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The New British Government, the 'Special Relationship,' and the Middle East

By [Simon Henderson](#)
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On May 6, Britain went to the polls to elect a new government, producing no clear result but forcing the resignation of Labor Party leader Gordon Brown. Within hours of taking over as prime minister, Conservative Party leader David Cameron had created a new body, a British national security council, whose first meeting focused on "discuss[ing] the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and review[ing] the terrorist threat to the UK." Apart from Britain's economic problems, these issues and Middle East policy in general will likely dominate the new government's agenda -- and its relations with Washington.

The Special Relationship

Despite the historical backdrop of the United States achieving independence from the British crown, the legacy of the past several decades has been of a close partnership between the two countries -- a "special relationship" that is well understood although often loosely defined. Its origins lie in the close collaboration between President Franklin Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill during World War II, but it strengthened during the Cold War.

In a 2009 [lecture](#), former undersecretary of defense Eric Edelman identified four pillars to the relationship: leaders and elites committed to the notion that English-speaking peoples have something special to bring the world in terms of open society and the rule of law; a willingness to wage war together; scientific exchanges, particularly on nuclear weapons; and close collaboration on signals and communications intelligence. In simple terms, it means that each country is the other's preferred military partner and most trusted intelligence and diplomatic partner.

Despite strains, U.S.-British ties have survived -- and, arguably, been deepened by -- the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, where Britain's military and other commitments have been second only to those of the United States. It is noteworthy that an hour after Cameron became prime minister, he received a congratulatory telephone call from President Obama, who told him that "the United States has no closer friend and ally than the United Kingdom," later describing the relationship as "extraordinary." Reinforcing the ties, newly appointed British foreign secretary William Hague flew to the United States for a brief visit within forty-eight hours of receiving an invitation from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

The Immediate Agenda

The main reported topics at the Clinton-Hague meeting were Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, and the Middle East peace process. Of these, Afghanistan seems preeminent, with Washington reportedly worried that Cameron will reconsider Britain's military commitment due to domestic concern about British casualties and a sense of futility regarding a political settlement. Lack of funds to purchase the most suitable military equipment was an issue in the run-up to the election, and Cameron will not want to inherit the blame from Brown.

In terms of defense and foreign affairs, it is difficult to distinguish any policy differences between the previous and new administrations. Their approach will almost certainly be different, however, given past criticisms of the government for seemingly kowtowing to Washington on key Middle Eastern issues. For example, in remarks at the State Department on May 14, Hague called the relationship "unbreakable" while at the same time promising "solid but not slavish" ties -- a formulation used by Cameron in a 2006 speech, when he stated that Britain would no longer be "America's unconditional associate in every endeavor."

Strains within the British Governing Coalition

In order to reach a parliamentary majority, the Conservatives were forced to form a coalition with the leftist Liberal Democrats, at the cost of granting them five seats in the twenty-three-member cabinet. (The Liberal Democrats had also tried to form a pact with the defeated but more ideologically similar Labor Party.) Commentators are already speculating how long the collaboration -- very rare in British politics -- can last.

On foreign policy, the differences are wide. Most of the Conservatives are natural Atlanticists and cautious of Europe. In contrast, the Liberal Democrats tend to warn of Britain's "subservient" relationship with the United States. They also oppose maintaining Britain's independent (and expensive) nuclear deterrent, which is based on U.S.-supplied Trident missile submarines.

The division of cabinet portfolios means that Conservative politicians retain a firm grip on foreign, defense, and financial policy and the British equivalents of the Justice and Homeland Security Departments in Washington. But Liberal Democratic leader Nick Clegg is both deputy prime minister and a member of the new national security council, meaning, in the words of Foreign Secretary Hague, that he will be "in the inner core" for key foreign policy decisions. In March, Clegg declared that Britain's "strategic interests will not be served unless we release ourselves from the spell of default Atlanticism which has prevailed so strongly since [1956]."

Regarding the Middle East peace process, the Conservatives are generally supportive of Israel. Cameron told British Jewish leaders before the election that he would renew focus on relations with Gulf Arab states. But during a visit to Israel, he described east Jerusalem as occupied territory. The Conservatives are reportedly sympathetic to the argument that Britain cannot take a role in the peace process while Israeli officials visiting Britain are vulnerable to arrest under "Universal Jurisdiction" procedures -- that is, possible arrest under war crimes charges assembled by pro-Palestinian activists. Regarding military actions, Foreign Secretary Hague was critical of Israel during the 2006 Lebanon war but supportive during the 2009 Gaza conflict.

For their part, the Liberal Democrats are traditionally regarded as unfriendly toward Israel, supporting positions such as boycotts against Israeli goods. Several senior party members have a reputation for being outspoken on the issue. In one particularly outrageous example, Clegg was forced to sack Baroness Jenny Tonge as the party's health spokesperson in February 2010 after she lent credence to a report that Israeli medical teams operating in post-earthquake Haiti may have been harvesting organs from victims. And Clegg himself called for an arms embargo against Israel during Operation Cast Lead in Gaza. On Universal Jurisdiction, the party believes the issue needs further investigation and review before any changes are made.

Regarding Iran, the Conservative Party has tended to be very forceful, supporting immediately tightened sanctions through the UN and European Union or unilaterally. Liberal Democrats recognize the threat posed by Iran's nuclear program and support "targeted" sanctions, but they oppose any military action.

Iran sanctions and Universal Jurisdiction (the abolition of which requires a parliamentary vote) will be early tests of the new national security council and the coalition government's inner workings. Political antagonism seems less likely on counterterrorism, however. The new government will likely repeal laws allowing forty-two-day detentions of terrorist suspects and cancel plans for a national identification card. And Cameron has seemingly demonstrated his own personal view of the terrorist threat, reducing his motorcade to just one chase vehicle and, yesterday, mingling with tourists as he insisted on walking the few hundred yards from his

Downing Street office for an appearance in Parliament. An early indication of policy will be whether his government channels its contacts with the Muslim community through the Muslim Council of Britain (which the Brown administration last year boycotted because of a statement by the council approving violence) instead of favoring a wider approach to engagement.

Role of Personal Relationships?

Aside from military and intelligence cooperation, the last half century of U.S.-British relations clearly shows that the special relationship tends to reflect the depth of ties between the two nation's leaders and their close associates. On this basis, President Obama's prompt congratulations to Cameron augur well.

A meeting between Obama and Cameron is scheduled to be held at the G-20 economic summit in Canada next month. The president has also invited Cameron and his wife to visit the United States as early as July. At the same time, Obama is reportedly prone to avoiding close personal friendships with allied leaders. In any case, by calling the U.S.-British partnership "extraordinary," he has attracted the attention of an audience anxious to know the latest definition of the special relationship, and what it can contribute to several major policy challenges.

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