

Viewpoints

A Trilateral Renaissance of Expeditionary NATO Air Power

By Group Captain Tim Below

Introduction

Since Churchill's famous *Fulton Missouri Iron Curtain* speech in 1946, the phrase 'special relationship' has been synonymous with the political relationship between the UK and the USA.¹ Whether it be in nuclear weapons cooperation or intelligence sharing, this relationship has weathered numerous variations of ruling political party ideologies on either side of the Atlantic, and surmounted the vagaries of cooler and warmer Anglo-American interpersonal relationships over the intervening six and a half decades, to endure as strongly today as ever. Fundamental to the very bedrock of NATO, the American presence in Europe underpinned the continent's security throughout the Cold War, and indeed has continued to underwrite its security since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Preventative air operations over Libya in 2011 highlighted the presence of a third significant air power in Europe, that of the French Air Force, the *Armée de l'air*. Yet the apparent arrival of the French on the European scene is nothing new: the *Armée de l'air* was engaged in coalition operations over Bosnia, Kosovo, and Iraq, and is still active in the skies over Afghanistan today. Indeed, it was through drawing on a rich history of contemporary combined air operations with the *Armée de l'air* that the Anglo-French forces were able to act so effectively so rapidly after the UN endorsement of UNSCR 1973 authorising the protection of Libyan citizens and the enforcement of a no fly zone over Libyan territory.

Although French forces were withdrawn from NATO's integrated military structure by President de Gaulle in 1966, France remained a member of NATO, and a deeply responsible member of the European community. France and the UK have been close partners for years, but recent

developments in the dawning years of the 21st Century have brought us even closer together. Without doubt President Sarkozy's 2009 decision to rejoin the integrated command structure of NATO is a significant factor, raising France's military power within British consciousness; but the November 2010 signing of the Anglo-French treaty on defence and security cooperation is as much a factor, drawing the nations inextricably closer together and inculcating a burden sharing culture between them.² The third inescapable element in the present era of global austerity is of course the relentless financial pressure on European nations to deliver our commitments with fewer resources.³ Combining these factors in a security environment in which, as reaffirmed by President Sarkozy and Prime Minister Cameron at their Paris summit in February 2012, no situation could be envisaged in which the vital interests of either nation could be threatened without also threatening those of the other, the case for increased security cooperation and defence interaction becomes irrefutably compelling.⁴

So must the UK's modern evolving security relationships with the USA and with France necessarily compete, or can they coexist in harmony? While at first look, an observer would certainly hope that it were the latter, the reality is yet more favourable. Despite its relative might and the enormity of its military power, the USA itself faces its own challenges. On the one hand the rise of Oriental and Asian powers in the global hierarchy is inexorably drawing America's focus from the Atlantic to the Pacific; while on the other hand, the USA is not exempt from facing the same fiscal challenges as beset Europe, and it too is being required to reduce its military expenditure in the face of diminishing budget allocations. It is against this backdrop that a Europe which is able to better assure its own security, in which increasing numbers of nations are net providers not net absorbers of security, and which has both the capacity to assure its own security and the capability to lead those operations necessary to do so, is a Europe in which the USA can feel comfortable in making force reductions to fund force enhancements in the Pacific rim.

The Chiefs of these 3 air forces share a vision to increase their operational effectiveness through closer collaboration between their Services.⁵ Taken together, despite continuing force reductions, and although still presently dependent upon the USA for augmentation of their enabling capabilities such as air refuelling and surveillance, the air forces of NATO, of Europe, of contributing non-NATO nations such as Sweden and non-NATO non-European nations such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates are already capable of highly effective application of air power, as demonstrated so vividly over Libya. But it is in leadership of such coalition forces that France and the UK are now stepping up to the mark to take on the European mace wielded so effectively by the Americans since the Second World War, and it is in this context of open coalitions that we should consider the emerging relationship between the UK, French, and US air forces.

Within that relationship is an emerging line of unified exploration steered by collaborative activity between strategy teams representing each of the air forces through the UK's Air Staff (AS), the French Centre d'études stratégiques aérospatiales (CESA), and the US Strategic Studies

Group (SSG). This triumvirate is by no means the final dawning of a Gaullist “directorate,” but leveraging off each others’ investments in strategic thinking, it exists to articulate the airpower message of the strength, value, and relevance of our relationship to political decision makers, our own Joint communities, and the wider international community of air forces. Coined as the ‘Trilateral Strategy Steering Group,’ this tripartite team draws strength through its constituent members’ diverse collective means of air power advocacy, which range to various degrees between the teams from the respective Air Force leadership, across Defence, internal Service, academia, and both the private and public sectors.

Exercising increasingly with each other, as with each of our other allies, has been the bedrock of contemporary Western coalition air operations. With a common understanding of the roles and employment of air power, the political will to lead air operations when called upon to do so, and crucially having senior airmen with the operational expertise to do so, the Royal Air Force and the *Armée de l’air* are well placed to play a leading role in the assurance of Europe’s continuing security. Yet impediments remain, and the optimisation of our air forces’ effectiveness, synergy, affordability, and responsiveness will require improved command and control processes and infrastructure; an increased willingness to share information, constrained neither to the intelligence axis nor in terms of with whom sharing (to whatever appropriate degree) can be achieved; and in an era of global austerity, the confidence to parse sovereign capabilities and increase our mutual interdependence.⁶ These are lofty challenges indeed, but they are ones from which the UK, French, and US air forces must not shy away if they are truly to fulfil their potential as leading coalition air powers in the 21st Century.

Notes

¹ Cambridge Editorial Partnership, *Speeches that Changed the World*, (London: Quercus Publishing plc, Revised Edition 2010), 98.

² *Treaty between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the French Republic for Defence and Security Co-operation* (London: The Stationary Office, 2010), <http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/cm79/7976/7976.pdf> accessed 20 Feb 12.

³ Reference the OpEd here once published

⁴ “UK-France Declaration on Security and Defence,” <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/uk-france-declaration-security/> paragraph 5, accessed 20 Feb 12.

⁵ Joint Letter of Intent from Jan 11

⁶ Refer to the 3 Chiefs’ OpEd once published

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