

By Robert Crowcroft, Reseach Co-ordinator, UK Defence Forum

Over the last eighteen months, there has been much talk of Britain and France expanding their military co-operation in order to save money. This has being depicted as a crucial moment in the long-term fortunes of both countries. Last weekend Admiral Pierre-Francois Forrisier – the head of the French Navy – entered the debate and told British media outlets that the two states are destined to closely integrate their respective navies. That built on the Anglo-French summit last November, where David Cameron and Nicolas Sarkozy signed agreements deepening military co-operation.

Yet Britain should beware. While the idea of pooling resources is certainly attractive at a time when Britain faces severe financial challenges, the fact is that such an arrangement carries far greater advantages for the French national interest than the British.

If France can lure Britain into a military alignment, that would go a long way towards underpinning the grand strategy of Paris: a dual policy of good relations with the German behemoth to the east, while hedging French security bets by an unofficial entente with Britain. France is too weak to contain Germany alone, and while the European Union restrains Gulliver for the moment, the fact is that Germany is happy to be visibly restrained; if and when that changes, the EU won't be worth a great deal. Security stability on the European continent is underwritten by the United States through NATO. France knows this, recognises that it might not last forever, and is hedging its bets. There is more than cost-cutting at work here; realpolitik is proceeding as normal. In the worst-case scenario, an Anglo-French alignment could seek to counter future German ambitions.

But does it serve British interests to be tied to France in this way?

I would argue that it does not. In 1914 Britain was dragged into the First World War because, in the preceding decade, its politicians decided that there was a vital British national interest in France being secure from Germany. Yet, as the historian John Charmley argued, in 1870 Prussia had defeated France and the world had not ended; why would it end if Germany defeated France in 1914? The reality is that it wouldn't have. Unfortunately London didn't calculate the situation in this way, and waged a war that broke British power. To be blunt, it is unclear if France was worth the price paid. Statesmen are supposed to be unsentimental, but in the 1930s they were foolish enough to repeat the error. By binding Britain to France once again, policymakers became hostage to Gallic paranoia about their powerful neighbour. Britain was trapped in another war against Germany, which finally killed Britain off as a world power. This was some reward for British exertions, and only an unwillingness to question our national myths prevents broader public recognition of these disastrous decisions.

If the country hadn't engaged in the two wars, then British strength wouldn't have been thrown away. That mistake stemmed from specific calculations made in London: that the interest of Britain and France were aligned in security matters, and that we must therefore support the French. This was erroneous, and Britain must be careful not to make the same mistake again in the early twenty-first century. Geographically and internationally, London and Berlin are not natural enemies and so Britain should, if anything, lean more towards Germany. On balance, though, British interests are probably best served by staying out of continental geopolitics altogether: It's a European problem, so let the Europeans deal with it.

Through military co-operation, the British government may be taking the first steps down the same slope that proved so slippery twice before. It is easy to see what France gets out of all this – a willing partner – but Britain must not replicate the calamitous errors made in the twentieth-century. Beware the French embrace.