

Reassessing the special relationship

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The 'special relationship' between Britain and America has underpinned British foreign and defence policy for the past 60 years—since before most of today's British citizens were born. Gordon Brown once again reaffirmed the British commitment to this guiding concept in his prime ministerial speech to the Lord Mayor's Banquet on 10 November 2008. The 'central argument' of his speech was 'that the alliance between Britain and America—and more broadly between Europe and America—can and must provide leadership' in reshaping global order. 'Rightly people talk of a special relationship; but that special relationship is also a partnership for a purpose—to be 'the engine of effective multilateralism'. 'Winston Churchill', he added, 'described the joint inheritance of Britain and America as not just a shared history but a shared belief in the great principles of freedom and the rights of man.'¹ Shared global leadership, shared history, shared values, shared commitment to a liberal world order: the core elements of Churchill's conceptualization of the Anglo-American special relationship remain at the heart of the current Prime Minister's exposition of British foreign policy.

The election of President Obama has removed the most visible sources of recent doubt in British commitment to close partnership with the United States: the Bush administration's unilateralism, its retreat from international law, its inclination to define its foreign policy in terms of good versus evil. The scale of Obama's victory, and the splintering of the conservative–evangelical coalition which had supported Bush's unilateral foreign policy, seem to indicate a return to the values that Churchill and Roosevelt jointly proclaimed in the Atlantic Charter of August 1941. British policy-makers and commentators may therefore return to the comfortable assumptions of a 'special' Anglo-American partnership. The aim of this article is to argue that, before they do, a more open and critical debate should take place on its costs and benefits to the United Kingdom.

The US–UK special relationship today has a political and ideological superstructure and an embedded military and intelligence substructure. Its political dimension rests partly on privileged access for British politicians and diplomats in Washington, partly on the perception that British and American interests are—or should be—closely aligned, and partly on sentimental assertions of shared values. Mrs Thatcher's dismissal of the first Bush administration's explicit preference for

¹ Gordon Brown, speech to the Lord Mayor's Banquet, London, 10 Nov. 2008.

partnership with Germany on coming into office sums up this sentimental element: ‘the ties of blood, language, culture and values which bound Britain and America were the only firm basis for US policy in the West.’² The substructure, however, is also significant, both in terms of its evident advantages to the UK and in terms of the formal and informal constraints it places on Britain’s freedom of action. We examine below aspects of the intelligence link, the defence—and defence procurement—relationship, including the vital nuclear deterrent relationship, and Britain’s provision of bases to support the US global role. A brief historical survey will help to explain the structures we have inherited and the assumptions on which they rest.

The special relationship, 1947–1963—and after

From the moment the United States entered the Second World War, British and American military commands, intelligence operations, defence research and arms supply chains worked closely together—virtually integrated in the European theatre, though much less so on the American-dominated Far Eastern front. Diplomats and domestic officials from the two countries together negotiated the shape of postwar international institutions, intended to secure a lasting peace. A close personal relationship between the two national leaders, Churchill and Roosevelt, gave this partnership legitimacy and strategic direction. Churchill’s cultivation of the American president was key to the relationship between allies whose military priorities and postwar interests often diverged. ‘No lover ever studied the whims of his mistress as I did those of President Roosevelt,’ he later told his private secretary.³

With the end of the war, however, the troops went home. Joint commands were dismantled, codebreaking operations run down, air bases were closed, shared defence research suspended. On 5 March 1946, in his ‘iron curtain’ speech, Winston Churchill summoned the Americans to return to protect western Europe from the rising external and internal threats of Soviet-led communism and conjured up the concept of Anglo-American partnership to lead the free world. ‘The crux of what I have travelled here to say’, he emphasized, was that

Neither the sure prevention of war, nor the continuous rise of world organization will be gained without what I have called the fraternal association of the English-speaking peoples. This means a special relationship between the British Commonwealth and Empire and the United States ... Fraternal association requires not only the growing friendship and mutual understanding between our two vast but kindred systems of society, but the continuance of the intimate relationship between our military advisers ... It should carry with it the continuance of the present facilities for mutual security by the joint use of all naval and air force bases in the possession of either country all over the world.⁴

² Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street years* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 784.

³ Sir John Colville, in conversation with David Dimbleby, quoted in David Dimbleby and David Reynolds, *An ocean apart: the relationship between Britain and America in the 20th century* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1988), p. 125.

⁴ Winston S. Churchill, ‘The sinews of peace’, speech to Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri, 5 March 1946.

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It was Washington's changing assessment of Soviet intentions, more than the evocation of fraternal solidarity, that persuaded the Truman administration to respond.

In 1947 the UK and United States (together with Canada, Australia and New Zealand) pooled many of their intelligence assets, through the UK–USA Agreement. In 1948, as the first Berlin crisis erupted, US bombers returned to British airfields, initially under temporary and informal arrangements. In 1948–9 British diplomacy worked to create the Atlantic alliance, bringing the United States in alongside the UK as external guarantors of the security of the weak states of continental western Europe. Britain played a leading role in the negotiations in 1954–5 which permitted the return of formal sovereignty to West Germany, allowing for the recreation of German armed forces under the supervision of the Western European Union after the collapse of the reluctant French proposals for a European Defence Community. Thus Britain's position as America's leading European ally was confirmed. British ministers and diplomats worked with Washington—and Paris—to create a network of alliances to contain the Soviet Union: CENTO (the Baghdad Pact) across the Middle East and SEATO across South-East Asia.

Secret British cooperation with the French and Israeli governments to recapture the Suez Canal and overthrow the Egyptian regime in 1956 led to a brief hiatus. The US administration refused to support the pound sterling as it plunged on the international exchanges; intelligence cooperation between the two governments broke down. Leaders in Paris concluded that the United States would always put its own geopolitical interests ahead of those of its allies, and turned to Germany to support France's international ambitions. Their counterparts in London turned back to Washington, and away from the European continent, as the only way to maintain Britain's global role. In 1957 Prime Minister Macmillan negotiated the Bermuda Agreement, formally restoring the Anglo-American cooperation in military nuclear research that the US Congress had broken in 1946. As the costs of Britain's own nuclear deterrent force escalated, its government first negotiated the purchase of the US air-launched Skybolt missile; then, after its cancellation in December 1962, Macmillan persuaded President Kennedy to provide the submarine-launched Polaris instead.

Nevertheless, first the Eisenhower administration and then the Kennedy administration pressed the British government to widen this bilateral partnership by joining with France and Germany in developing an integrated 'European pillar' within the 'western' Atlantic community. The recovery of western Europe, with first Germany and then France overtaking Britain in economic performance, made Britain a less privileged partner in economic and financial diplomacy; it was the European Economic Community that the United States saw as its strategic partner in the Kennedy Round of trade negotiations. Macmillan reluctantly opened negotiations with the European Economic Community in 1961; the negotiators were still struggling with the details of Commonwealth agricultural trade when de

quoted in Robert Rhodes James, *Winston S. Churchill: his complete speeches 1897–1963*, vol. VII, 1943–1949 (New York and London: Chelsea House Publishers, 1974), pp. 7285–93.

Gaulle pronounced his veto in January 1963, using the UK–US Polaris Agreement as his justification. As Macmillan was travelling to Nassau to save Britain’s nuclear deterrent, at the cost of Britain’s application to the EEC, Dean Acheson declared—to British fury—that ‘Britain has lost an Empire but has not yet found a role’. He added that ‘The attempt to play a separate power role—that is, a role apart from Europe, a role based on the “special relationship” with the US, a role based on being head of a “Commonwealth” which has no political structure or unity ...—this role is about played out.’⁵

Acheson thus declared the special relationship to have outlived its useful life. Macmillan resigned the following year; and after him, through the late 1960s, the wartime generation in Washington and London retired, both from politics and from government service. Defence cuts and withdrawals, together with the decolonization of Britain’s African and South-East Asian territories, reduced the UK’s strategic weight.

In a series of lectures at Harvard in the spring of 1967 the Conservative opposition leader, Edward Heath, followed the logic of Acheson’s argument, dismissing ‘the so-called special relationship between Britain and the United States’. He cited the reorientation of America’s strategic priorities away from Europe to East Asia, the devaluation of sterling, the withdrawal from east of Suez, and the loss of Britain’s leadership role in the Commonwealth as marking a ‘shift in power in the modern world’ to which a future British government would have to adjust.⁶ In government, Heath led the UK into the European Community in 1973, at its third attempt, helping to shape the development of European foreign policy cooperation. The embedded substructures of Anglo-American cooperation nevertheless remained in place. Intelligence cooperation was sustained, as were military exchanges—though reduced by the more limited overlap in military tasks.

It was Margaret Thatcher as prime minister, presiding over domestic economic recovery and the reassertion of the projection of military power in the Falklands war, who re-established close personal relations with the incumbent US president as a cardinal principle of British foreign policy. Like Churchill with Roosevelt she played expertly to Ronald Reagan’s whims, with the aim of exerting influence over US foreign policy. There were several sharp disagreements: over the US intervention in Grenada, over the US–Soviet nuclear heads of agreement in Reykjavik, even over the degree of American support for Britain in the opening stages of the Falklands campaign. But the British government was solidly supportive of the United States when necessary, accepting US cruise missiles in the teeth of popular demonstrations, refraining from criticizing the ‘Star Wars’ initiative in spite of misgivings within Whitehall, and (in contrast to France and Spain) permitting US aircraft to operate from bases in Britain to bomb Libya in 1986. Margaret Thatcher had no doubt that Britain carried more global influence as a partner of the United States than as a member of a European caucus.

⁵ Speech at West Point, Dec. 1962, quoted in Peter Riddell, *Hug them close: Blair, Clinton, Bush and the ‘special relationship’* (London: Politico’s, 2003), p. 41.

⁶ Edward Heath, *Old world, new horizons: Britain, the Common Market and the Atlantic alliance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 63–6.

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The deliberate choice of the incoming Bush administration in 1989 to meet the German chancellor before inviting the British prime minister to Washington was therefore wounding. James Baker, Bush's Secretary of State, mistrusted Reagan's indulgence of Margaret Thatcher, and intended to signal that American interests came before sentimental attachments.⁷ London re-established its position in Washington somewhat the following year after the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait. Alone among the United States' European allies, Britain provided a fully equipped armoured division for the coalition which won the first Gulf war, demonstrating that for extra-European deployments Britain remained America's most valuable partner. The Major government nevertheless struggled to build influence in Washington, distracted as it was by internal divisions and economic setbacks. So it was left to New Labour, from 1997, to rebuild the political dimension of the special relationship, first with its progressive allies in the Clinton administration and then, more delicately, with the administration of the second George Bush. It is a sign of its success that the primacy of the special relationship remains a matter of consensus between government and opposition in 2009, even after the strains which a number of Bush administration policies have placed upon it.

The structure of the special relationship since 1997

Defence cooperation

Defence cooperation was at the heart of the special relationship from the outset, and remains central to it. 'Britain has influence on American policy to the extent that it still has some power and influence itself in various parts of the world ... the price of consultation is presence and participation,' as one recent British ambassador to Washington has put it.⁸ Since the end of the Cold War, the UK has provided the largest and most effective non-American contingent in three US-led extra-European conflicts: the first Gulf war in 1991; the intervention in Afghanistan since 2001; and the second Gulf war of 2003 and the subsequent occupation of Iraq. 'From the outset,' the Secretary of State for Defence stated of Britain's response to 9/11, 'we demonstrated by our actions our wish to work closely with our most important ally, the US. Our ability to operate alongside the US ... will be key to future success.'⁹

The 2003 defence white paper spelled out the central importance of defence capability to the special relationship, and the clear trade-off between defence contribution and expectations of influence:

The significant military contribution the UK is able to make to [US-led coalition operations] means that we secure an effective place in the political and military decision-making processes. To exploit this effectively, our Armed Forces will need to be interoperable with

⁷ Riddell, *Hug them close*, p. 52.

⁸ Lord Renwick, quoted in Jeffery D. McCausland and Douglas T. Stuart, eds, *US-UK relations at the start of the 21st century* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2006), p. 3.

⁹ *The Strategic Defence Review: a new chapter*, Cm. 5566 (London: SO, July 2002), p. 5.

US command and control structures, match the US operational tempo and provide those capabilities that deliver the greatest impact when operating alongside the US.¹⁰

The 2008 defence white paper reaffirmed that ‘the importance of our relationship with the United States will not diminish’.¹¹

The costs over the preceding ten years of maintaining Britain’s position as America’s most loyal and effective ally, with a contribution to make in all major dimensions of conflict, have been high. The ‘revolution in military affairs’ and network-enabled warfare have driven a steep rise in US defence procurement, leaving the British struggling to afford compatible systems and with a heavily overcommitted future procurement programme. The Royal United Services Institute has estimated the British contribution to operations in Afghanistan at 80 per cent of the American effort in relation to population size and 110 per cent in relation to GDP.¹² The parallel commitment to intervention and post-conflict occupation in Iraq has left British forces severely overstretched. In spite of this major input, there have been a number of reports of US military dissatisfaction with British tactics and equipment, in both countries.¹³ There is a strong case that British defence spending will have to be increased if the UK is to sustain its privileged position and the respect of its US partner.¹⁴

In return for this contribution, however, British officers and civilian officials have privileged access to US defence planning. Officials from the Ministry of Defence were ‘embedded’ in the Pentagon team that conducted the 2005 US Quadrennial Defense Review, for the first time in such a process.¹⁵ Seventeen British personnel were embedded in US Central Command in late 2008 as it conducted a review of the coalition’s strategy in Afghanistan.¹⁶ Others are seconded to US naval headquarters in Norfolk, Virginia and to a number of research and development programmes across the United States.

Britain is also a privileged partner in defence procurement: the only ‘Level One’ partner in the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter programme, the largest foreign investor in the US defence industry, and thus the largest foreign supplier to the US defence procurement programme—though often from British subsidiaries within the United States. Given the dominant size of the US defence market, and its technological lead, this is an immense advantage to British companies—and to the British government, so long as the UK is committed to maintaining a substantial defence

¹⁰ *Delivering security in a changing world: defence white paper*, Cm. 6041-I (London: SO, Dec. 2003), p. 8.

¹¹ *The defence plan: including the government’s expenditure plans, 2008–12*, Cm. 7385 (London: SO, June 2008), p. 11.

¹² Michael Codner, *The hard choices: twenty questions for British defence policy and national military strategy* (London: Royal United Services Institute, 2008), p. 1.

¹³ See, e.g., Rachel Sylvester, ‘Memo: don’t rely on the Brits during a battle’, *The Times*, 6 Jan. 2009.

¹⁴ The UK’s National Security Strategy, however, cautions that the UK already has ‘the second-highest defence budget in the world in cash terms, and the fifth-highest in purchasing power terms (after the United States, China, India and Russia). In the last year we will have spent up to £2.9 billion in addition to the defence budget in Iraq and Afghanistan ... But the primary factor is the rising cost of equipment’. Cabinet Office, *The National Security Strategy of the United Kingdom: security in an interdependent world*, Cm. 7291 (London: SO, March 2008), p. 46.

¹⁵ Leo Michel, ‘Observations on the special relationship in security and defence matters’, in McCausland and Stuart, *US–UK relations*, p. 157.

¹⁶ Interview. While preparing this article, the authors conducted a number of background interviews with British personnel currently or recently involved in managing UK–US relations.

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industrial base. Privileged access to US defence technology is not, however, guaranteed. There has been a longstanding tension between the US administration and more protectionist voices in Congress; there have been bitter arguments over British access to operating codes for electronic equipment, for example, which at one stage threatened continued British participation in the F-35 programme. 'Access to US technology will ... continue to be of particular importance,' the 2001 defence white paper noted (the United States was then spending ten times as much as the UK on defence research and development, the rest of Europe only four times as much). 'To maintain access we can expect to need something to offer in return.'¹⁷ British development of vertical take-off capability through the Harrier programme, licensed to McDonnell Douglas, had contributed to the F-35 project; the UK was also the largest foreign contributor to the costs of the programme.

Military nuclear cooperation

Nuclear cooperation was not part of the special relationship until the late 1950s. The wartime Manhattan project had been governed by secret agreements, which an uninformed Congress disregarded after the war. The UK thereafter pursued its own independent programme for the development of nuclear weapons and of delivery systems for them—both aircraft and missiles. The financial strains of defence research, development and procurement, however, made it increasingly important to the British government to regain access to US nuclear programmes. In 1958, at the Bermuda US–UK summit which completed the re-establishment of the special relationship after the hiatus of the Suez crisis, Macmillan concluded the 'Mutual Agreement for Cooperation on the Uses of Atomic Energy for Mutual Defence Purposes'. The House of Commons Defence Committee in 2006 described this as 'the cornerstone of the UK's nuclear weapons programme', allowing the UK to draw on US warhead designs and laying the foundation for British procurement of US delivery systems.¹⁸

One aspect of this agreement was a joint programme to procure the Skybolt air-launched missile, which was to form a central component of the UK's next-generation nuclear force. Unilateral American cancellation of this programme, in 1962, led to another crisis in US–UK relations, resolved at the Nassau summit by the US offer of Polaris submarine-launched missiles instead on what were reported to be financially generous terms. Development of the US Polaris base at Holy Loch, on the Firth of Clyde, was part of the package agreed. When the United States moved on to the longer-range Trident missile, the UK modified the Polaris sales agreement to purchase these. Britain 'has title' to 58 Trident missiles, out of a common pool of missiles maintained and serviced at the US Strategic Weapons Facility at King's Bay, Georgia on the US east coast. These carry a British-manufactured nuclear warhead which is reported to be closely related to the US

¹⁷ *The future strategic context for defence: defence white paper*, Cm. 30, Feb. 2001, p. 8.

¹⁸ Ministry of Defence, *The future of the UK's strategic nuclear deterrent: the strategic context*, HC-986, 2005–6, June 2006, para. 29.

W76 warhead.¹⁹ The Atomic Weapons Establishment in Berkshire, where the warheads are partly designed and manufactured, has itself been one-third owned by Lockheed Martin since its partial privatization; in December 2008 it passed to majority American control, when the British government sold its 33 per cent stake to a Californian company.²⁰

US Trident boats were built with a longer lifespan than their British equivalents, leaving the British government with a delicate decision to take on the renewal of the UK strategic deterrent system. The planned new generation of British submarines will have an operational life up to 2050, whereas the United States proposes to phase out the 'extended life' Trident missiles in the early 2040s when US submarines are replaced. The UK is relying on assurances from the United States that any replacement missile system will be compatible with British submarines already in service then—risking a shift in US procurement priorities of the kind that saw the Skybolt programme dropped.²¹

There are enormous advantages to the UK in this relationship. The UK has gained access to US technology, warhead and submarine design, as well as to US missiles at a price well below that of a fully independent system. The cost to the UK, of course, is that its deterrent is only semi-independent. 'The UK's current nuclear deterrent is fully operationally independent of the US,' the 2006 white paper declared; 'the US has never sought to exploit our procurement relationship in this area as a means to influence UK foreign policy.'²² The unstated qualification in this assertion is the knowledge that the United States could exploit the relationship in this way and that UK policy is therefore constrained to avoid provoking the United States to threaten so to do.

Fifty years ago, part of the rationale for maintaining a British independent deterrent was that its possession increased the UK's standing in Washington. Sir Norman Brook, Secretary to the Cabinet in 1961, argued that 'the key question was what size of force would make the United States believe that Britain was making a major contribution to the western deterrent'.²³ Dependence on the United States to supply the systems needed to convince Washington that Britain remained a major ally was in some ways a circular argument. The current British government has denied that its arguments for retention of an independent deterrent for another generation relate to questions of international standing with respect either to the United States or to France; but it cannot deny that it depends heavily, and one-sidedly, on America for its continued viability and that the UK's provision of support for US policies in other fields, of troops in support of US-led operations in other countries and of bases in Britain and in territories overseas are constrained by awareness of this dependence.

¹⁹ Michael Clarke, 'Does my bomb look big in this?', *International Affairs* 80: 1, Jan. 2004, pp. 49–62.

²⁰ *Financial Times*, 19 Dec. 2008. The Ministry of Defence, in *The future of the United Kingdom's nuclear deterrent* (Cm. 6994, Dec. 2006, para. 7–3), admits that 'certain non-nuclear components of the warhead' are manufactured in the United States.

²¹ Ministry of Defence, *The future of the United Kingdom's nuclear deterrent*, para. 1–8.

²² Ministry of Defence, *The future of the United Kingdom's nuclear deterrent*, paras 4–6, 4–8. Operational independence means freedom to deploy, or to threaten to use its nuclear weapons, in a crisis; dependence on American consent for regular maintenance of missiles and for longer-term provision of technical assistance and expertise is accepted.

²³ John Baylis, *Ambiguity and deterrence: British nuclear strategy 1945–1964* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 369.

Provision of bases to the United States

The return of US air forces to Britain in 1948 was not covered by any formal agreement. When in 1950 the Americans asked to take over additional airfields in Oxfordshire, the British government set out its position in a letter to the US ambassador—which was subsequently mislaid by both the British and the Americans.²⁴ Consultation on the operational deployment of American aircraft (many armed with nuclear weapons) from bases in Britain was agreed by Prime Minister Attlee and President Truman in October 1951 and confirmed by Churchill and Truman at a meeting in Washington in January 1952.²⁵ From then until the end of the Cold War, US bases in the UK were governed by a series of exchanges of notes—the ‘other arrangements’ in what the British government has continued to describe as the ‘NATO Status of Forces Agreement of 1951 and other arrangements’.²⁶

After the end of the Cold War the United States ran down and closed several of its largest British air bases, as American strategic priorities shifted away from the European theatre. There remain two major air bases, at RAF Lakenheath and RAF Mildenhall in East Anglia, a forward operating base at RAF Fairford in Gloucestershire (one of three bases, the other two being Guam and Diego Garcia, to which US B-2 (Stealth) bombers can easily be deployed), a major US intercept and intelligence analysis station at RAF Menwith Hill in North Yorkshire, an intelligence analysis centre at RAF Molesworth in Cambridgeshire, and eight smaller bases. Together, these employ around 15,000 US personnel in total, roughly half the numbers of US forces in Britain during the Cold War.²⁷ The 2005 US Quadrennial Defense Review envisaged further investment at RAF Lakenheath and RAF Mildenhall, in contrast to continuing reductions in the larger American military presence in Germany. Lakenheath is the largest air base in the UK, with over 5,000 personnel; it hosts the only US F-15 fighter wing in Europe. Mildenhall is a major refuelling base, with other units dedicated to reconnaissance, intelligence, special forces and air mobility. Ministers insist to parliament that these are RAF bases ‘under the command of a British officer’, but most have only one resident liaison officer of relatively junior rank.²⁸

²⁴ Exchange of letters between MoD and US Department of the Air Force, 25 June and 19 July 1976 (UK Public Record Office). The letter of 25 June, from Miss B. E. Lee of the MoD, adds, with reference to RAF Menwith Hill, ‘Incidentally I cannot find any copy of a lease between the US Army and War Office and conclude that the occupation rests on correspondence.’

²⁵ John Baylis, *Anglo-American defence relations 1939–1980* (London: Macmillan, 1981), p. 35. ‘Even then,’ he adds, ‘these “Attlee–Churchill Understandings”, as they became known, were rather vague and open-ended.’ The Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, noted that ‘there had never been a decision taken by the Cabinet regarding the permanent location of American bombers in this country; neither had we ever reported the question to Parliament’. Quoted in Dimpleby and Reynolds, *An ocean apart*, p. 186.

²⁶ See, e.g., Bob Ainsworth MP, Minister of State, Defence, Hansard (Commons), 15 Jan. 2008, col. 1137. The Air Minister, in a letter of 9 September 1953 to the US ambassador about these ‘arrangements which have been agreed upon’, confirms ‘that Her Majesty’s Government see no need for the terms of the understanding to be embodied in a formal agreement’.

²⁷ David Gee, *US military and intelligence bases in Britain: a briefing* (London: Quaker Peace and Social Witness, June 2004), p. 3, estimates US forces personnel at 16,500.

²⁸ Baroness Crawley, Hansard (Lords), *Hansard* debates, 10 Jan. 2008, col. 986 and Sean Simmons, ‘Getting personal: RAF Lakenheath’s new, singular Brit’, *Stars and Stripes*, 3 Oct. 2007.

RAF Menwith Hill is primarily a US National Security Agency listening station, with around 1,500 civilian and military personnel. Its interception of civil as well as military communications has attracted controversy, notably in a European Parliament inquiry in 2001 which suggested that US personnel were monitoring commercially significant communications across Europe.²⁹ Together with RAF Fylingdales, the British-manned radar station on the Yorkshire moors, it forms part of the US and NATO missile early warning system and now also of the planned US ballistic missile defence system.

The UK also provides two bases for American forces in British Overseas Territories, at Ascension Island and Diego Garcia. The airfield on Ascension Island was built by the Americans during the Second World War; it was closed after the end of the war but reopened in 1957 as a missile tracking station. In 1982 the US Space Command provided facilities for the British to use the airfield as a staging post in the Falklands war. Since then the base has been shared, although civilian air operators still negotiate with the US authorities, rather than the British, for access. The development of the Diego Garcia base followed Britain's separation of the Chagos Islands from Mauritius in 1965, with the creation of the British Indian Ocean Territory and the forced transfer of the Chagos Islanders to Mauritius. In 1971 the United States began the construction of a major base, which now includes an airfield, submarine and naval moorings, and 'pre-positioned' military equipment on naval support vessels and on land. It has played a major role in the projection of US power into the Persian Gulf since its construction and into Afghanistan since 2001. A small number of British personnel provide administrative services, but the inability of British ministers to establish whether or not the United States had held detainees captured in Afghanistan on the island between 2003 and 2008 indicates that British information about operations in Diego Garcia is severely limited.³⁰

The United States benefits very considerably from the provision of these bases. Like Diego Garcia, the operational bases in Britain now serve primarily as staging posts in the projection of US power across the greater Middle East. Britain benefits from this power projection to the extent to which it shares US objectives and threat analyses across that region. The costs to Britain are largely intangible, and may be summarized as the cession of sovereignty over British territory, within a framework where executive agreements largely beyond public or parliamentary accountability rest upon mutual trust between the British and American administrations. RAF Menwith Hill, the British base with the most restricted access, was for many years closed to British MPs; members of the Parliamentary Intelligence Scrutiny Committee are now permitted to visit. Diego Garcia remains effectively

²⁹ European Parliament, 'Report on the existence of a global system for the interception of private and commercial communications (ECHELON interception system)', 2001/2098(INI), 11 July 2001.

³⁰ In January 2003 Baroness Amos assured the House of Lords that 'The United States Government would need to ask for our permission to bring any suspects to Diego Garcia. They have not done so and no suspects are being held on Diego Garcia.' Hansard (Lords), 8 Jan. 2003, col. 1020. In February 2008 David Miliband, as Foreign Secretary, stated that US authorities had now informed him that two rendition flights had passed through the base. See Mark Tran, 'Miliband admits US rendition flights stopped on British soil', *Guardian*, 21 Feb. 2008. On 1 August 2008 *Time* magazine published details of prisoners in the 'extraordinary rendition' programme who had been held in Diego Garcia.

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closed to British scrutiny. There have been unconfirmed reports that the cession of Diego Garcia to the United States as a base was part of the 1962 package on the provision of the Polaris missile, with a lower price attached to the missiles in return.³¹ A series of agreements and exchanges of notes between the two governments between 1966 and 1976 provided for a 70-year lease of the island to 2036, with provision for either side to opt out after 50 years in 2016.

Intelligence

The intelligence relationship grew out of the wartime partnership between Britain's Special Operations Executive and Secret Intelligence Service (SOE and SIS) and US agencies, which rapidly outgrew their British counterparts as they expanded to counter the Soviet threat. The Suez debacle—during which London had hidden intelligence from Washington and Washington retaliated by cutting cooperation—resulted in the relegation of UK intelligence to the role of junior partner that it has played ever since. Few in the UK agencies today question the value of the intelligence relationship with the United States, even if they have reservations about some US methods.

Since the 1947 UKUSA agreement on signals intelligence (SIGINT), the UK has monitored Europe and the Middle East through its bases on Cyprus and at GCHQ in Cheltenham and passed SIGINT on to the US National Security Agency (NSA). Aided by similar intelligence gathered by Australia and Canada, the UKUSA Echelon network has been described as 'an eavesdropping superpower'.³² Originally designed for Cold War purposes, this network nevertheless expanded during the 1990s, with an increasing focus on internet communications—in spite of criticism of Echelon, most strongly by the European Parliament.³³ Such close ties with the United States provide the UK with access to projects it could not afford alone, such as the purchase of a 'time share' on the US Magnum SIGINT satellite.³⁴

The degree of integration of the SIGINT network with the NSA has raised questions about the operational independence of GCHQ from NSA. US insistence in 1984 that membership of trades unions should be banned for all GCHQ employees, carried through by the Thatcher government, aroused domestic controversy. Many 'joint' operations, such as access to the Magnum satellite, are dependent on US consent.³⁵ The Falklands war illustrates the UK's dependency. Though SIGINT was essential in defeating Argentina, 98 per cent of it came from NSA and not GCHQ—which under the UKUSA agreement focuses on Europe. With some members of the Reagan administration cautious about hastening the fall of

³¹ Gee, *US military and intelligence bases in Britain*, p. 27 and *Sunday Times*, 25 Jan. 1976. See also David Vine, *Island of shame: the secret history of the US military base on Diego Garcia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, forthcoming 2009).

³² James Bamford, *Body of secrets: how America's NSA and Britain's GCHQ eavesdrop on the world* (London: Arrow, 2002), pp. 40, 422.

³³ European Parliament, 'Report on the existence of a global system'.

³⁴ Richard J. Aldrich, 'Transatlantic intelligence and security cooperation', *International Affairs* 80: 4, July 2004, pp. 731–5 and Bamford, *Body of secrets*, p. 401.

³⁵ Bamford, *Body of secrets*, p. 400.

the anti-communist Argentine junta, data were not at first passed on automatically to Britain, leaving the UK dependent for intelligence on 'clandestine' negotiations with pro-British American officials.³⁶ Conversely, on European intelligence the United States collates much of its own data from its UK-based SIGINT station at RAF Menwith Hill, autonomously from GCHQ.³⁷

In contrast, within the arena of human intelligence (humint), Britain's MI5 and MI6 (SIS) agencies retain operational independence, despite close cooperation with their US counterparts. Intelligence in this field is shared with various countries beside the United States, most notably the primarily European Berne Group.³⁸ The more subjective nature of the material gives rise to a greater tendency on the part of both the CIA and the SIS to scrutinize and often reject each other's humint reports than those of SIGINT.³⁹ On occasion results are even withheld for political reasons: Britain was, for example, selective in passing on classified data on Northern Ireland in the 1990s, suspecting Irish nationalist sympathies within the Clinton administration.⁴⁰ More recently, the parliamentary Intelligence and Security Committee reported in 2007 that the US use of torture and rendition since 9/11 has led to the agencies exercising 'greater caution in working with the US, including withdrawing from some planned operations'.⁴¹ Nevertheless, it is symptomatic of how automatically information is relayed to the United States that special measures are needed to withhold information, as was done over Northern Ireland. The presence of a CIA representative on every Joint Intelligence Committee meeting in Whitehall illustrates how institutionalized this cooperation is.⁴² Occasions have even been reported when British intelligence findings have reached the White House before Downing Street, such as the 'Mitrokhin affair' in the 1990s.⁴³ While British humint agencies retain their independence, detailed cooperation with the United States is institutionalized, automatic and rarely questioned.

The political relationship under Blair

In March 2002, during the growing debate over whether to invade Iraq, Tony Blair told a sceptical Cabinet that 'we must stand close to America. If we don't, we will lose our influence to shape what they do'.⁴⁴ The perception that British policymakers could exchange public loyalty for behind-the-scenes influence in guiding

³⁶ Steve Marsh and John Baylis, 'The Anglo-American "special relationship": the Lazarus of international politics', *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 17: 1, April 2006, pp. 173–211.

³⁷ David Reynolds, 'A "special relationship"? America, Britain and the international order since the Second World War', *International Affairs* 62: 1, Winter 1985–6, pp. 1–20.

³⁸ Aldrich, 'Transatlantic intelligence', p. 738.

³⁹ Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into chaos: how the war against Islamic extremism is being lost in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia* (London: Allen Lane, 2008), p. 132.

⁴⁰ Riddell, *Hug them close*, p. 55.

⁴¹ Parliamentary Intelligence and Security Committee, *Rendition*, July 2007, Conclusions and Recommendations H, p. 29.

⁴² John O'Sullivan, 'How "special"? For how long? Between Washington and London', *National Review*, 5 Feb. 2001.

⁴³ Ann Widdecombe, Hansard (Commons), 22 June 2000, col. 479.

⁴⁴ Robin Cook, *Point of departure* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2003), p. 116.

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‘the naïve American giant’ has been a core component of the special relationship since its inception.⁴⁵ Recently published accounts show how actively Blair as Prime Minister used his relations with the President to influence US policy.

The 1999 Kosovo conflict was Blair’s first real test in shaping US policy. While consensus was reached within NATO for a bombing campaign against Milosevic’s Serbia in March 1999, a Clinton White House gripped by the Lewinsky scandal proved reluctant to deploy the ground troops that Blair believed were essential for victory. Blair tried to sway Clinton in both public and private. His ‘doctrine of the international community’ speech in Chicago on 22 April, at the height of the bombing campaign, in effect questioned the US stance on ground troops, angering some within the administration. In private, a day earlier in the White House, Blair took Clinton to one side, prompting the President to declare that he would do ‘whatever necessary’ to win the war, though not explicitly mentioning ground troops.⁴⁶ Tensions rose between Downing Street and the White House as a consequence, but the United States did harden its line against Serbia.⁴⁷ Though Milosevic eventually withdrew without a NATO ground invasion, the British government believed it was the threat of troops that led to victory, vindicating Blair’s strategy. Most analysts, however, have concluded that Serbia’s surrender owed more to contacts between Russia and the United States than to Blair’s commitment of conventional troops.⁴⁸

When Clinton left office, Blair heeded his advice to ‘get as close to George Bush as you have been to me’.⁴⁹ From the early ‘Colgate’ Camp David summit in February 2001 through to his memos of advice and support immediately after 9/11, Blair’s desire to stand ‘shoulder to shoulder’ with America entailed a determination to sustain close personal contact with the President at all costs.⁵⁰ With the White House baying for blood immediately after the 9/11 attacks, Blair, believing himself to be ‘the one Western leader the US will really listen to’, tried to direct Bush in three directions: towards an attack on Afghanistan rather than Iraq; towards incorporating a renewed drive for Middle East peace within whatever action was taken; and away from making war unilaterally.⁵¹

The outcome, that Afghanistan and not Iraq was targeted, supports the view then prevalent in Whitehall that Britain was able to restrain the bellicose Americans.⁵² However, Bob Woodward’s accounts of these events suggest that by 15 September Bush’s team was already unanimous, save for Donald Rumsfeld, against action in Iraq and that Blair’s voice was just one of many.⁵³ In instances when his view was in the minority Blair’s marginalization was more sharply evident. Despite his attempts during a summit in November 2001 to have Bush link the

⁴⁵ Marsh and Baylis, ‘The Anglo-American “special relationship”’, p. 178.

⁴⁶ Anthony Seldon, *Blair* (London: Free Press, 2005), pp. 396, 399–400.

⁴⁷ Andrew Rawnsley, *Servants of the people: the inside story of New Labour* (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 274.

⁴⁸ Riddell, *Hug them close*, p. 114.

⁴⁹ Riddell, *Hug them close*, pp. 2, 131.

⁵⁰ Peter Stothard, *30 days: a month at the heart of Blair’s war* (London: HarperCollins, 2003), p. 21.

⁵¹ Blair’s comment to a friend, in Seldon, *Blair*, p. 573.

⁵² Seldon, *Blair*, p. 493.

⁵³ Bob Woodward, *Plan of attack* (London: Pocket Books, 2004), pp. 25–6.

Afghan war with an Israeli–Palestinian peace initiative, the President declared at the joint press conference that he would defeat Al-Qaeda, ‘peace or no peace in the Middle East’.⁵⁴ The one area where Blair did make an impact was in coalition-building. Some commentators see Blair as ‘obsessed with his role as interlocutor’ between the United States and the world, embarking on a sequence of 31 flights and 54 meetings with world leaders over an eight-week period.⁵⁵ Blair’s actions ensured that the war didn’t appear to be unilateralist, but all military and postwar planning was managed by the Pentagon, with little consultation with Britain or other allies.⁵⁶

The 2003 Iraq war presented the most crucial opportunity for Blair to use his moderating influence on the Bush administration. The Prime Minister was determined that the war be conducted under a UN Security Council resolution, which he persuaded George Bush to obtain. Robin Cook claimed that American pursuit of Resolution 1441 in November 2002 was ‘the only point in the whole saga where it is possible to pinpoint a clear instance where British influence made any difference to US policy on Iraq’.⁵⁷ Blair’s biographer Anthony Seldon states, however, that Bush’s decision to go against the anti-UN hawks in his team was shaped more by powerful domestic voices (such as former Secretary of State James Baker) urging caution than by Blair’s arguments.⁵⁸ The eventual decision to seek a second resolution was viewed as a favour from Bush to Blair, who needed it to gain domestic blessing for the war, rather than as the outcome of Blair’s persuading him of its importance.⁵⁹ And even this was of limited value, as Bush refused to delay the scheduled countdown to war, leaving Blair only a few weeks to lobby for a resolution, with limited American diplomatic support. Officials in the administration suggested that it was Blair’s over-eagerness to support the United States that lost him his leverage; one aide remarked that ‘What the White House heard was Blair was going to be with America, come what may, peace process or not, UN resolution or not.’⁶⁰

Blair’s ability to affect US policy over the nature of the occupation and reconstruction of Iraq was also limited. Despite the failure to gain a second resolution, the Prime Minister persisted in pressing for a UN role in postwar reconstruction. Blair’s foreign policy adviser, David Manning, described the United States as ‘dead against’ any UN role—the message he received when lobbying Bush at Camp David during the conflict in March 2003. Marginally more success was had at the Hillsborough summit between the two leaders in April when Bush, free from the unilateralist grip of Cheney and Rumsfeld, declared the role of the UN in Iraq to be ‘vital’.⁶¹ This was, however, undone as soon as the President returned to Washington, with the hawks swiftly persuading Bush to modify his position. When

⁵⁴ *The Times*, 8 Nov. 2001.

⁵⁵ Rashid, *Descent into chaos*, p. 66 and Riddell, *Hug them close*, p. 156.

⁵⁶ Anthony Seldon, *Blair unbound* (London: Pocket Books, 2008), p. 393.

⁵⁷ Cook, *Point of departure*, p. 205.

⁵⁸ Seldon, *Blair*, p. 578.

⁵⁹ Woodward, *Plan of attack*, pp. 296–7.

⁶⁰ Interview in Seldon, *Blair*, p. 578.

⁶¹ Stothard, *30 days*, p. 226.

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Resolution 1483 was eventually passed it gave what Clare Short described as only 'a minor role to the UN', prompting her resignation.⁶² After successive bomb attacks in August and September 2003, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan ordered the withdrawal of all his staff. Blair's efforts to involve the UN thus came to nothing.⁶³ Nor did he exert significant influence over postwar strategy. The Pentagon gave presidential envoy Paul Bremer sweeping powers within Iraq; Britain's representatives were frequently ignored or not informed. Blair's protests to Bush about the nature of Bremer's efforts were similarly sidestepped, though this was often the result of Bush's own limited influence over a policy directed by Rumsfeld.⁶⁴ The White House dismissed Blair's call for restraint in Falluja and Najaf in April 2004, pausing only when advised to do so by Bremer; it was similarly unwilling to implement the recommendation of the 2006 Hamilton–Baker report, which Blair supported, to engage with Iraq's neighbours.⁶⁵

Yet Blair expected greater reward for his constant loyalty than consultation alone. One issue he persistently tried to push onto Bush's agenda in return for committing to Iraq was the Middle East peace process. Eventually Washington agreed to publish the 'Road Map', although only after the Iraq conflict.⁶⁶ Colin Powell claimed that Blair succeeded where he had failed in persuading Bush on the issue, an assessment supported by fellow insider John Bolton.⁶⁷ However, though Bush made the right noises on Middle East peace, even boldly declaring the goal of a 'Palestinian state in four years' in 2004, US leadership in the process remained half-hearted and visibly skewed in favour of Israel, undermining any realistic chance of achieving the success Blair craved. British advice to Bush, such as avoiding endorsing too enthusiastically an endorsement of Palestinian President Abbas lest his association with America cost him domestic popularity and benefit Hamas, was ignored.⁶⁸ The level of commitment needed to produce a lasting peace settlement was never forthcoming.

The Middle East peace process was not the only example of Britain's receiving insufficient 'payback' from the United States for its loyalty during the Blair premiership.⁶⁹ Following support during the Lewinsky scandal, Clinton's National Security Adviser informed British ambassador Christopher Meyer, 'We owe you big time,' leading Blair to hope for a positive American impact on Northern Ireland's peace talks. Yet despite Clinton's presence at the talks, behind closed doors the British felt his influence was 'hugely exaggerated': Meyer claimed that Clinton 'never quite gave the bite on Sinn Fein/IRA at crucial moments ... I never thought we got the return we deserved'.⁷⁰ A later example was Blair's plea for the return of

⁶² Clare Short, *An honourable deception? New Labour, Iraq and the misuse of power* (London: Free Press, 2004), p. 209.

⁶³ Seldon, *Blair unbound*, p. 233.

⁶⁴ Lawrence D. Freedman, 'The special relationship: then and now', *Foreign Affairs* 85: 3, May/June 2006, pp. 61–73.

⁶⁵ Seldon, *Blair unbound*, pp. 262, 520–4.

⁶⁶ Riddell, *Hug them close*, p. 238.

⁶⁷ Interview with Colin Powell, 1 Feb. 2007, in Seldon, *Blair unbound*, p. 180 and interview with John Bolton, 3 Dec. 2003, in Seldon, *Blair*, p. 620.

⁶⁸ Seldon, *Blair unbound*, pp. 317–19, 466.

⁶⁹ Interview with Sir Christopher Meyer, 2 June 2003, in Seldon, *Blair*, p. 375.

⁷⁰ Interview with Sir Christopher Meyer, 18 March 2003, in Riddell, *Hug them close*, pp. 86–7.

nine British citizens held by the Bush administration in Guantanamo Bay. Blair became the target of domestic criticism for his inability to persuade the President to release these men, the last of whom were returned only in 2005.⁷¹ Even the G8 Gleneagles summit in 2005, one of Blair's few celebrated international successes, saw only a partial gratitude dividend from the United States. Ostensibly the White House was united in its support, with one State Department aide commenting, 'We frankly all agreed that we did owe our British colleagues this one,' and Karl Rove claiming Bush himself was 'absolutely determined that the Gleneagles G8 had to be a success for Blair'.⁷² However, this support extended to endorsing only one of Blair's stated goals of the summit, increasing aid to Africa. The second, climate change, was considered a 'red line' issue in Washington—a line that no amount of goodwill towards Blair could persuade the administration to cross.⁷³

The lack of commensurate returns for Britain's loyalty to the United States during the Blair years was exacerbated by the damage this explicit transatlantic preference did to the UK's European relationships. Within six months of his election in 1997 Blair had returned to the imagery of Thatcher and Macmillan by announcing at the Lord Mayor's Banquet that 'we are a bridge between the US and Europe'.⁷⁴ The revival of this British self-image seemed to contradict Blair's other stated goal of being 'at the heart of Europe'. Britain's European allies mocked the notion that their relations with Washington needed to be interpreted through London; other European governments had their own direct dialogues with Washington, often—as in the Italian, Irish, Greek and Polish cases—with domestic American lobbies to reinforce them. Helmut Schmidt remarked to a group of British visitors that the Anglo-American relationship was 'so special that only the British know it exists'.⁷⁵

Blair's early attempts to pursue closer relations with his French and German counterparts, most notably through the Franco-British St Malo initiative on European security and defence policy in 1998–9, faltered as he turned increasingly towards Washington. The emphasis he placed on building a close relationship with President Bush from the spring of 2001, and his commitment to the Bush administration's strategy on Iraq, led to a breakdown in relations that had already weakened. President Chirac considered that Blair was 'straining a little too hard' to do America's work for them; Chancellor Schroeder complained that traffic on Blair's bridge only seemed to flow one way.⁷⁶ The British government, like its counterpart in Washington, orchestrated a press campaign that not only blamed the French government for the collapse of negotiations through the UN in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq but attacked the integrity of French politics and culture, playing to the Eurosceptic tone of the British press. In retrospect, it is now

⁷¹ *Guardian*, 12 Jan. 2005.

⁷² Interview with Karl Rove, 19 March 2007 and private interview with State Department official, in Seldon, *Blair unbound*, p. 322.

⁷³ Seldon, *Blair unbound*, p. 368.

⁷⁴ Tony Blair, speech at the Lord Mayor's Banquet, 10 Nov. 1997, quoted in William Wallace, 'The collapse of British foreign policy', *International Affairs* 81: 1, Jan. 2005, pp. 53–68.

⁷⁵ Interview.

⁷⁶ Seldon, *Blair*, pp. 378, 501 and Philip Stephens, 'Married man seeks friendship', *Financial Times*, 16 Feb. 2001.

clear that the French were justified in the sceptical position they took on the Bush administration's case for war.

The avoidance of public debate

The absence of public debate on the structure of the UK–US relationship since the transformation of Britain's international environment after the end of the Cold War contrasts sharply with the detailed (and often suspicious) scrutiny of every aspect of Britain's engagement with institutionalized Europe. When asked in parliament in October 2004 when the UK had last refused a request from the US administration, Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon curtly replied that 'we have never and will not provide a running commentary' on the 'comprehensive and continuous dialogue' with Washington over the defence relationship.⁷⁷ Opposition parties have collaborated with this reluctance to scrutinize the terms and conditions of the American alliance. During the Blair premiership (1997–2007) neither the Conservatives nor the Liberal Democrats used any of their allocated Commons debates to examine Britain's longstanding security arrangements with the United States, despite several coming up for renewal.⁷⁸ It is ironic that during this period the European Parliament set aside more time than the British parliament to debate the UK's Echelon signals intelligence network.⁷⁹ When in July 2002 an MP attempted to raise the Echelon issue, Foreign Secretary Jack Straw replied that 'It is a long standing policy of this government and previous administrations not to comment on the detail of confidential arrangements which might exist between the UK and the US for the UK's national security.'⁸⁰

As well as national security, governments have used past precedent to avoid public debate over extensions and changes to existing arrangements with America. When asked in March 2008 for a parliamentary debate on the proposal to site components of the US missile defence shield in the UK, Defence Secretary Des Browne responded that 'It has not been the practice of successive administrations to seek parliamentary approval for decisions of this type.'⁸¹ Browne had acknowledged the arrangements with the United States only after a leak in *The Economist*, having disregarded questions from MPs on the matter for the previous 18 months.⁸² Similarly, past precedent is regularly used quietly to renew existing agreements without a debate. During the renewal of the 1958 mutual defence agreement over nuclear cooperation with Washington in 2004, for example, Geoff Hoon declared that government 'would not undertake to find time to debate renewal of such a longstanding agreement such as this'.⁸³ Ministers 'refute emphatically' any accusations from members that 'Government are trying to avoid proper scrutiny' and insist

⁷⁷ Hansard (Commons), 25 Oct. 2004, col. 943W.

⁷⁸ 'Opposition day debates since 1997', *Parliamentary Information List*, standard note SN/PC/3190, 7 January 2008.

⁷⁹ European Parliament, 'Report on the existence of a global system'.

⁸⁰ Hansard (Commons), 2 July 2002, col. 276.

⁸¹ Hansard (Commons), 19 March 2008, col. 604W.

⁸² Hansard (Commons), 26 Feb. 2007, col. 602.

⁸³ Hansard (Commons), 6 Dec. 2004, col. 341.

that ‘Government would in any case seek to ensure that Parliament had adequate opportunity for debate’.⁸⁴ Modifications of US–UK arrangements are at best ‘laid on the table’ for the accepted minimum of 21 days or announced in written statements as parliament is rising for a recess.⁸⁵ UK agreement to the integration of RAF Menwith Hill into the US missile defence system was announced on 25 July 2007, the last day that parliament was sitting before the long summer break; the transfer of the Atomic Energy Establishment to majority US ownership slipped out as parliament was rising for Christmas in December 2008.

Ministers are most defensive in resisting regular questions about American bases in the UK—an issue which has, after all, aroused public controversy, and large-scale demonstrations, on several occasions over the past 60 years. Defence Minister Bob Ainsworth commented, for example, on 21 April 2008 that RAF Menwith Hill ‘will continue to be made available to the United States Visiting Force (USVF) for as long as it is in our mutual defence interests’, without pointing to any recent statement of those mutual defence interests or offering any prospect of future clarification.⁸⁶ Similarly, the formula ‘NATO Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) and other confidential arrangements’ is frequently used by ministers to close off further discussion of the use of British bases by USVF. SOFA is a list of conditions covering the legal status of visiting troops, not an agreement about the length of their stationing in the UK or about the conditions under which they may be deployed from the UK. On deployment, it states merely that the ‘decision to send them ... will continue to be the subject of separate arrangements between the parties concerned’.⁸⁷ Yet these ‘separate arrangements’ remain ‘confidential’. MPs who press their questions further are warned ‘not to whip up suspicion about what is undoubtedly an important part of our defence interests as well as that of the US’, as Defence Minister Adam Ingram put it in June 2004.⁸⁸

Costs and benefits, illusions and interests

The idea of the special relationship has a Lazarus-like quality; it has successfully been revived twice since Dean Acheson declared it dead, first in the 1980s and again in the late 1990s.⁸⁹ The second revival was the more remarkable, since the shared framework of strategic interests represented by the Cold War had gone. Under Blair and Bush, the special relationship therefore came to depend on the alignment of British policy towards the central focus for US global strategy, the Middle East, even though British and American understandings of the underlying security issues across the region differed significantly. Nevertheless, it remains after 60 years

⁸⁴ Parliamentary Under-Secretary Lord Bach, Hansard (Lords), 22 June 2004, col. 1119 and Geoff Hoon, Hansard (Commons), 19 Jan. 2006, col. 953.

⁸⁵ Geoff Hoon stated that the amendment to the 1958 mutual defence agreement was laid before parliament for 21 days under the Ponsonby rule. Hansard (Commons), 6 Dec. 2004, col. 341.

⁸⁶ Hansard (Commons), 21 April 2008, col. 1663.

⁸⁷ ‘Agreement Between the Parties to the North Atlantic Treaty Regarding the Status of Their Forces’, 19 June 1951, <http://www.nato.int/docu/basicxt/b510619a.htm>, accessed 31 January 2009.

⁸⁸ Hansard (Commons), 21 June 2004, col. 1078.

⁸⁹ Marsh and Baylis, ‘The Anglo-American “special relationship”’, pp. 173–211.

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a guiding principle for foreign policy, largely unquestioned even after the bruising experience of working with the Bush administration. British foreign policy since the 1940s, Timothy Garton Ash has remarked, has consisted of a series of ‘footnotes to Churchill’ and his legacy of ‘unambiguous commitment to the United States, ambiguous commitment to Europe’.⁹⁰

Both the British government and the British press have nervously welcomed the transition from President Bush to President Obama, a Democrat whose understanding of world politics seems much closer to British (and other European) views than his predecessor’s but who comes into office without any of the sentimental attachment to the English-speaking peoples and the Anglo-Saxon legacy which—British commentators seem to believe—have given British leaders, officials and military officers a special welcome in Washington for so long. Barack Obama’s dismissive description of the Bush administration’s mock-multilateralism as ‘we round up the United Kingdom and Togo and then do what we please’ is not reassuring; nor is his account, in *Dreams from my Father*, of how Kenyans experienced British colonial rule.⁹¹

One of the greatest illusions in the contemporary British concept of the special relationship is that there remains across the Atlantic a special and sentimental attachment to Britain, beyond shared interests and welcoming rhetoric. Many of those recently involved in the management of transatlantic relations in London see the tendency for British leaders to give way to sentiment (and to the glamour of Washington), while their American counterparts pursue underlying national interests, as the greatest imbalance in the relationship.⁹² Sentiment, or domestic electoral calculation, has been more evident in US policy towards Irish politicians than towards British—particularly during the Clinton administration. Henry Kissinger in his memoirs remarks on the unusual experience of meeting with Edward Heath, ‘a British Prime Minister who based his policies towards the US not on sentimental attachments but on a cool calculation of interests’.⁹³ Most British politicians are more familiar with New England—where Gordon Brown, for example, has often spent holidays—than with the American West or South; but it is these latter growing regions, with their multi-ethnic populations and their deep religious faith, which now swing US elections, not Anglo-Saxon New England. Colonial Anglo-Saxon media owners, including both Conrad Black and Rupert Murdoch, have fostered the Churchillian idea of deeper mutual understanding and more closely shared values among the English-speaking peoples; but few within the incoming US administration have Anglo-Saxon roots.

A further widespread illusion in London is that the tie with Britain is America’s only special relationship, or even its most important one. To many in Washington, ‘the most special relationship of all is undoubtedly that with Israel, as politicians and

⁹⁰ Tim Garton Ash, *Free world: why a crisis of the West reveals the opportunity of our time* (London: Allen Lane, 2004), pp. 36, 41.

⁹¹ Barack Obama, *The audacity of hope: thoughts on reclaiming the American dream* (New York: Crown, 2006), p. 309.

⁹² Interviews.

⁹³ Quoted in Riddell, *Hug them close*, p. 43.

analysts both recognise'.⁹⁴ American relations with Australia, its other dependably loyal ally, also have special military and intelligence dimensions.⁹⁵ General James Jones, President Obama's National Security Adviser, has remarked that the most important bilateral relationship for the United States is now with China, given the interlinking of economic interdependence with security rivalry.⁹⁶ The relationship with Washington remains Britain's most important bilateral relationship; but that is also the case for Canada, Mexico and Japan, as well as for Germany, France, Italy and Spain. In the intelligence field, the Americans share information with Australia and Canada through the UKUSA agreement, and share information on Middle East issues closely with Israel. In the nuclear field, it is likely that they also share significant information with France.

The US–UK special relationship is a security relationship. Its maintenance requires the British government to invest enough in military personnel, equipment and operations, and in intelligence resources, to justify continued access to US policy-making. Britain's claim to privileged partnership over other European states in the postwar world was based upon the claim that Britain had global interests—and global military reach—beyond Germany, France or Italy. The contemporary rationale for the relationship, and for the additional investment needed to maintain the relationship, remains the same. The benefits from this investment must be measured in additional British influence over the direction and detail of US foreign policy and in the contribution this added influence makes to Britain's claim to 'punch above its weight' in world affairs. The experience of Tony Blair's premiership, however, does not indicate that the security partnership carries over into other dimensions of US–UK relations, whether on climate change or on extraterritorial jurisdiction. If under the Obama presidency the global agenda shifts away from hard security issues to economic coordination, global environment, migration and health, Britain's contribution will be less distinctive.

It would be useful for British policy-makers to debate a little more openly how direct are the links between the embedded structures, political support for US foreign policy and personal political relations at the top and in which direction these links run. The danger for British policy-makers is that a concern to maintain links seen as advantageous to Britain's global standing serves to constrain British choices—in foreign policy, in military procurement and deployment, and in other areas of national policy (such as extradition) where they might have an adverse impact on Washington's perception of the value of the partnership. This may now be of most concern in British defence policy. Some policy-makers speak of a 'psychology of dependence' in a Ministry of Defence deeply committed to maintaining forces capable of operating alongside the US as the guarantee of continuing access and influence, but they are unable to demonstrate how valuable

⁹⁴ Mitchell G. Bond and Daniel Pipes, 'How special is the US–Israel relationship?', *Middle East Quarterly* 4: 2, June 1997, <http://www.meforum.org/article/349>, accessed 2 Feb. 2009.

⁹⁵ Jeffery D. McCausland, Douglas T. Stuart, William T. Tow and Michael Wesley, eds, *The other special relationship: the US and Australia at the start of the 21st century* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2007).

⁹⁶ Albert R. Hunt, 'Letter from Washington', *International Herald Tribune*, 8 Dec. 2008.

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that influence is to British interests. The 17 British personnel attached to US Central Command in late 2008 were, after all, excluded after the analytical phase of the exercise, leaving the Americans alone to decide on redefining strategy in Afghanistan.

Anxiety in London, in January 2009, over whether President Obama would meet the British Prime Minister before or after his German or French counterparts, and relief that his first phone call to a European leader was to Gordon Brown, indicates how dependent Britain's claim to global status is on Washington's approval. The Bush administration in its second term was promiscuous in its favours. Chancellor Merkel was feted when the Germans held the EU presidency, while President Sarkozy (also exploiting the status of the EU presidency) succeeded Tony Blair in 2008 as Washington's favourite European. The Obama administration, even more than the Bush administration at the end of its term, is interested in a partnership with the major European states collectively more than with the United Kingdom alone—let alone with the UK as interpreter and 'bridge' to thinking in Paris and Berlin. All the indications from Washington are that the new administration wants to see closer cooperation in European defence, with Franco-British cooperation at its core. There is a risk that an incoming British government, focused on gaining approval and access in Washington, could find itself more sceptical about closer European cooperation in defence and security than the White House and the Pentagon.

A third revival of the special relationship may therefore prove impossible. The US National Intelligence Council's scenarios for the world in 2025 assume a coherent European partner, with scarcely a reference to bilateral relations with the UK.⁹⁷ The domestic debate on choices in foreign and security policy should therefore address where British interests lie, without imposing a taboo on areas in which—ministers fear—encouragement of public debate might jeopardize relations with Washington. The intelligence relationship is sufficiently robust to survive greater British autonomy or closer integration with the continent; the sharing of intelligence with other European agencies has already grown markedly in recent years.⁹⁸ The decision on whether to renew the British deterrent should be taken, at the point when major expenditure must be committed, with reference to British interests alone. Hard decisions on defence spending, likely to be cut back as economic recession bites, should not be shaped disproportionately by arguments about what will meet with most approval in Washington. Ministerial refusal to account to parliament for the conditions under which US bases operate on British territory—an abnegation of British sovereignty far greater than any

⁹⁷ National Intelligence Council, 'Global trends 2025: a transformed world', 4th unclassified report, http://www.dni.gov/nic/NIC_2025_project.html, accessed 1 Feb. 2009.

⁹⁸ On February 4th 2009 the High Court in London (Case no.: CO/4241/2008) disclosed that the Foreign Secretary had provided a Public Interest Immunity Certificate, in August 2008, in response to a request for documents related to a British resident interned in Guantanamo, which stated (p.3) that 'disclosure would seriously harm the existing intelligence arrangements between the United Kingdom and the United States.' Press reports differed on whether this followed a threat from Washington to reduce intelligence cooperation, or a request from London to provide support for a British refusal to disclose sensitive information about the treatment of an internee.

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yet conceded to the EU—might constructively give way to public accountability. British foreign policy would then at last free itself from the legacy of a concept conjured up by Churchill 60 years ago.