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# A MORE CORDIAL ENTENTE? UK-FRANCE SUMMIT GOALS 2023

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## INTRODUCTION

The much-anticipated Franco-British summit takes place on Friday, 10th March, in Paris, France. With French President Emmanuel Macron hosting UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, this is the first such summit between the two sides since 2018, and presents a vital opportunity for the two leaders to discuss – and forge agreements – on key issues. This UKICE–Centre for Britain and Europe policy brief provides both the state-of-play following the deluge of changes in the UK–France relationship since the last big summit, and a primer on the key issues dominating the summit agenda itself.

The summit is both a “sign of thawing relations between Britain and key EU partners” and an opportunity for a much-needed bilateral reset in several areas (FT, 11 January, 2023). These fall into two broad categories. First, those issues like cross-Channel migration and defence which relate largely to the UK’s bilateral relations with France and, second, those including energy security, regional security (including the war in Ukraine) and foreign policy that relate more broadly to the UK’s relationship with Europe and the EU. While these are all highly pressing issues, they also represent multidimensional policies where one side’s approach materially impacts on the how the other side can respond, which in turn increases the overall scope for cooperation. Indeed, the multi-level nature of the agenda provides a helpful opportunity for Sunak and Macron to make real strides in establishing a new strategic ecosystem (or possibly rebooting the old one) between the two countries which in turn can apply to their wider relations with Europe (S. Malhotra, 2022). While the summit brings together the UK and France, these issues touch on both bilateral, and European policy frameworks.

A tumultuous five years has passed since the last UK–France summit in 2018. During that time, the travails of the Brexit divorce proceedings have complicated and arguably worsened Britain’s relationship with the EU as a whole, and with key EU Member States in particular. Britain’s relations with France have remained tense in key areas, with antagonism producing deeply entrenched positions on migration, and limited cooperation on in other areas such as security, the post-Covid recovery, climate change, and energy shocks.

Timing, however, is everything. The recent Windsor Framework, which represents a significant deal between PM Sunak and the EU to settle the dysfunctional relations around the Northern Ireland Protocol, so far appears successful. Having established a compromise on the most challenging of issues through the use of “old-fashioned diplomacy”, the Windsor Framework has established a much-needed tone of trust and compromise between the UK and the EU, including President Macron, who has been among “the most hard-line of EU leaders on how the British should be treated” (Grant, 2023). While not all parties have yet given their blessing to the framework (including the Democratic

Unionist Party representing unionist voters in Northern Ireland), the end of the UK's Brexit purgatory could at last be in sight.

While summits are often an opportunity for extensive pageantry and little commitment – long on flag-waving and short on binding provisions – both sides appear to be taking the 10 March bilateral seriously. Both sides will want to undertake three goals. First, to outline the specific visions that each country has established for itself, and its role in the world (the UK's upcoming second edition of its Integrated Review, and France's recent *Revue Nationale Stratégique*) (A. Billon-Galland and E. Tenenbaum, 2023). Second, to clarify both the limits and ambitions of their bilateral security and defence cooperation, arising from agreements in the original 2010 Lancaster House Treaties (P. Bergsen, R. Whitman, A. Billon-Galland, 2023). Third, to discuss their respective leadership roles within Europe, key international fora, and regarding the next stages of the war against Ukraine. Crucially, both sides need to find themes with which they readily identify and demarcate areas unique to them alone. Beyond defence and security, migration, energy, and international frameworks for cooperation are likely to be other focal points, and this paper now considers each of these areas in turn, looking at the state of relations and what is potentially up for discussion.

## 1. SECURITY

### WHERE HAVE WE GOT TO?

UK – France relations are rarely simple. On occasion, EU membership complicated this still further, while at other times, both sides demonstrated the ability to make and maintain bilateral autonomy irrespective of simultaneous commitments to the EU. Collaborating on highly innovative projects including the Channel Tunnel and Concorde in the late 20th century, the two countries have also worked together extensively in both security and defence policy. In the past decade or so, the 2010 Lancaster House Treaties represent the most important of these accords in transforming the UK and France's unofficial status as each other's key strategic partners into formalised, action-oriented recognition. Confirming defence cooperation as the cornerstone of the UK's bilateral relationship with France, the treaties were hailed by both Prime Minister David Cameron and President Nicolas Sarkozy as “a new chapter in a long history of cooperation on defence and security between Britain and France” (Cameron, 2010, cited in P. Ricketts, *Hard Choices* 2020). The agreements themselves take the form of two 50-year landmark treaties.

The first, overarching Defence Co-operation Treaty aimed at strengthening operational linkages between the UK and French Armed Forces, allowing each side to share materials and equipment, provide mutual access to defence markets, build joint facilities and promote technological and industrial cooperation (GOV UK, 2010). As the principal vehicle for strengthening cooperation between both armed forces, the Combined Joint Expeditionary Force (CJEF) is the most visible success of Lancaster's ambitions (Harrois, 2020). The second Lancaster treaty deals with nuclear cooperation, leading to the establishment of the Teutates Project: a shared facility in France to test the safety of nuclear warhead designs.

From the UK perspective, the Lancaster agreements operated on two levels. Internally, they kickstarted an ambitious new national security structure including a UK National Security Council, a National Security Strategy and a Strategic Defence and Security Review. Bilaterally, Lancaster set out a series of ambitious defence plans enabling the UK to plan more effectively for high-intensity warfare in domains across the globe, and to do so in cooperation with France, as its closest defence partner, via a series of parallel projects (Lord Ricketts, 2020). The view from France was that the Treaties represented a positive, even essential framework for Franco-British cooperation on issues of strategic importance.

Despite the framework of cooperation laid out by the Lancaster agreements, a real lack of coordination remains between the foreign, security and defence policies of the two countries, resulting in misaligned responses to international crises. Brexit did not, in material terms, undermine the ability of Europe's two preponderant military powers to cooperate, and given the increasing range of external threats from Russia, China and post-Covid challenges, the two could easily have identified a wide range of areas in which to cooperate. Yet the trend that Lord Ricketts observed in 2020 is still broadly apparent today, namely that in practice, "Brexit has pulled in the opposite direction. There is no appetite in London for structured dialogue with the EU on defence and security, while Paris is busy promoting EU-based autonomy" (Lord Ricketts, 2020).

The best recent example of this misalignment is the 2021 announcement of a new military and technology pact between the UK, US, and Australia (or AUKUS), in which the three partners agreed to share their nuclear propulsion technology with Australia to ensure sufficient deterrence capabilities in the highly contested Indo-Pacific (Conley and Green, 2021). Whilst for the UK, AUKUS reinforced post-Brexit opportunities to rough out examples of 'Global Britain' at work, France appeared blindsided by the loss of a highly-prized contract with Australia for 12 conventional submarines. It represented a breach of confidence with the UK as its longest-standing European ally, and raised questions over France's own strategic commitment to the Indo-Pacific region (A. Billon-Galland and H. Kundhani, 2021).

AUKUS arguably increased levels of post-Brexit distrust felt by France towards the UK and possibly undermined aspects of the UK's own approach by leaving its anticipated Indo-Pacific 'tilt' visibly uncoordinated with France (G. Weber and E. Tam, 2022). Despite the apparent strategic alignment established by the 2010 Lancaster House Treaties, they were not ultimately robust enough to underpin the totality of UK-France security and defence ambitions, nor policies beyond these areas.

## WHERE DO WE GO?

Against the backdrop of an unstable and shifting geopolitical reality, both Britain and France are in the process of repositioning themselves. The question is whether these changes can be undertaken both concurrently, and collaboratively.

The 2021 Integrated Review outlined the UK's strategic objectives for 'Global Britain in a Competitive Age', arguably the most ambitious assessment of the UK's foreign, security and defence policy since the Cold War, championing a self-image of Britain as a proactive, innovative international actor, capable of both international involvement and underwriting European security.

(T. Latici, 2021, R. Niblett, 2022). France meanwhile has continued to spearhead a European 'geopolitical awakening', leading on new strategic initiatives like the European Political Community (EPC) and positioning the EU itself as a more independent actor, capable of using its influence on the world stage in a more transactional way, from security and defence to revamped energy security frameworks. French strategic ambitions have in turn had a gradual, but increasingly clear effect on the EU's overall foreign policy. The concept of 'strategic autonomy' has gained considerable traction within foreign policy circles since its introduction as a possible EU approach in the EU's 2016 EU Global Strategy (EUGS). More importantly, the EU has accelerated in consolidating key security and defence aspects, at strategic, budgetary, operational and industry levels. This presents opportunity for both the UK to work more effectively within key EU frameworks like PESCO, (Permanent Structured Cooperation) which focuses on deepening defence cooperation, as well as for enhanced UK-France bilateral to more securely underwrite both bilateral and regional strategies in general.

Getting to the stage however requires much work, beginning with a successful summit. Neither the UK nor France's geostrategic ambitions, whether national, bilateral, regional, or even global, can come to fruition in the current political climate without dedicated, intense and sustainable cooperation. NATO cooperation is a requisite forum, the Lancaster House treaties are a helpful structure, but the next, vital step of remedying both proximate policy problems and coordination on large-scale challenges including Ukraine can only take place via a conscious effort to reduce the considerable 'incompatible theologies' that continue to separate both sides in security and defence, and adopt a proactive, 'problem-solving

approach’ (IFRI, 2023, 5). Failing to do so leaves the Lancaster House treaties as the high-water mark of bilateral cooperation, and hollows out both countries’ recent attempts at regional and global repositioning. Neither side must confuse their tacit statuses – e.g. consequential military players in Europe, founding members of NATO, nuclear powers, permanent members of the UNSC – with the active planning now needed to make and maintain a shared strategic vision (Wright, 2017).

The challenge is that despite an emerging desire, and a clear opportunity, to press the reset button for enhanced collaboration, while their “strategic cultures generally align, their preferred delivery mechanisms and strategic end goals may not” (A. Billon-Galland and E. Tenenbaum, 2023, 4). Both sides therefore need to overcome – or at least respect each other’s asymmetric heritage – while identifying clear areas of complementarity in terms of their shared security interests, and partners from the Euro-Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific, from Africa to the Middle East (Martill and Sus, 2022). Doing so would enable both sides to shift their bilateral gears from episodic détente to a genuine and lasting rapprochement.

## **2. MIGRATION**

### **WHERE HAVE WE GOT TO?**

Since the UK’s departure from the EU, a policy vacuum has arisen in the UK’s migration and asylum policy (Centre for Britain and Europe, 2022). While covering some cross-border issues including trade, police and judicial cooperation, and fisheries, the December 2020 Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) contained no overarching migration provisions. The TCA’s existing migration-related provisions relate first to anti-smuggling operations, with the agreement establishing that Europol continue its operational and communication role in this area (of which the UK is now a third party). Other areas covering migration and asylum, including family reunions and returns represent long-term aspirations to support the “good management of migratory flows” rather than binding agreements (European Commission, 2020, 10). Absent clear reciprocal obligations, the TCA instead suggests the UK’s preferred approach to the challenging “practical arrangements on asylum, family reunion for unaccompanied minors or illegal migration” is bilateral engagement (European Commission, 2020, 10). The UK however has been singularly unsuccessful in persuading EU Member States including France, as well as Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands and Sweden) to undertake such return agreements (Neidhardt, 2022, 6).



With the conclusion of the Brexit transition period in December 2020, the UK is no longer part of the EU's Dublin Regulations or associated migration and asylum frameworks, including the Common European Asylum System, the Eurodac fingerprint database (UK in a Changing Europe, 2021). This has left the UK without an overarching framework on which to cooperate with the EU, or Member States like France, in sharing responsibility for receiving asylum seekers or tackling smuggling networks (Neidhardt, 2022,4). Conflicting priorities over border control combined with a growing political disconnect over the approach to migration between the UK and France have further contributed to the current impasse on establishing anything close to a comprehensive cooperation agreement on migration.

The paucity of the TCA's coverage of migration and asylum issues is at odds with the array of agreements reached between the UK and France since the completion of the Channel Tunnel. The 1986 Treaty of Canterbury, signed by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and President François Mitterrand, established the initial terms for the construction of the 'Channel Tunnel Fixed Link'. The establishment of the land frontier was followed by the 1991 Sangatte Protocol, which provided for juxtaposed border controls between the two countries, with France establishing physical border checkpoints at the Eurotunnel Folkestone Terminal in Kent, and UK border controls at the Eurotunnel Calais Terminal in Coquelles, France (Parliament UK, 2021). Sangatte was put in place by the UK and France as a direct response to growing concerns over increased immigration and smuggling activity in the area surrounding the Eurotunnel, and represented a key moment of convergence and cooperation in the Franco-British relationship.

By 2003, the situation had changed considerably. Both Canterbury and Sangatte had been outstripped by increasing migratory dynamics, as well as changes within an enlarging EU. The Touquet Treaty ramped up the bilateral approach by ceding greater authority to UK and French border agents with a new framework for the joint management of border controls, permitting immigration officers from both sides to exercise their own national frontier controls within the territory of the other party. In 2018, Le Touquet was replaced by the Sandhurst Treaty, signed by British Prime Minister Theresa May and French President Macron at the last bilateral summit between both sides. In an effort to make UK borders more secure, Sandhurst saw the UK pay an extra £44.5 million, on top of the £100 million already paid to France for Calais-based fencing, CCTV and detection technology (France 24, 2018), reducing processing time for migrants bound for the UK from Calais (BBC News, 2018). This illustrated both the depth to which migration policy had become securitised between the UK and the EU, and the practical incompatibility of UK-France attempts to provide a response that was both humane and secure. Sandhurst's goals have had perverse, frequently tragic outcomes. With the UK government continuing to adopt policies making it increasingly arduous for migrants to cross the border into the UK, and France

itself not obligated by law to retain them, migrants themselves – faced with ever greater challenges – are now “taking greater risks” to leave France, and to get to Britain (Smith, 2022, cited in Davidson, 2022).

## WHERE DO WE GO?

With the Sandhurst Treaty itself in need of review, UK–French rapprochement on migration policy at the March 2023 Summit is now vital. Channel crossings continue to increase, with 28,526 in 2021 rising to 45,000 in 2022, and more than 150 deaths in the past five years (Elgot, 2023). Against the context of complaints by UK ministers that France appeared lax in ensuring its own measures to reduce small boat crossings, a limited bilateral agreement in 2021 saw the UK commit a further €60 million to France to once again bolster both policing and border control measures. The November 2022 agreement reached by the home affairs ministers of both countries sought to further share, and indeed deepen, co-responsibility in deterring Channel crossings, with UK funds totalling upwards of €72 million for advanced surveillance technologies and increased security (Basso, 2022). Integrated Franco-British troops are also planned, with the directive of patrolling French beaches, dismantling organised crime groups, and curbing smuggling activity.

None of the present treaties are designed to resolve the challenge of increasing numbers of people crossing the English Channel from Calais to Dover. While recent agreements indicate a basic acceptance by the UK and France of the sheer scale of bilateral border management required, there is still little by way of either political rapprochement between decision-makers on either side, or a clear understanding of the infelicitous conflation of security and humanitarian factors affecting migration challenges of all forms. Unsurprisingly, a host of NGOs, charities and civil society voices continue to express frustration, condemning both sides for failing to tackle the underlying ‘push factors’ that drive both migrants and asylum seekers to France, and onward to the UK (Human Rights Watch, 2021). The Refugee Council recently argued that any agreement must focus “on creating more safe routes such as family reunion and working with the EU and other countries to find global solutions to share responsibility for what is a global challenge as more people are displaced by war, terror and violence” (The Refugee Council, 2022, cited in Basso, 2022). Indeed, the driving demographics of migration are all too easily forgotten; UK Government figures, as published by the Refugee Council, show that “91 per cent of people crossing the Channel in small boats came from just ten countries where human rights abuses and persecution are common, including Afghanistan, Syria, Iran and Eritrea”, with many mistreated by traffickers, leaving them with “no choice at all over their destination” (JCWI).

In addition to the ‘high politics’ of foreign, security and defence policy, the March Summit has national, regional and local challenges to answer arising from migratory pressures and policies. Migration is both

uniquely proximate in terms of the localised areas in both France the UK in which Channel crossings take place, and remote in terms of its overall root causes. After years of impoverished attempts to find a workable solution, the issue of increased numbers of irregular Channel crossings – and migration more broadly – remains one of supreme salience in the UK, while being deeply localised in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region of France. It is sporadically managed via a mix of unilateral and bilateral approaches between both countries that seemingly ratchet up budgetary commitments and juxtaposed security demands. To reduce the number of crossings, Macron and Sunak must now be prepared to offer concrete, safe alternatives to the Mediterranean migration route and the Channel coastline institutionalised and ‘owned’ by both sides, as well as organising a more dignified response for people claiming political asylum (Balch, 2022).

Having laid the framework early on in 2023 by declaring ‘illegal migration’ one of his top priorities, Sunak – along with the Home Secretary Suella Braverman – has used the days leading up to the UK-France summit to kickstart the ‘Illegal Migration Bill’, designed to detain and deport people entering Britain illegally (chiefly via small boats) from claiming asylum by placing a legal requirement on ministers. Combined with the recent success of the Windsor Framework, and trailed in advance of the 10th March summit, Sunak’s new migration legislation appears designed to “foster a better climate for cross-Channel co-operation with both France and the EU over illegal migrant crossings” (W. Wallis, J. Cameron-Chileshe and G. Parker, 2023). While the approach may be regarded favourably by Macron from a bilateral perspective as a signal of the UK’s commitment to overhaul existing migration agreements with France, the role of the proposed legislation in circumventing Britain’s obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights arguably poses real difficulties in the future in terms of its prospective relations with European partners.

### **3. ENERGY**

#### **WHERE HAVE WE GOT TO?**

After nearly 50 years of EU membership, the energy markets of the UK and the EU have become progressively interlinked. This is particularly the case between the UK and France, with a high concentration of gas pipelines and electricity interconnectors running between the two littoral states. This means much of the bilateral energy relationship remains governed by wider UK-EU frameworks, namely the TCA and the Euratom-UK Agreement on nuclear energy. Whilst existing EU Single Market tools are no longer in use to manage energy trading between Britain and Europe, Title VIII of the TCA contains provisions to facilitate cooperation on energy security, underwritten by agreements to help

ensure a clean energy transition in the medium and long-term (Official Journal of the European Union, 2020).

While an EU Member State, Britain was part and parcel of a European energy area that ranged in its preferences from wholesale dependence on fossil fuels to radical transformations to carbon neutral economies, from heavily subsidised energy industries to laissez faire energy markets. Both Britain and France are long-standing users of nuclear power, as well as leading proponents of a green energy transition. While the UK has moved ahead more rapidly than France in terms of its phase out legislation on combustion engine cars, both countries have generally viewed climate change-induced transformations as national and regional opportunities to make inroads on global commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions under the aegis of various UN accords, and in France's case, promoting the EU's global role in environmental transitions.

In response to Russian aggression against Ukraine, EU institutions and Member States have combined energy security, sustainability, foreign and security policy, and trade into increasingly interconnected policies, helping to increase its influence in Europe, alongside the US, NATO and the UN. The core policy outcome is RePowerEU, a robust European response in which France has played a central role, and which Britain has supported from amongst the wider collection of European allies. Combining a dramatic determination to halt the import and use of Russian gas and oil with long-term climate change goals and broader east-west foreign policy goals, RePowerEU represents a multifaceted, multigoal shift in Europe's political, and commercial attitudes to Russia. While UK energy imports contain only a small portion of Russian gas and oil, its energy market is deeply connected to Europe in terms of overall unit prices, as well as access, transit, availability of energy sources.

Both France and Britain can capitalise on the new policy terrain represented by RePowerEU. France is likely to play a leading role in attempts to mitigate the policy's short term material consequences (including ongoing energy volatility while European markets wean themselves comprehensively off Russian imports) and facilitate its long-term strategic impacts (including the development of European strategic energy autonomy). Britain can contribute by supporting this dramatic fossil fuel shift, cooperating over sanctions, and supporting the general concept of enhanced energy security, chiefly by ramping up its agreements on nuclear power with France. While not particularly headline-grabbing, a consequential outcome of precisely this form of enhanced UK-EU energy relations is the Memorandum of Understanding between the UK and the North Seas Energy Cooperation group (NSEC: comprised of ten members including France) in late 2022, which sets out a framework for cooperation on renewable energy, fulfilling the commitments laid out in the UK-EU TCA. Crucially, the NSEC enables the UK to

participate in the development of renewable projects in the North Sea, helping it to strengthen European energy security at a regional level, while also reinforcing energy ties between it and France.

## WHERE DO WE GO?

The first steps towards resetting UK-France energy relations took place at the inaugural meeting of the Summit of the European Political Community (EPC) in Prague, in October 2022. At that point, former Prime Minister Liz Truss and President Emmanuel Macron took the opportunity both to resuscitate broader UK-France relations, and underline a few specific commitments, including their determination to advance bilateral cooperation on energy. This confirmed the full support of the UK and France for both renewable and nuclear energies, as part of a bilateral strategy to transition away from reliance on Russian hydrocarbons and achieve strategic autonomy. Truss and Macron also stated their support to the advancement of a Franco-British civil-nuclear cooperation, focusing on innovation, workforce capacity-building, and infrastructure development, areas that may well be on the agenda at the upcoming March Summit.

The best evidence of the increasing centrality of energy security to bilateral relations came in November 2022, with a pledge by Macron and UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak to continue the ambitious cooperation established at the EPC summit in the field of nuclear energy, in response to volatilities in global energy markets brought about by Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Reuters, 2022). Heading into the March Summit, Macron and Sunak need to reaffirm the principles of RePowerEU from their respective positions, redouble their commitment to the NSEC MoU, and reestablish the necessary assurances to increase bilateral civil nuclear cooperation, most likely by building on the recent agreement over joint ownership of Sizewell C, a new nuclear power station project in East Anglia. Marking the first material sign of Franco-British rapprochement in energy security, Macron welcomed the development as a “new phase of our common relations” (Macron, 2022, cited in Bounds et al, 2022). Whether Sizewell C operates in the UK-France summit as the microcosm of wider, more tangible energy security development remains to be seen.

## 4. INTERNATIONAL FORA

### WHERE HAVE WE GOT TO?

On many issues, UK-France relations are set and mediated through the UK-EU TCA, which sets out preferential arrangements across a spectrum of policy areas ranging from trade in goods and services to energy and fisheries. However, despite the European Commission's (2021) overarching goal of

“preserving longstanding friendship and cooperation” between the EU and UK, the TCA has not been particularly well received by all individual EU member states. Britain’s arms-length approach to the EU, whether by dint of its ‘Global Britain’ ambitions, or cultivation of new security, defence and trade partners, has also widened unhelpfully the diplomatic, financial and strategic gap between itself and the EU. The mistrust and ill-feeling between the UK and the EU became a hallmark during the ensuing six years of Brexit negotiations.

This in turn had profound impacts on the UK’s own relations with France. The two sides have remained entangled in disagreements on almost every topic arising from Brexit, from fisheries to migration, from regulation and deregulation to the commercial heft of London versus Paris. In his New Year message of 2021 (cited in Woodcock, 2021), Macron stated diplomatically that the ‘United Kingdom remains our neighbour but also our friend and ally’. Later in 2022, however, Macron had no qualms in urging the EU to be ‘tough’ on the UK in terms of sticking to its commitments on both fishing and the Northern Ireland Protocol (Samuel and Crisp, 2022), with France threatening a series of retaliatory measures against the UK after claims that the UK was failing to adhere to its TCA commitments to allow French vessels to fish in UK waters post-Brexit (Fietta, 2022). Such retaliatory measures were then expanded to include other policy areas touching more directly on UK-France relations, including the enforcement of stricter custom controls.

The response by UK Environment Secretary George Eustice (cited in Adler, 2021) to France’s retaliatory measures – “two can play that game” – is a reflection of the testy state of UK-French relations in general over the past two years. From ministerial jibes, to PM Truss herself declaring that “the jury is out” regarding whether President Macron is a “friend or foe” (cited in Gibbons and Forrest, 2022), bilateral relations with France have been progressively debilitated by ‘the strange antics’ of recent UK governments (Chrisafis, 2022).

The point of summits, however, is not only to highlight the heritage of abiding interests held in common by both sides, but to actively press the reset button after periods of acrimony. Neither side can long afford to remain embroiled in retaliatory measures, either in terms of their bilateral engagement, or – more crucially – because of the profound regional security issues arising from the war in Ukraine. Indeed, the tit-for-tat approach that arose in implementing the TCA, which initially widened the political distance between the UK and both the EU and France, has been diminished somewhat by the war. The wholesale, ‘intra-European’ response it demanded has seen swift and purposeful realignment of the UK with the EU on critical political, security and defence issues, helping in a sense to put the wiring back in: a putative restoration of relations at a time of high political crisis.



## WHERE DO WE GO?

The inaugural European Political Community summit in October 2022 played host to a number of presumptive realignments for the UK with key EU institutions and Member States, with one tangible outcome being the rebooting of UK relations with France. Presenting a looser, even conveniently ambiguous opportunity to bring forty-four European countries together against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, its overarching themes aligned strongly with the UK's own national interests in terms of regional security demands within and beyond the EU, energy security, and increasing challenges to democracy in Europe (Grant, 2022). The positive post-EPC messaging from both London and Paris following a successful meeting of Prime Minister Truss and Macron therefore represents the foundation on which Macron and PM Sunak can build at their own summit.

Two overarching dynamics remain, both of which could serve to either spur on, or to trip up, UK-France bilateral relations in 2023. The first is the possible outcome of the Northern Ireland Protocol, which since its implementation in 2020 has worsened relations between the UK and virtually every other political actor involved. Previous Johnson and Truss governments sought to overturn the original agreement, risking a potential trade war with Brussels. Macron's hawkish responses has sought to position France as a key player in post-Brexit relations with the UK, including on Northern Ireland, arguing that the UK has "more to lose commercially than we Europeans" from a Brexit trade war (Macron, 2021, cited in Parker et al, 2022). The Windsor Framework, however, agreed a fortnight before the UK-France summit, has provided a refreshing reboot on this complex issue, with the summit's timing offering an opportunity for both sides to unveil both a bilateral reset and a considerable Sunak win. Formal approval of the Framework by the UK Parliament will be key to embedding such newfound stability in the relationship.

The second is the role of non-EU forums like EPC to provide both sides with regular, high-profile opportunities to engage in areas of common interest and shared values. Both sides have a wealth of such forums available, from the pinnacle of global governance at the United Nations Security Council, to NATO forums, to entities devoted to regional political economy including the G7, OCED, and the Council of Europe. Current market volatilities and the tribulations of responding to ongoing Russian aggression in Ukraine are likely to dominate bilateral relations in all of these forums, posing serious questions for both the UK and France regarding significant changes in the global security architecture.

Sunak and Macron, however, are likely to view the majority of such challenges similarly, with both leaders already broadly in agreement over the current handling of the conflict (Parker et al, 2022). National leaders who are temperamentally complementary is a good start. However, it is the consistent, effective pursuit of corresponding national strategic cultures within key forums that represents the key ingredient

in a genuine reset of UK–France relations. There are two standouts in this respect.

First, as discussed above, is PESCO, the loose intra-EU security and defence framework which the UK has recently joined. Alongside more public forums like the G7, and NATO, the operation-specific framework of PESCO could provide crucial channels for strengthening both bilateral cooperation in the absence of deeper institutional relations within existing EU frameworks, as well as rebooting the UK’s overall relations with the EU. Second, while still largely on ice, is the E3, in which alongside Germany, the UK and France could undertake various forms of European leadership to support regional strategic goals, granting the UK a usefully non-EU forum to further recalibrate its post-Brexit relationship in foreign, security and defence and other policies. Touted as a likely post-Brexit diplomatic forum, the E3 has in recent year proven impractical for its three members, given the prevailing state of post-Brexit rancour. However, with volatile geopolitical contexts including the war in Ukraine, increasing parallelisms in defence cooperation, and opportunities for joint capability investments, the E3 may regain renewed relevance (van Rij and Wilkinson, 2021, P. Nanda, 2021). As argued in 2020, “ultimately, Paris, Berlin, and London do not have a choice over whether to coordinate their foreign policies more—the question is whether they can manage to overcome internal differences and make the E3 format more regular and strategic” (Brattberg, 2020).

## CONCLUSION

While Rishi Sunak and Emmanuel Macron may have some differences in ideology and international experience, they do share similar backgrounds. Both are the eldest sons of doctors and products of elite education, who began their careers as investment bankers before moving on to run financial and economic ministries (Chrisafis, 2022). Both also share a similar set of political challenges, in terms of domestic difficulties, European demands, and global expectations. And, significantly, since taking power, both leaders have been characterised as centralising technocrats who pore over the detail of everything that comes across their desk. If both leaders can use these common areas to build a cordial working relationship – and bring their methodical attention to bear on co-owned policies that promote problem-solving between their two countries -- there is a good chance of strategic outcomes being agreed.

These possibilities are aided by recent improvements in relations between the UK and France, with both sides intent on finding new constructive pathways of engagement outside of the framework of the EU. The new Rishi Sunak government has healed some of the corrosive tensions and unprecedented levels of distrust that characterised the Franco-British relationship under the leadership of Johnson and Truss.



Whilst the former Prime Minister's attendance at the European Political Community Summit in October 2022 represented the beginning of a more cooperative UK-EU framework, it is Sunak's prioritisation of a value-based relationship with the leading EU player, against the backdrop of war and instability, that has brought the UK and its European allies closer, putting into action the motto that the UK is 'leaving the EU, not Europe' (Bergesen et al, 2023).

The March 2023 Summit will therefore provide a platform to build on this momentum of deep diplomatic investment between the two countries. There remains much to do in creating more structured and enduring frameworks of cooperation that can withstand domestic political imperatives and external crises. Sunak's visit to Macron can also highlight the uniqueness and longevity of their relationship: 2024 will after all mark 120 years of the Entente Cordiale which established the contemporary bilateral relationship between the two countries. Whether as a charm offensive on the part of the UK, or by conclusively pressing the reset button to get past recent antipathy, the March summit affords both sides the opportunity to reflect on the critical mass of what remains to be achieved.

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