

European Interview

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Britain should now take steps to share a nuclear deterrent with France

from **John Stevens**

a former Conservative MEP.

He is on the Council of Business for New Europe and the Advisory Council of the Federal Trust.

1. Twelve years after the Saint Malo Declaration how do you see the development of the EU's defence policy? How do you interpret the proposal made by the British government in support of a partnership with France in the area of defence? In your opinion what might the components of a Franco-British partnership be? Including from a nuclear point of view?

It is important to understand that the Franco-British defence agreement of 2nd November is not viewed by the British Government as a return to the approach undertaken by Prime Minister Blair at Saint Malo. Prime Minister Cameron and his Defence Secretary, Dr Liam Fox, remain very hostile towards any specifically EU role or EU packaging for defence co-operation. They believe that defence is first and last a matter between sovereign nation states, subject only to the overarching structures of the North Atlantic Alliance. Nevertheless, it seems very possible that the consequences of what has been agreed will lead to effective European defence co-operation, far more swiftly than would be the case were such initiatives to have indeed been framed in EU, rather than bilateral, or even NATO, terms.

2. What are you expecting from the Franco-British summit on 2nd November?

The crux of the matter is the nuclear deterrent. The British decision to have their warheads tested in French facilities constitutes a breach of the Special Relationship with America that has prevailed in these matters ever since the Macmillan-Kennedy agreement on Polaris missiles in 1962. It opens the way to eventually sharing patrol schedules for our nuclear submarines which could, if budgetary pressures remain severe, allow both

nations, in future, only to have, jointly, the capability of guaranteeing permanent at sea readiness, rather than each enjoying this individually. More significantly, it could allow Britain and France to develop together a new generation of submarine launched missiles, thus substantially diminishing the dependence upon the United States which currently prevails for the British strategic force.

This, in turn, might become the beginning of a truly European nuclear deterrent, rather than merely British and French national systems. The way in which this could come about would be by other European states bilaterally agreeing with Britain and France to participate in the costs of their capabilities, in return for sharing to a greater or lesser degree, in the decision-taking on doctrine, targeting and deployment of nuclear weapons. But such a development is probably some way off and will be determined, in the last analysis, by the evolution of strategic threats to overall European security and by European perceptions of the continuing commitment of the United States to their strategic defence.

3. The shortfalls in European defence have to be considered clearly: the budgets do not match the stakes; the situation is not good as far as military capabilities are concerned; the situation in view of the arms programmes is not really encouraging either since we lack major new cooperation projects which are however vital for the establishment and maintenance of an industrial and technological base for European defence. In your opinion how can these shortfalls be made up for – even from a progressive point of view?

London is concerned that any rationalisation of European defence industries might form part of a

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generally enhanced emphasis in the EU on industrial policy, perhaps as part of a broader programme for stabilising the Eurozone. Certainly, an important motivation for the British Government's present desire to push forward military co-operation with France, and, indeed, with other European nations states is to provide a counterbalance to the perceived, or anticipated, diminution of British influence, across a whole range of European policy areas, following the British decision to remain, for the foreseeable future, outside the euro.

4. The Member States' defence policies are particularly unequal in dimension notably from a budgetary point of view – within the EU, France, the UK and Germany alone represent 2/3 of the EU27 defence effort. In addition to this Europe wide budget restrictions are affecting defence programmes and we note a decline in spending devoted to defence. How can we take the European defence policy forwards in this context?

Obviously, the shadow hanging over all of this is the enormous squeeze on Government budgets over the next few years, which has inevitably impacted upon the tax payers' willingness to tolerate substantial defence expenditure. However, shortage of money is not necessarily a negative for European defence. Though there have long been many people in the British establishment who have advocated closer ties with France, and, indeed, a greater coherent European role within NATO, there is no denying that it has been immediate budgetary restraints which have persuaded the present Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government to take the historic steps which we are now seeing. This is particularly the case, since otherwise this British Government has declared itself very cool towards any closer ties with Europe. It seems likely that similar restraints elsewhere across the EU - one need only look at the present debate about the reform of the armed forces in Germany, or the cuts in military expenditure envisaged in Spain and the Netherlands - are just as likely to accelerate European co-operation as to delay it.

5. Considering this do you believe it possible that certain types of equipment can be pooled thanks to a "permanent structured cooperation" mechanism

as planned for in the Lisbon Treaty or via bilateral agreements as part of joint industrial projects, notably between the French and the British?

What is true in the nuclear area would also follow, perhaps more readily, with conventional forces. Franco-British co-operation could progressively include other nations, notably Germany, Spain, and the Netherlands. All in all, this could come to constitute the basic framework for a gradual agglomeration and rationalisation of national defence efforts, into a common European system, almost entirely independent of any EU institutional arrangements. Parallel with such developments, of course, would come an increasingly integrated system for procurement. Here, as an industrial policy, the EU role would be clear. But again, the British view would be that such arrangements should not be undertaken through the "permanent structured co-operation mechanism" of the Lisbon Treaty, but rather through bilateral or multilateral agreements between particular nation states subject to EU competition and public procurement regulations.

6. With this in mind which States do you think would be prepared to commit to joining a pioneering group in terms of defence on a European level?

Once the structures for co-operation are in place, it is altogether possible that a Europe which is more economically confident and clearer about its strategic interests, in a world increasingly dominated by the rise of Asia, will find both the funds and the democratic will to increase defence expenditure to a level where the NATO Alliance would truly be more of a partnership of equals across the Atlantic. Ultimately, of course, it would be desirable if all members of the EU were also members of NATO and thus able to participate, to an appropriate degree, in the financial and other burdens of mutual defence. But the British view would be that at the moment such sacrifices do still bring their own geopolitical rewards, and such a development would not be a priority, compared to other considerations such as, for example, developing a more stable and long-term understanding with Russia.

7. Would a strong European defence policy inevitably be a competitor or be complementary to NATO? And how in your opinion does the USA see the emergence of a European defence policy?

There remains the question how such an evolution would alter the existing structures of NATO. Here, it would seem that what the British Government understands of the United States' attitude is that the Alliance should eventually become a more equal partnership, between an American and a European pillar for Eurasian defence, as Washington's attention shifts from the Atlantic to the Pacific. London believes that if the Europeans do not do more for their own defence, which must mean more co-operation between individual nation states, the long-term commitment of the United States to NATO will be at risk.

There is one final aspect to the British Government's decision to enter into this historic agreement, which is worthy of note. There is a belief, in some circles of the Conservative Party, the leading partners in the in the present British Coalition Government, that the model of strong bilateral or multilateral nation to nation

agreement in defence, might also be applied to other policy areas. Such thinking has to be understood as part of a general Conservative philosophy, the legacy of Mrs Thatcher, which remains deeply suspicious of the institutionalised integration of the EU. Perhaps, this Anglo-French agreement is seen by Prime Minister Cameron as expressing of an authentically Conservative vision of Europe's future which emphasises much more the "*Europe des Nations*" rather than the "*Europe des Institutions*." This seems unlikely, however, to diminish President Sarkozy's apparent confidence that if Britain gets the former, it will also have become reconciled to the latter.

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