

France and Great Britain: an unbeatable combination – Japan Times 15.05.17

by *David Howell*

LONDON – The new president of France, Emmanuel Macron, is young, dynamic and by all accounts extremely clever. This is a good moment for France and ought to encourage all France's allies. Unfortunately, even in the hour of victory there have been voices of doubt and criticism, questioning whether he will succeed with internal reforms, arguing that the French trade unions will obstruct him and that lack of a majority in the French Assembly will make his life impossible.

On the other side of the channel there have also been some British critics, claiming that Macron's European views will make Brexit harder, that he is part of the bankers' elite and not in tune with modern populist aspirations and so on. But these British critics are making a great mistake. Far from sounding negative, the British should be seizing the moment to make new and stronger-than-ever alliances with their French neighbor.

It is true that during the French election campaign Macron made a few unhelpful remarks about "Le Grande Bretagne." But these things get said in the heat of elections. Basically, his aims for reform and reinvigoration of the French economy should receive an unqualified welcome and full support from Britain. France has been badly held back in the recent past with no less than 57 percent of its income being consumed by the state and with unemployment stuck at 10 percent. It should do much better, and where they can the British should assist the new French leader in his reforming struggle.

Macron's other theme — that European Union integration should be accelerated — will anyway come to grief in face of realities. Neither the French themselves, nor most of Europe, want to see still more EU domination and centralization of power. Nor will Germany agree to pay still more money to support the rest of the EU. So worries there can be put aside. Events on that front will look after themselves.

Instead it should be recognized that France and Britain working together make an unbeatable combination. France is the one European nation besides Britain that is a nuclear power, a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council, and has powerful foreign policy skills and deep experience, especially in the troubled Middle East. It already has close cooperation with Britain in many fields, including defense, security, intelligence, cyber issues, policing, scientific research, culture and the arts, education and medicine. Now it should become closer still on foreign policy, regardless of Britain's departure from the EU system.

The alliance is historic and goes back well into the 19th century. Two world wars brought it even closer. At one stage, in the darkest days of Nazi triumph in 1940, it was even proposed that France and Britain should merge as one entity, although this proved a step too far.

Going back even further into past centuries, of course there were terrible battles between the two rival nations. But even after the defeat of Napoleon, Britain retained strong respect for his achievements in the creation of modern France.

Today, hundreds of thousands of French live in Britain and almost as many British in France. Crowded Eurostar trains whisk travelers hourly between the two capitals and frequent daily flights connect dozens of French and British cities. Eurostar is the living linkage which has been an outstanding success.

Back in the 1980s the British were skeptical about building any channel tunnel connection, despite French enthusiasm. The British Treasury tried every stratagem to resist it and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was skeptical. She preferred a motorway to a railway. She believed the taxpayer would end up paying (she was nearly right at one stage!). Fortunately, as secretary of state for transport at the time I was able to keep the project quietly alive through a close relationship with the French transport minister, Charles Fiterman — a charming former Communist Party member of the Mitterand government — until British doubts subsided and it all went happily ahead.

While the media like trying to play up British and French antagonisms and official differences, the reality is that on the ordinary people's level there is affection on both sides. The British love France and the French experience.

There is no real reason why the Brexit prospect should stand in the way of ever closer policy links. Any customs clearance — and it should be minimal — can be handled in seconds with modern technology. Movement of citizens may be tightened, especially on the British side, but this is happening anyway throughout Europe in face of terrorist dangers and the formidable refugee pressures from the south. For British and French citizens moving to and fro daily there should be little difference from the present routine showing of passports which happens anyway at airports and at the London and Paris Eurostar terminals.

Another bonus from more French-British togetherness is that it would please the Scots and curb further the impulse of Scottish independence. Scotland's closeness to France goes back well into history.

Finally, it is worth noting that very recently the British have done France an enormous favor by agreeing to the construction by Electricite de France of a vast and expensive new nuclear power station on British soil, at Hinkley Point in Somerset (with Chinese financial support). Former French President Francois Holland welcomed this mega-project as crucial underpinning for the company and for French civil nuclear power generally.

One favor deserves another when it comes to the forthcoming Brexit negotiations. There should be readiness to show maximum goodwill on both sides, French and British, in the months ahead, whatever some other EU and Brussels officials may indicate.

This is clearly in the strongest interest of both countries. What has long been clear is that French prosperity is essential to Britain and British prosperity is essential for France. That is the underlying and deeply rooted reality that should shape all relations between the two

nations in the months of negotiations and discussions ahead, and into the longer-term future.

David Howell is a Conservative politician, journalist and economic consultant. He is chairman of the House of Lords International Relations Committee.
