



Transcript

The Whitehead Lecture: Special or Merely Close? Britain's Relationship with the US in 2010

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UK Foreign Secretary (2001-06)

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Rt Hon Jack Straw MP:

'Britain is a small country. Don't forget that'.

This comment came from one of a distinguished panel discussing the world economy and the 'BRICs', at a conference in Colorado I attended in late September. The comment was not made in any disobliging way – but as a statement of fact. It was received in that way by all the (mainly American) participants present.

In discussing the perennial issue of US/UK relations, it's worth beginning with some metrics which are sometimes overlooked.

The US on 311 million¹ has a population over five times ours, on 61.8 million²; its GDP is nearly seven times ours – and accounts for 24% of world GDP (though its population is only 4.5%)³. US GDP is three times larger than that of the second largest economy [Japan].

The US has by far and away the strongest defence forces. It has 1.58 million personnel under arms⁴; we have 195,000⁵. The US spends \$660bn per year on defence – 4.3% of its GDP – which is more than the total of the next 17 countries put together⁶. In contrast, although the UK has the second largest defence budget in Europe⁷, its spend is just one tenth of the US's, in 2009 representing 2.7% of our GDP⁸.

Partly because of the size of its defence spend, but as much because of the extraordinary intellectual and entrepreneurial environment so long a hall-mark of the US, it is dominant in most fields of technological advance, and is likely to remain so into the future.

The US is still European in heritage but less than it was – and the non-European proportion is growing. Latest population estimates show around 13% African American, 5% Asian⁹. On some projections the Hispanic population will increase to around 19% by 2020¹⁰. Underlining this is President Obama himself. Previous Presidents may have been brought up

¹ <http://www.census.gov/main/www/popclock.html>

² <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/pdfdir/popnr0610.pdf>

³ <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2001rank.html?countryName=United%20States&countryCode=us®ionCode=na&rank=2#us>

⁴ The Military Balance 2010, IISS

⁵ UK Armed Forces - Monthly Manning Report, MoD/DASA

⁶ <http://milexdata.sipri.org/>

⁷ <http://www.eda.europa.eu/defencefacts/>

⁸ Financial and Economic Data Relating to NATO Defence, NATO press release June 2010.

⁹ Table 3. Annual Estimates of the Resident Population by Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin for the United States: April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2009 (NC-EST2009-03), US Census Bureau

¹⁰ Table 6. Percent of the Projected Population by Race and Hispanic Origin for the United States: 2010 to 2050 (NP2008-T6), US Census Bureau

with a jaundiced view of Europe – and especially the UK; President Kennedy comes to mind - but all were of European heritage. President Obama is the first President more of African/Asian heritage than of European and, as significant, is the fact that he is the first post-Cold War President.

Do these metrics mean that the term 'special relationship' is now at best an emotional comfort-blanket for a once great nation whimpering at the dying of the light, at worst simply fiction, or is there something exceptional about the US/UK relationship which marks it out from any of the other multitude of key relationships which the US – and indeed the UK – has to maintain?

In some respects our relationships with the United States are exceptional. Though the United States was born out of rebellion against the English Crown, the way in which we both have developed and matured the idea of the rule of law, the central foundation of any democratic state, and the norm against which behaviour by all states is judged under the United Nations' Charter, is extraordinary. The jurisprudential engagement across the Atlantic is indeed special; judgements of superior courts in the US are replete with references to Magna Carta, the 1689 Bill of Rights, to Coke and Blackstone. These common ideas of law and rules are there, too, when it comes to trust and confidence, the basis of any sustained relationships.

Whilst, as I have mentioned the demographics of the United States are shifting, the binding vision of that nation, the 'American dream' remains deeply rooted in the ethics of north European, especially British, protestant capitalism. So too is the boundless optimism of that dream which in some senses emigrated across the Atlantic from Victorian Britain as the US began to establish its globally dominant position. The UK and the US are the single largest overseas investors in the other¹¹; the US is the leading destination for UK exports and is also the second largest source of our imports¹².

Though Bernard Shaw's caution that 'England and America are two countries separated by the same language' should serve as a timeless reminder not to make any assumptions about how the US sees things, there is something about the 'English speaking peoples' which makes for an ease in relations and common endeavours. These factors underpin, I suggest, the pre-eminence of 'Anglo Saxon' institutions in finance and commerce; and help explain why in the field of contemporary culture – music, film, theatre, television – of any foreigners it is Brits who have by far and away the greatest penetration with American audiences.

¹¹ House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee (2010), p.11

But the term 'special relationship' is most frequently used in the field of foreign and security policy, and it's on that I wish now to concentrate.

As everyone here knows the phrase was coined by Winston Churchill in his 1946 'Sinews of Peace' speech at Westminster College, Missouri. What, however, may be less well known is the precise words which Churchill used.

This is what he said:

'Neither the prevention of war, nor the continuous rise of world organisations 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.'¹³

There are three things to note about this conception:-

- Churchill calls for a 'fraternal association' – nothing more;
- He uses the indefinite article 'a special relationship';
- This 'association' is to embrace not just the US and the UK but the whole of the 'British Commonwealth and Empire'.

The context, and Churchill's world view are also important to understanding what he meant.

At the time – just a year after the war had ended - the UK was having to come to terms with what had been inevitable since the First World War – the replacement of the UK by the US as the major world power.

Churchill was a majestic war leader. It is impossible to think of anyone else in Britain who could have led the UK through the darkness of the early years of the war when we did stand alone – with the US on the sidelines. He was also a romantic Imperialist, hostile to Indian independence, who hoped against hope that somehow it would be possible to maintain British hegemony across the 'British Commonwealth and Empire' to be a strong counterbalance to the US.

The context in which Churchill spoke is no more. The politics and economies of the 'old Commonwealth' – Australia, New Zealand, Canada – and South Africa – are dominated by their regional neighbourhoods; so are those of the newer Commonwealth. India, which Churchill so often called wrong, is itself a

¹² http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_economy/mm24sep10.pdf

¹³ http://www.nato.int/cps/en/SID-030EA920-5724E175/natolive/news_16942.htm

fast-emerging world power, with a population likely to overtake China's and become the fourth biggest economy by 2025¹⁴.

For four decades from Churchill's Westminster College speech, the centre of gravity of United States' foreign policy continued to be the Atlantic, because of the Cold War, and the relative weakness of India and China. Today the centre of gravity for the US strategically, as for President Obama personally, is the Pacific. Aside from the current concerns with North Korea, no one should under-estimate the quite profound change in the United States' very sense of itself which will arise when – and it is a matter of time alone – China, then India, knocks the US from the position as world top dog which it has enjoyed for at least the last 100 years as the largest economy in the world¹⁵. Yes, it will also be the case that the GDP per capita of the US will be way ahead of China and India's for as far as one can see; nonetheless the US's removal from the No 1 aggregate position will affect both the US's self-confidence and its exceptionalism.

Anyone who was President of the United States today – even the most Anglophile of Presidents - would therefore be bound to regard the US's relations with China and India as the two most important ones to nurture and to enhance; and from security, technology, to currencies and trade, relations with China are likely to be pre-occupying and problematic.

Like every country in the world, the United States has to seek the best relationship with every nation; so does the UK. But the relationship between the US and the UK cannot be symmetrical

A year ago, the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC) held an inquiry into the UK/US relationship. In the evidence there is a marvellous account by Mr Justin Webb, now of the Radio 4 Today Programme, but reflecting on his eight years in Washington as a correspondent for the BBC. Mr Webb had asked a contact in the White House press office to ascertain from a senior member of the Administration the 'current feeling' about the 'special relationship'. The response was dramatic: 'Get out of my room. I'm sick of that subject. You're all mad.'¹⁶

So far as I can tell, I'm not mad. As British Foreign Secretary between 2001 and 2006, and subsequently, I have always tried (not with complete success) to avoid the term 'special relationship'. It is patronising, confusing, and in many ways inaccurate. I agree with the FAC that the 'use of the phrase

¹⁴ <http://www2.goldmansachs.com/ideas/brics/book/BRIC-Full.pdf>

¹⁵ <http://www.theworlddeconomy.org/MaddisonTables/MaddisontableB-18.pdf>

'special relationship' is...potentially misleading,' and, 'that its use should be avoided.'¹⁷ Far better, in my view, to talk of a 'distinctive and close' relationship with the United States. Most certainly we should abandon the ridiculous neurosis about our relationship which also has expression in concerns about who's first through the White House door, how many seconds of 'face-time' there is with the President – and chill. We are not the 'junior partner' of the US, as Prime Minister Cameron suggested¹⁸: nor the 'younger brother.'¹⁹ What we are is a close friend of the US. Like all true friends we should always be ready in private, and sometimes in public, to say exactly what we think.

Let me add this. Although the notion of this 'special relationship' goes back to Churchill's Westminster College speech, the roots of the neurosis are in my view to be found some ten years later – in Suez. Those few days in late October and early November 1956 were more catastrophic in terms of Britain's world reach and relationship with the US than any other event in the last 70 years. The US did not just feel blind-sided, but double-crossed by us (and the French). They punished us, forcing us to stare down the barrel of their power. Few talk about Suez these days, but the spectre of Suez has hung over the foreign and security policy conducted on both sides of Downing Street ever since. Suez also put distance between the UK and France; for whilst our reaction was, as it were, to try to hug close to the US, France's reaction was to treat with the US on a long spoon.

Our security and foreign policy relationship with the United States is at its deepest in respect of intelligence and military operations, and – Wikileaks notwithstanding – I see no reason why that degree of cooperation should not continue. The intelligence relationship is mutually supportive, and whilst in the military sphere the United States certainly has the capacity, and sometimes the need to go it alone (as did we over the Falklands), they understandably prefer to operate with allies. We have forces which are familiar with their counterparts in the US, and typically are both more willing and more able to make significant troop or other contributions than any other country. Our acceptance that if we put forces in harms' way some may be killed, and quite a proportion may be injured, also separates us from many European nations who seek to square a circle of military participation but without risk by

¹⁶ House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee (2010), p.21

¹⁷ Ibid., p.22

¹⁸ Cameron, David- *A Staunch and Self-confident Ally*, *The Wall Street Journal*, 20th July 2010.

¹⁹ Riddell, Peter- *Goodbye Bill, hello George: How Blair bridged the gap*, *The Times*, 29 September 2003

imposing national restrictions which seriously hobble their front-line participation.

What of wider cooperation with the US in foreign and security policy?

In significant part, as Sir David Manning, former UK Ambassador to Washington spelt out in his evidence to the FAC, exactly how strong and deep is the relationship will depend on the personal chemistry between the US President and the UK Prime Minister of the time, and, though to a lesser extent, on that between the US Secretary of State and the UK Foreign Secretary, and other senior Ministers²⁰.

But there are also some objective strengths for the closeness of the relationship.

The United Kingdom is one of the five Permanent Members of the United Nations. Whilst there have been many sensible proposals for widening the membership of the Security Council to include as permanent members India, Brazil, Japan, and Germany, for example, there is no realistic possibility of the right of veto being extended beyond the original five. This, and the associated fact that under the Non-Proliferation Treaty the UK is one of the five authorised nuclear weapon states, does give us a position and a platform in the United Nations very different from that of any other country of our size apart from France, and provide for extensive cooperation with the United States – as well as with the other P5 members. However, we all need to have a care for the apparent decline in the authority of the UN, and key instruments like the NPT, as we move into a more multi-polar world.

As in the military sphere, so in foreign relations does no country, the US included, wish to be isolated, and this gives us an influence which we may sometimes under-estimate.

Tony Blair used to make part of his case for the very strong relationship he sought – and achieved – under two very different Presidents that the UK could be a ‘bridge’ between the US and Europe. I’m not sure that this was the best term to use, but he was in substance correct. Our influence and reach with the US will be the stronger if we have deep and sound relations with our European partners.

Whilst the centre of gravity of the United States’ security and foreign policy pre-occupations has indeed moved to the Pacific for the reasons I have set

²⁰ [House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee \(2010\), EV35](#)

out, this does not mean that the US's relations with Europe, nor our role in that relationship, will become marginal.

The same factors which are and will increasingly require the US to be pre-occupied with their Pacific neighbours also apply to Europe. As the US comes to terms with the fact that it is no longer the largest economy in the world, so too will Europe have to re-adjust its perception of itself, as the world's 'largest trading block', and major manufacturer; and as the centre of what we call interchangeably the 'civilised world' or the 'western world'. In some ways the trauma could be worse for Europe than the United States, especially in the critical sphere of intellectual endeavour and innovation. With the stark exception of the United Kingdom, universities across Europe have slipped down the world league tables, and look set to continue that slide- with this year's more stringent Times Higher Education World Rankings placing only 26 European universities in the top 100, but 14 of those 26 are in the UK²¹.

The United States will however continue to have a major problem in dealing with Europe – which is, in Henry Kissinger's resonant phrase, 'Who do I call if I want to call Europe?'

Exactly nine years ago the EU held a summit during the Belgian Presidency in the exotic surroundings of the Royal Palace at Laeken. This was just three months after 9/11, when the US and Europe cooperated more thoroughly than at any time since the war. In the weirdly euphoric atmosphere of Laeken a new agenda for the EU was set, to make it 'more democratic, more transparent and more efficient'²²; a Convention was established to plan the future decision making structure of the Union; the Euro, as a real single currency with notes and coins, was only two years old. The 'A10' countries of the old Soviet Bloc, and Cyprus and Malta, were set fair to join, as they did, just three and half years later. For all the deep divisions over Iraq, the EU did hold together, and the 'E3' initiative of Germany, France, and the UK in respect of Iran was a genuine example of a putative European foreign policy in operation.

Nine years on, however, and the outlook for Europe is a very different one. It will not be glad confident morning for the EU for a long time to come, as the EU now has to wrestle with an existential issue- the future membership of the Euro.

²¹ Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2010/11.

²² Presidency Conclusions (2001), p.21

There is no cause for *schadenfreude* over the Euro. It is plainly in the interests of everyone in the UK, regardless of the view they might hold of the Euro, that economic and financial stability is restored as soon as possible to the Eurozone, and (of immediate concern), to the Republic of Ireland. But once the dust has settled there will have to be a thorough examination by the EU as to whether it is possible in the long term for there to be a single currency which is common to so many diverse economies and polities.

This critical, but internal, issue is bound to pre-occupy the EU for some time to come. Without an unalterable degree of political union parallel to the economic and monetary union I have often wondered what the long-term future could be of the Euro.

In an echo of Henry Kissinger's plaintive cry about who to call, French Finance Minister Christine Lagarde explained last week that, 'Europe is difficult to understand for the markets'²³. The difficulty in understanding is not however confined to the markets, but more widely – and that includes the United States. In the absence of any high level leadership of Europe as a whole, and no prospect of this given the continuing tensions within the EU, leadership is going to fall back on Germany, and France – and, if it is ready to take it up, the United Kingdom. I do not share the view now quite frequently expressed on the continent that if the Eurozone were cut back to 'Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Finland, and perhaps France' to quote from one commentary last week in the German press, 'Europe's joint appearance on the world stage, on an equal footing with the US and China, would have to be called off for good'²⁴.

One key to strengthening our relationship with Europe overall, and helping ensure that the EU is able to engage effectively in the world, not least with the US, is our relationship with France.

For all the apparent irritations and suspicions – both mutual – of the Franco/British relationship, there are some strong and common fundamentals we all need to understand. France has not been a military adversary of the UK for well-over a century; mostly it has been our active military ally; it has a defence spend of a similar size, fighting experience, and a military culture similar to ours; it is a nuclear power and member of the UNSC P5; and crucially its sense of nationhood, its suspicion of European federalism is very strong, as is ours. That de Gaulle was hostile to the UK's first attempt to join the (then) EEC because he feared that this would indirectly strengthen the US's

²³ Christine Lagarde interview *RTL Radio*, 29 November 2010.

influence in Europe is I think well known. What at least I was not aware of until I read Philip Ziegler's excellent biography of Edward Heath in the summer was de Gaulle's fear that the UK 'would gang up with Holland and Germany and create a Europe which was ... too federal' [Ziegler quoting British diplomat Michael Butler]²⁵. We need to go beyond the parody of France that so often appears in our press as an alternative to serious analysis. They want an all-powerful EU Commission no more than do we; their frustration by jurists and politicians alike with a 'creeping competence' of the ECJ is no less than ours. They may use different language, but their sense of where their interests are is similar to ours. Of course they stick close to the Germans – why wouldn't they? – but that does not mean that there are not significant dividends for us from a closer and deeper relationship with the French.

So I welcome the signing on 2 November of the Franco/British Defence and Security Co-operation treaty, themselves facilitated by President Sarkozy's important decision that once again France should become part of the military structure of NATO. The more we are able to cooperate with France in military – and foreign policy – matters, the better in my view, not only directly for the UK, but also in terms of our relationship with the US.

Some see relations with the US and Europe as an 'either/or'. It is not. Trade is the most obvious example; where we do need the collective strength of the abiding feature of the EU, and its key *raison d'être* as a single trading bloc to negotiate with the US.

There are foreign policy areas too where, if the EU was able to agree and follow through a single strategy, this would also objectively be in the US's interests. This will require changes in the way the EU meets the world, with France, Germany and the UK together, if it can, assuming the lead.

Take the Middle East. The US is the only nation capable at present of exerting pressure on Israel to agree to a peace with the Palestinians which has to involve serious compromises by both sides. There are few serious interlocutors in Israel or the US who do not know this, and want this. But Israel is trapped by its political system which gives disproportionate power, through proportional representation, to small minorities especially on the right, whilst the power of the Israeli lobby on Capitol Hill is so strong that few members of Congress can ignore it. The EU neither provides arms nor aid to Israel, but it is an important trading partner, and could do much more

²⁴ Finanzkrise: *Erst hart, dann weich*, Die Zeit, 2 December 2010
²⁵ Ziegler (2010), p.129

diplomatically. Such countervailing pressure on Israel would not be unwelcome by many in Washington however muted such sentiments might have to be.

Or take Iran, the single most critical foreign policy issue of the day.

I remain of the view that military action against Iran in respect of its nuclear facilities is not a good idea. Those who think that it is fail to appreciate that Iran is not Syria nor Iraq, and that the repercussions across the region could be most adverse. With one attack the international coalition so carefully put together, and cemented by the work of the 'E3 + 3', and UNSCR 1929 would fracture²⁶; Iran would escape international isolation, and gain support around the globe; the prospects for non-proliferation would be put back years if not decades; the hardliners in Iran would be strengthened; and the Arab 'street' would not be very happy

The UK and our partners in Europe need to debate this issue in much more depth, and consider a 'Plan B', not least so that it can better engage the United States in thinking through the consequences of either support for an Israeli strike, or acquiescence in one.

I have long been struck by an almost casual observation made to me by a senior US Administration official who said poignantly– 'the trouble is that the State Department is primarily a department of foreign relations, and when we ceased relations with Iran' – now more than thirty years ago – 'we ceased to have any serious policy capacity either'; and, they added, had instead become vulnerable to inevitably partisan views of the large US/Iranian diaspora.

To pick up my opening quotation, it's simply a fact that we are a 'small country', compared to the giants of the US, China, and India – not forgetting Brazil and maybe Russia - who together will increasingly dominate the world economy, and much security policy too. But we are not that small. In the next decades, if Turkey does not join the EU, we are likely to become the largest country by population in the EU. We are also an unusual country, for the strength of our values and institutions, our culture and language, and our extensive world-wide interests. We can build on those strengths if we have confidence in ourselves together with an understanding of our limits; and if in

²⁶ 'E3+3'- refers to France, Germany and the UK (known as E3) plus Russia, the US and China. The grouping 'E3+3' was set up to deal with the issue of Iran's nuclear programme. UNSCR 1929 refers to the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1929, which was passed on the 9 June 2010 with twelve member states voting for and two against (Brazil and Turkey). UNSCR 1929 set out further sanctions against Iran in response to the continuance of its nuclear programme,

the important and multifaceted relationship with the United States we do not maintain the mirage of 'the special relationship' but build on our strengths as its 'close friend'.

including an expansion of the arms embargo and a tightening of restrictions on financial and shipping enterprises.

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