

FEATURE

Clara Marina O'Donnell asks whether the recent Franco-British defence deal will prompt other such agreements among EU countries

SAVE AND SECURE?

At a bilateral summit in London on November 2 last year, Britain and France embarked on what their leaders described as a "new chapter" in defence cooperation.

British Prime Minister David Cameron and French President Nicolas Sarkozy announced a series of ambitious joint initiatives, including the shared use of aircraft carriers, collaborative research for their nuclear deterrents and the creation of a joint expeditionary force. Both countries – and Britain in particular – are keen to find savings at a time of fiscal austerity.

The summit was a welcome step towards rationalising European defence spending. At a time of significant public spending cuts, similar efforts will be required from other European countries in order to stall the deterioration of Europe's military capabilities. Yet it is unclear whether other governments will follow suit.

Combined, European governments are the second largest defence spenders in the world, devoting around €200 billion per annum to their armed forces. But taken individually, defence budgets have for years been too low to allow European countries to maintain effective military forces alone. In addition, much money has been wasted on cumbersome armies and inadequate military equipment – often legacies of the Cold War.

As a result many European states have struggled to deploy troops in expeditionary operations, and some would not be

capable of ensuring their own security if required. With governments across the continent – not least in Germany, Spain, Italy and Britain – making significant new cuts to their defence budgets as they attempt to tackle the economic crisis, Europe's ability to contribute to international security risks being weakened further.

Governments have long acknowledged the scope for savings through closer defence cooperation – be it through integrating their defence markets, common logistics and training, joint exercises, shared procurement or most ambitiously, pooling military capabilities. But while ministries of defence have taken some steps towards rationalising their spending over the years, overall cost-saving joint efforts have remained limited.

A variety of bilateral and regional initiatives have been set up: air forces from various countries train their fighter pilots together; Germany and the Netherlands share an operational headquarters; Belgium and the Netherlands have an integrated maritime command structure; and the Baltic states share a defence staff college.

Under the NATO umbrella, European countries have developed radar aircraft together and they plan to acquire large unmanned surveillance platforms. And EU-driven defence efforts have led most member states to participate in a variety of military research programmes, including on unmanned aerial



vehicles, and they have encouraged several to take part in an initiative to lease Russian aircraft in order to improve the availability of strategic airlift for EU (and NATO) operations.

Nevertheless, in the run-up to the economic crisis much unnecessary duplication remained. In 2008, only 20 percent of defence procurement in the EU was done jointly. Altogether, member states had nearly 90 different weapons programmes, while the US, with a defence budget more than twice the size of EU countries' defence budgets combined, had less than 30. And defence ministries continued to deploy much of their logistics separately, even when troops from several European countries were involved in the same place, such as Afghanistan or Bosnia.

The defence budget cuts being introduced across Europe only exacerbate the need for closer cooperation amongst European militaries. Yet so far only a few European governments – with France and Britain in the lead – have sought to substantially enhance their joint efforts. While France has traditionally been supportive of closer European defence efforts, Britain's interest in exploring cost-saving ventures is quite unprecedented.

In addition to strengthening bilateral ties with France, and redesigning its remaining aircraft carrier so it can be used by French and US aircraft, the British government has set up a forum consisting of 11 northern European countries – the Nordic and Baltic states plus Germany and Poland – designed to explore options for closer military collaboration.

The coalition government's strategic defence and security review, published in October, lists Italy, the Netherlands and Spain as additional partners with whom Britain will look to explore stronger bilateral cooperation. But the coalition only wants to pursue bilateral and limited multilateral efforts, as it considers large multinational initiatives as inefficient. The Defence Secretary, Liam Fox, is particularly hostile to EU

defence undertakings, which he perceives as a waste of money.

Britain may be unwise to neglect the opportunities which large cooperative efforts can bring, including those of the EU. In many cases, bilateral or limited multilateral efforts will be the most appropriate format for closer defence cooperation. Smaller groups are less cumbersome. And European countries have different levels of ambition in defence and armed forces of various sizes, so synergies are more likely amongst limited numbers of like-minded partners.

But wider multilateral efforts, including those of NATO and the EU, can also make a helpful contribution to rationalising European defence spending. A big group of countries will provide larger funds and ensure more defence ministries adopt the military equipment developed. This in turn strengthens interoperability and increases the amount of capabilities across Europe. In addition, NATO and the EU can offer helpful forums for European governments to explore options for bilateral initiatives.

Fiscal retrenchment has incentivised some other European capitals to spend their defence budget more efficiently. Germany is taking advantage of its defence cuts to modernise the army. Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden are considering several new regional initiatives including joint cyber-defence systems. But in many European countries efforts to enhance bilateral defence cooperation remain too modest. And while NATO and the EU are exploring options to help ministries of defence coordinate their cuts, it remains to be seen whether governments will implement their suggestions.

Indeed the traditional obstacles to closer defence cooperation remain and they might continue to inhibit countries from collaborating. Governments might be interested in saving money through buying military equipment together, but they risk continuing to require the kit at different times, or to disagree on technical requirements because they want to use their equipment for different missions.

Most importantly, even at a bilateral level, European states are likely to remain reluctant to pool military assets or develop joint units – which would provide the greatest savings – out of concern that their partner might disapprove of a military action in the future and block the use of their shared capability.

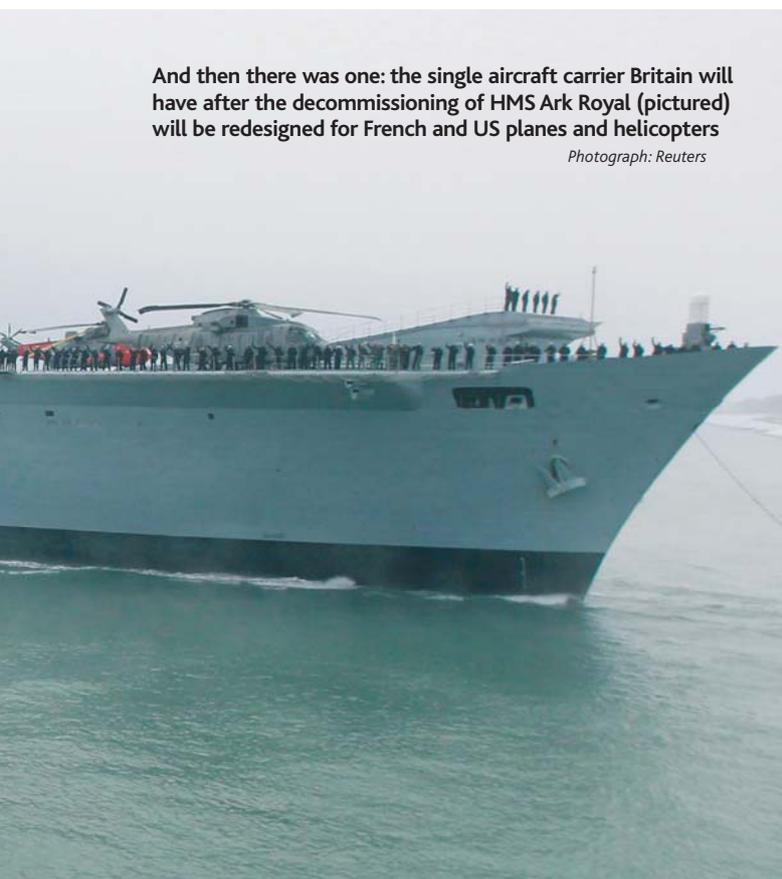
It is too early to tell whether the defence cuts resulting from the economic crisis will galvanise European governments to overcome their traditional aversion to closer defence collaboration. The recent agreement between Cameron and Sarkozy could be the first of a series of ambitious joint initiatives as governments across Europe change their approach to defence spending. At the same time, the Franco-British deal might remain one of a few isolated improvements in the backdrop of deteriorating European military capabilities.

After all, for years and despite concerns expressed by their allies – not least Washington – most European countries have continued to let their armed forces wither. It cannot be precluded that they will continue to do so.

While France has traditionally been supportive of closer European defence efforts, Britain's interest in exploring cost-saving ventures is unprecedented

And then there was one: the single aircraft carrier Britain will have after the decommissioning of HMS Ark Royal (pictured) will be redesigned for French and US planes and helicopters

Photograph: Reuters



Clara Marina O'Donnell is a research fellow at the Centre for European Reform