

French Lack of a Cordial Entente with Britain

by Michael Curtis



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A fine romance, with no kisses, a fine romance my friend this is. Just friends, two friends drifting apart.

Times, they are a changing in France. As a result of Covid 19, a tradition that goes back to Roman times and became

prominent after the French Revolution is coming to an end. *La bise*, the traditional way of greeting, a peck on each cheek, an intrusive action, will be discontinued to prevent or restrict the spread of the virus. But another tradition, historic rivalries, real and theatrical, between France and UK persists. Nicknames are illustrative of the divide: Rosbif for English people, and Frog for French.

Separated by a small strip of water, the English Channel, or La Manche, the two countries have had a turbulent history and countless conflicts and tensions, though almost 45% of the English vocabulary is derived from French. Of course, periods of cooperation and personal friendships have been present. A military entente began in London in 2010 with the meeting of David Cameron and Nicholas Sarkozy; a Franco-British rapid reaction force, CJEF, came into operation in 2020; British Chinook helicopters transported French troops in wars of the Sahel.

There was joint development of the supersonic Concorde. The Chunnel, Channel Tunnel, since 1993 has been the 31mile rail link between London and Paris. The French football manager, Arsene Wenger, managed the London club Arsenal steering it to victory, and using French players.

However, disputes between the UK and France over the centuries are memorable: the 100 years War that lasted 116 years; Joan of Arc the self-declared savior of France; Napoleon's failure to invade Britain; Charles de Gaulle's veto in 1963 of Britain's attempt to join the European Economic Community, EEC; the hostile rhetorical dispute between President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Tony Blair at the EU summit in 2002.

The Fashoda Incident haunts the relationship between the two countries. In the 19th century each country wanted to link up its colonial possessions in Africa, and gain control of the Upper Nile River basin. The UK wanted to link Uganda to Egypt, while France wanted to extend its dominion across Centra

Africa and Sudan. The clash of rivalries over central Africa reached a climax in 1898, when a small contingent of French troops which had reached the town of Fashoda was defeated by a larger British army.

The incident was settled by an agreement, acknowledging British control of Egypt, and France as the dominant power in Morocco. France, in an act akin to humiliation, withdrew from the area that is now southern Sudan. Fashoda is important for at least two reasons; it was the precursor of the Entente Cordiale between the two countries in 1904; and it gave rise to the Fashoda Syndrome, French foreign policy asserting French influence in areas that might come under British control.

In recent years there are echoes of Fashoda. Anglo-French relations, and the level of trust between the two nations, have deteriorated to the point that in August 2021 French President Emmanuel Macron refused to agree to a date for a summit meeting with Prime Minister Boris Johnson, and others have the view there is no point in holding talks: the summits have been taking place about every two years, though none since January 2018. The Johnson government had thought that a new summit would help repair the strained relationship between the two countries, and worked hard for a high level meeting.

Elected in May 2017, aged 39, Macron became president, the youngest in French history, a shooting star, willing to exercise presidential power. He emerged as post-ideological, neither left nor right, unsettling would-be opponents, and demolishing the traditional French parties of right and left. His success was due in part to his ambiguity, and to dependence on charisma more than political content. He remains an enigma.

Macron is a curious mixture of proclamation of European ideology and personal Bonapartist behavior with touches of arrogance and haughtiness. He began with the image of a strong

Jupiterian presidency, a symbol of French glory and civilization.

His main international concern is for a policy of European sovereignty and strategic autonomy, making France and Europe independent from the U.S. and China. Europe, he holds, must build its own solutions, not depend on American or Chinese technologies.

European sovereignty would mean building European common objectives, defense capabilities, ensuring peace, technological and strategic autonomy, military capacity, and providing security and building trade. In his most striking remark, Macron said that Europe is on the edge of a precipice, and may disappear geopolitically unless its destiny is controlled, and retains its political purpose.

He asserted EU needs to act as a political bloc: commerce , single market, and trade alone not enough. Europe should also be a "finite space," a united space, a highly integrated region, with a clear political outlook instead of concentrating on market issues,.Europe, he advocates, should be a leading power in education, health, digital and green policies. Also. responsible for its own defense as well as linked to NATO. The question arises of whether Macron envisages restoring France, as the leading European power, to grandeur and sees himself as the reincarnation of General de Gaulle.

Irrespective of the general outlook of Macron in international and in domestic affairs, the most acute issue is the deteriorating relationship with the UK, after a series of conflicts, mutual grievances, and seemingly refusal to agree to a bilateral face to face summit meeting with British Prime Minister Boris Johnson.

Macron has long been critical of UK actions and relationship with the EU. He has been the most vocal critic of British

Brexit policy, though he acknowledges the two countries share a common vision and common interests on many global issues and transatlantic policy. In 2016, while French minister of the economy, Macron remarked that if the UK left the EU it would become like Guernsey, the self-governing British crown dependency, one of the Channel Islands, that had not been part of the EU. Leaving the EU would mean that the UK would then be a little country on the world scale. It would isolate itself and become a trading post and arbitration place at Europe's border.

Macron differed from UK on a number of issues. One was on the September 15, 2020 joint statement on Saudi Arabia, proposed by Denmark when France was slower than UK to accept the statement that Saudi Arabia should release all political dissidents and end its president discrimination against women.

On June 10, 2021, Macron insisted the Brexit deal was not negotiable and that everything must be applied in practice. Macron is critical of British actions since Brexit for a variety of reasons, over post-Brexit fishing rights for French boats off the coast of Jersey, and threats by France to cut off Jersey's electricity supplies. This threat prompted Boris to send two RN patrol vessels to the area to protect it against the threat of 60 French fishing vessels.

Differences between the countries emerged over EU common agricultural policy, Iraq, support for U.S. policy against Saddam Hussein , Zimbabwe in 2003, travel restrictions, cross-channel migration, quarantine restrictions, and even whether British sausages could be sold in France .

Britain believes Macron sabotaged the Oxford Astra Zeneca vaccine, made by a British-Swedish company, from being sold. Hours before Astra Zeneca was approved by the European Medicines Agency, Macron said "everything points to thinking that it is quasi-ineffective on people older than 65, some say

60." His view was largely responsible for the rapid decline in use of the vaccine.

The strongest difference is over Northern Ireland which Macron considers is not part of the same country as UK. He proclaims that the UK is not adhering to the Northern Ireland protocol, the agreement governing trade. Boris wants the EU to be more flexible in easing trade from the UK to Northern Ireland, arguing it is causing disruption in supplies of goods.

Macron imposed a travel ban on entrants from Britain. The stated reason is that France is concerned about the spread of the Indian variant of the virus in Britain. He had already imposed such a ban in December 2020 because of the discovery of the Kent variant of the virus, alleged to come from Britain, though its origin is still unknown. Opinions differ on whether the Kent variant is more deadly than the original strain of covid. In any case the main concern is with the Delta variant, one that is more likely to be spread to other people than the Kent variant. Noticeably, the UK decided on August 5, 2021 to scrap quarantine for fully vaccinated people entering the UK from France.

There is clearly need for de-escalation in tensions between the two countries. Macron has an obligation to agree to a summit meeting with Boris. He should not waste his time voicing his opinion about the UK place in the world and making it one of his top priorities, or heed controversies created in corridors and backrooms.