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Anglo-French Union, Again?

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By Inderjeet Parmar

An Anglo-French military treaty, due to be signed today, has been greeted with dismay in some quarters while indicating to others that the Anglo-American 'special relationship' may well be slipping away. Is this a turning point? I'm not sure. If it is, is it an unalloyed advance? Is Britain less likely to try and police the world, just behind the American behemoth, if the French are close to hand, whispering restraint in Britain's ear? Would an Anglo-French military alliance have opposed the Iraq War or would it have forced France to support it (or would the matter have split apart such a union)?

The historical precedents are there to consider: in June 1940, when France was on the verge of signing an armistice with Nazi Germany, Britain offered to France the prospect of an Anglo-French Union – one nation with a common currency, passports, and the like. But the French cabinet rejected it, much to PM Winston Churchill's relief (he hadn't been too keen in the first place), and the French headed to a kind of European union headed by Adolf Hitler, against which many Frenchmen and women fought valiantly, a valuable aid to Anglo-American efforts. Britain, of course, went on to forge an Anglo-American alliance that holds to this day.

In 1956, the-then French prime minister, Guy Mollet, proposed a union of France and Britain as they cunningly manoeuvred in the Suez 'crisis'. Egypt's President Nasser, you will recall, had had the temerity to take control of the Suez Canal, which was on his sovereign territory, much to the chagrin of Britain and France – who still entertained ideas about gunboat diplomacy to 'sort out' such people and put them in their place. Clearly, their ideas about de-colonisation did not fundamentally impoverish their imperial mentalities.

Prime Minister Anthony Eden, perhaps sensing that the Suez adventure was about to go awry, declined the French offer. He also wanted to ensure that Britain, whose ambitions remained global in scope, would not get too tied down in Europe. France, which was very keen to unify Europe as a way of controlling Germany, then signed the Treaty of Rome and, a decade or so later, withdrew from NATO's military command structure (which it re-entered only last year). France then blocked Britain's attempts to enter the European Community for almost twenty years, declaring the Anglo-Saxons to be bent on global domination, especially in the Vietnam War era, when said Anglo-Saxons were fighting a war in a former French colony.

Is a post-Iraq War, post-Blair-Brown, Britain ready to embrace Europe, tame its global mentality, eschew further American adventures, and stop punching above its weight in world affairs? Will PM David Cameron, current leader of Churchill's party, sign the death warrant of British imperial mentalities?

The severe financial crisis, which is driving the current phase of national security policy suggests that this is no permanent retreat from imperial thinking, merely a practical, pragmatic response to a crisis.

American power continues to align with every cultural, imperial and ethno-racial instinct of Cameron's party, never mind the political influence of Tory Euro-sceptics. But times are hard. You have to 'make do' with what you can. Even within these parameters, however, there remains the notion of a certain degree of freedom within an Anglo-French alliance – room for manoeuvre, should a tempting offer from across the Atlantic come Britain's way. The other point is that the new treaty is being sold as an opportunity for joint Anglo-French military intervention in Africa, where they share 'common interests'.

Their forms might change, but imperial mentalities do not die easily.

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