

Why France and Britain must join forces

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Summits, like familiarity, can easily breed contempt. Promises readily made are quickly forgotten. Projects announced with a flourish prove rhetorical not real. We hope this week's **Franco-British summit** will be different, putting work in hand that will be good for Britain and France; and good, too, for Europe and the transatlantic relationship.

Franco-British relations often fall victim to tabloid treatment. Watch out for the focus on the French president's glamorous new wife. Spats are usually played up, differences exaggerated and emotions aroused. Long memories on both sides – and a French perception that Britain has something of a complex about France – ensure that the past frequently casts a cold shadow over the future. Occasionally the lows give way to *entente cordiale* and there is a burst of enthusiasm for working together. Usually, quite quickly, the optimism fades and old reflexes and stereotypes reassert themselves.

Nicolas Sarkozy, the French president, and Gordon Brown, the British prime minister, can hardly be expected to cure the manic-depressive nature of Franco-British relations at their first summit. But they can make another attempt at reducing the debilitating mood swings. Both have come relatively recently to their jobs and have the chance to forge a new relationship at the top of government. Both are unencumbered by past Franco-British differences over Iraq. Both, in their respective ways, appear fundamentally agnostic as far as Europe is concerned. Finally, both lead countries that are joined at the hip in dealing with foreign policy challenges, from Afghanistan to the Balkans and the need to define a common approach to China and to the Russia of Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev.

The day-to-day relationship is much better than headlines pretend. Our militaries usually work easily together. So do our intelligence services on critical issues such as counter-terrorism, illegal immigration and people trafficking. Successive French governments have worked hard to stem the flow of illegal immigrants across the Channel, an issue that was on the front pages a few years ago but has largely disappeared thanks to the co-operation between UK and French enforcement agencies. On wider international issues there is often close co-operation: at the United Nations, Britain and France have been at the heart of efforts to find a negotiated solution to the Iranian nuclear issue. But, for many years, bilateral co-operation has been much less good in another international forum – Nato.

That may be about to change. Mr Sarkozy **appears keen** to reintegrate French forces into Nato's military structure more than 40 years after General Charles de Gaulle pulled them out. If he does, the symbolism will be striking. The most long standing of transatlantic divisions will be healed. The summit is a chance to give the prospect of French reintegration a loud and unequivocal welcome. This would be of more than symbolic importance: it would increase the coherence and capability of Nato at a time when the alliance is facing tough challenges in Afghanistan, and in the battles European defence ministries are waging with finance ministries to secure adequate funding.

Europe needs to spend more and do more. Here Britain and France can give a lead. The time has come to revisit the idea of European Defence, a project they launched jointly at St Malo nearly a decade ago. Those who argued then that European Defence could develop only at the expense of Nato have been proved wrong. European Union security operations have complemented Nato's efforts in the Balkans, in both Bosnia and Kosovo. Europeans have also taken on useful, if small, missions in the Transcaucasus, Africa and Asia. We need to be ready to assume new obligations. If France rejoins Nato's military structure, with European Defence constituted as a credible and well articulated pillar of the alliance, the European members should examine ways of enhancing their capabilities through joint procurement, specialisation and a commitment to spending a minimum percentage of gross domestic product.

A willingness to do more at both the hard and soft ends of the military spectrum is about Europe's own security. But it is also about Europe's role, identity and relevance; about its will and capacity to be a global operator. There will be a long list of demands that European capitals make of the next US president, whoever he or she is. But what will the answer be when Europe is asked in turn what it is proposing to contribute? Advice, solicited or otherwise, is no substitute for capability and the willingness to use it.

Mr Brown and Mr Sarkozy can start the debate, and put an action plan in hand, so we have an answer for the next president. This will not end the bilateral spats or tabloid treatment of the British-French relationship: the Common Agricultural policy will see to that. But it will provide a new direction and put our differences in a broader, co-operative context. It will also enhance the chances that, in resolving international issues, Washington will conclude that the Europeans are both capable and increasingly relevant.

Mr Sarkozy's state visit, following the **difficult compromise** on the "Union pour la Méditerranée" reached a few days ago by Paris and Berlin, is a clear reminder that there is no real alternative to tight policy co-operation and co-ordination between France, Germany and the UK – to an implicit "Club of Three" – if

Europe wants to be taken seriously in the world, and in particular in Washington.

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