

Speech: Britain and France: Past, Present and Future

It is a great pleasure to be here in Paris this morning, in this historic setting.

This is – to use a little English understatement – an important moment in the future of the relationship between our countries.

There have been many such moments in the long sweep of our history, and we know, without a doubt, that there will be many more in the decades to come.

What matters is what we decide to do with those moments.

Those decisions fall to each generation.

To plot their own course and determine their destiny and that of their countries.

What is unique about the relationship between Britain and France is the extent to which those decisions, those destinies, have been, are, and will be, entwined.

That long history has, as we all know, had...let me put it diplomatically... its high and its lows.

And it is a relationship of competition and cooperation, similarity and difference.

Indeed my view is that it is precisely that mix which gives it its strength – because we have made a choice – for nearly 200 years – to work together.

And it is my contention that the relationship between our countries – born of shared geography, history and culture, and forged through joint struggle and sacrifice, is as important today as it has ever been; that our fortunes are as bound together as they have ever been; and that the case for the closest possible partnership between Britain and France is as strong as it has ever been.

But how that partnership evolves depends on the decisions we make now.

So today I want to look at things in the round – to consider our past, our present and our future – the future that, yes does mean getting Brexit right, but which goes beyond that and will be for the next generation to build.

The Past

But I want to start with the past.

This week – of all weeks – our shared past has particular resonance and

weight.

This Sunday, at 11 o'clock, it will be 100 years exactly since the guns fell silent on the Western front.

At the Arc de Triomphe here in Paris and at the Cenotaph in London, and in towns and villages across France and Britain, our countries will commemorate the end of the War.

Tomorrow, the French President and the British Prime Minister will be together in the battlefields of the Somme – scene of some of the bloodiest fighting.

They will remember our shared sacrifice. The British Army lost 20,000 dead in a single day on 1 July 1916. The Somme was our Verdun.

This was a war which changed our countries and our continent forever.

It was a war in which our destinies as nations were yoked together – in which we fought and bled side by side for over four years – and in which, in the end, we prevailed.

We sometimes forget that in the closing months of that war, the two million soldiers of the British Army fought under French command for the first time.

The British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, said that Marshal Foch was the 'only general in the field with the necessary decision and vision to plan out such a campaign'.

After the Armistice, Foch said 'I am conscious of having served England as I served my own country' – words carved in stone beneath his statue near Victoria Station in London.

But the victory that Franco-British cooperation made possible came at a terrible price.

Across France, 575,000 British and Commonwealth soldiers lie buried, alongside 1.4 million French comrades who fell alongside them.

Row after row of silent white headstones speak more eloquently than we ever could on the strength of our alliance, and the depth of our shared sacrifice.

I am fortunate to come from a generation which has never known such horror, and which has been blessed by the peace and friendship we have built with Germany, something we will also mark this weekend.

But if our shared history has taught us anything, it is surely to value peace – and never to take it for granted.

Of course, our history goes back much further than a hundred years.

Britain's long and complex relationship with France is one of the most important that we have with any country in the world.

We are approaching 1,000 years since William the Conqueror landed near Hastings, and the Duke of Normandy became the King of England.

The Bayeux tapestry – which chronicles the story of William's arrival in England – turns out to have been just the opening chapter in the Franco-British story.

If we brought the tapestry up to date, it would stretch all the way from Paris to London and back.

It would tell of our highs and our lows, our friendships and our enmities, our triumphs and our defeats.

That is why President Macron's decision to lend the Bayeux tapestry to Britain – announced at the Sandhurst Summit earlier this year – so captured the public imagination on the other side of the Channel.

It represents – literally – the common thread of our shared history, going to the heart of both countries' identity.

That sense of similarity and difference runs through the next nine centuries.

And it extends into the most recent period of our story during which – for nearly 200 years now – Britain and France have not only been at peace, but in alliance, standing together against danger and when, twice in a century, the very existence of our nations was threatened.

The Present

Why does all this matter?

Because it is not the stuff of books and museums.

It is the underpinning of the world we built – together.

And in that world our countries are as closely connected, our story is just as interwoven as it has ever been.

Geographical neighbours; separated by 33 kilometres of what Churchill called that 'strip of salt water', but joined now by a tunnel through which 57,000 pass every single day.

Hundreds of thousands of our fellow citizens choose to live in each others' countries, where they make such a valued contribution.

I would like to take this opportunity to repeat the Prime Minister's commitment to the French people in Britain – and all EU citizens – protecting their rights after we leave the EU. And I am sure that the same assurances will be offered to British citizens living here in France.

About 12 million Britons visited France last year – and more French people visited the UK than any other nationality.

It is a relationship that is underpinned by human ties of friendship.

And at a Governmental level, by the fact that Britain and France are both European nations with a global vocations, who share the same values, and who see the world in broadly the same way. We helped fashion the global order, and we share an interest in defending it.

We face the same terrorist threats, and we know that we must work hand in hand to defeat them.

We both know that sometimes to defend the peace, you need to be ready to use military force.

We know that the threats to European peace and security are more serious than they have been for a generation, and that as Europe's only two major military powers, we need to confront those threats together.

We both believe in nuclear deterrence, and in maintaining our deterrents for our own defence and the defence of our allies.

That is why we so often form joint positions, including on the Security Council where we both have permanent seats, to deal with an increasingly unstable world.

That is why when our countries have been attacked by terrorists, there was such an outpouring of mutual solidarity.

We will never forget the moment after the Manchester attack when President Macron walked from the Elysee Palace to the British Embassy to express France's solidarity, and the crowd at the Stade de France sang the British national anthem – nor, when, after the Bataclan attack the crowd at Wembley sang the Marseillaise.

That is why, after the chemical weapons attack in Salisbury in March, France rallied to the UK's side, leading a robust European response, working together to expel scores of Russian diplomats from our continent.

And in April, British and French aircraft, with our US allies, acted together to strike chemical weapons installations in Syria, and to enforce the global ban on the use of chemical weapons which was itself born out of the suffering in the trenches 100 years ago.

That is why our defence cooperation – rooted in the Lancaster House accords – is so deep.

RAF Chinook helicopters are flying missions in the Sahel, transporting French troops as part of Operation Barkhane.

Together we have forged a combined joint expeditionary force, which will be combat capable by 2020.

This year our warships have both upheld freedom of navigation by sailing through the South China Sea.

And our cooperation extends far beyond the security domain to genomics, artificial intelligence, cyber and space.

The scale and breadth of cooperation is probably closer than it has ever been.

The Future

Which brings us back to Bayeux.

Now, as President Macron said at Sandhurst, we are weaving a new tapestry.

What path will it follow, what scenes will it depict?

Because we are at a moment of decision, and the answers we give in the coming weeks and months could determine the shape of Franco-British relations, and of relations between Britain and her European partners, for many years, perhaps decades to come.

Which brings me, of course, to Brexit.

And here our history is again relevant: for all our similarities, we are also different.

I understand that for so many in France that the outcome of the referendum result was disappointing.

I know that in France the Brexit vote is often seen as Britain pulling up the drawbridge, turning its back on Europe and reaching out for 'le grand large'.

But that is not how we see it.

And this is where our peculiar mixture of similarity and difference is important.

France sees the EU as vital to its destiny, to the stability of the continent and above all to its relationship with Germany.

We recognise that. We understand it. We value it.

But Britain has never felt quite the same, for the simple reason that our experiences have been different.

Yes, we are similar in that we are both European countries who cherish our global role.

But we differ, I believe, in our view of the process and goals of EU integration. The reality is that our public has always been reluctant about the political character of the Union and uncertain about its ultimate destination.

That made the experience of the pooling of sovereignty which the EU entails uncomfortable for us – and I think that goes a long way to explaining the result of our referendum.

Indeed for most British people, their concept of Europe has never been synonymous with the European Union.

Whereas for so many people in France, I believe, the European Union is at the heart of their notion of Europe.

Why does this matter?

Because so far in our recent history we have been able to draw strengths from our similarities, but recognise and respect our differences in the choices we have made together.

And we have now reached another such moment of decision, and the decisions we take as Governments will have far-reaching consequences.

Our people have voted in a referendum to leave the EU and its decision-making bodies.

We must respect their democratic choice.

But we intend to remain a European power into the future, as we have always been in the past.

A European power, whose values remain European values.

A European power committed to the security of the European continent.

A European power with a European economic model, with universal public services and the highest standard of consumer and environment protection.

A European power, whose children continue to do exchanges with each other and get to know and treasure each others' countries – as I did at the age of 7 in Angers, in France; whose students study together; whose scientists and researchers and Nobel Prize winners continue to push forward the frontiers of human knowledge together.

That is the strategic choice we have made in our approach to these negotiations. From our perspective we see no contradiction in wanting to continue to work together even as the institutional relationship changes.

And so?

What does this mean for our future, and for this negotiation, which is now entering its crucial endgame?

I would suggest three things.

First, our shared past, does not, of course mean that we do not remain two nations, each pursuing our national interests as we judge them, in the interests of the people we are elected to serve.

But, having thought deeply about these issues, my view is that just as our interest and choice is to remain close to Europe, the EU's interest lies too in close cooperation – for our security, our economies and our peoples.

So I hope that we can redouble our efforts to reach an agreement.

Second, we each need to make a particular effort to understand the other's perspective.

I know there are concerns that a deal which allows the UK to have the advantages of membership without the obligations, could lead to unfair competition and ultimately to the unravelling of the EU.

I want to be 100 percent clear. We have heard those concerns, and we believe that we can address them. Indeed that the only way to address them is for an ambitious agreement that provides the kind of guarantees necessary.

Remember this basic fact.

From 29 March next year, we will be on the outside, not the inside.

There will be no British Prime Minister turning up at European Council meetings, no Ministers deciding new legislation, no British MEPs, no British judges on the European Court of Justice.

So we are not, as is sometimes suggested, even occasionally here in France, trying to have our 'cake and eat it'.

But we have offered a framework for our future relationship which should give you confidence that we are not going to pursue a race to the bottom, and which would allow our economic and security relationships to continue, not as they were before – but on a dependable basis on which we could continue to build in the years ahead.

A relationship in which the UK will be a third country – but would remain tied by bonds of friendship and commerce for decades to come.

The alternatives do not deliver that certainty. They make a choice for friction – at our border with queues at Dover and Calais, in the exchange of information between our security services and in greater divergence in our rules and regulation.

That choice would seem to me to be a mistake.

My last point is this.

This is not a dry, technical discussion, although sometimes it can seem that way – with all the talk of regulatory standards and implementation periods and the like.

At heart, it is about the destiny of our ancient nations – and of our ancient continent – and how best we shape our future as European nations.

About how we weave the next chapter of the tapestry and what story it will tell.

That is why I feel so passionately that we need to get this right, that we

need to make the right choices in the weeks to come.

So that the generations who come after us and look across the Channel will see that in 2019 Britain left the European Union, and a chapter ended.

But the story of the European Union continued, and that the story of Britain's friendship and alliance with Europe and above all with France not only endured, but grew in strength.

In other words the end of a chapter did not mean the end of the book. Far from it. It mean the beginning of a new chapter, in which we found new ways to work closely together.

Those future generations will see, I hope, that confronted with the common threats before us, and which are growing, we faced up to them together.

That together we defended the post-war international order and institutions that are today under threat.

That we together stayed true to our values and democratic principles that are being challenged – in practice and in theory – as never before in my lifetime.

That we together adapted to the challenges and opportunities that globalisation is posing to our economies and more importantly our societies.

I know it is not easy but that is my hope.

That is Britain's hope.

I believe that is France's hope, and that of our European partners.

Let's find the political will – as friends, as allies, as partners – to turn that hope into reality.