

Pros and Cons of the UK-US Special Relationship

Written by Giulia Valentini

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GIULIA VALENTINI, OCT 4 2013

Since World War II, Britain and the United States have enjoyed extremely close ties in a diversity of areas, forming what has been known as the “special relationship”. This phrase, coined by Winston Churchill, underscores the military, diplomatic and economic cooperation that has existed between them ever since their successful alliance during World War II, the shared cultural and historical identity between Britain and its ex-colony, and on a smaller scale the close personal relationships that existed between some of the leaders of both countries. Despite all this, some critics have seen it as an unequal relationship that has left the UK in a weak position in relation to the more powerful US (Wright 2002). This essay will analyze the pros and cons of the special relationship in three different areas: military intervention, defense, and economy, in order to prove that the special relationship’s benefits have far outweighed the disadvantages and that the relationship has been a positive one for Britain.

Military cooperation in the international sphere has been the cornerstone of the Anglo-American special relationship. Starting during World War II, with the victory of the Atlantic Alliance over the Axis powers, it continued during the post-war years and the Cold War (Thomson, 1990). Both the US and the UK feared the Soviet threat and the spread of communism in Europe and beyond, so military ties between the two were strengthened. Their air forces reached in 1946 “an agreement to continue their wartime collaboration in staff methods, tactics, equipment and research” (Baylis 1977, p.70). In 1947, “further agreement was also reached on an extension of co-operation in officer exchanges for training purposes” (Baylis 1977, p.70). Both countries also gained mutual access to each other’s military information.

Military closeness with the US, however, has also led the UK towards controversial decisions. A main example of this was the 2003 invasion of Iraq. In the period after the 9/11 attacks, the UK was against attacking any country that had no clear connection to them. However, British policy quickly changed in the face of America’s determination to invade Iraq in order to overthrow Hussein’s regime. The invasion was carried out despite lack of certainty over Iraq’s possession of weapons of mass destruction, and in its aftermath the view has emerged that Tony Blair, then PM, decided to become involved mainly to be in a position to influence the US. The Iraqi invasion is a “warning against excessive loyalty to American war agendas” (Dumbrell 2006).

It is important, however, to avoid making generalizations based on the Iraqi invasion and concluding that the “special relationship” has made the UK a mindless follower of the US. First of all, the threat from Iraq was not completely baseless; its evasion of UN weapons inspections and previous use of chemical weapons was certainly worrying (Dumbrell 2006). But more importantly, in the past Britain has proved capable of resisting US pressure, as shown in the Vietnam War, when Prime Minister Wilson refused to send military forces to help the United States (Dobson 1995). It’s important to note that the flexibility of the Anglo-American relationship has allowed disagreements like this to happen without permanently damaging it.

Since WWII, the US has also played an important role in assuring the UK’s security and defense. It maintained a considerable amount of troops in Europe during the post-WWII years, when economically devastated nations faced the threat of a strong Soviet Union. This helped reduce the UK’s defense costs significantly (Baylis 1984). Defense cooperation has continued even after the Cold War, with around 11,000 American military personnel still in Britain by 2005. Additionally, the UK takes part in the US Ballistic Defence programme (Dumbrell 2006), and both countries collaborate in the area of nuclear defence.

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Nuclear weapons development has been an area of intense US-UK cooperation. With the amendment of the McMahon Act and the creation of the 1958 Mutual Defence Agreement, the UK gained access to American classified information and support in the development of its own nuclear deterrent (Butler, 2004). The UK at this point had already developed nuclear weapons; however, the problem arose of how to develop a delivery system. The UK faced two challenges: the heavy costs and the question of location. Therefore, a decision was made to have the US develop a missile system which would then be acquired by the UK. This was the submarine-based Polaris system, later replaced by the Trident system (Dumbrell 2006).

Despite these benefits, nuclear cooperation also caused problems for the UK. Firstly, the United States' sudden cancellation of the development of Skybolt, the delivery system originally ordered by the UK, due to its expensive and slow development, represented a small crisis for the US-UK relationship (Dumbrell 2006). An even bigger issue is the complete dependence of the UK nuclear defense system on US technology. However, the US being a close ally, it was considered preferable to the alternative of the UK not having a nuclear deterrent, both during the Cold War against the Soviet Union, and now, against North Korea, Iran, and any other potential future threats.

Although military and defense collaboration have been the most visible aspects of the special relationship, the UK's economic ties to the US are also exceptionally strong. In 1945, with the British economy exhausted by war expenditures, the US gave Britain a 3.75\$ billion loan at 2 per cent interest, and wrote off the remaining Lend-Lease agreement debts. Despite this, by 1947 the UK was in a financial crisis because of "a large dollar deficit, a convertibility crisis and a downward trend in British exports" (Leigh-Pippard 1995, p.23). Therefore, the US' Marshall Plan, developed to give financial aid to European countries whose economies and infrastructure had been devastated by the war, came at a very convenient time. No country was as favored by the US as Britain was, either through Marshall Aid, of which the UK from 1948 to 1951 received in total \$3,297 million (almost a third more than what France, the second top beneficiary, received), or through loans outside the Plan (Leigh-Pippard 1995) (Ovendale 1998) (Gardner 2001).

Beyond the end of the Cold War and of Britain's financial crisis, economic relations between the two countries have been kept strong by trade. They are both each other's main foreign investors, and US companies employ about 1.3 million workers in Britain, with the majority of American firms working in Europe having their headquarters in the UK (Raymond 2006). Such an extensive amount of trade with the world's strongest economic power has certainly helped boost Britain's own economy, and access to the vast American consumer markets has brought great profits to British industries. Besides having helped Britain get out of its postwar economic crisis, the US has proved to be a solid ally throughout the twentieth century, helping maintain its partner's competitiveness in the face of rising world economies and industrial powers such as China and Japan.

It might be possible to make the assumption that Britain has become economically dependent on and subordinate to the capitalist world power that is the United States, especially given the amount of monetary support received in the post-war period and because of their current economic relationship. However, it is important to note that despite all this, the UK has still maintained an independent economic policy, as shown by its refusal to stop trade with communists during the Cold War, its commitment to the British imperial trade preferences (later the Commonwealth preference system) and the sterling monetary area, and its resistance in the face of American pressure for more European integration in the 1940-50s (Dobson 1995). All of these policies caused friction between the UK and the US, but as noted before, the elasticity and strength of the special relationship has permitted them to happen without serious repercussions.

In conclusion, the benefits received by the UK from its special relationship with the US far outweigh the costs. Since World War II, they have been partners in many successful military operations, and worked jointly in military research, development and training. The US has been of special aid to Britain in the area of security, and helped it develop its nuclear deterrent. And after contributing to Britain's economic recovery in the postwar period, it has been its main economic partner and a source of investment and trade. Concerns about the UK becoming excessively dependent or subservient to the US have been proven unjustified by the many occasions in which Britain's policies have gone against America's wishes, without damaging the relationship. It would be worthwhile to make further investigation on the possibility of the European Union eventually replacing the US as Britain's main partner, and of further British

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integration with Europe, as it becomes a more regional power and as the US strengthens its ties with Asia in the 21st century.

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