

France: Security

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Question

 3.36pm

Asked by

Lord Owen >

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To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs when the next bilateral is planned between the United Kingdom and French governments on security issues, and whether it will involve the President and Prime Minister as well as the two foreign secretaries.

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs >

(Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton) (Con)

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My Lords, last week, the Prime Minister and President Macron spoke on illegal migration and European security. On Thursday, I will speak to Foreign Minister Séjourné at the G7. I am confident that the Prime Minister and President Macron will meet again in person before too long. My colleagues, the Defence Secretary and the Home Secretary, and their teams similarly maintain regular, action-orientated dialogue with their French counterparts.

Lord Owen >

(Ind SD)

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In light of the forthcoming elections in the United States and the constant reiteration of senior Russians that tactical nuclear weapons should be used in their invasion of Ukraine, would it not be a very good thing if the French and British Heads of Government got together and discussed their own targeting strategies for the nuclear weapons they possess in Europe and give some guidance—to Europe, to the rest of the world, and, above all, to the Russians—about their attitude to this constant invocation of nuclear weapons being used in Ukraine?

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton >

(Con)

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I thank the noble Lord for his question; he clearly has huge experience in this area. The Lancaster House agreement that I signed with President Sarkozy in 2010 expressly sets out areas where Britain and France will collaborate, including the most sensitive areas of nuclear weapon research and nuclear weapons. If what he is saying is that we need to enter into deeper dialogue to think about these things in the future, I agree. Britain's nuclear deterrent is declared to NATO, and I am in favour of us having deeper conversations with the French about that.

I still maintain that one of the aims of NATO is, as Pug Ismay put it,

“to keep the Americans in ... and the Russians out”.

That is still absolutely key to NATO's future. I missed out a bit of that quotation, the noble Lord will be pleased to note. One of the things we must do is to make sure that we are talking to all parts of the American system, to make sure that NATO is in the strongest possible shape in its 75th year, with more members and more members reaching 2%, so that whoever becomes President at the end of this year can see that NATO is an institution worth investing in.

Lord King of Bridgwater >

(Con)

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In an earlier incarnation, I had the opportunity to introduce the French Minister of Defence to our nuclear facilities and visited Saint-Nazaire, where the French showed me their facilities. It is on the importance of that background of our nuclear collaboration that the noble Lord, Lord Owen, is absolutely right. It is a background against which the United States is perhaps showing less interest in NATO, and its future involvement may not be so obvious and immediate. That makes it clear that the nuclear arrangements and nuclear understanding between this country and France are of manifest importance. The Heads of Governments and the Foreign Secretaries of both countries need to be very closely involved against the dangerous situation that we face in Europe at the present time.

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton >

(Con)

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Again, the noble Lord has huge experience of this. This is a great year for Britain and France to be talking about these things. It is the 120th anniversary of the entente cordiale, we will be commemorating D-Day again in June and there are the French Olympics, which I am sure will be a great success—we are helping France with security and other issues. So of course that dialogue, in line with the Lancaster House agreement and its renewal, will be part of it.

However, it is important that we try to encourage America to see NATO as a huge positive. One must not overinterpret this, but it was good news when yesterday the US Speaker of the House of Representatives made this remark about the Ukraine funding:

“We have terrorists and tyrants and terrible leaders around the world like Putin ... and they are watching to see if America will stand up for its allies and our own interests around the globe, and we will”.

When asked about the Ukraine funding, he said that he expected to bring it forward this week. So there is positive news. Therefore, as well as all the things we should be doing with European partners to strengthen NATO, we should do everything we can to encourage America to see it as part of its defence as well as ours.

Lord Wallace of Saltaire >

(LD)

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My Lords, we now know that the fourth meeting of the European Political Community summit will take place in Blenheim in July. The European Political Community is one of Macron's major initiatives to encourage all European countries to work together on security and, in particular, to form a British-French partnership in leading European security. Can the Foreign Minister tell us when the Government will tell us more about what the agenda will be, and how far they will consult with other parties about this particularly important multilateral summit, in which Britain and France will play leading roles?

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton >

(Con)

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First of all, I am delighted that the meeting of the EPC, the European Political Community, is going ahead. I am also delighted that it is at Blenheim, because that is in my old constituency and is one of the finest places in Britain to hold a summit. We will not necessarily remind all the participants who was on which side at Blenheim, but I am sure we can find a way through that. In fact, there were Germans on both sides, so perhaps that will help. We will certainly talk about security and Ukraine, and I am sure that there will also be discussions about the issue of illegal migration, which we are all wrestling with around Europe. However, I am sure the Prime Minister will have more to say about it closer to the time.

Lord Browne of Ladyton >

(Lab)

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My Lords, I do not disagree with the Foreign Secretary about the importance of the United States, but, whether we like it or not, we are in a context where future US leadership can be hoped for but not relied upon. In such a context, defence co-operation and co-ordination between the UK, France and the wider EU is crucial. President Macron has said:

“Our partnership with the United Kingdom must ... be raised to another level”.

Given that openness to a deeper defence and strategic relationship, what discussions have the Government had with France and other European allies in respect of the important issue of co-ordinating defence production to ensure that our procurement harmonises rather than conflicts with the proposed European Defence Industry Programme?

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton >

(Con)

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That is a very important question. The way that the UK has worked with other European powers in response to Ukraine has shown that, although we are outside the European Union, we can work together very effectively and put in place arrangements such as those around the Wiesbaden arrangements and others that work extremely well. Of course we should look at what other co-operation and collaboration we should do, but quite a lot of clarity will be required, including about the European Defence Industrial Strategy and on what terms it should be open to non-EU members. Collaboration makes sense only if we are acting in a way that not only benefits our own industries as well as other European industries but is open to collaboration with others at the same time. So far, from everything I have seen in this job, I can say that where you have good ad hoc arrangements and can make them work, that may well be better than a very structured and potentially rather bureaucratic dialogue—unless you are really getting what you want.

Lord Collins of Highbury >

(Lab)

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My Lords, one area that the United Kingdom and France have worked closely together and given leadership on is nutrition. I was very pleased to see that we have now got a date for the Paris Nutrition for Growth summit, which will take place not this year, sadly, but next year on 27 and 28 March. Will the Minister be raising support for the Nutrition for Growth summit when he meets his counterpart? Will the Prime Minister be involved, to ensure that the leadership that both countries have given in alleviating the world's problem of malnutrition is delivered properly and that we remain supportive?

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton >

(Con)

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I certainly will raise that with my European counterpart, Stéphane Séjourné. The first of these summits happened at the London Olympics in 2012, partly because it was a very important issue but also because we knew that Brazil, which has a very deep concern about this issue, was going to host the next Olympics and we could create that momentum. It was more difficult in Tokyo because of Covid and everything else, but this is a good opportunity to get this back on the road and I will certainly raise it with my counterpart.

Lord Polak >

(Con)

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My Lords, surely there was no better display of French-British co-operation than in the skies of the Middle East on Saturday night. Will the Foreign Secretary discuss with his French counterpart how we can increase the pressure on the regime in Tehran so that it might allow the region to live in peace?

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton >

(Con)

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My noble friend makes a very good point. In our case, the Americans asked us to backfill their operations, in our Joint Operation Shader, where we have been running a counter-ISIL, counter-Daesh operation in Iraq and Syria for many years now. We have delighted to do that, to free up more of their planes to defend Israel. At the same time, we told our pilots that they should shoot down any projectiles coming Israel's way in the process. That is exactly what they did, with great skill and ability. My noble friend is right to say that Britain and France can work very closely together on this agenda.

We have sanctioned hundreds of people in Iran. We have sanctioned the IRGC in its entirety. We will be discussing with the French and others further steps to discourage Iran from this behaviour and further sanctions that should be put in place. We also need to look at the work that we do together at the International Atomic Energy Agency, where we need clear resolutions when Iran is in breach of the promises that it has made. The point that he makes more generally is right. When you look at this region, who is funding Hamas? Who is funding the Houthis? Who is funding Hezbollah? In every case, the answer is Iran.

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