

IS THE SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP STILL SPECIAL?

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America has found its strongest, most enduring alliance in its Special Relationship with Great Britain. This relationship has been defined by consistent and recurring cooperation, systematic engagement, and enduring bilateral relations that emerged from common values and obvious interests. Mutual recognition of the value of democratic government, the rule of law, individual rights, and the market economy are combined with a single historical and cultural experience until 1776, continued cultural intermingling since then, and a common language. America and Britain, in other words, have a relationship of both “blood and philosophy.”¹

However, there is now a third party in this marriage: Brussels. As scholar Douglas Johnson has noted: “The United States, the United Kingdom (UK), and the European Union (EU) form a triangular relationship that simultaneously conditions and threatens the U.S.-UK relationship, as the UK must participate in European affairs.”² How Britain navigates the Special Relationship while at the same time dealing with this increasingly assertive supranational body will have massive geopolitical consequences in the years ahead.

The ties that bind

Over the years, the Special Relationship has faced repeated challenges, and always emerged unscathed. On occasion, each country has put its national



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interest above that of the other. But these instances have not fundamentally threatened the relationship. In their day, for example, Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan notably disagreed over the U.S. invasion of Grenada, but still went on to cooperate fully in fighting—and eventually winning—the Cold War.

In fact, the Thatcher-Reagan era demonstrates some of the most enduring features of the Special Relationship. Thatcher's ability to be both a steadfast partner and cautionary critic of the United States was not simply a demonstration of her mastery of statecraft; it was a testament to the strength of the alliance itself. Shared beliefs do not prevent quarrels, even among allies. More often than not, however, they yield the right result for both sides. Critics saw Reagan's eventual support for the British liberation of the Falkland Islands as a departure from America's long-held Monroe Doctrine. But Reagan came to see that supporting Britain's claim had greater merit and value than did supporting the existential, geographical pull of Argentina.

Today, the passivity that marked the Special Relationship in the post-Cold War era has given way to a period of frenetic cooperation between the United States and United Kingdom in the War on Terror. The recurring pattern is of each finding the other a necessary, indispensable ally in times of need, regardless of left-right orientation or prevailing political conditions.

Ultimately, the Special Relationship is so special because the shared values and common interests that bind the two countries reach far beyond the philosophical utopia of European Union (EU) elites dreaming of a European superstate. The common political, diplomatic, historical, and cultural values shared between

Americans and Britons actually mean something. What's more, Britain and America are actually prepared to defend these values—with military force if necessary. Common values mean something only if both parties are ready to defend them. It is significant that Winston Churchill coined the term "Special Relationship" in 1946, after Britain and America had spilled horrendous amounts of blood and expended copious treasure in an unwavering defense of their shared values during the Second World War.

The underlying traditions and history of cooperation between Britain and America essentially negate any short-term threat to this enduring alliance. Indeed, while it was the French who proclaimed "Nous sommes tous Américains" in the wake of 9/11, it is Anglo-American political, cultural, military, and diplomatic solidarity that has outlasted this initial show of strength from America's Continental friends.

Three's a crowd

Today, however, the Special Relationship faces a new challenge. The EU's relentless supranational drive has demanded a surrender of British national sovereignty in areas such as trade, the economy, and even defense.

The institutional and political constraints demanded by further European integration will severely limit Britain's ability to make foreign policy, especially in international alliance-making. In political, diplomatic, and financial terms, no good has come from limiting Britain's geopolitical outlook to the European continent, and certainly no benefit can be derived from deeper EU absorption that limits Britain's historical and proven links with the United States.

But doing just that is very much on the minds of European officials. Large

parts of the EU policy agenda—such as the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP)—are designed precisely as counterweights to American “hyperpower.”³ Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the perceived need for another power to counterbalance the United States has consistently motivated advocates of European integration.

The 2006-7 investigation by the European Parliament into America’s rendition policy demonstrates the frequently anti-American direction of EU policymaking.⁴ The EU believes that supranational institutions like itself and the United Nations should be the sole arbiters of the use of force and should determine the rules of engagement for both symmetric and asymmetric conflicts. This thinking was further displayed by the EU in the run-up to Operation Iraqi Freedom, with powerful European nations, including France and Germany, actively seeking to obstruct American foreign policy. EU accession countries were even threatened with delays to their membership for supporting the war.⁵ It was a clear—and ominous—signal: Europe had issued a direct challenge to a sovereign foreign policy decision of the United States in an effort to contain American power.

Underlying this stance is a fundamentally different global outlook: one that views “multilateralism as the best means to solve global problems.”⁶ The EU believes that diplomacy trumps all other foreign policy tools in addressing international threats, and sees economic sanctions and military operations as “a last resort.”⁷ Brussels is likewise an enthusiastic proponent of the International Criminal Court, global abolition of the death penalty, the Kyoto Protocol and various inter-

national treaties which are inimical to U.S. interests. Under the recently-signed European Reform Treaty this phenomenon will get worse. Just as the EU has become an increasingly confrontational trade actor unafraid to square off against Washington, Europe will become more aggressive in the foreign policy arena.

In this regard, it is vital the U.S. recognize the value of its pre-existing bilateral partnerships. It is equally vital that the United States heed the warning signs about how far the EU actually is prepared to go in its effort to centralize foreign policymaking. In its desire to create ‘One Europe,’ the European Security and Defense Policy has already created duplicate security structures to NATO and threatens traditional alliance-building by the United States. Under such conditions, as Henry Kissinger notes, American interests will inevitably, even if unintentionally, lose out:

When the United States deals with the nations of Europe individually, it has the possibility of consulting at many levels and to have its view heard well before a decision is taken. In dealing with the European Union, by contrast, the United States is excluded from the decision-making process and interacts only after the event, with spokesmen for decisions taken by ministers at meetings in which the United States has not participated at any level... Growing estrangement between America and Europe is thus being institutionally fostered.⁸

Neither Britain nor America should view deeper EU absorption as preferable to Britain’s historic and proven links with the United States. The EU’s foreign policy agenda, led by the CFSP and an independent

defense identity, is clearly designed to serve as a counterweight to American global leadership. Britain, for its part, should no longer risk its enduring alliance with the United States to pander to anti-American sentiment in Europe. Or, as Sir Winston Churchill so simply put it: "Never be separated from the Americans."⁹

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Popularity and principle

Another major challenge to the Special Relationship is posed by rising levels of anti-American sentiment in Britain. Favorable opinion toward the United States has dropped from 83 percent in 1999-2000 to just 56 percent in 2006.¹⁰ The British press regularly ridiculed Tony Blair as President George W. Bush's poodle, and Blair's successor and Her Majesty's opposition have both jumped on the America-averse bandwagon. The Conservative Party even went as far as calling for Britain to adopt a less "slavish" relationship with America.¹¹

Worryingly, anti-Americanism is just as widespread among the British public as the political classes. In a June 2006 YouGov Poll, just 22 percent of respondents thought current American policy was helping to make the world a better place, while 65 percent said U.S. policy was making it worse. And a whopping 74 percent of those surveyed thought American actions were contributing to greater instability in the Middle East.¹² A 2007

poll reveals similar sentiments, with incredible hostility toward American actions on the world stage. An overwhelming majority of Britons disapproved of American policy toward Iraq (82 percent), its treatment of detainees at Guantánamo and other prisons (76 percent), as well as other issues, such as its approach to global warming (79 percent).¹³

Such hostility has been perpetuated by a distinct public relations deficit. Neither Blair nor Bush properly made the case for the fruits of the Special Relationship, which has in fact operated to mutual advantage in this new era of transnational terrorism. Undoubtedly, the plots to detonate liquid explosives on up to 10 transatlantic flights in summer 2006 were foiled only because of key transatlantic intelligence exchange and cooperation. As Prime Minister Blair said at the time, "There has been an enormous amount of cooperation with the U.S. authorities which has been of great value and underlines the threat we face and our determination to counter it."¹⁴

No incident more ably illustrates the depth and breadth of the Special Relationship in comparison to the illusory EU alliance than the 2007 Iranian seizure of 15 Royal Navy personnel. While Britain's European neighbors scurried to protect their sizeable investments with Tehran and refused to specify any retaliatory measures in support of a fellow EU member, the United States gave Britain an unequivocal demonstration of its support, conducting its largest naval exercise in the Gulf since 2003.¹⁵ Through its deployment of aircraft and warships, America effectively gave Britain a security guarantee that it would stand shoulder-to-shoulder at any cost during this major international incident.

Both sides need to make the case for the Special Relationship much more aggressively, demonstrating the effectiveness and substantial value of the close British-American cooperation. Both sides could learn from the golden days of Thatcher-Reagan, as well as those of Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt, each of whom regarded the other as an indispensable partner and all of whom made cooperation a politically viable policy.

The muscle behind the alliance

A close and unwavering military relationship goes to the heart of why U.S.-UK ties are so special. In his seminal post-war “Sinews of Peace” speech, Winston Churchill said that interoperable capabilities, personnel exchanges, and doctrinal commonality were the linchpins of the Special Relationship.¹⁶

But these ties are clearly under threat from the European Union’s integrationist ambitions. Commentator Christopher Booker argues that the integration of British military arrangements into the European Union represents a fundamental threat to the current status quo between Washington and London:

The nature of this new military relationship with her European partners will make it increasingly hard for the UK either to fight independently or to cooperate militarily with the U.S. That “special relationship” which has been the cornerstone of British defense policy from the time of the Second World War up to the recent U.S.-British coalition in Iraq will be at an end.¹⁷

British academic Richard North maintains that the “secret” realign-

ment of the UK’s procurement policy demonstrates the gulf opening up between the UK and the United States.¹⁸ North notes that two competing and incompatible high-tech warfare systems are being developed by America and Europe, and points out Britain’s systematic realignment toward the latter. Procurement is abstract, technical, and politically nontoxic, rarely making the front pages, but this does not mean that a wider political agenda is not at work. “For those who would seek to see a European army replace NATO,” British Shadow Defense Secretary Liam Fox has observed, “defence procurement offers the perfect means of undermining the Special Relationship by stealth.”¹⁹

The EU understands Churchill’s thesis very well. The European Security and Defense College, established in 2005 for the exchange of key military personnel among EU member states, will be critical to fostering shared camaraderie and doctrinal understanding of the EU’s approach to security and defense policy in the longer term. The development of personal and professional relationships between British and American military personnel has sustained the Special Relationship for many years, just as America’s International Military Education and Training Program has been a successful tool of U.S. defense policy more generally.

The EU’s relentless supranational drive has demanded a surrender of British national sovereignty in areas such as trade, the economy, and even defense.

With stretched defense budgets and the enormous costs associated with modern high-tech weaponry,

defense expenditures must take on a more global character. As the technological revolution rolls on, the interoperability of defense systems will likely become not just desirable, but essential to joint military efforts. In this respect, jointly funded, interoperable projects which arbitrarily exclude non-EU countries do not make sense. In the age of digital warfare, procurement decisions are absolutely critical, but the EU has made them as political as they are strategic. With Europe's dual desire to create a stronger defense industrial base and to advance an alternate warfare system, the procurement agenda has become skewed against sensible military budgeting and toward the EU's narrow agenda.

As EU military planners aggressively pursue an integrationist agenda, the Special Relationship will undoubtedly suffer as British independence as a military power (and buyer) is constrained. If Britain continues to relinquish the most critical elements of sovereign statehood to Brussels—the right to military action and autonomous foreign policymaking—the British government will become little more than a local authority, either unable or unwilling to partner with the U.S. on military missions, even when they clearly serve Britain's national interest.

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The economic case for the Partnership

It should not be underestimated how heavily the UK is invested in the United States and vice versa.

The U.S. is Britain's top destination for overseas investment. The UK is equally America's biggest trading partner in services, and the top destination for its foreign direct investment. In fact, over the past decade, the UK has accounted for around a third of America's entire overseas investments in the EU.

However, the power of Brussels to interfere in this strong relationship should not be taken too lightly. As the largest trading partner of the EU as a whole, the United States is greatly affected by the regulations being churned out by Brussels. Further centralization of power in Brussels presents the U.S. with long-term challenges in its economic relationship with Europe.

Firstly, European elites continue to dogmatically defend the European social model against global competition. For example, in February 2007 a group of nine EU member states issued an open declaration calling for stronger social, environmental, and work protections, which will only serve to further sap economic growth.²⁰ As America's biggest trading partner, the EU's failure to enact free-market reforms and to reach agreement on wide-ranging socialist provisions such as the Charter of Fundamental Rights will automatically have a negative effect on the U.S. economy.

Secondly, the EU is acting as the world's greatest regulator. Research from Open Europe recently found the EU's current body of law—the *acquis communautaire*—to be a staggering 170,000 pages long, over 100,000 of which have been produced just in the last 10 years.²¹ Günther Verheugen, European Commission Vice-President for Industry and Enterprise, estimates that the cost of regulation in the EU amounts to €600 billion, or

about 5.5 percent of total EU GDP, contrasting with published estimates from the European Commission stating the trade benefits of the Single Market to be just €165 billion.²² The EU has a profound inability to undertake serious economic reform despite numerous pledges to do so. Nor is there any indication that it has a desire to do so. Indeed, the EU is now taking its growth-sapping formula global. According to the *International Herald Tribune*, it is now the EU that determines the antitrust regime for big American companies.²³

The EU's control of member states' trade policies also places limits on the freedom of economically like-minded countries to the U.S., such as Britain, to fashion trade policies more consistent with their bilateral interests. Britain generates 16 percent of EU-27 GDP,²⁴ and is one of just three EU countries whose working-age population is set to increase in the next half century.²⁵ Britain's export markets inside the EU are shrinking while its export markets outside the EU, including that of the U.S., are growing.²⁶ With its entrepreneurial Anglo-Saxon economic model, strong Commonwealth ties, English language and powerhouse financial capital, Britain is increasingly damaged by Brussels' excessive regulations and statist model.

Still special after all these years

"We are with Europe, but not of it," Winston Churchill famously remarked in 1953. "We are linked but not comprised. We are associated but not absorbed. And should European statesmen address us and say, 'Shall we speak for thee?', we should reply, 'Nay Sir, for we dwell among our own people.'"²⁷

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The Special Relationship demonstrates that common interests can overcome past enmities and occasional conflict. Britain and America have stood shoulder to shoulder in the hardest of times and continue to enjoy the fruits of a solid relationship. As my colleague at the Heritage Foundation, Nile Gardiner, has stated, "The U.S.-British alliance continues to operate as a strikingly successful partnership of two great nations built on the solid foundations of a common heritage, culture, and vision."²⁸

This history suggests grounds for optimism for the future, in spite of today's considerable anti-American feeling in Britain. The anti-Americanism of the 1980s gave way to the British- and American-led victory in the Cold War. The passivity of the 1990s gave way to a post-9/11 period of enormous diplomatic and military unity. Hostility and indifference are temporary. The common interests and values that drive the Special Relationship have proven enduring time and again. And, whatever the ups and downs, that is not likely to change.



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