



BULLETIN

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COMMENTARY

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Significance of British Prime Minister's U.S. Visit

by Bartosz Wiśniewski and Bartłomiej Znojek

The first visit by Prime Minister David Cameron to the U.S. (21–22 July) confirmed the latter's paramount importance for the UK, misunderstandings over BP activities notwithstanding. At the same time, the British government seeks to reduce the expectations of its public and the U.S. administration regarding the scope of cooperation with the U.S.

Controversies over BP operations loomed large during Prime Minister's meetings with President Obama, Vice President Biden and members of the Congress. Cameron has been involved directly in attempts to mitigate U.S. authorities' criticism of BP in connection, first, with the Gulf of Mexico oil spill from a damaged BP oil well and, second, with allegations that the BP had pressured the British authorities over a prisoner transfer agreement with Libya. BP is said to have argued that the deal would make it easier for British companies to enter the Libyan energy sector. Yet the agreement led to the release to Libya, in 2009, of Abdel Baset al-Megrahi, a Libyan citizen serving a prison sentence in Scotland for his participation in the 1988 bombing of an American airliner over Lockerbie. As regards the oil spill, the British authorities are worried about the impact of criticism on BP's financial condition (the performance of many British pension and insurance funds rests on the group's market standing) and on Britain's international prestige. Still, Cameron admitted that BP was responsible for removing the effects of the disaster and for compensating for the losses. Also, he denounced the decision on the al-Megrahi transfer and he declared that BP's role would be clarified—while noting that the government of Scotland had had the final say on this.

The Afghan mission—a priority for both countries—got relatively less attention, yet Cameron and Obama declared great affinity over this and issues such as Iran's nuclear program or the Middle East peace process. Obama referred to the UK as America's "closest ally and strongest partner".

Prior to the visit, Cameron described Britain's role vis-à-vis the U.S. as that of a "junior partner". The opposition criticised this as a declaration of the subordination of Britain's policy to American interests. Yet by pointing to the asymmetry of the relationship, the UK government might be in fact seeking to limit the British public's expectations of the benefits of close cooperation with the U.S. Only such a move could gain the support of the coalition government partner, the Liberal Democrats. For the Obama administration, it could signal that while Britain shares U.S. views on the Afghan strategy, relations with Pakistan or policy towards Iran, it has only limited capabilities to back up U.S. activities.

Presumably, these limitations would not apply to making available to the U.S. strategically located military installations, such as the Diego Garcia base in the Indian Ocean. For the base to service air attacks (if any) on Iran, a separate authorisation by the British authorities would be required regardless of the otherwise free use of the base by the U.S. Neither would the broad intelligence cooperation be affected, provided the U.S. does not attempt to curb it following the cases of disclosure by the British authorities (for purposes of court proceedings on special services' complicity in the torture of British citizens suspected of terrorism) of documents holding details of this cooperation.

What could be limited—in view of the lessons from Afghanistan (high human and material costs, negative public opinion) and the strained budget—is Britain's readiness to engage militarily in new overseas stabilisation operations. Should the announced defence spending cuts affect the British military's capability to undertake such activities (the cuts will not affect the separately financed mission in Afghanistan), UK would risk losing one of its trump cards in relations with the U.S., as the Cameron government is presumably well aware. Also, this could lead, for instance, to the sharpening of criteria for involvement in NATO and (presumably to an even greater extent) EU missions. The concept of military engagement in expeditionary operations will be laid down by the end of this year in a Strategic Defence and Security Review, It will therefore provide an important clue to Britain's policy towards the U.S. and towards NATO and the EU.