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The Special Relationship and Western Grand Strategy

John Hemmings believes that the anxiety over Britain's 'resignation' as a global power speaks volumes about the incoherence of Western strategic thinking and the need for a unified approach to a complex security environment. Here are his recommendations for righting the ship.

By John Hemmings for ISN

In the past year, there has been a growing debate in Washington about Britain's loss of stature on the world stage. This increasingly public conversation has suggested that Britain's will to be a global power may be eroding and that the future of one of the key alliances of the 20th century may therefore be uncertain. Yet this debate actually represents a wider problem: i.e., the lack of a coherent Western strategy and the need for a unified approach to an increasingly complex security environment. In this new context, three measures can help the West to negotiate its current strategic impasse: 1) reconsidering retrenchment; 2) downgrading humanitarian intervention; and 3) increasing strategic dialogue.

The sun finally sets?

Over the past year or so, quiet conversations have been taking place in Washington regarding the trans-Atlantic relationship. After US requests for information met with silence in Whitehall, these conversations began to spill out into the public arena. In March, [General Ray Odierno](#), the US Army Chief of Staff, said he was "very concerned" about the UK's planned defence cuts. As if on cue, the former Chief of Staff of the British Army, [General Peter Wall](#), then argued in a *Telegraph* article that the UK had "a lower level of ambition for UK involvement in global security than ever before."

This opened the floodgates: in the following week, the *Washington Post* published an [article](#) worrying about the UK's 'shrinking military clout'; then, in April, the *New York Times* published a longer [article](#) about Britain's 'drift from the global stage.' Finally, in May, CNN journalist Fareed Zakaria argued that Britain had essentially 'resigned' [as a world power](#). Only the *Independent's* Washington correspondent, Peter Foster, pointed out that the US itself also seemed to be in retreat. After 'leading from behind' in Libya, it had ducked behind the British Parliament over Syria and failed to produce tangible defence guarantees to the Ukraine. Foster was not right about everything, but his point illustrates a wider problem: that the West has an alarming 'strategy gap' and is undergoing a review period.

It is true that the UK is in the midst of a slow-motion constitutional crisis and deep financial

retrenchment, but it is also – like the US – experiencing a crisis of strategic thought after a decade of setbacks. To illustrate, consider how the Cold War unified the UK, the US, and their ‘first world’ allies behind two basic notions: that there was a single overarching threat (communism) and that they had a strategy for dealing with it (containment). With these two reference points, the Treasury could get down to the tricky business of allocating resources to Britain’s Armed Forces and intelligence agencies and coordinating parallel and complementary goals with the United States and its NATO allies. It was as effective as it was simple.

A brief look at priorities of the [2010](#) National Security Strategy indicates how much has changed. The report includes four major high risk areas: (1) terrorism, (2) cyber, (3) international crises, and (4) major accidents or hazards. There are also a number of lesser risk areas, such as energy security, organized crime, and border security, and a number of variables, such as the rate of technological change, demography, the diffusion of power in the international system, and environmental factors, among others. To cap things off, the report then makes clear that “Our most urgent task is to return our nation’s finances to a sustainable footing.”

To simplify: the UK would like to have a medium-sized military force that would work closely with others (i.e., the US and NATO allies) to defend against terror attacks at home and abroad; to defend against cyber- espionage, cyber- crime, and cyber- attack; to carry on nuclear deterrence at sea; to defend Britain’s trade routes; and to get involved in short-term humanitarian interventions in fragile or failed states. The UK would like to do all of this while continuing to modernize its ISR capabilities – and *while* saving money. This is not a strategy: this is what President Obama and many others are beginning to refer to (in an American context) as the “ [whack-a-mole](#)” approach. One prioritizes everything, so that, in the end, nothing is prioritized. With the tail wagging the proverbial dog, such an approach blinds strategists to two emerging realities: that great power politics is returning to the global system; and that the age of humanitarian interventions and ‘soft’ security is over.

Whitehall is not completely to blame for the current strategic drift. American critics of the UK’s downsizing are no less critical of their own strategic ambiguity. After all, what is Western – or even American – strategy in Ukraine? Or the Middle East? If the US is to lead, then it must communicate an overarching strategic vision to its Western allies, one that gives meaning to the allied blood and treasure already lost in Iraq and Afghanistan and to any future blood and treasure that will be spent. It must also attempt to reset its Asian Rebalance to match the realities of growing European insecurity.

A new strategic vision

If the West is not only to survive but to thrive in the modern age, it will have to make difficult choices in an effort to anticipate future developments rather than simply react to them. In this regard, three courses of action can help to resolve its current strategic crisis.

(1) Prioritize spending

As London’s foreign policy choices have highlighted, this is ultimately an age of economic scarcity where smart resource allocation is needed. With this in mind, Prime Minister Cameron has attempted to husband his resources. While this has not stopped him from sending troop trainers [to Ukraine](#) or from bombing ISIL, it has meant making difficult choices, for example, when asked by the US not to join China’s new infrastructure bank, the AIIB. However, it should be noted that there has been a degree of political side-stepping by the Cameron government on spending. Despite claims of austerity, the UK remains the world’s fifth largest [economy](#), hosts one of the largest global financial hubs, recovering far faster from the financial crisis than many of its European counterparts. The fact that it is being outspent on defence by a historical peer competitor, Russia, is galling – particularly

since its [budget revenue](#), at \$986 billion, is nearly twice that of Russia's \$416 billion. The fact that Osborne is again likely to [ringfence](#) DfIDS's aid budget indicates that there is more latitude in this debate than Whitehall has admitted. In other words, there are alternatives to the planned defence cuts. They should be discussed, rather than assumed behind closed doors.

(2) Prioritize threats

The UK cannot treat all threats as equal. Threats to the system should be prioritized over threats to humanitarian values. This means that Ukraine is more important than Syria because of the effect it would have on Europe's eastern flank. In the wake of failures in Libya, Iraq and Afghanistan, the West should abstain from the humanitarian interventionism of the 1990s. The idealism represented by such interventions was well-meaning and occasionally effective (as in Sierra Leone and the Balkans), but it also occurred in a much more benign international environment, in which revisionist Russia and China were themselves engaged in domestic retrenchment. What has become clear to many, particularly after Libya, is that while Western nations can carry out front-end kinetic operations against lesser regimes, they lack the stomach and resources for peace-building and state-building. The continued lack of a strong state and the flow of refugees from Libya suggests that, without this necessary institution-building, interventions may hurt more than they help. Power vacuums present non-state actors with opportunities, while creating further problems for those they were intended to help. It is unclear that bringing about Assad's downfall in 2013 would have alleviated the suffering of civilians: indeed, ISIL would have been the clear winner in territory, population and resources.

(3) Talk more with each other

The UK-US Alliance is certainly experiencing problems, but these are exacerbated by a lack of communication over delicate issues. Some place the blame for this at the level of the incumbent administrations, pointing to a lack of dialogue between this Prime Minister and this President. Others emphasize a necessary phase of navel-gazing in the UK during a period of constitutional difficulties relating to the Scottish situation and the upcoming referendum on EU membership. In the case of the UK's domestic turmoil, the United States has little choice but to remain patient with this loss of focus in Whitehall. However, the UK cannot take an indefinite break from talking to its allies or from the work of providing security in and around Europe. Now more than ever, it must communicate its commitments to enemies and allies alike. Happily, alliances are seldom based on the personal foibles of leaders but on common interests, values, institutions, and history. The deeply enmeshed intelligence relationships, for example, involve common institutions with a legacy of working together for shared goals. The bureaucracies can continue working closely together – but strategic vision is policy, and that must be coordinated at the political level. In the run-up to the November release of the NSS and SDSR, the UK and United States should build on the track 1 and track 1.5 work that is already taking place – to discuss their worries, concerns and possible solutions in a way that is clear and useful for other Western / NATO allies.

Conclusion

It seems that one of the defining features of alliances is the assumption that they are in trouble. Since the beginning of the US-UK Alliance after the Second World War, a year has scarcely passed without the publication of a newspaper article or book worrying about its health. Indeed, worries about the state of affairs between Washington and London are arguably an offshoot of the decline narrative, one of the most common tropes in Western political discourse – one that should be treated with respect

but also with a certain amount of stoicism. What is needed now is more discussion rather than more alarming headlines.

The US-UK Alliance is certainly experiencing a triple challenge of war-weariness, insecurity overload, and resource scarcity. However, these are problems that the West writ large is also facing. The Special Relationship has been one the most significant alliances of the 20th Century - one that has endured two world wars, numerous civil wars and insurgencies, and countless other conflicts including the current intervention against ISIL in the skies of Iraq. The two intelligence agencies and defence industries work closely together in a way that adds values to their respective capabilities. Even now, American and British diplomats are working closely on Iran's nuclear programme, over Russian revanchism in eastern Ukraine, and on NATO's readiness. We cannot afford to take this partnership for granted. It is the cornerstone to European security.

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