

For many, France is the old enemy (that is after discounting the Scots. And the Welsh. And the Irish). For me, from a line of centuries of agricultural peasant the thought that my Saxon ancestors had it all taken away from them after the Norman French invasion of 1066 is an interesting diversion. What Englishman's blood does not quicken at the mention of Agincourt, Crecy, Poitiers?

But the reality is that once the upstart Napoleon got his comeuppance enshrined in the Treaty of Vienna in 1815, France and Britain have become natural allies - Crimea; two World Wars; Suez; NATO.

The Entente Cordiale of 1905 ; Churchill's 1940 offer of pooled nations; the St. Malo Declaration; all underpin joint actions. But the ingrate General Charles de Gaulle, with his rejection of Britain's first attempt to join the European Common Market, put things in a proper perspective. Nations have permanent interests. Their alliances and friendships may be more transient in nature . And a friendship may put the frights under the neighbours - witness Germany's concerns about encirclement which had an impact twice in the last century and which even today underpin their willingness to be the European Union paymaster.

All of this is rehearsed by way of introducing the topic of defence collaboration with France. Should we - and equally importantly, could we?

Clearly we already have ties that bind, particularly now that France has come back into the NATO command structure (although it is evident that even at the height of France's estrangement from the USA, they'd have been back in it within 24 hours of Soviet tanks moving west). The Petersburg Declarations is a case in point. The fight to liberate Kuwait and significant deployments in Afghanistan clearly demonstrate that of all the European nations only Britain and France have any significant expeditionary capability.

The recent talk of some sort of aircraft carrier tie-up is not new. I recall a conversation in the back of a taxi with a former Defence Minister more than 15 years ago about the possibility of coordinating with France on the patrol cycles of submarine-borne deterrents. Nothing came of this.

There have been fruitful areas of cooperation before. The Anglo-French ground attack Jaguar was a useful 'mudmover'. Storm Shadow, son of SCALP, is a great stand off missile as well as a dowry for the formation of MBDA and thus some rationalisation of the European missile industry. France put 100 million into the design phase of the UK's new carriers for access to the drawings. At an industrial level, French-funded R & D has pulled through into its products offered to the UK MoD by Thales.

Looking forward, France has an air tanker requirement that could easily be satisfied by the EADS A330 aircraft being torturously navigated through the UK defence procurement system. Nexter offered the UK MoD a FRES utility variant, which it now has deployed in Afghanistan, off the production line - or even the whole company for purchase. A UK procurement decision that 95% of the solution wasn't good enough meant that now we have nothing except a spat with the preferred contractor GD whose award was subsequently terminated.

Recently France has sent out mixed messages regarding industrial cooperation with Britain. At a recent defence conference Dassault's chief executive stated that industrial cooperation between Britain and France was essential if critical defence capabilities are to be maintained. Yet the French government appears confident that this can be achieved without British involvement. At the same conference Defence Minister Herve Morin confirmed that he had asked the Direction General pour l'Armement (DGA) to conduct a study of France's missile sector with a view to preserving its sovereignty. The three companies under consideration - MBDA, Thales and Saffran - have a mixed record when it comes to cooperation. However the DGA has frozen scarce R & D funds to encourage closer working arrangements.

Back to the original exam question, should we and could we collaborate with France? Clearly we have in the past and could do so again. But maybe the question needs

a tighter definition. Should we collaborate more closely than we do on operations? This sounds like it is getting into common command structure, and joys of squaddies not talking the same language. Doesn't sound like a proposition that would get to first base. Could we have common equipment with the implications that either nation could use it? Er um, how is it decided whose 'turn' it is, and on a practical level note the problems of the British Army with equipment being transferred between Brigades and who is responsible for wear and tear. But the Royal Navy is slowly getting round this with minor warships being kept on station for several years with crews being rotated by air.

Maybe that is a bridge too soon. Common specification for equipment? Doubters will point to Project Horizon - abandoned by the UK in favour of what is now the Type 45 destroyer - and the withdrawal of France from the Eurofighter programme in favour of its own Rafale (but at least it has an indigenous carrier-operable aircraft). This requires a revolution in procurement at the UK end at least, but should trouble the trained warfighter not at all. But as soon as 'national requirements' are included, costs go up and the benefits of commonality decline.

Common platforms? This has been a traditional route, and one where a good deal more effort is called for drawing on those projects where this was a successful route and revisiting the lessons of where it was not.

Common R & D? This is certainly an area for further intensive effort. R & D is the invisible area for the axe, and as many of the areas are of similar concern any greater efficiency of expenditure would be welcome. But the big issue here might be the legalities. Much of the work at the early stages is of a highly sensitive nature. Would this require a common legal framework of secrecy enforcement including perhaps a 'no questions asked' extradition regime?

Projects on a case-by-case basis seems to be the most acceptable and most-discussed approach - almost business as usual. But the hammer that must be taken to the craniums is that this is about saving money NOT about ensuring projects are cancellation proof (c.f. the problems all the nations are having getting out of the obligations for Tranche 3 Eurofighters which nobody wants anymore).

Whatever is to be done, for it to be beneficial will require a lot of history to be overlooked, but not without ignoring many of the lessons. And history suggests that it is the Brits that will struggle the more with this!