policy?'
- 'Against the recent significant deterioration of the security environment, what are the implications for UK and French military capabilities and commitments?'
- 'How should UK and France incentivise the industrial sector respond to the new defence environment?'
- 'How could the concept, missions and structure of the Combined Joint Expeditionary Force (CJEF) be updated to remain relevant to the evolving security environment and what would it take for the UK and France to commit the CJEF?'

The Conference was supported by the UK and French Ministries of Defence and by the French Embassy in the United Kingdom and the British Embassy in France. It was funded this year by the **UK Ministry of Defence** together with generous commercial sponsorships from **MBDA** and **Airbus**.

Four military members of the Franco-British Young Leaders programme also helped to facilitate the Conference.

Keynote speeches

By The Rt Hon Grant Shapps MP, UK Secretary of State for Defence, and Sébastien Lecornu, French Minister of the Armed Forces



The UK Defence Secretary, The Rt Hon Grant Shapps MP, welcomed the French Minister of the Armed Forces to London and highlighted the historical significance of the Entente Cordiale with the shared values of liberty, equality and fraternity between the UK and France. The speech talked of the changing global landscape and increased threats, citing the conflicts in Ukraine, the Middle East and the alliance between Russia, Iran and North Korea as issues where the UK and France have common purpose. The speaker outlined three key points: supporting Ukraine, strengthening the international order through NATO and enhancing the UK-France relationship to address contemporary challenges, including extremism and cyber threats, and maintaining shared values for a strong future partnership.

The French Minister of the Armed Forces, Sébastien Lecornu, reflected on the evolving nature of defence and security challenges and stressed the need for both countries to work together on deterrence and addressing specific threats including those in maritime regions. He noted the significance of the UK and France sharing security responsibilities in the Channel and the Atlantic, and of NATO in dealing with hybrid threats.

He also stressed the contribution of U.K.-French economic and strategic cooperation to European security, even post-Brexit, and the need for industrial alliances to ensure military capabilities in the face of increasing global competition.

Both ministers also highlighted the value of the, now well established, network of exchange and liaison posts, and the fact that intimate cooperation on operational matters has become routine.

In conclusion, the French Minister of the Armed Forces acknowledged the challenging times and the need for both countries to work together to ensure security against emerging threats. He looked forward to receiving conclusions from the Defence Conference as a guide for future collaboration between both nations.

Welcome

From Lord Peter Ricketts, Chair of the Franco-British Council in the UK



The Chair of the Franco-British Council, Lord Peter Ricketts, gave a speech welcoming delegates to the Defence Conference. He acknowledged the new momentum in UK-France defence cooperation, especially after the March Summit. He highlighted the ambitious agenda set by the President and Prime Minister, emphasising the need for integration of armed force exchanges, data sharing, technological advancement and enhanced coordination. Lord Ricketts stressed the importance of government and industry collaboration to achieve these goals and he reflected on historical agreements like Lancaster House and the 25th-anniversary of the 1998 St Malo Agreement but he expressed concern about the barriers to UK- France defence cooperation post-Brexit and closed by encouraging the need for creative solutions to dynamic cooperation.



The diplomatic perspective

Both the French Ambassador to the United Kingdom, and the British Ambassador to the French Republic gave speeches on the diplomatic perspective on the defence relationship between the UK and France.

The French Ambassador to the United Kingdom, Hélène Duchêne, welcomed the strengthened cooperation between the UK and France in defence, especially amid increasing global tensions. She highlighted the challenges faced in the current geopolitical landscape with new conflicts, fake news, hybrid threats and rising tensions in Asia. She outlined the extensive efforts in defence cooperation including joint exercises, high-intensity conflicts and synchronised planning for deployments in the Indo-Pacific region.

The Ambassador also emphasised the opportunities for further collaboration including the need to enhance further the effectiveness of the CJEF and ensure its adaptability to new strategic challenges including the importance of military assets, communication tools, and tactical cooperation. She called for collaboration on climate challenges, new technologies and resilience in terms of industry and critical infrastructure protection.



The British Ambassador to the French Republic, Dame Menna Rawlings DCMG, gave an overview of the Franco-British relationship and highlighted the significant progress made after an eventful period including Brexit, COVID-19, and the AUKUS submarine deal. She emphasised the importance of the UK and France working together in security and conflict resolution and the unifying impact of the war in Ukraine and cited instances of successful collaboration including a new £500 million agreement to address illegal migration. She reflected on areas of cooperation, such as nuclear collaboration and dialogue on the Indo-Pacific region, and expressed optimism for continued progress in 2024 as a year of ambition in UK-France relations.



FIRST THEMED DISCUSSION

How can the UK and France work together to influence NATO policy?



Highlighting decades of resilient relations, speakers for this first themed discussion elucidated the tangible progress achieved in reinforcing the commitment to Ukraine. Noteworthy initiatives, such as the deployment of liaison officers and reciprocal one-star Deputy Commanders, underscore the comprehensive nature of Franco-British collaboration. The pivotal role of NATO as the cornerstone of UK security, coupled with a renewed commitment to Europe as the priority theatre, sets the foundation for collective action.

The discussion acknowledged differences within the alliance on some issues and stressed the importance of Franco-British joint working to find common ground, especially with the Eastern European countries. Actionable points, ranging from advocacy for Sweden's NATO accession to optimising contributions from both nuclear powers, emerged as strategic imperatives. Furthermore, the emphasis on joint nuclear initiatives and bolstering cooperation with neighbouring countries amplified the commitment to collective defence and strategic resilience.

Addressing the multifaceted landscape of emerging threats, the conference discussed challenges posed by migration and energy, underscoring the need for a forward-looking strategy. The role of innovation and joint action in contested spaces, alongside a call for coordinated commemorations in 2024, reflects a proactive approach. The overarching theme of reinforcing sovereignty and showcasing contributions to the common good, irrespective of U.S. political shifts, signifies a strategic roadmap for the future.

In conclusion, this comprehensive discussion delineated a roadmap for Franco-British collaboration within the NATO framework. As the UK and France navigate a very difficult geopolitical landscape, the strategic imperatives and collaborative ethos outlined provide a robust foundation for shaping and influencing NATO policy in the coming years.



The industrial perspective

The CEO of MBDA, Éric Béranger, gave a keynote speech on the industrial perspective on behalf of the sponsors MBDA and Airbus. He described the Franco-British Council Defence Conference as crucial for building relations, enhancing mutual understanding and fostering innovative approaches in the face of increasing global security challenges.

The recent events in Ukraine and the Middle East have profoundly altered the security paradigm, emphasising the critical nature of the relationship between the UK and France. He described the impact of the Ukraine crisis on the company's operational model and the broader defence industry.

The Ukraine war is described as a wake-up call, marking a return to large-scale interstate conflict in Europe. The conflict underscores the importance of technical choices made by the UK and France, such as the Scalp/Storm Shadow or ASTER, which have proven to be decisive capabilities for Ukrainian forces.

He emphasised the challenges involved in ramping up manufacturing and production, highlighting risks and vulnerabilities in critical supply chains. Shortages, delays and uncertainties in the availability of components and raw materials were identified as significant challenges, exacerbated by the current geopolitical situation.



To address these challenges, industry is taking several measures including building up stocks, anticipating orders to shorten lead times, increasing production capabilities and investing in people and industrial assets. He stressed the importance of innovation and working on future technologies to remain technologically advanced while delivering products promptly.

Franco-British cooperation is a key strength in responding to these challenges. The multinational cooperation not only ensures interoperability but also enhances efficiency, prevents fragmentation, avoids duplication, and enables cost savings through economies of scale.

Looking forward, he called for a stronger European defence technological and industrial base with focused priorities, a results-oriented approach and for sustained cooperation between nations to address evolving security challenges effectively. The aim is for continued commitment to a cooperative model that delivers world-class capabilities and contributes to the resilience of the collective security of Europe.



SECOND THEMED DISCUSSION

Against the recent significant deterioration of the security environment, what are the implications for UK and French military capabilities and commitments?



The second themed discussion focused on the implications of the deteriorating security environment for UK and French military capabilities and commitments. Speakers for this discussion highlighted the complexity of the current global landscape, emphasising the challenges posed by COVID-19, migration, climate issues, Balkan instability and the conflict in Ukraine.

They stated that the UK's planning has centred on force-specific campaigns, particularly focusing on Russia and Iran, with a growing interest in China. The cyber, space and intelligence challenges require strategic investments. Collaborative efforts, such as Carrier Co-Ord and national resilience, were discussed, along with overseas opportunities in defence networks and bases.

They emphasised the strong relationship between the UK and France, citing common values and shared global commitments. The two nations had collaborated on military operations in Mali and were working together in Africa and the Indo-Pacific. Potential areas for improvement were identified, such as intelligence sharing, cyber and space awareness and a common strategy to support Ukraine and deter Iran in its destabilisation efforts in the Middle East.

The conversation then shifted to the Summit Declaration's commitment to increasing cooperation with Ukraine. The speakers highlighted their programmes of support, with a focus on ammunition supply, troop training and long-range missile assistance. Concerns were raised about Russia's actions in the Black Sea, emphasising the need to move eastwards together in terms of maintaining pressure.

The discussion touched on geopolitical objectives and the challenge of balancing values, with a consensus that these issues are primarily political rather than military. The potential engagement in the Indo-Pacific raised questions about the UK and France's ability to cope, with assurances that the current capabilities allow for effective tri-service projection.

Regarding European security, both speakers emphasised the leadership role of the UK and France, with a commitment to work with other European allies to offer complementary capabilities. The NATO agenda was discussed, highlighting improved alignment since Russia's attack on Ukraine.



The session concluded with discussions on commitments, potential peacekeeping efforts and adapting political-military strategies based on the evolving Middle East situation. The speakers expressed a willingness to support, with a likely emphasis on logistical and aid assistance in collaboration with leadership from local regional states.

Research Fellow for European Security, RUSI



During the following session, Edward Arnold, Research Fellow for European Security at RUSI, welcomed the increased interest in UK-France relations in 2023 compared to previous years and the success of the March 2023 Franco-British Summit in resetting collaboration. The aim of a more persistent presence of a European Carrier Strike Group (CSG) in the Indo-Pacific is a good example of joint political will.

The contributions of the UK and France to European security were outlined in terms of Leadership, Capabilities and Experience. Leadership was emphasised with both nations being primary candidates for large-scale or expeditionary operations. The upcoming US election was identified as a potential driver for increased cooperation, irrespective of the election outcome. The discussion expanded to capabilities, highlighting both countries as nuclear powers with similar expeditionary force structures and post-Ukraine war investments aligning in key areas.

Experience in expeditionary operations, global security policy and collaboration in various regions such as Estonia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Libya and support to Ukraine was discussed. Limiting factors were acknowledged, including differences in EU membership, opinions on a European pillar within NATO and strong defence industries. Collaboration efforts such as OCCAR and joint statements committing to addressing shared concerns were also mentioned, emphasising the importance of industrial resilience, supply chain security and reciprocal market access.

THIRD THEMED DISCUSSION

How should UK and France incentivise the industrial sector respond to the new defence environment?



The speakers for the third themed discussion expressed the shared imperative to adapt to a shifting paradigm, where historical tech advantages are diminishing amid escalating threats. Their discussion emphasized NATO's remobilization and the need for allied integration, interoperability and interchangeability to fortify our collective defence capabilities. Openness and collaboration across nations and the industrial sector were hailed as pillars for a secure future. Notably, the UK and France's joint efforts, exemplified by ventures like Airbus, Thales, and MBDA, specifically their centres of excellence, showcase the potency of cooperative industrial initiatives.

Addressing the particularities of the arms market, especially post the Ukraine conflict, the speakers emphasised the need for a collaborative approach between industry and defence establishments. Factors such as reduced stock levels, vulnerable supply chains and the technological gap posed significant challenges. The impact of the COVID-19 crisis served as a wake-up call, highlighting the low visibility of the market and the necessity for a collective effort to find common solutions.

They underscored the essential role of the industrial sector in war-fighting capability, emphasising that industry is a cornerstone of robust defence. Initiatives were discussed, such as providing long-term visibility to industries for enhanced investment in production capabilities, simplifying administrative processes and managing risks.

Key areas included supporting the defence industry's access to bank financing, addressing bottlenecks in production and conducting a value-for-money analysis for material development. The call for a transposable approach between the involved nations resonated, suggesting mutualised stocks and a joint industrial strategy committee.

The industry representative highlighted the significant challenges facing the defence industry, including disruptions in supply chains due to geopolitical events. The response involved strategies such as building stocks, increasing production capacities and investing in personnel and equipment. The importance of a long-term approach, focusing on innovation, interoperability and avoiding overreliance on non-European procurement, was stressed. Despite industry efforts, a substantial portion of new procurements since 2022 originated from outside Europe, underscoring the need for a robust European defence industrial base.

The discussion also highlighted the unpredictable defence environment, acknowledging the commitments of the involved nations in various operations. The emphasis on more interoperability, synergies and amplification was evident, especially in projects like aircraft carriers and combined projections. The CJEF was discussed as a key element, highlighting the need for improved communication channels, shared information systems and ongoing joint exercises to maintain adaptability without constraining its capabilities.

Both the UK and France agree that swifter response times, alongside streamlined procurement processes and increased investment in innovation are vital to incentivise industry to prioritise defence investment. Similarly, redefining the defence market, addressing production bottlenecks, giving greater visibility to industry were all raised as key to achieving the responsiveness needed to best exploit our national and multinational capabilities in the face of emerging threats. The conversation pivoted on three key strategies: bolstering industry, synchronising requirements, and ensuring smoother access to industrial bases.

Together, France and the UK would seek to focus on coordination through centres of excellence. They would seek to develop priority systems with industry for critical elements to support allied generation of capability in times of war, allowing SMEs more efficient access to funding and support could further encourage defence industry engagement and investment. Emerging challenges encompassing cyber defence and the information war, urge a proactive approach in adapting production tools and embracing new domains like AI and quantum science. As such, and in recognition of these growing challenges, there was a shared commitment to a joint Industrial Strategy Committee and a call for agile frameworks to navigate the dynamic defence landscape.

In conclusion, the dialogue on mobilising the defence industry unveiled a multifaceted approach. The speakers outlined strategies to address challenges, emphasising collaborative solutions, increased visibility and a shared commitment to bolster the European defence industrial base. As involved nations navigate an evolving geopolitical landscape, the imperative remains to foster innovation, enhance interoperability and fortify industry resilience in the face of global uncertainties.

Honorary Senator and former Chair of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly



Honorary Senator Joëlle G gave a keynote speech on her experience as a former Chair of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly which had recently engaged with issues including nuclear issues, cybersecurity, defence and the situation in Ukraine.

She reflected on the Assembly's response to the conflict in Ukraine and the need to raise issues in national parliaments like the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia. She stressed the need for a strong and unified European defence pillar, even in the context of Brexit. The role of the UK in European security is critical, especially considering potential changes in the position of the United States.

In conclusion, she called for an unbreakable union between the UK and France, asserting that together they are invincible. The responsibility of the two nations to lead European defence is key as well as the need for continued investment in defence cooperation and industrial capacity.

FOURTH THEMED DISCUSSION

How could the concept, missions and structure of the CJEF be updated to remain relevant to the evolving security environment and what would it take for the UK and France to commit the CJEF?



The Franco-British CJEF has been fully operational since 2020. The results obtained are not only technical and organisational; they are also relational and human. The level of knowledge, understanding and mutual trust between French and British military personnel achieved thanks to the CJEF is unparalleled. However, these successes could be weakened by the emergence of a new generation of officers foreign to the construction of the Force. Above all, its lack of use risks, in the long term, harming its credibility as a strategic tool.

France and the United Kingdom have built the framework allowing the deployment of a force of 10,000 fighters. The structures are ready for use and would make it possible to plan a joint operation in an extremely broad spectrum of employment, to ensure command and control, logistical support and to fight together, including in cyberspace and the informational field.

Fundamentally linked to the political vitality of the Franco-British relationship, the future of the CJEF and the probability of using it depend on the progress which will be made along three lines of effort:

- The field of intelligence calls for increased proactiveness, both in terms of data sharing and modernisation of existing networks.
- More CJEF-labeled joint training is needed, including in high-intensity scenarios. This is the purpose of the GRIFFIN STRIKE exercises.
- The French and British military must ensure the promotion of the Force at the level of political decision-makers, recalling its high level of adaptability in terms of framework and employment format.

Closing speech

By the President of the Franco-British Council
in France

The Defence Conference was closed by former minister and President of the Franco-British Council in France, who thanked the UK Secretary of State for Defence, the French Minister for the Armed Forces, both Ambassadors, all of the speakers and the sponsors, **MBDA** and **Airbus**.

The Conference had discussed shared values and the emerging challenges, especially in the context of events in Ukraine and Israel that show how much today, sometimes, war precedes peace. The conference aimed at addressing various aspects of security and peace in Europe, and the ambition level of all discussions had been evident.

Discussions explored further the role of NATO, the European response and the strategic autonomy of the European pillar within NATO. The significance of the economic dimension, including a "war economy" concept was also highlighted and its practical implications, such as stockpiling and production, was discussed, aligning with operational realities. It is clear that security in Europe is now heavily influenced by events in Ukraine.

While Ukraine was a central theme, Hervé Mariton stressed that we must not forget other critical challenges including the relationship with China and the threat it poses. Cooperation in responding to Islamic threats in various regions was also emphasised.

The Conference highlighted the depth of cooperation at various levels, including industrial, military and human interactions. While there is pride in the achievements and capabilities of both countries, there is recognition that more concrete projects are needed to face future challenges. The concept of CJEF remains strong and resilient but there remain discussions ahead for how this will operate in practice.

The Conference also touched upon the financial dimension, particularly with regards to SMEs and the importance of transparency in conveying the choices made at individual and collective levels. The acceptance of budget increases for defence in both countries reflects an understanding of the need to invest in security.

In conclusion, the Conference demonstrated that cooperation between the UK and France is vital for addressing security challenges in Europe and beyond. The shared values, ambitions and industrial capabilities of both nations contribute to a resilient defence.



Conclusions



The UK and France have an important role in influencing NATO policy, with a focus on reinforcing commitment to Ukraine. Franco-British cooperation also plays a pivotal role in consolidating the alliance, particularly with Eastern European countries.

Discussions revolved around the implications of the deteriorating security environment for future UK and French military capabilities. Both nations committed to collaborative efforts in areas such as intelligence sharing, cyber, and space awareness.

Challenges to industry include disruptions in supply chains and shortages, necessitating measures like building up stocks and increasing production capabilities.

The Combined Joint Expeditionary Force (CJEF) was a focal point, with discussions on updating its concept, missions and structure to remain relevant.

The future effectiveness of the CJEF depends on progress in intelligence, joint training and its promotion to political decision-makers.

The Conference touched upon the financial dimension, emphasising transparency in conveying choices made at individual and collective levels and a “war economy”. The acceptance of budget increases in both countries reflected a commitment to investing in security.

While Ukraine was central, wider challenges such as the China threat and responses to global Islamic threats, were recognised.

The Conference concluded with a recognition of the depth of cooperation at all levels and the need for concrete projects to face future challenges. The CJEF concept remained strong, but discussions on its practical operation remain necessary.



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About the Franco-British Council

The Franco-British Council was founded in 1972 on the joint initiative of President Georges Pompidou and Prime Minister Edward Heath in the context of a developing Europe and of an increasingly globalised community. Since then it has dedicated itself to the promotion of a better mutual understanding between the UK and France by bringing together leading representatives of the worlds of defence, science, politics, business, education and culture.

Please visit the Franco-British Council website for further information about future defence conferences; the Franco-British Young Leaders Programme and Local Leaders Initiative; along with other news

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