

Whither the Leading Expeditionary Western Air Powers in the Twenty-First Century?*

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Since Winston Churchill delivered his famous “Iron Curtain” speech in Fulton, Missouri, in 1946, the phrase “special relationship” has been synonymous with the political relationship between the United Kingdom and the United States.¹ Whether in nuclear weapons cooperation or intelligence sharing, this relationship has weathered numerous variations of the ruling political parties’ ideologies on either side of the Atlantic and has surmounted the vagaries of cooler and warmer Anglo-American interpersonal relationships over the intervening six-and-a-half decades. Today the relationship between the US president and the United Kingdom’s prime minister is as strong as ever, President Barack Obama describing it as “truly special” during a joint press conference shortly after Prime Minister David Cameron’s election to office in 2010.² In 2011 the two leaders jointly described it as “not just a special relationship . . . [but] an essential relationship—for us and for the world,” a position further cemented during Prime Minister Cameron’s near-state-level visit to the United States in March of this year.³ Fundamental to the very bedrock of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (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.

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However, the US presence and the special relationship with the United Kingdom has formed only part of the European defense equation. Although President Charles de Gaulle withdrew French forces from NATO's integrated military command structure in 1966, France remained a member of NATO and a deeply responsible part of the European community. France and the United Kingdom have been close partners for decades, but developments in the early years of the twenty-first century have brought them even closer together. Without doubt, President Nicolas Sarkozy's decision in 2009 to rejoin the integrated command structure of NATO is a significant factor, raising France's military power within British consciousness. The signing of the Anglo-French treaty on defense and security cooperation in November 2010 is just as much a factor, drawing the nations inextricably nearer and inculcating a burden-sharing culture between them.⁴ Of course the present era of global austerity includes a third inescapable element: the relentless financial pressure on European nations to deliver their commitments with fewer resources. At their Paris summit in February 2012, Prime Minister Cameron and President Sarkozy reaffirmed that they could envisage no situation in which threats to the vital interests of one nation would not also threaten those of the other. In all, the combination of these three factors in the current security environment makes the case for increased security cooperation and defense interaction irrefutably compelling.⁵

Must the United Kingdom's modern, evolving security relationships with the United States and France necessarily compete, or can they co-exist in harmony? At first look, an observer would certainly hope for the latter; the reality is yet more favorable. Despite its relative might and the enormity of its military power, the United States faces its own challenges. On the one hand, the rise of Asian powers in the global hierarchy is inexorably drawing America's focus from the Atlantic to the Pacific. On the other hand, the United States cannot avoid confronting the same fiscal issues that beset Europe, and it too must reduce military expenditures in light of diminishing budget allocations. Against this backdrop, we see a Europe better able to assure its own se-

curity, one in which increasing numbers of nations have become net providers rather than net absorbers of security, and one that has both the capacity to assure its own security and the capability to lead those operations necessary to do so. Given this state of affairs, the United States can feel comfortable making force reductions in Europe to fund force enhancements in the Pacific Rim.

Preventive air operations over Libya in 2011 highlighted the significance of the Armée de l'air (French air force) as a European expeditionary air power. Yet the apparent arrival of the French on the European and international scene is nothing new: the Armée de l'air had engaged in coalition operations over Bosnia, Kosovo, and Iraq, and remains active in the skies over Afghanistan today. Indeed, the rich history of contemporary combined air operations between the Royal Air Force and the Armée de l'air enabled Anglo-French forces to act effectively and rapidly after the United Nations' endorsement of UN Security Council Resolution 1973, authorizing the protection of Libyan citizens and the enforcement of a no-fly zone over Libyan territory. With the US Air Force "leading from behind," operations over Libya were perhaps indicative of a new paradigm in European expeditionary air operations.⁶

The chiefs of the Royal Air Force, Armée de l'air, and US Air Force share a vision to increase their operational effectiveness through closer collaboration among their services.⁷ Despite continuing force reductions and their dependence upon the United States for augmentation of enabling capabilities such as air refuelling and surveillance, the air forces of NATO; Europe; 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 the highly effective application of airpower, as demonstrated so vividly over Libya. But the United Kingdom and France are now stepping up to the mark with regard to the leadership of such coalition forces, taking on the European mace wielded so effectively by the Americans since the Second World War. It is in this context of open coalitions that we should consider the emerging

relationship among the air forces of the United Kingdom, France, and the United States. By no means a final dawning of a Gaullist “director-ate,” their collaboration initiative is coherent with NATO’s principles of “smart defense,” wringing more operational effectiveness from extant capabilities as well as informing future capability and capacity decisions in concert with major expeditionary allies.

Within this relationship is an emerging line of unified exploration steered by collaborative activity among strategy teams representing each of the air forces through the United Kingdom’s Air Staff, the French Centre d’études stratégiques aérospatiales, and the US Strategic Studies Group. Coined the Trilateral Strategy Steering Group, this tripartite team draws strength from its constituent members’ diverse, collective means of airpower advocacy, which range to various degrees among the teams from the respective air force leadership across defense, internal service, academia, and both the private and public sectors. Leveraging off each air force’s investment in strategic thinking, the Trilateral Strategy Steering Group seeks to contribute to establishing a resilient steady state of collaborative engagement, aiding adaptation to an uncertain future, and articulating the airpower message of the strength, value, and relevance of our relationship. Doing so will better inform our own joint compatriots; the broader defense community, including political decision makers; and the wider international community of air forces.

Conducting more exercises with each other, as with each of our other allies, has served as the bedrock of contemporary Western coalition air operations. With a common understanding of the roles and employment of airpower, the political will to lead air operations when called upon, and, crucially, senior airmen having 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 while the US Air Force adjusts its force structures and role on the continent. Yet impediments remain, and the optimization of our air forces’ European and global effectiveness, synergy, affordability,

and responsiveness will require improved command and control processes and infrastructure. It also demands an increased willingness to share information, constrained neither to the intelligence axis nor in terms of with whom to share (to whatever appropriate degree) that information. Lastly, in an era of global austerity, such optimization requires the confidence to parse sovereign capabilities and increase our mutual interdependence.⁸ These are lofty challenges indeed, but the air forces of the United Kingdom, France, and United States must not shy away from them if they truly wish to fulfil their potential as leading coalition air powers in the twenty-first century. ✪

Notes

1. Cambridge Editorial Partnership, *Speeches That Changed the World*, rev. ed. (London: Quercus Publishing, 2010), 98.
2. "Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister Cameron of the United Kingdom in Joint Press Availability" (Washington, DC: White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 20 July 2010), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-obama-and-prime-minister-cameron-united-kingdom-joint-press-avail>.
3. "Barack Obama: UK Relationship Is 'Truly Special,'" video clip, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-10693215>; and "UK and US: An Essential Relationship," Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 24 May 2011, <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/news/latest-news/?view=News&id=600145482>.
4. Treaty between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the French Republic for Defence and Security Co-operation (London: Stationery Office Limited, 2 November 2010), <http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/cm79/7976/7976.pdf>.
5. "UK-France Declaration on Security and Defence," 10: The Official Site of the British Prime Minister's Office, 17 February 2012, par. 5, <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/uk-france-declaration-security/>.
6. The phrase "leading from behind" is generally attributed, incorrectly, to Ryan Lizza, who coined it in a magazine article. See Ryan Lizza, "The Consequentialist: How the Arab Spring Remade Obama's Foreign Policy," *New Yorker*, 2 May 2011, http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/05/02/110502fa_fact_lizza?currentPage=all. For more detail on Lizza's interpretation of this phrase, see Lizza, "News Desk: Leading from Behind," *New Yorker*, 27 April 2011, <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2011/04/leading-from-behind-obama-clinton.html>.
7. Gen Norton Schwartz, Air Chief Marshal Sir Stephen Dalton, and Gen Jean-Paul Paloméros, "Libyan Air Ops Showcase French, UK, US Partnership," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 21 March 2012, 19.
8. *Ibid.*



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