

Franco-British Cooperation in Africa and Europe

Cumming, Gordon ¹ Harrois, Thibault ²

¹ School of Modern Languages, Cardiff University

² Université Sorbonne Nouvelle

TO CITE

Cumming, G., & Harrois, T. (2025). Franco-British Cooperation in Africa and Europe. In *Proceedings of the Paris Institute for Advanced Study* (Vol. 24). <https://paris.pias.science/article/franco-british-cooperation-in-africa-and-europe-cumming>

PUBLICATION DATE

04/04/2025

ABSTRACT

The United Kingdom and France have a long history of rivalry in Africa, which marked both the colonial and the early post colonial periods. In 1998, British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, and French President, Jacques Chirac, launched the Saint Malo initiative II, pledging closer franco-British collaboration in Africa. While this agreement enjoyed some positive results, particularly in the security domain, it was largely undone by Brexit, which saw the UK and France eschewing cooperation and ploughing their own furrows in Africa. The re-election of American President Donald Trump has called into question many of the certainties of the multilateral rules based order, opening up new opportunities for Anglo-French cooperation in Africa and Europe, most notably in Ukraine.

Discussant: Dr Thibaud Harrois, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle

CARTE BLANCHE

Gordon Cumming

[Franco-British Cooperation in Africa and Europe](https://paris.pias.science/article/franco-british-cooperation-in-africa-and-europe-cumming)

Thibaud Harrois: Hello everyone. We are here at the Paris Institute of Advanced Studies. I'm here with Professor Gordon Cumming. You are a professor at the Institute of Advanced Studies. You are also a Professor at Cardiff University. My name is Thibaud Harrois. I am a senior lecturer in British politics and the University Sorbonne Nouvelle.

Gordon, your research is on Anglo-French relations, particularly in Africa. When we talk about Anglo-French relations in the colonial and also over the postcolonial eras, there is a tendency to talk in terms of rivalry. How accurate is this term?

Gordon Cumming: Well, it's certainly true that Anglo-French relations have always been marked by rivalry. This is usually traced back to the 1898 Fashoda incident when France had to abandon its territorial claims to Sudan and allow the British empire to run from Cairo to Cape Town. This led to what is known as the Fashoda syndrome, France's obsession that the British and Americans were somehow trying to take over francophone Africa. And it was only partly assuaged by the 1904 Entente Cordiale.

The rivalry between Britain and France continued throughout the post-colonial decades, and we can see it for example in the fact that the British and French bequeathed very

different political systems to their respective empires and they supported different models of economic development. So, the British obviously supported the neoliberal structural adjustment austerity measures in Africa whereas France opposed the so-called 'pensée unique' of the World Bank.

We also saw it in security matters. So, during the Nigerian civil war, Britain and France were actually on **opposing sides. This rivalry, it existed. But it was always attenuated by three factors:** the Cold War, during which Britain and France had a duty to keep their former empires in the Western orbit; the fact that there were franco-British summits; and ultimately the fact that Britain did not care that much about Africa. It was always accused of benign neglect.

Thibaud Harrois: British Prime Minister Tony Blair and French President Jacques Chirac famously tried to encourage Anglo-French cooperation via the 1998 St Malo II agreements. How successful was this attempt?

Gordon Cumming: Well, it's certainly true that the Tony Blair government and the Chirac administration as well as Lionel Jospin's modernising government wanted to change relations between Britain and France in Africa. And Saint Malo was in 1998, exactly one hundred years after the Fashoda incident. In a sense, there was a need to work together in and on Africa, and that is what they pledged to do. In order to do that, they set up a rather useful but at the same time ad hoc institutional framework. And that included, for example, within the franco-British summit, there was a distinct 'Africa chapter' and a greater Ministerial representation. There were six monthly meetings between the Foreign Ministry Africa Directorates. There were joint Ministerial statements, joint Ministerial visits. There was an exchange programme between foreign ministry staff and also defence ministry staff. Within the European Union, the Africa Working Group met weekly rather than monthly. And at the United Nations, as from 197, Britain and France and the United States worked together in the P3, the Permanent 3, and effectively coordinated their positions on United Nations Security Council Resolutions, many of which dealt with Africa.

With that institutional framework, Britain and France did have some success in working together on poverty. So, Britain and its Department for International Development knew that it could only tackle the Millennium Development Goals if it worked in Francophone as well as Anglophone Africa. So, Britain and France supported the education for all initiative. Britain backed France on its UNITAID programme which

was for vaccines, and France supported Britain on its IFF, International Finance Facility on immunisation. There were also silent partnerships between the two.

In addition, there was some attempt at diplomatic coordination. So, France supported Britain in its quest to ensure sanctions against Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe regime and Britain supported France on its need to have UN Security Council Resolutions for its military interventions in Cote d'Ivoire.

But really it was in the realm of security cooperation that Britain and France worked together most effectively. They participated in each other's military training exercises. They established a network of West African regional military training centres. They contributed to EURORECAMP which was a European training initiative. And, above all, they worked together on Common Security and Defence policy initiatives which were military in nature and which included a mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo called Artemis in 2003.

So, all of that said and done, I wouldn't say that Anglo-French cooperation was a huge success. Ultimately, the visits were only occasional, the statements were only occasional, the money often wasn't actually delivered and there was never an entente formidable as was promised. Britain and France were never really partners of choice. Why was that? Well, Britain and France never had the same natural affinity that we see with the special relationship between Britain and America. And nor did they have the dense institutional ties that we see between France and Germany. They were hindered by mistrust, different extractive capacities and sometimes different priorities. And ultimately nothing was really forcing them to work together. And that's a point I want to come back to at the end.

Thibaud Harrois: What was the impact of Brexit on Anglo-French relations, specifically in Africa?

Gordon Cumming: Well, obviously, Brexit had a damaging impact on UK-French relations in general. But Brexit also made it harder to see the shared interest and benefits from working together in Africa. And this was partly linked to the fact that the institutional ties between Britain and France were quite ad hoc and informal. So, the Anglo-French summit stopped working between 2018 and 2022. It was only resuscitated by Rishi Sunak in 2023. Then there was the merger of Britain's Department for International Development with the Foreign Office, now called the FCDO. It was no longer clear who should be speaking to whom because in France there was no

Cumming, G., & Harrois, T. (2025). Franco-British Cooperation in Africa and Europe. In *Proceedings of the Paris Institute for Advanced Study* (Vol. 24).

<https://paris.pias.science/article/franco-british-cooperation-in-africa-and-europe-cumming>

2025/1 - cartes-blanches - Article No.1. Freely available at <https://paris.pias.science/article/franco-british-cooperation-in-africa-and-europe-cumming> - ISSN 2826-2832/© 2025 Cumming G. and Harrois T.

This is an open access article published under the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International Public License \(CC BY-NC 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

development minister. So, there was an institutional problem there. Another institutional problem was the fact that Britain was no longer in the European Union so could no longer take part in the Africa Working Group meetings or in the CODEV meetings. And this all meant that when it came to things like poverty reduction, there wasn't the same alignment of positions. Britain was actually cutting its aid to 0.5% at a time when France was increasing its assistance to 0.55 per cent. And Britain was also using aid, via Aid for Trade, in order to sponsor post Brexit trade deals around Africa and to encourage British businesses to invest in Africa.

In terms of diplomatic coordination, this was also more difficult. Britain and France were simply not aligning their positions on issues that were of great importance to both. So, restoration of cultural artefacts. There was no common position. Apologies on reparations for past colonial transgressions. No common position. Partnerships-everybody wanted partnerships but with whom and for what purpose? And then the pandemic. Britain and France really did not work together on the pandemic at all. Britain opposed any waiver on the patent for vaccine production whereas France supported this. Britain was not really in favour of Africa manufacturing its own vaccines whereas France wanted to set up a factory in Senegal. Britain was hoarding its vaccines in a process known as vaccine nationalism. France was engaged in vaccine diplomacy. In other words, France was channelling vaccines through COVAX but earmarking them as specifically French.

During Brexit, cooperation collapsed, except in one field which was security. So security cooperation continued with Operation Serval, France's military adventure in Mali when Britain provided logistical support. Then Operation Barkhane in 2014 when Britain supplied three Chinook helicopters and also non-combat troops to the UN mission in Mali. And the UK also offered special forces for Operation Takuba in Northern Mali. But security cooperation was hard outside the Common Security and Defence policy framework. It was hard because Britain was promoting quite a strong 'nationalist' position promoting Global Britain. So, Britain for example was engaging in support for the Ethiopian regime which was brutal and engaged in human rights violations at a time where the European Union had the Ethiopian government under sanctions.

Thibaud Harrois: What does the re-election of Donald Trump mean for Anglo-French cooperation?

Gordon Cumming: So, I spoke to British and French diplomats back in November and I had the distinct impression that the French were more enthusiastic about cooperation than the British were. I imagine that that is still the case, not least as the French have been forced out of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger as well as being required to withdraw militarily from Cote d'Ivoire, Senegal and Chad. But that said, the arrival and the re-election of Donald Trump has changed everything because Donald Trump and his administration are posing an unprecedented challenge to the multilateral rules-based order in which France and Britain both believe deeply. So, the British government under Labour is a progressive realist government and the Macron administration has always been a largely realist administration. They know the benefits of working together.

Examples of benefits. When Britain and France cooperate, they can garner two thirds of the votes on the UN Security Council. When Britain and France cooperate, they have an enormous convening power. They can bring others on board. They can reduce the risk of being play off against one another by African leaders on specific issues. They can promote common values at a time when emerging powers such as China, Russia and Turkey are actually promoting values that are not those of the Global North and which are, in some cases, quite problematic.

When Britain and France work together, they can promote common interests, tackling migration, tackling terrorism, mitigating the effects of climate change. So it is against that backdrop, when we see Donald Trump in the White House, we think, well, do Britain and France need to work together more closely in areas such as development. So, what has happened in [international] development? Donald Trump has suspended USAID, which contributed \$15 billion in 2023 to Africa. He has initiated the withdrawal of the United States from the World Health Organisation, 15 per cent of whose budget came from the United States. And the Trump administration this week has begun to talk about disentangling itself from the Sustainable Development Goals. So, when you have all that going on, Britain and France may be required to step up to the plate and show joint leadership in the absence of the American hegemon.

Now, what form will that leadership take? It will probably not be more overseas development assistance because Britain now stands at 0.3% of GNP in terms of aid and France is also talking about a 40% cut. So, what can Britain and France do? Well, they can mobilise others through the bi-multi capacity they have to convene others and persuade them, other donors and also private donors such as the Gates Foundation to plug the gap in other areas such as reproductive rights which will be seriously affected

by the Trump administration. Britain and France could also jointly invest in infrastructure projects, the Agence Française de Développement on the one hand and British International Investors on the other. And, in some ways, this is an opportunity for Britain and France because if the Sustainable Development Goals end up being set to one side or challenged, is this a moment perhaps to reset the North-South agenda because the SDGs were always incredibly diffuse and could never really be measured. Is there a way of ensuring that the Sustainable Development Goals better tackle growth and job creation which is a key issue for Africa.

Diplomatic coordination. Well, that might be more ad hoc. But one case springs to mind, South Africa, because Elon Musk, who was born in Pretoria, has mobilised the American administration to take action against the South African government because he perceives that government to be grabbing land from white Afrikaaner farmers. Now, the Trump administration has suspended aid and may well deny South Africa easy access to American markets. South Africa is a key strategic partner of Britain and France. Will they work together to support and defend South Africa?

Now, I'll end on the security note, because this in some ways might be the most important. Trump and his administration have for some time threatened to withdraw from the Sahel. Now, the Sahel from the American point of view is a European problem, mainly a migration problem, partly a security problem. If Britain and France have to work together more in the Sahel, how can they do so, especially since France has been thrown out of the Sahel by the Alliance of Sahelian States? Well, at the moment, one way to do so is through the Alliance Sahel, which is a massive, coordinated development platform involving 27 donors. Much more could be done in that framework to support the countries of the Sahel. Britain and France could more together on counter terrorism more closely, and counter migration in places like Niger and Libya. And Britain and France could do more to support ad hoc military coalitions such as the MNJTF in Nigeria/ lake Chad, which is combating Boko Haram. Britain and France could equally work together in supporting the Accra Initiative, which would protect [the] Western coastal states of Africa, places like Cote d'Ivoire. But ... and I'm going to end on this note, at times there may be nothing that Britain and France can really do. If we take the case of the Democratic Republic of Congo which was invaded recently by M23 rebels supported by Rwanda, Britain and France were left powerless. France, because it has been implicated in the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, and Britain because of its failed immigration scheme in Rwanda. So, this left a clear pathway for

American intervention. And the Congolese government has asked the Trump

Cumming, G., & Harrois, T. (2025). Franco-British Cooperation in Africa and Europe. In *Proceedings of the Paris Institute for Advanced Study* (Vol. 24). <https://paris.pias.science/article/franco-british-cooperation-in-africa-and-europe-cumming>

2025/1 - cartes-blanches - Article No.1. Freely available at <https://paris.pias.science/article/franco-british-cooperation-in-africa-and-europe-cumming> - ISSN 2826-2832/© 2025 Cumming G. and Harrois T.

This is an open access article published under the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International Public License \(CC BY-NC 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

administration for security guarantees in the Congo in exchange for massive mineral rights and that, to me, is eerily reminiscent of what is going on right now in Ukraine. And perhaps I could take advantage of you being here to ask you a question about that. What in your view does Trump's re-election mean for Anglo-French security cooperation in Europe and particularly in Ukraine?

Thibaud Harrois: I think you are right to mention this. Of course, you were talking earlier about Saint-Malo and the Saint Malo Agreement of 1998. At the time, when the French and British started cooperating on security, there was this idea that this could lead to something else at the European level. And, at the time, there was also this long tradition of the Euro-Atlantic security dilemma between France and Britain. Britain insisted that efforts at the European level should not duplicate efforts to strengthen NATO and that NATO should remain the cornerstone for European security. Now, maybe because of frustration over things not happening at the European level, the **French and British decided to foster their cooperation in 2010. They signed two very important treaties:** the Lancaster House Treaty on nuclear cooperation and also on cooperation in conventional weapons, also trying to establish the combined joint expeditionary force between them. Then, there were a few challenges that you mentioned as well in your presentation, in your answers to my questions. Brexit obviously and of course the AUKUS deal that damaged trust between France and Britain. Now France and Britain have been trying to rebuild that trust and rebuild that cooperation. You mentioned the 2023 franco-British summit and of course that is a very important date in the history of rebuilding of cooperation between the two countries. Since then and because of the context of the war in Ukraine, I think France and Britain realised they needed to move on and cooperate a bit more. Now the re-election of Donald Trump is definitely creating a different context. And France and Britain are once again the two leaders trying to convene again, convene powers or countries that could participate in that coalition of the willing that they are trying to build. That doesn't mean France and Britain can do it on their own. They did need to include more countries, European countries possibly and the USA. Nothing can be done if the USA doesn't agree to be there as a backstop or whatever form their support may take in the future. But France and Britain have very important stakes in there. They are very important powers. They will definitely be the convening powers in Europe. But there is still this question of what they need to do with NATO. Should it be transformed? Should the Europeans play a greater role in NATO? And what form should this participation and this reinforced cooperation take within NATO? And what should be the

role of the USA in there. So, lots of what you said comes through, well, is coherent with what is happening in Ukraine. And we can see the echoes of the two. I think this was a very interesting discussion and very challenging thoughts as well. So, thank you very much for this Gordon.

Gordon Cumming: Thank you Thibaud

Bibliography

Backman, D. (2025). *Trump et l'Afrique : acte II*. <https://www.jean-jaures.org/publication/donald-trump-et-lafrique-acte-ii/>

Boycott-Owen, M. (2025). As Trump torches overseas aid, will Britain step up?'. *Politico*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-britain-uk-politics-labour-government-freeze-aid/>

Brown, S., & Rosier, M. (2023). COVID-19 vaccine apartheid and the failure of global cooperation'. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 25(3), 535–554. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13691481231178248>

Chafer, T., & Cumming, G. D. (2010). Beyond Fashoda: Anglo-French Security Cooperation in Africa since Saint-Malo'. *International Affairs*, 86(5), 1129–1147.

Connor, R. (2025). UK, France lead future Ukraine force meeting'. *DW*. <https://www.dw.com/en/uk-france-lead-future-ukraine-force-meeting/live-72199709>

Dizolele, M. P. (2024). Resetting U.S. Engagement in the Democratic Republic of the Congo'. *CSIS*. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/resetting-us-engagement-democratic-republic-congo>

Dunnois, D. (2020). Restitution of African colonial artefacts: A reassessment of France's post-colonial identity'. *International Journal of Francophone Studies*, 23, 1–2, 119–142.

Dyson, T. (2008). Convergence and divergence in post-Cold War British, French, and German military reforms'. *Security Studies*, 17(4), 725–774.

Eyssette, J. (2025). The Tribulations of the Fashoda Complex Theory: Origins, Apex and Obsolescence'. *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 1–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2025.2479815>

Foreign, & Office, C. (n.d.). *St-Malo ten years after*'. <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/news/latest>

Gallagher, J. (2009). Healing the Scar?'. *African Affairs*, 108(432), 435–451.

Glaser, A., & Smith, S. (2005). *Comment la France a perdu l'Afrique*. Calmann-Lévy.

Gya, G., & Johann Herz, J. (2009). ESDP and EU mission updates'. *European Security Review*, 43.

Cumming, G., & Harrois, T. (2025). Franco-British Cooperation in Africa and Europe. In *Proceedings of the Paris Institute for Advanced Study* (Vol. 24). <https://paris.pias.science/article/franco-british-cooperation-in-africa-and-europe-cumming>

2025/1 - cartes-blanches - Article No.1. Freely available at <https://paris.pias.science/article/franco-british-cooperation-in-africa-and-europe-cumming> - ISSN 2826-2832/© 2025 Cumming G. and Harrois T.

This is an open access article published under the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International Public License \(CC BY-NC 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

Kohnert, D. (2018). More Equitable Britain-Africa Relations Post-Brexit: Doomed to Fail? *Africa Spectrum*, 53(2), 119–130. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000203971805300206>

Loisel, S. (2004). *Entente cordiale ou moteur européen?* (1st semester). Les Champs de Mars.

Nicholson, K. (2023). It's Not Just The Elgin Marbles'. *Huffington Post*. https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/elgin-marbles-artefacts-uk-british-museum_uk_6565c009e4b05f498ba1ccf9

Porteous, T. (2005). British government policy in sub-Saharan Africa under New Labour'. *International Affairs*, 81(2), 281–287.

Ministry for the Armed Forces. (2025). <https://uk.ambafrance.org/France-and-UK-issue-joint-statement-on-Ukraine>