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NEW
DIPLOMACY
PROJECT

In the deep freeze: Franco-British relations after Brexit

TOP LINES

- The UK's full exit from the EU, following the end of the Transition Period, has led to competition increasingly supplanting cooperation between the UK and France on key policy issues, such as the Northern Ireland Protocol, fishing licences and the worsening Channel crossings situation
- This trend, in conjunction with provocative rhetoric on both sides of the Channel, has stoked tensions between the two countries, which is damaging core UK national interests.
- The political context means that the risks of further tensions are likely to rise further.
- However, there are areas for cooperation between the UK and France, including climate, security, public health and migration. A constructive, diplomatic approach would seek to maximise these opportunities while mitigating key points of contention
- The Labour Party should apply pressure on the current UK Government in the areas highlighted, holding it to account for the commitments made under the UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA), and doing the same with the French Government. This will build its credentials with France as an effective 'government-in-waiting' and credible interlocutor

BACKGROUND

Rising tensions between the UK and France have been much in the news over the last year, with good reason. 2021 was disastrous for Franco-British relations, with mistrust on both sides. What Charles de Gaulle once lamented as the UK's lack of "community spirit" has been seen on both sides over the last 11 months.

At a time when commonly-held adversaries, particularly Russia and China, are becoming more assertive and threatening UK and French interests, UK-France tensions provide an unwelcome distraction from the broader foreign policy picture. With Beijing developing hypersonic weapons and threatening Taiwan, and Russia massing troops on the Ukrainian border once again, allied cohesion between NATO nations is a key part of the toolbox for deterring and countering hostile activity from authoritarian nations.

The AUKUS submarine deal underlined the level of cohesion between the three nations involved, but it has also undermined cohesion between those countries and France. Pursuing UK national interests means leveraging and making the fullest use of our network of allies. While UK relations with France remain in the deep freezer, we will be unable to achieve optimal outcomes on a range of issues. Research has repeatedly shown that high levels of trust ease negotiations and lead to better outcomes. A thaw in relations is therefore required to improve outcomes for the UK national interest from migration and security to trade.

This briefing reviews some of the key issues which have led to the deterioration of UK-France relations, examines the current trajectory for relations in 2022 and provides recommendations for what the Labour Party can do to improve the situation.

Why are relations so frosty?

AUKUS

The biggest source of tension between the UK and France surrounds the [AUKUS submarine deal](#). This trilateral security arrangement has led to France feeling marginalised in the Indo-Pacific, where it has longstanding and deeply-held interests. Moreover, the nature of how the announcement was made and subsequent communication particularly rankled the French. Prime Minister Johnson's response to French anguish was summed up by "*donnez-moi un break*", which was particularly poorly received, and at one point President Macron even considered recalling the French Ambassador to the UK.¹

While France's relations with the US have since thawed, the UK (and Australia) have not experienced the same level of reconciliation. For the French, AUKUS appeared as the latest and most serious in a modern series of UK insults and provocations stretching back to the Brexit negotiations.

Fisheries

Almost equally as serious are the consequences of Franco-British disputes on fisheries. The UK granting of fishing licences has been a particular bone of contention; the 41 licences granted in May 2021, with specific conditions attached, provoked special consternation, with the French maritime minister threatening to cut power to Jersey at the time (the crown dependency imports about 95% of its electricity from France).²⁻³ The subsequent French detention of a UK fishing vessel in October highlighted how both parties have been responsible for stoking tensions. While France has now been granted over 90% of the licences it has sought, trust remains low on both sides.⁴

The Northern Ireland Protocol

In addition to the fishing wars, 2021 saw the emergence of the 'sausage wars'. These wars came about because post-Brexit EU rules initially meant that chilled meats could not be moved from the island of Great Britain to Northern Ireland. This and the fight over fishing have

¹ France 24, ['Donnez-moi un break,' Johnson tells France over submarine spat](#), 22 September 2021

² BBC News, [First Jersey fishing licences issued to French boats](#), 1 May 2021

³ Reuters, [France threatens to turn lights off in Jersey over Brexit fish row](#), 5 May 2021

⁴ Politico, [France granted 93 percent of post-Brexit fishing licenses, minister says](#), 13 December 2021

shown how the UK's exit from the EU and combative approaches on both sides of the channel have removed the need for compromise that was engendered by being within the EU. These kinds of disputes have also taken on a far more public dimension than when the UK previously had disagreements with fellow EU Member States, which were often solved behind closed doors.

Implicit in these wars is the UK Government's distaste for the provisions of the Northern Ireland Protocol (NIP), a position of which France has been the most vocally critical of all EU Member States.

Some have questioned why President Macron has been such an ardent critic of the UK's position on the NIP. Macron is a strong Europhile and his party *En Marche* is strongly committed to the European project: especially as France has highly active at the European level in recent years. To EU officials, tampering with the NIP risks the integrity of the Union, not just because it introduces friction at an EU external border but also because the Ireland/Northern Ireland border is porous and puts the integrity of the single market at risk. As a result, the EU is forced to implement an effective border between Ireland and the rest of the EU, jeopardising Ireland's place in the single market and challenging the EU's credibility.

Equally, from the UK perspective, the border in the Irish sea is understandably unpalatable to many, particularly Unionists in Northern Ireland. EU Vice-President, Maroš Šefčovič, has recently signalled willingness to revise the NIP, which should be welcomed by Labour, as keeping it in place in its current format may prove politically sustainable. However, a unilateral UK withdrawal could result in the EU suspending parts or the entirety of the Trade & Cooperation Agreement (TCA), which would badly damage UK interests. Labour should push back against reckless brinkmanship by the current Government and the rhetoric of some EU Member States to provide space for a negotiated compromise. The departure of Lord Frost from the scene will make this more likely, but the Party should remain assiduous in holding the Government to account for its commitments under the TCA.

It has been interesting to note that there has been far less antagonism between London and Berlin than between London and Paris. There are a couple of potential factors at play here. Firstly, the UK and France have historically clashed over EU issues far more often, from as early as the attempts by President de Gaulle to block British entry to the European Economic Area between 1963 and 1967. Beyond this, there are large differences in the personal styles of the leaders representing their countries: where Angela Merkel (and now Olaf Scholz) is more slow to arouse great passion, Macron is often prone to grandstanding and pontificating, which leads to a greater clashing of personality with the UK's current Prime Minister. The proximity of France, too, means that issues such as fishing, customs enforcement and migration are far more visceral and relevant issues in the relationship between the two countries than in the UK-Germany bilateral relationship.

One response to Brexit issues on the EU side has been to consider the deployment of 'strategic patience', hoping that "Outlooks in the UK may change, more pragmatic leaders may emerge."⁵ This approach shows the value of the Labour Party strategically cultivating links with French and EU establishment figures to present itself as those "more pragmatic" leaders.

⁵ Financial Times, [The Brexit stand-off: Boris Johnson's Christmas truce](#), 18 November 2021

It is often said of the EU that third countries, such as Switzerland (and now the UK), are in a 'constant state of negotiation' with the Union; Labour would do well to consider the UK's relationship with France in a similar way and consider what its negotiating priorities will be.

What will 2022 bring for UK-France relations?

2022 is an election year in France. The poor state of relations between the UK and France will allow candidates to wax polemical about how they would act tough on some of these issues in the bilateral relationship. The continued popularity of Marine Le Pen, along with the emergence of firebrand far-right candidate Eric Zemmour, has dragged the debate to the right. This has been nowhere more obvious than in the President himself as typified by the implementation of a draconian 'Global Security Law', which forbids protesters from taking pictures of policemen and includes harsh rhetoric concerning migrants.

As the polls currently stand, Zemmour's entry to the race may split the far-right vote, lowering the chances that he and Le Pen will make the second round of voting. With the Greens and the Socialist Party poll numbers stuck in the doldrums, the only other serious challenger is Les Republicains' newly chosen candidate, Valérie Pécresse, the President of the Council for the Île-de-France (Paris) region. With Macron's support holding steady at the head of the polls, it is shaping up to be a rerun of the 2017 Macron vs Le Pen election, but there is the possibility of a Macron-Pécresse or even Le Pen-Pécresse shoot out in the second round.

From a Labour Party perspective, the next President of the Republic (whether Macron, Pécresse or a far-right challenger) is unlikely to share the party's social values. However, barring the election of a far-right candidate to the French presidency, the Labour Party should seek to build a working relationship with the next President of the Republic.

The New Diplomacy Project has already identified the risk posed by a Le Pen/Zemmour presidency to the core UK foreign policy interest of democracy. The possibility that one of the two may be elected to the Presidency is very real and Labour should be prepared to robustly defend the UK's core interests in the face of opposition across the Channel in such a scenario. Labour should also give consideration as to its position on no-platforming such far-right leaders with authoritarian tendencies as Sadiq Khan did when he recently publicly stated that Eric Zemmour was not welcome in London.

Whoever the French President is, France will hold the Presidency of the Council of the EU for the first half of the year. During this time, France is expected to strongly push for the implementation of a Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism, as proposed in the European Commission's 'Fit For 55' package of green reforms. If the UK's carbon tax and emissions trading system is not deemed equivalent to the EU's, additional costs could be imposed on UK businesses exporting certain industrial inputs to Europe.

This could trigger another dispute between the UK and France, as the country pushes this mechanism at the head of the Council of the EU. The new 'traffic light' coalition of Social Democrats, Greens and Free Democratic Party in Germany are also avowedly pro-European and would likely back France and the EU institutions to the hilt in such a dispute with the UK.

Beyond the recurrence of fish, migration and trade issues (particularly in light of a new border operating model for UK imports), there are also likely to be further flashpoints that we cannot anticipate (the 'unknown unknowns'). Within this context, it seems reasonable to suggest that 2022 and beyond will therefore continue along the rocky trajectory which has been established until a significant effort is made by the UK or France to reset relations. The French election could provide a window of opportunity for such a reset, but given the likelihood of either a Macron presidency or a more nationalist French president, the chances seem slim.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A constructive approach would be to cool the war of words, maximise the opportunities for collaboration and engagement, and seek to mitigate key points of tension where possible. Giving out the final tranche of fishing licences, for example, is a low cost/no cost way which could help mitigate tensions from the UK side and could be used as an incentive to induce reciprocal action from the French.

Mitigating tensions

The first step to mitigating tensions between the two countries is to desist from the "megaphone politics", as one former UK ambassador recently put it. The current governments on both sides of the Channel appear to operate from a starting basis of mistrust and provocation; this sets them both up for failure on a range of joint policy issues which then further reinforces the negative spiral in relations.

The Labour Party should engage in strategic relationship-building exercises with officials of the French establishment to establish itself as a credible alternative to the current Government and demonstrate its willingness to put collaboration before competition in the bilateral relationship where possible. In addition to top level officials, Labour should seek out links with prominent politicians at the regional, mayoral and local levels in France, especially those that align closely with Labour values and those with promising career trajectories.

The Party does not need to actively promote such activities to a UK audience, as it is often attacked as 'unpatriotic', particularly during election time and developing relationships with French stakeholders could be misperceived in this environment. Engaging in these strategic relationship-building exercises would, however, make it easier for the party to achieve better outcomes when negotiating on key issues of UK national interest when in government.

Migration

As Lord Kerr highlighted in the 25th November House of Lords debate, government figures indicate that over 70% of those crossing the Channel on small boats are eligible for asylum. As he eloquently argued in that debate, the UK must reintroduce 'safe routes' for asylum seekers to enter the country. Re-establishing the Dubs scheme and creating a scheme for Afghanistan refugees would go a long way towards resolving the issue.

This is both good policy - it would reduce the need for perilous boat crossings and reduce the amount of money required to pay France - and it would improve UK-France relations as fewer crossings would lead to less blame cast in both directions across the Channel. The UK has certain implicit obligations to many of those whose lives are now at threat (for example,

translators and FCDO locally employed staff in Afghanistan), which mean that the UK rather than France is the appropriate country to take these refugees not just on a moral but also on a legal basis.

The UK would like a readmission scheme, which would send unsuccessful asylum seekers back to France. From the other side, France and the EU would like the UK to join a burden-sharing agreement, perhaps as an outside partner to the Dublin III Scheme for example to share refugees. These are not mutually exclusive, having a readmission scheme while sharing the burden for refugees is compatible with Labour values and would again help to reduce the number of small boat crossings, while improving the bilateral and UK-EU relationships for further negotiations.

Labour should also push both out of and in government for more resources to process asylum applications quickly, effectively and humanely. Realistically, crossings will not be reduced to zero and the party needs to seriously consider its policy on such a politically sensitive issue.

Trade

On the stringent enforcement of post-Brexit trading rules, the UK has fewer levers to pull. The current Government has recently announced the 'Race to a Trillion', seeking to boost exports from their current annual rate of £600 billion to £1 trillion. However, with the current difficulties moving goods between the UK and Europe (particularly through the Dover-Calais Short Straits crossing) and strict enforcement of customs procedures (with further checks to be introduced in January) the UK will struggle to significantly raise its exports into Europe. Improving relations with France could help mitigate some of the difficulties experienced and improve trade with France, either informally with the French unofficially reducing the strictness of customs checks or officially through a bilateral deal to increase customs processing resources on both sides of the border. Labour could push for such an approach to be tied to a more comprehensive settlement on fisheries.

The UK is also far too reliant on the Short Straits crossing as an artery for its trade and food supplies. In the short term, the UK must defuse the situation with France to relieve potential pressure on this trade route. In the long term, Labour should consider how to reduce French leverage on this issue. The party should consider how expanding infrastructure at other ports such as Felixstowe and building links with Dutch and Belgium ports could help relieve the burden currently placed on the Dover-Calais crossing.

Mobility

One of France's biggest asks from the UK is more flexibility on mobility. Of particular concern is the freedom of movement for school children, university students through the ERASMUS programme and other cultural exchange programmes. Giving ground here and making this form of movement easier could strengthen the UK's negotiating hand on wider issues such as British readmission to the EU's Horizon Europe research programme and the Galileo Space programme. Of course, both of these issues are decided at the EU level, but with France's leading role in the EU underlined through its Presidency of the Council in the first half of 2022,

Labour should recognise that strengthening the bilateral relationship may well yield fruits in wider EU negotiations.

Until trust is fully re-established, the best foot forward might be a 'steps for steps' or offensive/defensive approach, for example, giving some ground on handing out more fishing licences in return for less zealous enforcement of customs checks at the Short Straits crossing. However, this transactional mindset is limited in how far it alone can thaw the relationship and fails to capture the full benefits of the Franco-British relationship.

Priorities for the future

A highly proactive approach would be to go one step further and actively seek out new areas for collaborative approaches, for example on nuclear power and supply chain resilience (particularly for semiconductors and fresh food): areas where UK and French interests align. France and Italy have already demonstrated such a model for cooperation in recent weeks, while Italy and Germany are looking to strengthen bilateral ties. With trust levels between the UK and France at historically low levels, such an approach is unlikely to materialise with the current Government. A Labour opposition (and a potential Labour government) should do everything in its power to push for these outcomes through media statements, policy development, parliamentary committee work and legislative amendments.

Security and foreign policy

On security and foreign policy in particular, the UK and France already share a lot of common ground: the desire to uphold the rule of law and democracy throughout the world, the ambition to be a significant security actor not just in the Euro-Atlantic area, but also further afield in the Asia-Pacific region and in parts of Africa.

Beyond shared NATO membership and current side-by-side deployments in Estonia and in Mali, the current Russian troop build-up in Ukraine should give the UK an excellent opportunity for standing shoulder to shoulder with France on the world stage on a key issue of European security. Likewise, collaborating on African security and migration flows, international cybersecurity norms and negotiations with Iran over a return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action provide a whole range of geopolitical issues for the UK and France to demonstrate alignment. Comprehensive Labour Party foreign policy on all of these issues should highlight the importance of key strategic partners, making sure to include France within these.

Continued engagement in multilateral forums

Multilateral bodies more generally are an obvious place to extend this cooperation. The UK has already worked closely with France during the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Conference of Parties summits to combat climate change, as well as on the corporate tax deal negotiated through the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Taking this one step further, the Labour Party could consider joint health and scientific initiatives with France through the World Health Organization (WHO) (expanding the COVAX scheme for example). Working together with French and EU officials to understand the design of the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism could kill two birds with one stone

by enhancing continental relations and improving the design of a UK carbon border tax, a policy innovation which the New Diplomacy Project has previously written about.⁶

The current UK Government is working on proposals for renewing the strategic alliance between the UK and France. While the prospect of a major step forwards in Franco-British relations is highly appealing, a grand treaty could be overambitious (especially if it is seen by the French as side-lining the EU) and a series of bilateral deals on key topics of mutual interest could be more feasible. However, the St Malo Treaty signed under Prime Minister Tony Blair in 1998 sets a positive example in this regard (admittedly when the UK was still an EU Member State). If such a proposal is successful, the Labour Party should stand ready to scrutinise any associated legislation in Parliament to ensure it maximises the benefits of collaboration for the UK. If the French are unwilling to consider an agreement with the current Government, then the Labour Party should be ready to deploy a credible alternative blueprint as outlined above.

In short, there are many levers the Labour Party can pull, even in opposition, both to influence the actions of the current Government, as well as building credibility with the French establishment and other key stakeholders in France as a government-in-waiting. Developing coherent foreign policy, which recognises and integrates France as a key UK ally, will also be crucial for better relations between the UK and France if and when the Labour Party returns to power. These relations will be crucial to achieving the UK's national interest in a number of areas and building the performative legitimacy for the Labour Party both outside and in government.

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⁶ New Diplomacy Project, [Closing the emissions loophole: The case for a carbon border tax](#), 30 September 2021

About the New Diplomacy Project:

The New Diplomacy Project is helping Labour to develop a foreign policy for the 21st Century. Our experienced network of foreign policy researchers provide expert advice to Labour MPs and Lords, from real-time reaction to global events to in-depth policy briefings on complex areas of foreign policy. We seek to expand Labour's capacity to think about the foreign policy, while complementing and bolstering the work of its frontbench team.

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