

The Entente Cordiale: War and Empire
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Britain and France are neighbours. Like England and Scotland, they cannot avoid having a relationship. For most of the last thousand years it has been one of hostility. Indeed, antagonism towards England was what kept the Auld Alliance between France and Scotland. After the union of England and Scotland, it was the differences between the new nation and France that gave Britain an identity. Nationality was rooted in a sense of the other. "It is the same with nations as with the individual"; wrote the great historian of France, Jules Michelet in 1833, "he gets to know and defines his personality through resistance to what is different from himself"! Britain was Protestant (despite the best endeavours of the Jacobites); it had a constitutional government; and it rejected monarchical despotism.

In the nineteenth century British self-satisfaction increased. Under Louis XIV France had been the most powerful player in Europe in terms of population size, economic growth, military capacity, and intellectual influence. After 1789, its industrialisation faltered, its governments proved shaky, and revolution became a habit. The Napoleonic wars consolidated Britain's perception of its own worth, as a naval power certainly and even as a military one. From their arrival in Waterloo station to their visit to the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square, French visitors to London cannot avoid the symbols of British triumphalism under the late Hanoverians.

Britain had ample cause for smugness. The first industrialised nation in the world, it managed to achieve political stability without revolution. In 1854 Britain fought alongside France against Russia in the Crimean war, but it continued to use the threat of France as its antidote to complacency. Three times, in 1846-7, 1851-2 and 1859-60, it convinced itself – or at least did its best to do so – that the French intended to invade. The defeat by Prussia in 1870 should have confirmed France's faltering status. But Britain still needed its neighbour in order to define itself. In 1888 those anxious about the state of British national defences suggested that the self-serving careerism of General Georges Boulanger pointed once again to the threat of invasion. Boulanger had little following in France, even in the army, and his coup culminated in ignominy. But ten years later, in 1898 at Fashoda, Captain Jean-Baptiste Marchand and Sir Herbert Kitchener disputed control of the headwaters of the Nile. Once again their two countries looked to their coastal defences. Anglo-French enmity seemed to be a given of international relations. One of the more surprising outcomes of the nineteenth century was that there was no war between Britain and France after 1815. It corroborates the truism that arms races do not invariably cause conflict – and indeed that they might even deter it.

The paradox of the Entente Cordiale of 1904 was that it did not arise from geographical proximity. It was the product of the Fashoda crisis rather than of cross-Channel tensions. The confrontation of 1898 highlighted Britain and France's imperial rivalries, especially in North Africa. The French had built the Suez Canal, but after 1882 Britain controlled both it and Egypt. Kitchener had made clear to Marchand that the British also meant to master the course of the Nile. Théophile Delcassé, France's Foreign Minister and the architect of the Entente Cordiale, wanted an agreement with Britain less for its own sake and more to secure a free hand for French colonialism. In 1904, the two powers agreed to a demarcation. Britain would control the eastern end of North Africa, and hence the route to India; France would have the western end, from Tunisia, through its pivot, Algeria, and on to Morocco. "In a word", the French Ambassador in London, Paul Cambon, declared, "we give you Egypt in exchange for Morocco"! If Delcassé harboured wider ambitions, including the possibility of a stronger hand in relation to Germany, these were not shared across the channel. Lord Lansdowne, the British Foreign Secretary, was keen to improve relations with Berlin.

The Germans did not see the Entente as about North Africa – or any other of the agreement's global concerns, from Siam to the particularly vexed question of the rights of Bretons to fish off Newfoundland. For Germany the Entente was driven by European concerns, not colonial ones. They concluded that the alliance was directed at them, and that, given centuries of Anglo-French rivalry, it was friable. Morocco's independence had been guaranteed by the Madrid convention of 1880. Germany resolved to stop Delcassé and so expose the slender foundations on which the Entente rested.

On 31 March 1905 the Kaiser landed at Tangiers and announced his support of Moroccan independence. He hoped to break the Anglo-French understanding. A conference was convened at Algeçiras to consider the Moroccan question, but Britain's response to Germany was to show its support for France, not to back off. Sir Edward Grey, who succeeded Lansdowne as Foreign Secretary when the Liberals formed a government at the end of the same year, secretly asked the War Office to initiate staff conversations with the French. For the French army staff talks could only be about the most obvious military threat. Britain might have been France's oldest enemy, but the sea made a more logical demarcation of the frontier to the north-west than did the Moselle to the east, particularly as the lost provinces of Alsace-Lorraine lay beyond it. France did not go to war in 1914 to recover Alsace-Lorraine or to advance its eastern frontier to the Rhine, but its army knew that, if there were to be war, Germany was its most likely opponent. For the British, the staff talks were a diplomatic signal. They were not an indication of strategic intent and they were not sustained, but they worked. The Entente did not collapse under German pressure. Instead it was strengthened. The Entente Cordiale was not a product of the rise of Germany, but the Moroccan crisis of 1905 ensured that German antagonism became its *raison d'être*. Moreover, Germany had made clear that colonial rivalries could not be treated separately from European. The Entente had been recast.

Its principal function became burden sharing in defence, and its outstanding manifestation the Anglo-French naval agreement of 1912. In July 1911 Germany once again challenged France in Morocco, and once again revealed that the

Entente drew its identity from adversity. The British minister whom the French saw as the least reliable on defence, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, David Lloyd George, spoke in ringing terms of Britain's commitment to security in Europe. When Delcassé was recalled to government as Naval Minister in March 1911, he was appalled to discover that there were no naval talks comparable with the staff conversations conducted by the two armies. By allocating responsibility for the security of the Mediterranean to France, the Anglo-French naval agreement of 1912 followed the logic which had underpinned the original Entente. It gave France suzerainty in the western Mediterranean, between Marseilles and North Africa, and it confirmed what the British Admiralty was already doing, withdrawing its battleships to the North Sea to focus on Germany. The security of France's northern coast now lay largely in British hands, and the two navies adopted a joint naval code to prove it.

The French could be forgiven for thinking that an Anglo-French alliance was a done deal. Edward VII, who had knelt before the tomb of Napoleon at his mother's behest when a child in 1855, displayed that love of Paris and of French culture common to all civilised Britons. He died in 1910, and George V seemed less committed and more discreet. But his diplomats spoke the French language fluently, and the Foreign Office's head, Sir Edward Grey, reassured Cambon on 22 November 1912 that, "if either Government had grave reason to expect an unprovoked attack by a third Power, or something that threatened the general peace, it should immediately discuss with the other, whether both Governments should act together to prevent aggression and to preserve peace, and if so what measures they would be prepared to take in common".ⁱⁱⁱ

At the end of July 1914, the two powers confronted just such a crisis. But the British cabinet, anxious about its own unity, and fearful of the left, could not give the commitment Cambon wanted. "E. Grey had an interview with him this afternoon which he told me was rather painful", the Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith wrote to his girlfriend, Venetia Stanley, on 31 July. "He had of course to tell Cambon (for we are under no obligation) that we could give no pledges".^{iv} But Cambon reckoned that Britain was pledged, at the very least, to protect France's channel coast. Both Grey and Asquith were inclined to acknowledge the force of his argument.

In the end Britain stood by France in August 1914, but it did not do so because of any obligation entered into by its general staff. The Director of Military Operations, Henry Wilson, was a great lover of France, and like many of his fellow nationals, then and since, spent his holidays there. But the argument that he presented to the Committee of Imperial Defence when it met on 23 August 1911 during the second Moroccan crisis – that six British divisions could swing the balance if the Germans invaded France – was specious. Privately he admitted (with remarkable accuracy) they would be, "fifty too few".^v In the event Britain sent only five in August 1914, while the French massed 82. Moreover, on 5 August, with Britain now at war, the possibility of sending even this paltry total not to reinforce the French left wing, but to Antwerp to help Belgium, was given a full and considered airing. If burden sharing embodied a defence commitment, it was at sea and not on land.

The First World War proved to be both the making of the Entente Cordiale and its finest hour. Like nations, alliances need to be forged in war to acquire an identity. The significance of 11 November as a day of remembrance is greater in Britain and France than elsewhere. Those other nations for whom the war also ended on that day focus their commemoration on different events: Australia and New Zealand prefer to remember the Gallipoli landings, and Belgium the moment of national awakening when the Germans presented their ultimatum on 1 August 1914. Both Britain and France suffered greater losses in this war than they did in the Second. For Germany, as for the United States and Russia, the memory of the Second World War must always cast a longer, as well as more immediate, shadow. The landscapes of Britain and France now have at least one common feature – they are dotted with war memorials, in villages and towns, in squares and parks.

There is however a significant difference in these memorials. The battles they list are the place names of France – Albert, Béthune, Bapaume, the Somme – not of Britain. No *poilus* fought and died on British soil; the flow of men was in one direction. The First World War was a form of tourism. British soldiers went abroad in numbers and for lengths of time which few of their class had done before. They served amidst the slag heaps of the north-east: they did not see the best of France. To the south, Picardy was more attractive. Its devastation made many realise, with relief, the value to their own landscape of fighting on foreign soil. However, in the eyes of many French farmers the Boche were not the only ones to blame for the damage. Troops, their training and their transport, trampled crops and reduced pasture to mud. Officers who persisted in hunting and shooting evoked outcries comparable with the *cahiers des doléances* compiled by the Estates General in 1789. But peasants made profits in other ways, setting up *estaminets* and introducing Tommies to new pleasures, including *vin blanc* and, with lasting effects on the British diet, *pommes frites*.

British soldiers and French civilians gave the Entente life. Formally as well as informally, the alliance was cemented faster at the economic level than at the military. In February 1915 Britain, France and Russia met at Calais to discuss both the procurement of munitions and its funding. The initial pressures to cooperate were financial – to ensure that the allies did not force up prices in neutral markets by bidding against each other, and to keep the dollar/sterling exchange rate sufficiently steady given the allies' need to borrow on overseas exchanges. But France's Minister of Commerce, Etienne Clémentel, was looking to create a post-war order that drew on the wartime experience of a managed economy both to ensure a rational allocation of resources and to marginalize German competition. His hopes were spurred first by the needs of the allied blockade and then by Germany's declaration of unrestricted U-boat war in February 1917. Shipping losses forced the allies to allocate tonnage centrally through an Allied Shipping Executive. From this flowed the coordinated management of wheat, meat and fats, oil seeds, and sugar. Although in the first instance the adoption of rational, supra-national management tools was pragmatic, in due course they became an article of faith for one of Clémentel's brightest subordinates, Jean Monnet.

The Entente grew organically, from the bottom up. It therefore had more substance earlier in the war than the appointment in late March 1918 of a supreme allied military commander suggested. The complaints of one nation about the other should not be exaggerated. Douglas Haig may have huffed and puffed but, until they developed a mass army in 1916, the British were unequivocally the junior partners in a military sense. The plans for the battle of the Somme were predicated on this assumption, even if the effects of Verdun meant that in the event the British took the main burden. Haig's fury when he was subordinated to the command of the French Commander-in-Chief, Robert Nivelle, in February 1917, was directed less at Nivelle himself than at Lloyd George, now Prime Minister, who had manoeuvred him into this position. The failure of Nivelle's offensive on the Chemin des Dames in April and the subsequent mutinies in the French army gave the British army

an equivalence by mid-1917 that it had lacked previously. But even now, although possessed of an army of comparable size, Britain's of the western front was half the length of that held by the French.

Foch, as allied Commander-in-Chief, in 1918 achieved a victory whose speed surprised even him, congenial optimist though he was. The French army enjoyed a popularity in Britain that would have amazed Wellington or Napoleon. In 1924, a schoolmaster in India, P. C. Wren, published a boys' adventure story, *Beau Geste*, which went through thirty-one impressions by 1927. The portrait of Wren himself – or what purported to be Wren, reproduced opposite the title page, with the crown of a British major on his shoulder-strap and a row of medal ribbons across his chest - suggested that here was a military hero, who, like the improbably-named Major Henri de Beaujolais of the Spahis in *Beau Geste*, knew a thing or two about soldiering. In reality Wren's wartime service had lasted less than a year and had been passed in the Indian army reserve of officers. In *Beau Geste*, middle-class English boys, who before the war would have been guided by the pen of G. A. Henty either to serve the British empire in one of its remoter quarters or even to fight the French in the Peninsula or at Waterloo, join the French Foreign Legion. And they become loyal soldiers of the Republic, despite sadistic sergeants and brutal discipline. They defend Fort Zinderneuf against the Touareg, with the tricolour (called the 'Flag', with a capital 'F', in the book) flying to the end.

Such harmony was less evident in reality. Once the First World War was over, France's colonial ambitions reopened the tensions with Britain which the Entente had been designed to obviate. Admittedly nobody in London was inclined to quarrel (or even understand) France's preoccupation with the Maghreb. But Britain did see the Middle East as the outer bulwark for the defence of India. In 1916 competition between the two powers caused Mark Sykes and Georges Picot to divide Syria and Palestine with consequences which still plague that part of the world. But the deal did not prevent Britain endeavouring to steal a march on the ground as the Ottoman Empire collapsed in 1918. In Iraq, the British pushed on Mosul to secure its oil supplies, and further west Allenby's army reached out for Damascus. The fact that the Turks signed an armistice with Britain alone, aboard a British warship, and without French representation, seemed to confirm that Britain was anxious to keep France out of Syria.

"Within an hour of the armistice", Clemenceau claimed he had said to Lloyd George in 1918, "I had the impression that you had become once again the enemies of France".ⁱ The issue which divided them was not so much their colonial claims as their view of European security. For Britain, the relationship with France was designed to neutralise Germany as it faced west; for France, Germany could only be countered by attention to its eastern frontier as well. France could never believe that Britain was serious about defending the Versailles settlement when it did not have conscription. A mass army was still a *sine qua non* for intervention on the continent, but Britain persisted in believing that blockade had won the First World War and could be relied upon to win a second. When, in 1939, Britain did adopt conscription and then send a mass army to the continent, its soldiers had a stomach-wrenching sense of *deja vu*. They passed through Arras and took up positions on the Belgian border. The subsequent defeat took the cordiality out of the Entente. Just as war had cemented the alliance in 1914, so war smashed it in 1940. The 'miracle' of Dunkirk was the worst French nightmare of 1914-18 come true: their abandonment by the British. For London, France's capitulation on 25 June made its ally an enemy. On 3 July 1940 the Royal Navy bombarded the French fleet at Mers-el-Kébir. On 8 June 1941 British forces attacked the forces of Vichy France in Syria, the first battle between the two nations since Waterloo.

Once again war and empire were the touchstones of the Entente. Although the British were fighting against Frenchmen in Syria, they were also fighting alongside them. In Damascus Free French units of the Foreign Legion clashed with fellow legionnaires fighting for Vichy. But de Gaulle's men were excluded from the convention brokered at the campaign's conclusion. Churchill and de Gaulle were perhaps too similar – not least in their combativeness – to like or trust each other. After 1941, neither of their countries was any longer the arbiter of international relations that it had once been; both had difficulty coming to terms with the fact, and both aspired to preserve their empires and use them as foundations in their war efforts. In the history of the Entente Cordiale, it was entirely appropriate that the starting point for their joint military recovery should have been North Africa and the Middle East, and equally unsurprising that Churchill should have hoped to soften de Gaulle in July 1941 with the thought that, "France could aim at having in Syria after the war the same sort of position as we had established between the wars in Iraq".^{vii}

The denouement for this sort of thinking was played out not in France in 1944, but at Suez in 1956. For the last time Britain and France used the Entente Cordiale to wage war and to support their positions in North Africa. But now the 'enemy' that defined the alliance proved to be also an ally, the United States. In 1919-39 the triangular relationship between Britain, France and Germany strained Anglo-French relations, because Britain saw the place of France's eastern neighbour in different terms from those of Paris. In 1956 the United States refused to condone the Anglo-French seizure of the canal. Since then Britain has often found its perceptions of America differing from those of its nearest neighbour. Unlike Germany, the United States shares both a common language and a common political inheritance with the United Kingdom. The principal foreign policy challenge for successive British governments has been to honour the 'special relationship' with America, while at the same time ensuring that the Entente Cordiale remains in good shape. As the latter enters its second century, it has never been harder. War and empire no longer provide the binding force for the Entente, but they are constituent elements (however broadly defined and 'soft' that imperialism might be) in the 'special relationship'. Physical proximity, second homes, and battlefield tours to the western front will not be enough.

ⁱ Quoted by P.M.H. Bell, *France and Britain 1900-1940: entente and estrangement* (London, 1996), p. 1

ⁱⁱ Quoted by Christopher Andrew, 'The Entente Cordiale from its origins to 1914, in Neville Waites, *Troubled neighbours: Franco-British relations in the twentieth century* (London, 1971), p. 11

ⁱⁱⁱ Samuel R. Williamson, *The politics of grand strategy: Britain and France prepare for war, 1904-1914* (1969, reprint, London, 1990), p.297

^{iv} H.H. Asquith, *Letters to Venetia Stanley* (Oxford, 1985), ed. Michael and Eleanor Brock, p. 138

^v Keith Wilson, *The Policy of the Entente: essays on the determinants of British foreign policy* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 63

^{vi} J. Martet, *Le Tigre* (Paris, 1930), p. 59

^{vii} Winston Churchill, *The Second World War* (6 vols, London, 1948-54), III, p. 715