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Transcript

America, Britain and Europe: An Evolving Relationship

The John C Whitehead Lecture

Rt Hon Sir John Major KG CH

UK Prime Minister (1990-97)

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Sir John Major:

When Chatham House invited me to deliver this lecture, I was delighted to accept.

I was brought up with an affection for America. My grandfather was a master builder who lived and worked in Pittsburgh from the 1860s and helped build the Carnegie Steel works. My father was a dual citizen, who lived in Pittsburgh from his birth in 1879 through his teenage years. His philosophy was simple: if America and Britain were as one, all was well.

Three hundred years earlier, in 1587, Virginia Dare became the first child of English parents to be born in the New World. On the coast of North Carolina, links to her ancestral home were all around her. She grew up amid place names familiar to every Briton: the road between early settlements at Roanoke and Jamestown passed through Suffolk, Gloucester, Portsmouth, York and Surrey: all quaint reminders of 16th Century England. Subliminal links, perhaps – but evocative ones.

Our modern generation has grown up with the Atlantic Alliance.

For all our lives, the Alliance has been solid and reassuring: so familiar is it, that we take it for granted. We shouldn't: like every relationship it is flexible; and, as it evolves, it changes. It is doing so now in ways that are liberating, but which reflect the ambitions of two Sovereign nations.

When David Cameron became Prime Minister he set out a dictum of a 'solid but not slavish' relationship between the UK and the US. This is now taking practical shape across a wide swathe of policy.

Economically, the UK is pursuing austerity, while the US searches for stimulus.

Commercially, as a reminder that even the best of friends are economic rivals, coalition ministers have been boosting trade ties around the world.

Militarily, a Defence Treaty, agreed with France, has acquired more than symbolic meaning with the close Cameron-Sarkozy response to the uprising in Libya. And *diplomatically*, the government has taken a harder line than the White House in criticising Israeli policy on building settlements deemed illegal by the international community.

Some will worry about these distinctions in policy. They need not. One of the strengths of the UK/US Alliance is that, over many years, it has been able to withstand irritants, squabbles and even fierce disagreements: Suez in 1956; the cancellation of Skybolt; and Dean Acheson's disparaging Westpoint

speech, in which he asserted that: 'Great Britain has lost an empire and has not yet found a role'.

Britain's global role, he added, 'is about played out'. There have been differences over Vietnam; and arms embargoes in the Balkans – but none of them caused a permanent rift.

In looking at policy between Atlantic partners, it is a mistake – a simplification that deceives – to focus only on the US and the UK. For a long time, a third partner – continental Europe – has been material to the relationship.

Today, in a world of global transition, so is Asia – especially China and India – and the dynamic of new growing centres of power impacts inevitably upon the Anglo-American relationship. These days, America looks increasingly to the Pacific. As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan wind down, I expect this shift to accelerate. Both Leon Panetta and Hillary Clinton have explicitly foreshadowed this new focus.

It is not difficult to see why. The Pacific is the growing centre of gravity for future global growth; it is an area of exploding population; and it is the essential force driving global trade. This has changed its profile, and every nation – most certainly the United States – must take account of that. The fact that China is now the owner of over 25 percent of American government debt, simply illustrates a reality few believed they would ever face.

The point is simple: no-one can ignore Asia. However well disposed any US president may be to his ally across the Atlantic, he must be concerned primarily with the wellbeing of his own nation.

As wealth and financial power move to the Pacific, new trade and political relationships will be forged, hopefully friendly ones. In China's case, America will also have a wary eye on regional ambitions and military capability. No-one should be surprised at this evolution. Nor should we shrink away from nuance in policy, and sometimes outright disagreement.

The tide of history can point friendly Sovereign Nations to different conclusions: it is inevitable and healthy. The Anglo-American relationship is a living entity. It would be a mistake to preserve it in aspic. It is about self-interest and mutual regard, and to drape it in sentimentality is to undervalue it. Too often, people talk of a 'special relationship'. Every president is advised to use the phrase and courteously does so but – although not intended to be so – it is rather a patronising term.

President Obama – a post-War child and a post-Cold War politician appears – to the British and European eye – to be less Atlanticist than his predecessors. I don't say that to criticise; I merely observe it.

The president can't ignore the changing world. He would be failing in his duty to America if he did. He is likely to be followed by many presidents who must take account of strategic realities, however bound emotionally they may be to the ties of the 'special relationship'.

It is time to consign this phrase to history. We don't need it.

Despite self-interests that may be diverging, what binds Britain and America together is tangible and reassuring. We do a lot of business together. The United Kingdom is the largest single foreign investor in the United States. We are huge trading partners. Our citizens are familiar with each other: millions of tourists travel back and forth across the Atlantic each year.

We have strong cultural ties. Our shared tastes in music, film, theatre and television keep us close together – emotionally and psychologically. This comes so naturally we're barely conscious of it. I wonder what proportion of people protesting outside the US Embassy at any given moment, head home via Pizza Hut or Kentucky Fried Chicken, stopping off on their way to pick up a Budweiser beer, before settling down to watch yet another re-run of *'Friends'* on their television sets.

These shared cultural tastes are mirrored by shared political views. Our outlook on the world – our ambitions for it – are not identical, nor could they be, but they are strikingly similar.

Security and intelligence co-operation is profound, vital and deep. When I first attended meetings between British and American military commanders I was astonished at the free and easy exchanges between them. Secrets they would fiercely shield from third nations were discussed without inhibition.

Our Anglo-Saxon sensibilities place great importance on respect for the individual, the rule of law, the virtues of prosperity and the liberty of progress for all. Instincts like these are made policy flesh; they are what – one hopes and expects – will guide our relations with the new communities coming forward in Tunis, Tripoli, Damascus and Cairo.

These are not dissolvable links – they are solid. We can continue to rely on them. And yet...

It is the 'And yet' I wish to focus on: the divergent issues that could strain – even weaken – the relationship, if we permit them to do so. 'My enemy's

enemy is my friend', declares an old Arab proverb, reflecting a basic tenet of human behaviour. But what happens to friendship when the enemy is no longer a threat? There is no longer a Soviet threat to bind us together. What does this mean for NATO?

For 62 years, NATO has been the guarantor of security and freedom in Europe. Since the Soviet Union fell apart twenty years ago, its role has been problematic. We know we need NATO, but can't quite identify why: this has led to a progressive diminution of the European input into the Alliance.

Understandably, the US is alarmed at this and frankly, the Europeans should be shame faced about it. The future role of NATO may be opaque, but it remains the most visible and tangible military bond uniting Britain and Europe with the US. Europeans would be wise to focus on the comments of former US Defence Secretary, Bob Gates, who warned Europe over relying too much on America. Mr Gates is surely right.

His discomfort with an alliance where member nations *all* enjoy the benefits of the grouping, but only a few deal with the 'hard' military graft on the ground, is entirely reasonable. It is simply not acceptable for some countries to put limits on their operational commitment to NATO.

Mr Gates warns correctly, and I quote: *'If current trends in the decline of European defence capabilities are not halted and reversed, future US political leaders may not consider the return on America's investment in NATO worth the cost... there is the real possibility for a dim, if not dismal future for the transatlantic alliance.'*

That could not – would not – have been said before the collapse of the Soviet Union 20 years ago. And it would not have been said publicly by the cautious Mr Gates if it were not being thought privately by policy makers in Washington.

Since, after the presidential election, it is likely the US will cut total defence spending, it is a warning that it would be very unwise for Europe to ignore.

One threat to NATO countries is growing: the danger of cyber-attack. It is probable that more damage is being done to our interests through cyber theft of military, scientific and technical secrets than through any other form of sabotage. To combat that, the UK alone has already spent hundreds of millions in improving our cyber defences. Even so, this is an area that requires the closest possible co-operation between NATO members.

We know that NATO needs to change. But we need to agree how. To let it wither through neglect would be reckless policy. Although a present threat to the European Continent is highly unlikely, that could change.

Europe needs to lock America into NATO, not allow policy drift to diminish her commitment to it. It is simply not credible for Europe to sit back, cut defence budgets and blithely expect the US to bear a wholly disproportionate cost of defending her.

A new settlement on NATO: its role, its funding and fairer nation state contributions, is long overdue. Mr Gates expresses American frustration, but, as American eyes are drawn increasingly to the East, it is Britain and Europe – in their own interests – who ought to be arguing most for early and definitive decisions on NATO's future.

There are other potential fissures we should not ignore. In America, I detect contempt for what they see as feeble European policy. In Europe, I see a similar disregard for aspects of American policy, as well as a lofty disdain for its criminal justice system, with its harsh penalties. Some disagreements may be peripheral, but the mutual distaste is tangible. Economic management is a damaging area of friction that could get worse.

The US blames the global slowdown in large part on the on-going Euro crisis. Mitt Romney attacks President Obama, saying his 'answer is to borrow money... just like Europe. Europe's answers are not the right solutions'. This is not intended to be flattering to Europe. Indeed, it is dismissive, and – perhaps – with reason. A series of top-level meetings have failed to damp down a crisis that is having a world-wide impact.

This disregard is two-way traffic. Europeans point derisively at Lehman's collapse, and its aftermath. When US Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner told Europe to get its act together over Greek debt, he was met with a mixture of public indignation and private scorn. There was much talk of 'pots' and 'kettles'. Yet it is telling that no-one reacted so dismissively to Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao when he made a similar assessment of the eurozone.

Does this mutual disdain between the US and continental Europe matter to the UK? Yes, it does.

If it continues, bilateral relations may be weakened. Why so? It is a truth expressed too rarely that the US expects the United Kingdom to use her Anglo-Saxon influence within the European Union. She wishes our shared views on free trade, on deregulation, on low taxation and on fiscal responsibility to be presented within Europe.

If US links with the EU weaken, if her interest wanes, if she looks elsewhere, the British value to America weakens too, and so, potentially, does an elemental part of the Anglo-American alliance.

Some will see this differently. They argue that, if the US is disillusioned with continental Europe, and the UK is frustrated within the EU – both of which propositions are true at the moment – that the solution is simple: the US and the UK should move closer together.

Some Atlanticists and extreme Euro-sceptics go further: they argue that enhanced collaboration with the US is an alternative to the UK-EU nexus. This is sheer fantasy. The US does not want the UK as a proxy 51st State. It is the sensible, pragmatic Anglo-Saxon voice in Europe that the US welcomes: remove that, and the value of Britain to America diminishes.

What virtues do the UK and the US separately bring to the relationship? It is – in terms of crude economic and political power – an Alliance of un-equals. America's contribution is evident and massive: what does Britain bring to the table? I would say a lot: although there is one area – to which I will turn shortly – where we could do better.

First and foremost, in addition to Britain's trade and investment role, she is the principal military ally of the US. With her immense military capability, the US could manage without us: but she prefers not to do so. Militarily, we are her first – and most reliable – partner.

The UK has historic knowledge and niche abilities that complement American influence. As American author, John Updike put it: *'America is a land whose centre is nowhere: England one whose centre is everywhere'*. On 9/11, I was staying at the British Embassy in Washington. That night, most of the British intelligence hierarchy were flown in from the UK to brief and consult with their American counterparts.

And the UK has a wide diplomatic reach. American diplomacy is more persuasive and compelling if it has British diplomacy alongside it. Any superpower, acting alone, can seem isolated, can be characterised as the bully on the block. With a strong ally, arguing from conviction for the same policy, that risk is diminished.

There is one further role the UK can offer: that of the candid friend. A candid friend is more valuable than an unquestioning echo. We shall never know for sure but, perhaps, if the UK had been more candid in expressing doubts about the second Iraq War, events may have unfolded differently. At the outset, the

general assumption was that Saddam did have WMD. I'm sure that was the intelligence served up to the then prime minister.

But the real questions were: what sort of WMD? Were they deliverable? How imminent a threat was Iraq? And did any threat require action against such a tight deadline?

Several facts are relevant. On the basis of an IAEA assessment, the UN Security Council almost closed its file on Iraq's nuclear programme in the late 1990's. And, as we now know, the British government were advised in 2002 that Saddam's nuclear programme was frozen – and Iraq was at least five years from producing a useable nuclear device.

With this information, a candid friend might have cautioned against precipitate – I emphasise precipitate – action. But they did not. Upon mature reflection today, I would argue that the UK's apparent unquestioning support for the US, did not serve either country well. We could have done better.

Close as we are, we do not have to march in lock step. Our relationship is such that we can – and should – sometimes strike an independent stance as in the recent air campaign over Libya. The US was heavily involved, but it was the British and the French who took the diplomatic and military lead.

We might want to get used to more independence – especially in our dealings with the Muslim world. It may be helpful – and prudent – for the US to 'lead from behind' in some circumstances. We cannot – and must not – place the burden of leadership unfailingly on her. Others should share responsibility where they can.

I believe the UK and Europe could also take a more pro-active role in the MEPP [Middle East Peace Process]. The Quartet has not made advances. Indeed, after a total of twenty years of negotiation, we seem as far away from a solution as ever. But it seems to me – as I look forward – that Israel needs a settlement every bit as much as the Palestinians. The present sour atmosphere, worsened by Israeli settlement policy, is isolating Israel and – if the Arab Spring leads to more democratic governments in the Middle East – will isolate her further and, perhaps, dangerously so. This is unwise policy.

In the last few days we have seen the IAEA report confirming that Iran is most probably developing a nuclear weapons capability. I believe this justifies a tough international response. I would suggest upgrading the present sanctions on proliferation to incorporate more financial sanctions, sanctions on oil and gas as well as designation of named individuals involved in the weapons programme. Ideally these would be UN sanctions but, if China or Russia block

that, EU sanctions as a fall-back. It would be a tragedy if hostility to Israel inhibited that: Israel may feel alone but in truth she is not – but she does need to mobilise international support, not alienate it.

There are many reasons why we need progress on the MEPP. UNESCO's decision to admit Palestine as a full member state – despite diplomatic pressure not to do so from America and the loss of the US sixty million dollar budget payment – is an indication of widespread unease over the present impasse. Entry into UNESCO is likely to be followed by Palestinian applications to the World Health Organisation and other UN bodies.

This rejection of American policy – for that is what the UNESCO decision is – is an indication that much of the world blames the present stalemate, in part, on internal politics within the US. No doubt, because of US power, this point is put only sparingly to American policy makers, but it is put scathingly to third parties. Once again, the candid friend should tell America this.

We might too, be more candid with Israel. At present, their policy – and that of the Quartet – is not to engage with Hamas who, as senior Israeli ministers correctly point out, fire rockets into Israel. I understand this view – especially with the present polarisation of opinion in the country. But here, I think, the UK can offer valuable advice from direct experience.

The IRA bombed Northern Ireland and the UK mainland for many years. For as long as we held the position of never negotiating with terrorists, the bombs kept coming. It was only when we engaged the IRA directly – albeit initially through intermediaries – that we began a process that led to peace. Talking and talking and talking – continually, and without huge gaps in time for backsliding – can bring together the most intransigent positions.

'We won't negotiate with terrorists' is clear-cut policy and, one could argue, high-minded. But it makes it easy for the rocket attacks to continue. The more difficult decision is to try to negotiate, even against provocation and domestic criticism: it may be the unavoidable preamble to settlement.

After Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya I doubt there is much appetite – except as a last resort – for more military involvement. We may be moving into an era where diplomacy and soft power will take a higher profile. If so, I welcome that. It plays to British strengths. And, since UK and US objectives are so often the same – or similar – it should help both our countries.

I would like to see the UK extend our diplomatic reach and our ambitions for diplomacy. As our 'hard' power softens, our 'soft' power must increase. I claim – immodestly for the British – that embedded in our national character is a gift

for diplomacy. We should use it, encourage it, enhance it – both for trade and political purposes. We live in a tough world. We should use all our assets to advance our interests.

I don't view 'soft power' as a 'soft option', nor as some ill-defined 'third way' that exists only to soothe the conscience of liberal elites. Diplomacy requires patience and determination, and is characterised by intelligence, pragmatism, empathy and the transparent rule of law.

It should be backed by stick and carrot: by a willingness to use economic and political pressure in pursuit of our objectives. 'Soft power': Yes. 'Soft attitude': No. This is an area that can achieve so much – for Britain and America. Where it fails, it doesn't exclude military action in appropriate circumstances. But if it precedes military action, it helps justify it.

In our inter-connected world, it is through 'soft' power – and painstaking negotiation – that the really big challenges will be resolved – most obviously in making international bodies relevant to the modern world, and in the areas of energy security, climate change, aid policy – and peace-making as opposed to peace keeping. Soft power will embrace new alliances that unite the dominant global players. At the foundation of those alliances, Britain and America – with their common view of the world – will be likely to stand shoulder to shoulder.

They will do so – not as the by product of a 'special relationship' – but as pragmatic colleagues and candid friends who can bring others along with our shared vision for progress and prosperity – for all the 7 billion of us, and rising – who share the same resources of the same planet.

And, if this comes about, perhaps even Dean Acheson will finally be confounded: Britain will have found a role.