

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair



DPA picture alliance/Alamy

France and the UK: behind two men scoring political points are teams of diplomats behaving like grown ups

Published: December 3, 2021 10.56am GMT

Rogelia Pastor-Castro

Lecturer in International History, University of Strathclyde

Rachel Chin

Postdoctoral Research Associate, University of Glasgow

Instead of a more formal mode of communication, UK prime minister Boris Johnson recently decided to tweet a letter he had written to French president Emmanuel Macron issuing a series of demands on managing cross-Channel migration. Macron was duly enraged. He accused Johnson of not being serious and disinvited the British home secretary from crisis talks.

One of these two men is about to seek re-election. The other is under pressure to deliver on big promises to tighten immigration. It is therefore arguably in their interests to ramp up the rhetoric. Behind this war of words, however, it is important that French and UK officials continue to work together as they always have done.

The angry exchanges between Macron and Johnson follow months of tension over how to manage fishing waters after Brexit. Both sides have done their bit to escalate the ill will here, too. In the UK, this has manifested in a keen use of historical references among politicians and the media to remind the public of just how far back the bitterness runs. They have invoked well-recognised moments in history, from Agincourt to Waterloo to justify their respective positions.

Deploying history in this way, devoid of its wider context, may be an easy way to score political points but it could do long-term damage. Reducing Franco-British relations into a series of oversimplified tropes contributes to the misconception that there is some inherent rivalry between the two nations. In reality, their shared history is far more often characterised by cooperation.

The ever-present Corsican

Napoleon and the Napoleonic era have been wielded as instantly recognisable markers of historic Franco-British rivalry. Speaking in the House of Commons, Conservative MP Andrew Bridgen implored the British government to stand firm on fishing rights. Referring to Macron, he insisted that “history shows us that this House and our great nation’s interests are best served by standing up to the threats of little Napoleons clinging on to power”.

Conservative MP Jacob Rees-Mogg argued on Twitter: “The French are always grumpy in October, the anniversaries of Trafalgar and Agincourt upset them.”

This is all essentially based on an assumption that tension with France is a natural and even inevitable state of affairs.

Katya Adler, BBC Europe editor, observed that Macron, too, is using history to gain political ground in the upcoming presidential election. Under pressure from the French far right, Adler suggested, Macron wants to be seen to be “standing up to ‘perfidious Albion’”.

British criticisms of Macron in the wake of the recent Channel tragedy have taken a similar tone. Franco-British “enmity” and the “Entente Discordiale” have been particular themes in the press.

Reality on the ground

But reducing Franco-British relations to inherent rivalry is unhelpful and inaccurate. France and Britain have been at peace for over 200 years. During this time they have been allies, not adversaries, in European and global conflicts, in trade agreements and in cultural activities.

Speaking about Franco-British cooperation during the Crimean War in 1856 British MP Evelyn Denison remarked “our alliance with France had been proved by severe trials, by some reverses and by great successes”.

In 1859 British Chancellor of the Exchequer Benjamin Disraeli reminded MPs that the Franco-British partnership was “... no new policy. It is ... an alliance independent of dynasties, individuals or forms of government.”


The same is true today. Leaders talk tough in the hope of averting personal political losses but collaboration remains at the heart of Franco-British relations. Focusing on the bickering ignores the more pragmatic side of diplomacy, which relies on long-term relationship building, not cheap point scoring.

Our research reveals that civil servants working behind the scenes have highly effective relationships with their counterparts. These relationships thrive despite surface tensions and transcend the vitriol that so often characterises public discourse.

French and British security and defence cooperation, enshrined by the 2010 Lancaster House treaties, has been one area of fruitful and lasting collaboration. This agreement has led to the creation of a shared military force and provided for nuclear cooperation.

In 2019, an event we organised and hosted at defence and security think tank the Royal United Services Institute explored what it took to deliver such a complex agreement. At the event, current and former French and British policy makers served as “witnesses”. They spoke about their first-hand experiences involving the treaties.

All participants emphasised that consistent cooperation between the two states was much more habitual than discord even though the event was being held at the height of Brexit negotiations. Career civil servants, they argued, were instrumental to the long-term success of agreements like the Lancaster House treaties. These individuals, who remain in post under multiple political administrations, were identified as an important source of continuity. Their work and the relationships they forge are critical during times of political tension.

 A fisherman sorting the catch into different buckets on the deck of a trawler in the English channel

Fisheries disputes have British politicians invoking Napoleon. EPA/Vickie Flores

Former British Ambassador in Paris John Holmes described at a similar event how crucial it was in his role to situate the Franco-British relationship in the longer term. The two nations have gone through ups and downs but cooperation continues, even when it isn't being talked about.

This work is much more nuanced than the charged political rhetoric would lead us to believe. In the case of the immigration debate, France and the UK signed a treaty in 2005 that sees them trusting each other to police their respective borders. This continues to function while ministerial meetings are cancelled for theatre.

Now, while the highest profile figures exchange petty insults, the respective French and UK ambassadors in London and Paris, Catherine Colonna and Menna Rawlings, play a vital role. As former UK ambassador to France Peter Ricketts has asserted in relation to the fishing debate, “it is high time for some quiet, high-level diplomacy between London and Paris ...”. The same is true for the immigration discussion – even more so given that lives are at stake.