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Research Article

# ‘We Thought We Were Friends!’: Franco-British Bilateral Diplomacy and the Shock of Brexit

**Helen Drake and Pauline Schnapper**

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# Abstract

The British vote to leave the European Union in 2016 shook the Franco-British bilateral relationship (FBBR) to its core and led to unexpected tensions, considering the depth of cooperation between the two countries in many fields, and their geography. In this article we analyse the impact of Brexit on the FBBR to date, including the likely aftershocks. We focus on the 2017-2020 Brexit negotiations themselves, and on the matters that escaped those negotiations but which are core to the FBBR namely: security and defence; borders and migration. We draw on a number of high-level interviews with French and British officials and on literatures of contemporary diplomacy to ask how the new environment for the FBBR challenges traditional ways of conducting bilateral diplomacy outside of the multilateral framework provided by the European Union.



# Keywords

Diplomacy; Brexit; France; United Kingdom; Bilateralism

The EU-UK negotiations that followed the British vote to 'leave' the European Union (EU) in 2016 shook the Franco-British bilateral relationship (FBBR) to its core and led to unexpected tensions, prompting one British official to exclaim in 2019: 'but we thought we were friends!' (Interview 1). We understand such a shock as 'a dramatic change in the international system or its subsystems that fundamentally alters the processes, relationships, and expectations that drive nation-state interactions' (Goertz and Diehl 1995). Shocks bring change, then, at systemic level, and substitute complexity for relative certainty. That certainty may itself well be dysfunctional: for Puri (2000: 18), for example, 'all global shocks … unfold against the backdrop of historically rooted suspicions, rivalries and grievances, and tend to intensify them'. Thus defined, Brexit certainly counts as a shock to the EU as a system of inter-state governance and within that, to the Franco-British bilateral relationship.

The FBBR is defined here as a dynamic set of systems and subsystems comprising the myriad connections and interactions that link the two countries at many levels. Indeed, in its depth and breadth, the FBBR is unsurpassed in the UK's panoply of existing bilateral ties (Interviews 1, 3 & 8). In its defence and security dimensions, moreover, it is the most institutionalized of the UK's bilateral relationships (Glencross 2019). In addition, the Franco-British relationship is marked by the geographical fact of proximity, symbolised since 1994 by the fixed link of the Channel Tunnel, and by the historical depth and breadth of its cultural and stereotypical dimensions (Tombs and Tombs 2007).

In this article we seek to further our knowledge and understanding of the impact of Brexit on the FBBR to date, including the likely aftershocks. We look chronologically at the period 2017-2020, during which the UK and EU negotiated new terms of engagement. We show that, in spite of the claims by both governments to have successfully separated the (difficult) negotiations from the (smooth) flow of bilateral relations, the Brexit referendum and its aftermath have actually had a negative impact on the FBBR, at least in the short term, and that revitalising it will require effort on both sides. By classifying and evaluating the developments we find, we more broadly aim to contribute to thinking about contemporary forms of diplomacy, especially in its bilateral, 'networked' and 'minilateral' forms (Slaughter 2009; Patrick 2015; Manulak 2019). By taking a broad perspective of diplomatic activity we can reflect, notably, on its potential to repair not only the formal aspects of the FBBR, but also those dimensions that directly affect people, their lives and their livelihoods. Making diplomacy itself sustainable, and understanding diplomacy as a tool of a sustainable bilateral relationship, comprises our wider research agenda.

We proceed as follows. First, and in order to establish a baseline for our before-and-after Brexit comparison, we review the core components of the Franco-British relationship at the time of the UK's 2016 referendum. We ask how functional or dysfunctional these cross-Channel relations were: what were their 'historically rooted suspicions, rivalries and grievances' (Puri 2020)? We enrich our analysis here by comparing this (in)famous *entente cordiale* to other bilateral relationships of significance to each of France and the UK, specifically the Franco-German and UK-US relationships respectively.

Second, we evaluate the impact on the FBBR of the UK-EU Brexit negotiations themselves in both their key phases: leading to the December 2019 Withdrawal Agreement and Political Declaration; and then to the December 2020 Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA). We see that this impact in certain ways diminished over time as the wheels of formal diplomacy continued to turn and learn, even at the times of highest political tension, albeit at a slowed pace, and diminished in substance; and that the process was in itself instructive for the architects of the post-Brexit FBBR.

Third, we turn to two specific aspects of the FBBR of great significance for the relationship, barely covered in the TCA, and which will thus loom large in the post-Brexit FBBR. The first is Franco-British cooperation in defence and security, arguably the 'bedrock' (Interview 5) of the FBBR, by virtue of its institutionalisation and formalisation in the 2010 Lancaster

House Treaties amongst other formal commitments. The second is the web of governance surrounding the two countries' borders (fixed and maritime), and the migration and mobility that the borders both produce and constrain. For each of these dimensions of the FBBR, we identify and appraise the impact of Brexit to date, and look ahead to likely developments. We end by reflecting on the significance of our findings for the operation of the FBBR; for our understanding of that relationship; and for lessons in diplomacy conducted, moreover, in a digital, pandemic-ridden world.

We supplement existing primary and secondary sources with original data generated from nine elite-level interviews with individuals working in FBBR diplomacy on both sides of the Channel (see Appendix One). These discussions took place remotely by video link, in keeping with the impact of Covid-19 on research and fieldwork. Our interlocutors, both active and retired, included officials who were at the time of interview working in the two Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFA) *viz,* the *Quai d'Orsay* and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO); and in the French Embassy in London and the UK Embassy in Paris. We have anonymised all interviewees bar one to preserve the confidentiality of their insights and information.

## WHAT'S IN A BILATERAL? THE STATE OF THE FRANCO-BRITISH RELATIONSHIP AT THE TIME OF BREXIT

Bilateral relations have been at the core of diplomatic relations, constituting the first and most traditional element of international diplomacy since the seventeenth century (Pannier 2018). Over time, the number of bilateral relations increased dramatically, especially after 1945 when international networks became more and more extensive. There are several possible levels of depth and intensity to these bilaterals, from limited *ad hoc* relations to fully-fledged, so-called 'special relationships' covering political, military, economic and cultural dimensions. Moreover, they are always dynamic: typically varying over time, especially when the two countries share a long history and are close geographical neighbours, as is the case with Britain and France. Indeed, we note that in comparison to other bilateral relations in Europe, France and Britain have been said to be each other's 'Other', or *super-étranger*, in Crouzet's (1975) term for several centuries: in many ways, the two neighbours built their national identities in opposition the other (Colley 1992). The relationship between the two countries has more often been one of rivalry and competition than friendship and collaboration, at least until the beginning of the twentieth century (Tombs and Tombs 2007), and this aspect comes into clear view in the case of Brexit, as we see below.

### France Versus UK in the EU and the International System

France and the UK made (at least partly) different choices to mitigate the adverse effects of their relative decline after 1945. The UK chose a strategic partnership with the USA, while the governments of the French Fourth and Fifth Republics embarked on a process of European integration which they effectively led for several decades. De Gaulle's two vetoes of the British application to join the EC in 1963 and 1967 confirmed this pattern, while Britain's transactional approach to membership after it finally joined in 1973 continued to clash with France's aspirations to construct an economic and (rhetorically at least) political union (George 1998). Specifically on defence and security issues, furthermore, London's priority remained NATO and the Atlantic alliance whereas Paris pushed for an autonomous European defence capability, first within the Western European Union (WEU), then as part of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), and European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP). From 2017, French President Macron argued vocally for Europe's 'strategic autonomy', and not only in matters of hard power (Drake and Meunier 2020).

Despite these differences, the bilateral relationship flourished after the end of the cold war into a quasi 'special relationship'. Cooperation in the diplomatic and military field, based

on shared interests, gave France and the UK a stronger voice on the international scene, whether at the United Nations (UN) Security Council or in the Libyan desert in 2011. On the ground, military cooperation started in Bosnia in 1995 under UK Prime Minister John Major and French President Jacques Chirac, and was enshrined in law fifteen years later in 2010 by the Lancaster House agreements, which cover both conventional and nuclear cooperation (Harrois 2016). These agreements were based on a shared perception that, in spite of their differences over European integration, the two countries needed to increase military capabilities in the context of the 2008-2009 economic downturn and reduced defence budgets (Gomis 2011: 4). Both partners share a self-belief that they are global players, illustrated by their permanent seats at the UN Security Council, their nuclear arsenal and their commitment to military activism abroad.

### Entente vs 'Special' Relationships

How did this renewed FBBR compare in depth and feeling to the relationships that pertained between the UK and the US, or to the Franco-German bilateral relationship? In the case of the UK and the US, the closeness was forged during WWII and comprised close economic, military (both conventional and nuclear) and intelligence collaboration. The relationship remained a priority for British diplomacy after the end of the cold war, whichever administration was in place in Washington and whatever the disagreements on specific issues. Of note here is the UK government's insistence on the value of a post-Brexit bilateral free trade agreement with the US as an appealing alternative to membership of the EU single market, to the extent that it sought to run both the UK-EU and UK-US Brexit trade talks in parallel. In addition to these largely hard power dimensions, the UK-US relationship is encased in the rhetoric of the Anglosphere, based on a discourse about linguistic, cultural and historical ties (Wallace 1991; Gamble 2003).

In contrast, the Franco-German relation has been described as 'regularized intergovernmentalism' (Krotz 2010), and its lifeblood flows from the two partners' membership of the EU. Germany is France's first trading partner by far, both for exports and imports, while France is Germany's fourth. Multiple bilateral links have been established over the decades across numerous sectors since the 1963 *Elysée* Treaty, including the *Office Franco-Allemand de la Jeunesse*. In 2003, on the 40th anniversary of the treaty, the two governments set up a biannual Franco-German ministerial council which replaced bilateral annual summits and allowed all levels of government to cooperate directly. More generally, the two countries have generated routines, especially within the institutions of the EU, which have contributed to binding and socialising its key actors: the relationship is routinised at all echelons of government and across policies (Krotz 2010: 151-152). This does not mean that the relation has always been smooth or without problems and differences – institutionalised military cooperation has not brought the two partners together over actual military intervention, for example – but there is an expectation and shared commitment that disputes can be resolved, lending a long-term stability to the bilateral which largely insulates it from domestic or international changes and from crises. Thus, the risk of divergence or conflict is mitigated. Not dissimilar to the UK's 'special relationship' with the US, the Franco-German relationship also comprises a normative dimension in the political culture of both countries, where it is a given that is rarely questioned. This is not quite the case for the FBBR, as we shall see below.

### Back to the Channel: Facts, Symbols and Stereotypes

For Pannier (2018: 35), bilateral relations are potentially 'symmetrical or asymmetrical, dependent or interdependent, institutionalized or not, consensual or contested, new or old, based on shared interests and/or values'. In the Franco-British case, the relationship has arguably been both symmetrical and interdependent. First, both France and the UK are roughly equal in terms of economic and political weight and trade extensively with each other. Britain was France's fifth customer with over 30 billion euros worth of exports in 2016 and France is Britain's seventh with 23 billion euros. Second, the FBBR is partly

institutionalised as we have seen, and again, far more so than the transatlantic relationship, with annual bilateral summits and agreements such as Lancaster House or Le Touquet on the managing of the border in Calais (Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2003); but arguably less so than the Franco-German tandem. Third, relations between France and the UK are not specifically contested by political forces or public opinion in either country (although they are prone to stereotype, particularly in the UK, as we see below). But they are also relatively shallow, unlike either of the two other bilaterals explored above, where relations are both consensual and run deeper. Thus a French official told us that the Franco-German relationship was "more natural, more obvious" than the FBBR (Interview 7). Fourth, the relationship contains both very old and relatively new elements, similar to the US-UK and the Franco-German relationships respectively. Fifth and finally, the FBBR is based on certain shared interests and values; these commonalities are both more explicit than those binding the US and the UK, and far less so than for the Franco-German bond, particularly with regards to its EU dimension.

Extending beyond this typology of bilateral relations, it is notable that perceptions and stereotypes, positive and negative, continue to play a specific part in shaping the Franco-British relationship, present in the FBBR in a way that distinguishes it from its counterparts above. From the *entente cordiale* and *perfide Albion* to the *frogs* and *rosbifs*, from tabloid headlines and 'arrogant' French, to the 'stiff upper lip' and 'pragmatic' English (*les Anglais* being routine shorthand for the British, even at the highest levels of political and public discourse), imaginaries and prejudice have formed the background to the relationship, modified or reinforced by the political ups and downs in the relations between different governments (Tachin 2006; Crouzet 1975). Pictures of the past (especially the memory of WWII) and clichés bear on contemporary policymakers and commentators on both sides of the Channel, and routinely find their way into political and media discourse. This 'othering' characterises the FBBR just as much as its institutional frameworks, and feeds a propensity for the relationship to fall into dysfunctional habits when under specific stress.

## DIPLOMACY DISRUPTED? THE FBBR AND THE BREXIT NEGOTIATIONS, 2017-2020

The British vote to leave the EU on 23 June 2016 came as an electoral shock not just to the British government and political elites but to their counterparts across Europe. On the continent, few commentators had expected such an outcome in spite of the warning shots of the previous referendums which, in Ireland in 2001, and then France and the Netherlands in 2005, had rejected the Nice and Constitutional Treaties respectively. For the first time (setting aside the very different cases of 'Algexit', 'Grøxit' and Saint Barthélémy (Patel, 2017)), the EU was facing a domestic electorate now wishing to leave, thereby significantly shrinking the EU and raising the prospect of European *dis*integration after so many decades of integration and enlargement (Webber 2018; Vollaard 2018; Rosamond 2016; Jones 2018).

### Handle with Care: FBBR and Brexit on parallel diplomatic tracks

The Brexit referendum results came as a shock to France in the same way as it did to other member states. On 24 June 2016, President Hollande issued a statement saying how much he regretted the 'painful choice' made by the British electorate (Hollande 2016). His immediate reaction was to protect the EU, rather than the FBBR, and to turn to Germany to push for more cooperation on defence issues within the EU (Barker, Wagstyl and Chassany 2016). Hollande insisted that there should be 'a price' to pay to leave the EU; otherwise, he argued, the whole European project would be undermined. From May 2017, Emmanuel Macron maintained the same line about there being an essential distinction between being a member state and a third country (even where this third country was a bilateral partner, and ex-EU member state). This led to what one interviewee (Interview

4) described as a discrepancy between, on the one hand, the tough political signal that was sent from Paris to the British side; and on the other, a predisposition at the more technical level of relations to maintain as good a working relationship as possible between the two countries.

In contrast, Theresa May's UK government was hoping to use its bilateral relations within the EU in general as leverage to get a favourable deal once the negotiations got underway in 2017 (Figueira and Martill 2020). Yet as early as February 2017 the European Council adopted guidelines for the negotiations which stressed the need to maintain EU27 unity in the face of UK demands. It stated in particular that 'the Union's overall objective in these negotiations will be to preserve its interests, those of its citizens, its businesses and its Member States' and that 'throughout these negotiations the Union will maintain its unity and act as one with the aim of reaching a result that is fair and equitable for all Member States and in the interest of its citizens' (European Council 2017). Protecting the integrity of the single market was a priority shared by the EU27, a stance that subsequent developments showed was seriously underestimated by the UK government. Indeed, this unity was maintained throughout the negotiations and no member state agreed to deal unilaterally with the UK.

In France, individual government departments were officially banned from discussing Brexit issues with their counterparts in the British Embassy; and officials all report how they handled the FBBR with care, running it along a parallel track to the Brexit negotiations for fear of tainting the negotiations or, just as significant, being perceived as doing so[1]. Moreover, France was depicted as a particularly tough negotiator in the British media, where Emmanuel Macron was dubbed 'bad cop' in contrast to the supposedly German 'good cop' Merkel (Mallet and Barker 2019). In his account of May's years as Prime Minister, Anthony Seldon writes of Macron as 'a constant thorn agitating the EU to stand up to Britain over Brexit' (2019: 631). This was true especially at two key moments in the negotiation with Theresa May's government: the Salzburg EU summit in September 2018, which rejected the so-called Chequers plan (Boffey and Sabbagh 2018); and the April 2019 European Council which followed Theresa May's failure to get parliamentary ratification of the deal, and took place in the run-up to the European elections (Vaillant 2019).

At the same time, French officials were eager to see Brexit happen, not because they thought it was a good idea but because in their view, the vote of the British public should be respected, and it was better to have Brexit out of the way as fast as possible and focus on further developments within the EU (Montchalin 2019; Loiseau 2018). This was a strategic, unsentimental perspective in line with the norms and thrust of French diplomacy, as one senior UK diplomat put it (Interview 8). A French official in post at the time told us that Theresa May's resignation and the arrival of Boris Johnson as Prime Minister in July 2019 were a relief for the French government, in spite of Johnson's harder Brexit stand. There was at least a prospect that he would 'get Brexit done' (in reality, get the Withdrawal Agreement done); and after previously suggesting otherwise, Macron agreed to a Brexit extension to 31 January 2020 (rather than 31 December 2019) to accommodate Johnson's call for a UK general election in order to secure ratification of the Withdrawal Agreement (Boffey 2019).

### Learning new tricks

From March 2020 onwards when negotiations resumed, this time in the 'Transition' phase and on the future UK/EU relationship, there was a disappointment on the French side that the new British team was not seeking institutionalised links on security and defence during these talks (Rankin 2020; Interview 9). Furthermore, the limited progress of the Brexit talks over the spring, summer and early autumn of 2020, in a context dominated by the Covid-19 crisis, was frustrating for the French side. Indeed, the Paris government appeared again at some points as a more intransigent partner than others in the EU, for example on the issue of fisheries, which affected many coastal constituencies and was politically

sensitive (see Henley 2020; Boffey 2020a). A senior British diplomat commented precisely on how 'single-minded', 'unsentimental' and 'strategic' the French negotiating position was with regards to treating the UK as a third country like any other (Interview 8). The Internal Market Bill introduced by the British government in the autumn of 2020, which if not eventually removed, would have breached the agreement signed in December 2019 on border controls between the island of Ireland and Great Britain, also strained UK-EU27 relations and affected the level of trust towards London (Boffey 2020b).

Yet officials on both sides of the Channel also pointed, somewhat paradoxically, to a better atmosphere between the two governments under the Johnson government. They mentioned the good personal relationship between Macron and Johnson which they deemed as particularly important for the future of the FBBR (Interview 9; see also Forsyth 2020); and both sides acknowledged the lessons learnt during the previous round of negotiations (2017-19). For instance, British officials accepted that there would be no direct negotiations with individual member states, including its bilateral partner, France, and did not even try to have technical talks with ministerial departments in Paris (Interview 4). In the end an agreement was found on fisheries which provided for a 25 per cent reduction in EU boats' access to British waters for five and a half years followed by annual quota negotiations, and which unlocked the signing of the EU/UK TCA on 24 December 2020.

It would appear therefore that the formal diplomatic channels between France and the UK adjusted over time to the emerging realities of the Brexit negotiations. After initial turbulence, dialogue resumed between the two sides, albeit with necessary adjustments to previous standard operating procedures to accommodate the facts of a somewhat artificially-split reality: the FBBR could continue, with the exception of the matter of Brexit. In practice, several interviewees reported that it was sometimes difficult to separate the two, and indicated that the tensions in the negotiations took their toll on the bilateral relationship (Interviews 5, 7 and 8). It was evident that business was not as usual, which led to unease and uncertainty.

## 'C'EST COMPLIQUÉ': DIPLOMATIC OPTIONS FOR THE FUTURE FBBR

The negotiation of Brexit did not, it appears, in itself constitute a disruption, if we define disruption as a wholesale jettisoning of an old business model or operating system (Drake 2018). But that phase alone did deliver an immediate shock to the FBBR: a slow and on occasions painful process of the adjustment of existing routines and tools; and an impact on Franco-British bilateral diplomacy that was likely to be unprecedented in both depth and breadth. Indeed, once the dust had settled on the TCA, two key areas of cross-Channel collaboration and cooperation – security and defence; borders, migration and mobility – which had by and large been excluded from the negotiations mandate, would now fall to the two parties in the FBBR for negotiation and resolution. Would the old operating system suffice?

### Security and Defence

All interviewees mentioned defence and security as the areas where progress in the FBBR had hitherto been most far-reaching, and therefore where the shock of Brexit was now most strongly felt. Lord Peter Ricketts (and Interviewees 8 and 9) mentioned the 2003 Iraq war as a previous rift, but one which had been quickly 'patched up', whereas Brexit was expected to be 'deeper and more-lasting'. Several officials on both sides confirmed that behind the rhetoric of official communiqués, the FBBR in that area had indeed been badly affected and would require rebuilding in the future.

Indeed, the 2010 Lancaster House agreements were signed outside of the EU framework; in theory therefore, they would not be directly affected by Brexit, something that both

countries were keen to stress from the start (Pannier 2016: 485). Officially, military cooperation was expected to 'simply' continue (Guitton 2020). The communiqué following the Franco-British summit of January 2018 in Sandhurst reiterated, rhetorically at least, 'the continuing importance of the defence relationship between our two countries as a foundation of our national and of European security' (UK Government 2018). It listed the achievements of the FBBR in this field since 2010, including maritime cooperation in the Atlantic, Mediterranean and China seas; British support for French troops in Mali; French participation in the NATO-enhanced Forward Presence operation alongside the UK in Estonia; and the operations against ISIS in Syria and Iraq. It also set up a ministerial defence council which would meet three times a year. Operation Hamilton against Syrian chemical weapons facilities, which was conducted jointly with the US shortly after, in April, seemingly illustrated the resilience of this cooperation. In this context, the anniversary of the 10th Lancaster House agreements in 2020 was to have been celebrated with much fanfare. The Covid crisis made the celebration much more subdued, but both governments published a number of statements celebrating the FBBR in the defence field: the two Defence Secretaries, Florence Parly and Ben Wallace took stock of further developments in defence projects; while the two ambassadors gave a lengthy joint interview celebrating the FBBR (Parly and Wallace 2020; Llewellyn and Colonna 2020).

More generally, maintaining bilateral defence links became all the more important as the UK strategy changed with the new Johnson government; military cooperation, it would seem, was to be insulated from political change. Whereas the October 2019 Political Declaration on the future UK-EU relationship supposedly established the parameters of a future cooperation including 'law enforcement and criminal justice, foreign policy, security and defence and wider areas of cooperation' (UK Government 2019), the Johnson government actually shifted away from any agreement with the EU regarding the institutionalisation of foreign and defence policy cooperation in 2020, preferring instead ad hoc, bilateral or minilateral arrangements in Europe and 'Global Britain', with the Atlantic alliance as bedrock and the Indo-Pacific as a 'new' horizon (Whitman 2020; Pannier 2015; Johnson 2021). The E3 format (France, the UK and Germany) deployed since 2003 in the negotiations with Iran on their nuclear programme was potentially to provide a template for the future in that perspective (Brattberg 2020; Billon-Galland. Raines and Whitman 2020; Interviews 2, 8 and 9). Similarly, the European Intervention Initiative proposed by President Macron in his Sorbonne speech and launched in June 2018 with seven EU countries was welcomed by the UK which signed the Letter of Interest (Melvin and Chalmers 2020: 19; Macron 2017). Abecassis and Howorth (2020) argue that the post-Brexit context in fact coincided with a remarkable alignment of the regional and global ambitions of France and the UK, but did not imply automatic cooperation, given the many factors in play in both the relationship itself, and at large.

The arrival of the Biden-Harris administration in Washington in 2021, with its emphasis on multilateralism and the renewal of transatlantic ties, could also be expected to help reshape the FBBR by encouraging cooperation between the EU and its traditional allies, whereas President Trump was happy to drive a wedge between Brexit Britain and the EU. In diplomatic terms, this would mean France and the UK continuing to work together in the UN Security Council and coordinate on issues such as relations with Russia or China as well as developing coordination in the Asia-Pacific region which the Johnson government identified as a key arena for "Global Britain in a Competitive Age", provided British and French ambitions are not too curtailed by the economic consequences of the Covid pandemic (UK Government, 2021; Glencross 2019, Heritage and Lee 2021). The UK's 144-page Integrated Review published in March 2021 devoted only a few lines and a specific paragraph to the FBBR, promising to build on the Lancaster House treaties but without elaborating (UK Government 2021). Peter Ricketts for his part, emphasised the need to find new momentum (*élan*) and new projects for the FBBR in this field, as in others, to sustain the relationship.

Yet there are already limits to existing bilateral defence cooperation. The non-permanent Combined Joint Expeditionary Force (CJEF) is operational but was never deployed. Britain only contributed three Chinook helicopters to operation Barkhane in Mali, no more than other European partners like Germany and definitely fewer than the US. Looking ahead, medium to long-term challenges to the defence relationship concern the difficulty for France, strategically-speaking, to prioritise a bilateral special relationship with the UK whilst simultaneously pursuing its goal of beefing up the CSDP with Germany. There is also a question mark over French post-Brexit commitments to NATO, following Macron's provocative assessment of the Atlantic organisation as 'brain-dead' in 2019 (*The Economist* 2019; Interview 9). More generally, the UK's ambitions for a 'Global Britain' do not align with France's focus on Europe, the Mediterranean and Africa[2].

Similarly, there are limitations to the extent to which post-Brexit diplomatic arrangements can mitigate for the losses incurred by the FBBR due to Brexit. Ad hoc or *à la carte* cooperation brings advantages such as flexibility and adaptability but, when only semi-institutionalised, also risks becoming hostage to short-term political tensions or divergent interests (Patrick 2015). Indeed, several officials expressed doubts that these losses could be fully mitigated by the informal, minilateral arrangements of the E3, Intervention Initiative type alone. The future FBBR cannot therefore be isolated from a formal UK relationship with the EU around matters of security and defence, and at the time of writing, this remained a significant sticking point for Franco-British bilateral relations.

### Borders, Mobility and Migration

Moreover, Brexit puts the UK beyond the EU's shared regimes for border control, migration and mobility which are equally, if differently, central to the fabric and sustainability of the FBBR. We include here not only EU citizens – those previously free to cross the Channel with few legal constraints – but also those often undocumented individuals who attempt to cross the Channel from France to the UK at the cost of their lives and who have already, at the time of writing, found themselves pawns of a highly-politicised conversation between French and UK authorities about how to stem and regulate these flows after Brexit (*Financial Times* 2020).

The FBBR has indeed for centuries incorporated the *chassé-croisé* of both its citizens and denizens, these categories being variably defined according to the norms of the time (Drake and Schnapper 2018). While both countries were EU member states, their citizens could reciprocally exercise EU citizenship rights, particularly the right to the freedom of movement (including residency) within the EU. This freedom of movement proved popular with French and UK citizens alike. The French Embassy in London estimated in 2020 that there were over 600,000 French expatriates and 3,000 French businesses in the UK, and about 400,000 British people living in France, although it is highly likely that these figures underestimated the phenomenon by some serious degree, since registration with the respective consulates had for a long time effectively been voluntary (Lequesne 2020; Geddes, Hadj-Abdou and Brumat 2020; Drake and Collard 2008).

*'We're ending free movement to open up Britain to the world' (Patel, 2020)*

Whilst the 2019 Withdrawal Agreement addressed and secured the mobility and residency rights of those French and UK citizens already resident in each other's country by the cut-off date of 31 December 2020 (albeit with varying degrees of administrative transparency, cost and ease), arrangements for cross-Channel movement after that date became, post-Brexit, a test for the FBBR, particular with regards to the everyday realities of people's lives: (how) would France and the UK honour the commitments made on the part of their citizens to the other's country, be it in the form of property acquisition, contribution to culture, economy and society, professional and educational investments and other, less tangible but no less important, personal connections? What, if any contingency plans would be put in place to smooth over the abrupt change in status of French and UK citizens

moving across the Channel post-Brexit? Would Brexit, in matter of fact, signal one of the most significant ruptures in cross-Channel flows in the history of the FBBR?

At the time of writing (March 2021), 'concrete problems' (Interview 5; see also Reland 2021) posed by the abrupt ending of the freedom of movement had inevitably emerged for individuals and businesses alike. In the words of one interviewee (Interview 5), the ending of intra-EU migration was an 'enormous shock' to the FBBR, and adjustment was likely to take decades, not years. In the nature of shocks as defined above, the certainties of free movement had, at a stroke, been replaced with the complexities of new arrangements yet to be diplomatically enshrined or operationally absorbed. Early signs were that this was one key area of the FBBR over which bilateral diplomacy held little traction. For the UK, France was now a third country like any other, the movement of its citizens into the UK subject to the provisions of the 2020 Immigration Act which explicitly targeted and heralded the 'end of free movement' (UK Government 2020a); and which was politically celebrated as such, *viz* UK Home Secretary Priti Patel's Tweet of May 2020 (Patel 2020). Similarly, UK citizens' entry to France would henceforth be conditioned by the EU27 framework for third country nationals, with no exceptions made for its cross-Channel neighbour.

While the true extent of the repercussions of the ending of free movement were yet to make themselves fully felt, it was evident that they would spill into numerous and diverse sectors of customary cross-Channel activity including academic staff and student exchanges, and a wide range of cultural cooperation. Insofar as the formal FBBR has for its lifetime been sustained by the fabric of ties between its two populations (as well as its trading and commercial links), the shock of Brexit in this domain has already pointed diplomats on both sides of the Channel to stake stock of the multiplicity of stakeholders of the FBBR when rebuilding its post-Brexit bilateral futures.

*'Taking back control' of the maritime border?*

With regards to the situation of undocumented or otherwise irregular migrants seeking to make the perilous crossing from the north of France to the south of England, Franco-British cooperation within the EU framework constituted a regime for controlling and patrolling the EU's external borders with regards to third-country nationals seeking entry into the EU's member states by both regular and irregular means, and included EU-wide rules for handling asylum-seekers. These arrangements were supplemented by strictly bilateral agreements, notably the 2003 le Touquet treaty for 'juxtaposed' border controls, and the 2018 Sandhurst Treaty which articulated legal provisions for the ongoing securitisation of the so-called 'short straits' of the English Channel. In 2019, 2020 and again in 2021, these waters saw a rise in the number of crossings and attempted crossings in 'small boats' from France to the south coast of England, incurring tragic deaths (*le Monde* 2021). In response, France and the UK increased their bilateral efforts to securitize the Channel (UK Government 2020b) in accordance with what had become a de facto diplomatic formula whereby the UK increased its financial and material assistance to their French counterparts (such as the UK's Clandestine Channel Threat commander role) in exchange for commitments by French authorities to deter irregular movement across the Channel, and enforce the rules (Tyerman and Van Isacker 2020).

Early evidence would suggest that these post-Brexit arrangements lack full buy-in on the French side of the Channel where, as with regular migration, the priority – the default diplomatic setting - remained the EU27 legal framework (Interview 8). France also has other entry points for irregular migrants (the Franco-Italian border) that absorb official energy. The UK's exit from the EU's 'Dublin III' arrangements for returns and 'removals' (especially of minors), in particular created a gap to be addressed by new arrangements yet to be articulated or negotiated, and where diplomatic relations between France and the UK have entered an unprecedently uncertain phase. 'Taking back control' of this particular border has unsurprisingly proven far trickier, more costly and deadlier than Brexit

supporters were given to believe (see Akkad 2021). The late summer of 2021 was marked by particularly fractious exchanges between UK and French officials, with the UK Home Office threatening to withhold funds from their French counterparts, deemed to be failing to uphold their side of the bargain, a perspective inevitably not shared by France. The UK's Nationality and Borders bill, making its way through UK Parliament at this time, would criminalise the very act of crossing the Channel by irregular means. This, and UK ideas of 'turning back' the boats at sea, towards France, would inevitably further complicate Franco-British cooperation on this matter at a time when toughness on immigration featured in the promises of numerous would-be candidates in the 2022 French presidential elections.

## CONCLUSIONS: 'WHO CARES?' CHALLENGES FOR TRADITIONAL DIPLOMACY IN SUSTAINING THE FBBR

Brexit was a shock that threatened to disrupt not just the EU but also the FBBR, in many ways embedded in the EU framework. Tensions between the two countries were higher than expected, considering the depth of cooperation in many fields during the two rounds of negotiations, but also unsurprising, given the emotion involved (Interviews 1 and 9).

The FBBR has suffered as a result, and rebuilding it post-Brexit will require a learning process on both sides to adjust to the basic tenets of the relationship in a radically new environment. Brexit has also challenged the traditional ways of conducting diplomacy in the FBBR, and forces the two countries to almost start from a 'blank sheet' (Interview 9). It provides an opportunity to take stock of the FBBR and to decide how important this historic relationship is to both countries and the effort that should be devoted to repair its fabric. Given that the EU now functions as a very different reference point for the two partners – a default diplomatic framework for France, and a past to forget for the UK – alignment of the two mindsets presents a significant challenge for the relationship.

It is of note that the fact of reaching an agreement (rather than a 'no deal') in December 2020 on the future UK/EU relationship, however unsatisfactory and limited in scope, did ensure that the new FBBR restarted without immediate bitterness and recrimination. However, it also signaled an ongoing, drawn-out process of negotiation on specific aspects such as border controls, security cooperation, citizens' rights, fish and so on which will test the relationship, its illusions and inevitable disillusions (Menon and Portes 2021).

In this context, and because of the loss of the multilateral framework provided by the EU, we can expect bilateral and mini-lateral diplomacy to experience a revival, or at the very least to become more important. However, such ad hoc diplomatic arrangements are likely to still leave a void in the FBBR where the socialising routines of shared EU membership once occurred. Due to Brexit, both parties have lost the opportunities for socialisation at the elite level that came with shared EU membership. Furthermore, each country's image has taken a hit in the other's country, with opportunities for public diplomacy first constrained both by the rigours of the parallel tracks discussed above (FBBR on one, Brexit negotiations on the other); and later, by Covid-19 restrictions. In these respects, the shock of Brexit has indeed created the 'complexity' associated with 'dramatic change in the international system or its subsystems' (Puri 2020), in the face of which both countries will find themselves leaning heavily on their political leaders and the ephemeral relations between them to conduct affairs via 'summit diplomacy' with all its limitations in today's hyper-securitised environments, and vulnerability to disruption of the kind wreaked by Covid-19 (see Manulak 2019).

More generally, the evolution of the FBBR post-Brexit has shed some interesting light on bilateral relations and the future of diplomacy. Although symmetrical and interdependent, the FBBR has proved, at least in this first post-Brexit phase, to be less robust than other long-lasting bilateral relationships, such as the UK-US 'special relationship' or the Franco-German one. Both are much more embedded in the political culture of the respective

countries involved, and therefore more shock-proof, in theory, than the FBBR. Perhaps these latter relationships have yet to be similarly tested: the fall-out from the US withdrawal from Afghanistan on the UK-US relationship, and the impact of Chancellor Merkel's departure from the German chancellorship on the Franco-German tandem within the EU, despite both occurring in very testing circumstances, will most likely spare those relationships the 'dramatic change' that we have associated with the shock of Brexit.

The evidence points to Brexit both having made the FBBR harder work – certainly in the early days and months with tensions over the Northern Ireland protocol and the vaccine rollout flaring across the Channel – and to a shared commitment to undertake that effort. Brexit may well prove to be disruptive to the point of questioning the existing 'operating system' of the FBBR, creating a need for creative diplomacy which does not lack for tools or precedent. Indeed, in 2021 French diplomats had begun to undertake a structured rethink of the FBBR, marking time while the UK's review of its external relations turned its eyes firmly to the east, and its back to the continent. On the part of the UK, London sent its first ever female ambassador (Menna Rawlings, after 36 men in that post) to Paris in August 2021, raising expectations of change and renewal.

But the limitations of mini-lateral relations when the two countries espouse a different discourse on their place in the global order, even when sharing broad values and interests, are likely to appear all too clearly. A rhetorically 'global' but actually inward-looking UK will struggle to accommodate France and the EU's equally rhetorical 'strategic autonomy', especially if the UK government continues to pander to nationalism and France insists on treating the UK like any other third party country.

We have also seen that traditional, state-to-state diplomacy is unlikely to sustain the future FBBR, a matter that officials on both sides of the Channel stated most emphatically. While the FBBR has been built in part on 'historically rooted suspicions, rivalries and grievances' (Puri 2020), it has also taken shape from the bottom up, built from connections at the level of business, civil society and the general population to create levels of interdependence and contacts across the borders between the two countries that uniquely characterises this bilateral relationship, as seen above. As a result, the sub-state and non-state 'tissue of bilateral relations is more important than ever' (Interview 8): there is a 'job of work' to be done (Interview 8) to build a new phase in the relationship. Such change brings not only cost but also opportunity, especially given that we are in the age of digital diplomacy and social media (Interview 8), or 'webcraft' (Manulak 2019); and where some positive new routines may emerge from the experience of pandemic-era diplomacy to constitute a more networked set of diplomatic connections between France and the UK. As one senior UK diplomatic official put it: the FBBR 'needs a spectrum of people who care' including academics, but also those with the potential in many cultural fields (from food to football) to rebuild the relationship. This would support Manulak's observation (2019: 175) that: '[o]n a bilateral basis, actors wishing to deepen connections can draw upon historical, cultural, diasporic or other types of social linkages to strengthen connection across borders'.

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## AUTHOR DETAILS

Helen Drake, Loughborough University London, Institute for Diplomacy and International Governance, Loughborough University London, Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, London E15 2GZ [h.p.drake@lboro.ac.uk]

Pauline Schnapper, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris 3, Maison de la Recherche 4 rue des Irlandais 75005 Paris [Pauline.Schnapper@sorbonne-nouvelle.fr]

## ENDNOTES

1 One exception to this pattern regarded rail security (including interoperability) in the Channel Tunnel, where the EU empowered the French government to negotiate bilaterally with the UK (Interview 3; and see Bonnaud, (2021) and European Parliament (2020).

2 We acknowledge that further research would beneficially extend to the broader question of post-Brexit, Franco-British cooperation on foreign policy.

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