

The 'Intelligence Special Relationship' between Britain and the United States

Written by Jonjo Robb

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JONJO ROBB, JUN 15 2014

Is it accurate to talk of an 'intelligence special relationship' between Britain and the United States?

The United Kingdom and the United States are often regarded as having incredibly close and cordial bilateral relations, to the extent that this is often described as a 'special relationship'. President Barack Obama remarked when addressing Parliament on a state visit to the UK in 2011 that the two nations enjoyed 'one of the oldest, one of the strongest alliances the world has ever known'.^[1] On taking office in 2010, Secretary of State for Foreign & Commonwealth Affairs William Hague commented that 'the United States is without doubt the most important ally of the United Kingdom'.^[2] The two states share a language, a vast history, and a number of interests and values. The UK and USA have both in the past and at present cooperated intensively on military matters. Both were members of the 'Big Three' during World War II, both were founding members of NATO, and both formed the leading contingents in the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. As a result of their shared military experiences, the UK and USA have also cooperated on intelligence matters.

Much like other aspects of UK-USA relations, intelligence liaison and cooperation could be described as exceptionally close. It is said that 'the US and UK have developed a complex network of close links between their defence and intelligence communities'^[3], and that the UK and US intelligence communities regularly grant each other access to privileged intelligence 'that would be unthinkable between most other states'.^[4] They are the two founding members of what is often termed 'Five Eyes', a global intelligence community which has been described as 'the world's most exclusive intelligence sharing club'.^[5] Once more, the recent public disclosure of the global surveillance programs jointly operated by the US National Security Agency (NSA) and the UK's Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) further demonstrates the intensity of this association.

This essay will endeavour to understand and explain the substance and relevance of the intelligence relationship between the two states. It will begin by exploring the emergence of intelligence cooperation between them during World War II and in its immediate aftermath. It will then discuss cooperation between the two states during the Cold War period, firstly with regards to Iran in 1953 and secondly during the Falklands Conflict of 1982. The second section will analyse present-day intelligence cooperation, both within the realms of Signals Intelligence (SIGINT) and finally with regards to counter-terrorism and Human Intelligence (HUMINT). It will conclude by determining that both historical examples of UK-US intelligence cooperation, but more importantly present day instances, demonstrate the intelligence relationship between the two countries could indeed be considered special.

From BRUSA to UKUSA: The emergence of an Intelligence relationship

It could be said that the United Kingdom and the United States first began cooperating extensively on intelligence matters during the Second World War. On 17 May 1943 the British Government Code and Cipher School (GC&CS, precursor to GCHQ) concluded an agreement with the US War Department concerning cooperation on matters of 'special intelligence'.^[6] Also known as the BRUSA agreement, its significance for the intelligence relationship that would follow cannot be underestimated. Bradley F. Smith describes the BRUSA agreement as 'the written constitution which arose the Anglo-American cryptanalytic partnership that flourished during the final two-and-a-half

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years of World War II, and, in modified forms, has continued until the present'.[7] Focused mainly on Communications Intelligence (COMINT) and the breaking of enemy ciphers during the War, BRUSA was 'monumental. It established for the first time intimate cooperation on COMINT at the highest level'.[8] Aside from COMINT, British Security Coordination (BSC), an element of the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS), played a central role in the establishment of the Office of the Coordinator of Information (COI), the forerunner of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and consequently the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).[9] Clearly, British and US Intelligence services were very much intertwined from as early as the 1940s.

UK-US cooperation on COMINT was further cemented shortly after the end of the Second World War. The 'British-US Communication Intelligence Agreement' was settled on 5th March 1946.[10] This originally concise agreement was edited and enlarged numerous times, before taking its current form as the UKUSA Agreement on 10th May 1955.[11] This is the most recent version of the treaty publicly available and was significant in that Canada, Australia and New Zealand became parties to the alliance as UKUSA-collaborating Commonwealth countries.[12] Though the UKUSA agreement was a continuation of previous cooperation under the auspices of the BRUSA agreement, it deepened collaboration and allowed the five nations to 'carve up the earth into spheres of primary SIGINT collection responsibility'.[13] This resulted in Britain and the US (as well as the three Commonwealth countries) coordinating their intelligence targets and trusting each other's agencies to collect and disseminate intelligence within the alliance. This is clearly an exceptional level of intelligence cooperation and there is arguably no other intelligence relationship comparable. For example, it is alleged that the United States was heavily reliant on GCHQ's collection capabilities in Britain's outposts of Empire in the 1950s,[14] as 'Britain's old imperial bases dotted across the globe, from Cyprus to Singapore, became new homes to substantial SIGINT collection centres'.[15]

Arguably, the intelligence relationship between the United Kingdom and the United States has been 'special' since the outset. In wartime, the two states decided to coordinate COMINT resources in the hope of a more effective intelligence machinery for the allies. In the immediate peace following the conflict, the two countries chose to deepen their intelligence ties and take the unprecedented action of sharing burdens by allocating responsibility for certain targets between them, and distributing the intelligence collected between themselves and their Commonwealth partners. It is claimed that the UKUSA agreement remains in force,[16] and so continues to serve as the framework for SIGINT cooperation between the two countries. The arrangements made in the 1940s and 1950s laid the foundations for an intensely close intelligence relationship that remains to this day.

Cold War Companions: *Operation BOOT* and *Operation CORPORATE*

Though the intelligence relationship between Britain and the US was (and to an extent remains) prominently concerned with the realm of SIGINT, this has by no means been the limit of cooperation between the two nations' intelligence communities. The Iranian regime change which occurred in 1953 provides a pertinent example of British and US intelligence agencies cooperating to execute covert action, rather than simply to collect and analyse signals and data.

When Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadeq nationalised the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) in 1951, Britain and its ally across the Atlantic sought to bring about the demise of Mossadeq.[17] The emerging prominence of the pro-Communist Tudeh Party was also significant in generating the political will necessary to authorise the operation.[18] The 'London Draft' of the Operational Plan to carry out this action, codenamed *Operation BOOT* by SIS, outlined the steps SIS and the CIA would take to execute 'a planned and controlled replacement' of Mossadeq.[19] This included 'a massive propaganda campaign against Mossadeq',[20] and the bribery of members of Iran's legislature to ensure their support for the new government, which was to be headed by a new Prime Minister selected by SIS/CIA.[21] The intelligence agencies successfully conducted the operation, and Mossadeq was deposed as desired. That the British SIS and the American CIA conspired together to execute regime change in a joint operation demonstrates the special and truly unique relationship between the two countries' intelligence services.

Nearly 30 years after *Operation BOOT*, Britain launched *Operation CORPORATE* to retake the Falkland Islands, then a British Crown Colony in the South Atlantic. The Islands were invaded by Argentina on 2nd April 1982, and

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British Forces sought to liberate the territory from its occupying Argentine forces.[22] Though the United States was not militarily involved in the conflict, released archival documents reveal the wealth of intelligence that the US provided to Britain. In a meeting with US Secretary of State Alexander Haig, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher 'expressed appreciation for U.S. cooperation in intelligence matters'.[23] Declassified intelligence reports disclose the highly detailed assessments US intelligence provided Britain. This included reports on the state and location of Argentine military assets which were ascertained from US satellite imagery.[24] As well as imagery intelligence, the CIA provided SIS with a 'comprehensive overview'[25] of the Argentine military in the form of a 'complete order of battle for President Galtieri's army, navy and air force',[26] which helped to provide British forces with 'a highly accurate picture of the opposing team in the South Atlantic'.[27] Further to this, the NSA offered assistance to GCHQ by re-tasking one of its satellites for a few hours daily, providing valuable SIGINT on Argentine communications.[28] From what we know of US assistance during the Falklands War, it appears that a significant amount of CIA and NSA resources were delegated to assisting their British counterparts. The re-tasking of reconnaissance satellites was particularly expensive, and even shortened their operational lives.[29] However, this was to be no impediment for the willingness of the US to provide a vast quantity of intelligence assistance to the UK during its conflict with Argentina. This further underlines the distinctive levels of cooperation that make up the intelligence relationship between Britain and the United States.

SIGINT in the Twenty-First Century: ECHELON & Tempora

This essay has hitherto explored numerous examples in history of the special intelligence relationship between the United Kingdom and the United States. It will now examine how this intelligence relationship has developed in the twenty-first century, by examining intelligence cooperation between the two states in 2014. SIGINT continues to be an area of significant interest to the intelligence agencies of the UK and USA, and as such cooperation on SIGINT matters continues to evolve. As previously discussed, SIGINT cooperation between Britain and the United States is exercised within the framework of the 'Five Eyes' alliance that was established by the UKUSA agreement, comprising of the United Kingdom, United States, Australia, Canada and New Zealand.

The capability of the Five Eyes coalition to intercept a momentous quantity of telecommunications data has long been a cause of concern to foreign states and privacy groups alike. It is alleged that a global interception system known as ECHELON is operated by Britain, the United States, and its three allies which it is suggested is able to 'intercept any telephone, fax, Internet or e-mail message sent by any individual and thus to inspect its contents'.[30] The European Parliament established a temporary committee to investigate the ECHELON system, which reported its findings in 2001. Though the lengthy and in-depth report concluded that ECHELON did not provide such an absolute interception capability, it did state that given sufficient collection stations across the world, Five Eyes would be able to intercept 'all telephone, fax and data traffic'[31] transmitted via satellites. The committee noted that 'international cooperation is essential in particular for the worldwide interception of satellite communications'.[32] Such cooperation between the United Kingdom and the United States can be perceived at intercept stations such as RAF Menwith Hill in North Yorkshire, which was singled out as part of the ECHELON network by the Parliament's report.[33] The official website of the Royal Air Force describes Menwith Hill as 'an integral part of the US DoD world-wide defence communications network. Its primary mission is to provide intelligence support for UK, US and allied interests'.[34] The website also notes that only one-third of the 2200 staff at Menwith Hill are British citizens, and so the station is dominated by American staff of the NSA.[35]

Aside from the ECHELON system, the true scale of Five Eyes' ability to intercept communications on a mass and global scale in the internet age has recently been revealed by a number of Western newspapers, with the aid of classified material provided by whistle-blower Edward Snowden.[36] Internal GCHQ documents provided by Snowden to *The Guardian* disclosed the existence of Project Tempora, a GCHQ system that allowed the intelligence agency to 'tap into and store huge volumes of data drawn from fibre-optic cables for up to 30 days so that it can be sifted and analysed'.[37] The paper claims that this includes 'recordings of phone calls, the content of email messages, entries on Facebook and the history of any internet user's access to websites'.[38] *The Guardian* states that GCHQ's 'special source exploitation' capability to intercept communications transmitted via fibre-optic cables led it to boast of having the 'biggest internet access' in the UKUSA alliance.[39] Consequently, GCHQ shares access to intelligence produced by the Tempora program with the NSA.[40] Cooperation between GCHQ and NSA is

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reciprocal, and documents obtained from Snowden also reveal that GCHQ has access to the NSA's Dishfire database, which collects 'almost 200 million text messages a day from across the globe, using them to extract data including location, contact networks and credit card details'.^[41] Further to this, *The Guardian* has revealed that at least £100m has been invested in GCHQ's capabilities by the NSA in recent years, including £15.5m for the redevelopment of GCHQ Bude, £17.2m for its 'Mastering the Internet' project, and half the costs of operating GCHQ's listening post for the Middle East, Ayios Nikolaos on the island of Cyprus.^[42]

Even with the little information that is publicly available, it is clear to see that the present relationship between Britain's GCHQ and the United States' NSA is incredibly close. Whether it be satellite communications mustered from the ECHELON system, or metadata produced by the Tempora and Dishfire programs, the two agencies appear to work in tandem and to be very open to sharing intelligence and technical information. The intimacy of the two agencies' operations is emphasised by the revelation that the NSA provides funding for GCHQ's projects, and that the two organisations jointly fund a SIGINT collection facility on Cyprus. It is difficult to envisage a closer relationship between two foreign intelligence agencies.

Cooperation on Counter-Terrorism

The UK Government's *Strategy for Countering Terrorism* states that it aims to 'work with other countries and multilateral organisations to enable us to better tackle the threats we face at their source'.^[43] The nature of such cooperation is understandably secret and therefore there is even less information publicly available than that of cooperation on SIGINT matters. However, the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee did give an insight into some intelligence matters in its report on UK-US relations, published in March 2010.

The committee found that 'the field of intelligence co-operation is one of the areas where the UK-US relationship can rightly be described as 'special'', and that 'that there can be no doubt that both the UK and US derive considerable benefits from this co-operation, especially in relation to counter-terrorism'.^[44] The committee did note that HUMINT cooperation is not as intimate as SIGINT cooperation, with the Security Service (MI5) and SIS 'retaining operational independence, despite close co-operation with their US counterparts'.^[45] However, the committee's suggestion that 'the default UK position appears to be set to allow the automatic relay of human intelligence to the US'^[46] is a telling indication of the intelligence special relationship, if accurate. That one state permits its intelligence agencies to freely pass HUMINT to another without let or hindrance underscores the level of cooperation between them. One of the more curious findings of the committee's evidence hearings was that the US benefit from their close HUMINT cooperation with the UK because 'foreign assets are more willing to talk to British intelligence rather than to the Americans for a variety of historical or other reasons'.^[47] The Foreign & Commonwealth Office, the ministerial department responsible for SIS, told the committee in their investigation that the 'US is the UK's most important partner in protecting UK interests at home and that strategic and operational co-operation is close in a bid to deny Al-Qaeda and other extremists safe haven'.^[48] It is evident that counter-terrorism cooperation between the two states is indeed close due to their obvious shared interests to prevent terrorism attacks. This is yet further evidence of an 'intelligence special relationship'.

Conclusions on the Special Relationship

This essay has presented what appears to be overwhelming evidence that the United Kingdom and the United States have an incredibly intimate intelligence relationship which could certainly be described as special. Even as early as the 1940s, the two states were forming alliances to share what was then unprecedented access to each other's COMINT intelligence and capabilities. Since then, their level of collaboration appears to have grown and grown. Whether it be peacetime or wartime, a fight against the Third Reich or a conflict over islands in the South Atlantic, the two countries have stood by each other in the realms of intelligence cooperation.

What appears distinctive about the intelligence relationship between Britain and the United States is the level within which their intelligence agencies, specifically their SIGINT agencies, are entwined. It is not simply a matter of sharing what intelligence is relevant to the other state on an *ad hoc* basis. Rather, from what we can gather, their networks and technical capabilities are interlinked to such an extent that the intelligence product of GCHQ is freely accessible

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to the NSA, and vice-versa. Of course, there will be exceptions to this. It would be naïve to suggest that *all* intelligence collected by the two countries is freely shared between them. However, it does not appear unreasonable to suggest that the vast majority of such intelligence is pooled between them, with a relationship akin to that between two intelligence agencies of the same government, rather than two agencies of foreign powers. With regards to HUMINT, investigation into cooperation of a recent nature is hindered by the need for official secrets. However, from what little light was shone on the nature of HUMINT cooperation by the Foreign Affairs Committee, we can see that the bonds between MI5/SIS and the CIA/FBI appear close, even if not as close as those between GCHQ and the NSA.

One final point to make about the gravity of the intelligence special relationship that this essay has examined is its longevity. This relationship has stood the test of time. It is clear to see that the relationship has evolved to meet the requirements of intelligence consumers as old threats have dissipated and new threats emerged. Where the GC&CS and the US War Department would once work together to decrypt German and Japanese ciphers, GCHQ and the NSA now work together to scupper communications between terrorists in the internet age. This is perhaps the best testament to the relationship's intensity, and it is unimaginable that this association will dissolve at any point in the near future. The intelligence relationship between the United Kingdom and the United States is indeed a relationship of a special nature, and it is hard to envisage another relationship so much so.

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Written by: Jonjo Robb
Written at: Aberystwyth University
Written for: Claudia Hillebrand
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