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The End of the Special Relationship?

The close alliance between the U.S. and the U.K. has lasted since World War II, but strains are showing in the age of Trump and Brexit.

By David Reynolds, July 19, 2019

Kim Darroch, the British ambassador in Washington, became an international celebrity overnight on July 7, when some of his confidential cables to the U.K. Foreign Office were leaked to a London newspaper. His assessment of the Trump administration as “inept” and “dysfunctional” triggered a tirade of tweets from the president, who called Mr. Darroch “a very stupid guy” and declared that “we will no longer deal with him.” Mr. Darroch is only the third British ambassador in history to become persona non grata in Washington; the others were in 1856 and 1888.

Mr. Trump has been called far worse things, of course, by the other Kim—the North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un, with whom Mr. Trump has conducted an on-and-off diplomatic romance. (“He wrote me beautiful letters, and we fell in love,” Mr. Trump has said.) The president’s petulance about the Darroch cables isn’t simply a matter of being thin-skinned—after all, most of the ambassador’s criticisms can be read most days in U.S. newspapers. Rather, the attack on Mr. Darroch seemed to be a piece of diplomatic calculation, and the affair reveals a good deal about the current state of the U.S.-U.K. “special relationship.”

That term was popularized by Winston Churchill during and after World War II, and it was in large measure an attempt to mask and manage the decline of Britain as a global power. Over the following decades, most U.S. presidents were more circumspect about assigning so elevated a status to the relationship. But during the Cold War, Washington valued the U.K. as a vital and

distinctive ally, especially for its roles in Europe and the Atlantic alliance. In the era of Trump and Brexit, it is unclear whether the relationship can endure on the basis of shared principles and interests, even as China and Russia exert a wider influence inimical to both countries.

The close connection between the U.S. and the U.K. can be traced to June 1940, when the amazing defeat of France by Nazi Germany transformed geopolitics. Continuing British defiance of Germany was essential to prevent a total Nazi victory, and Churchill knew that defeating Hitler would require American participation in the war. President Franklin Roosevelt was convinced that, in the emerging age of airpower, the U.S. could not allow aggressive states with alien values to dominate Europe.

He also believed that, after the obscenity of two world wars, it was necessary to set out fresh principles to forge a more decent and stable world. In the Atlantic Charter, Roosevelt and Churchill affirmed basic precepts of a rules-based liberal order, including the right of self-determination, the principle of no territorial changes by force, the reduction of trade barriers, the advancement of social welfare and the promotion of international disarmament. After Pearl Harbor, the Atlantic Charter became the basis of the “Declaration of the United Nations” in January 1942.



British Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery (left) and U.S. General Dwight Eisenhower in Berlin, June 6, 1945. PHOTO: AP

Although the Allied victory in 1945 owed much to the Red Army—in the four years between France’s collapse and D-Day, Soviet forces inflicted about 90% of the German army’s battle casualties—the heart of the alliance was the U.S.-U.K. relationship. It was probably the closest in history between two major powers—the sharing of signals intelligence and the institution of the Combined Chiefs of Staff being notable examples. And it was rooted in a shared heritage of political liberalism, going back to the English Parliament’s struggle against monarchical power in the 17th century.

Still, nothing could conceal the growth of American dominance as the war progressed. (In 1944, British gripes about the “Yanks” being “oversexed, overpaid and over here” prompted the telling American riposte that the Brits were “undersexed, underpaid and under Eisenhower.”) That is where the idea of a “special relationship” came in: British leaders believed, or hoped, that the junior partner could **manage** the senior, because of their shared cultural values.

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What’s more, being relatively new to world power, the U.S. would surely need the help and advice of a global veteran. “It must be our purpose to make use of American power for purposes we regard as good,” a Foreign Office memorandum stated patronizingly in 1944, adding that “if we go about our business in the right way we can help steer this

great unwieldy barge, the United States of America, into the right harbor.”

In 1943, Harold Macmillan, a future British prime minister, reached for a classical analogy to describe Allied Force Headquarters in Algiers. “We...are Greeks in this American empire,” he told a colleague languidly. “You will find the Americans much as the Greeks found the Romans—great big, vulgar, bustling people, more vigorous than we are and also more idle, with more unspoiled virtues but also more corrupt. We must run AFHQ as the Greek slaves ran the operations of the Emperor Claudius.” A combination of American brawn and British brains—that was the conceit behind London’s conception of the special relationship.

In Washington, things naturally looked a bit different, not least because of the legacy of 1776. In American folk memory and textbooks, Britain, one might say, was the original “evil empire”—the brutal overlord from which the Americans had escaped thanks to the combined efforts of the Founders, the Minutemen and Divine Providence.

Cooperation with the British therefore had a rather bad odor. When the U.S. entered World War I in 1917, President Woodrow Wilson had demanded that it be called an “associated” rather than an “allied” power, to show that it did not share the imperialist values of Britain and France. In World War II, one of Roosevelt’s primary war aims was to end European colonialism. In 1942, his insistence that Britain should concede independence to India provoked a private threat of resignation from Churchill. Later, during the Suez crisis of 1956, President Dwight Eisenhower pilloried Britain at the U.N. because he regarded the joint British and French invasion of Egypt to recover control of the Suez Canal as a grotesque reversion to 19th-century gunboat diplomacy.

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But attitudes in Washington shifted as the U.S. set out to confront communism world-wide. In this new global struggle, British power became an asset. Though in retreat from empire, Britain had an industrial output in the early 1950s equal to that of France and West Germany combined, and its armed forces numbered nearly a million, trailing only the Soviet Union and the U.S. In 1952, Britain

followed the superpowers in testing an atomic bomb, thereby becoming the world's third nuclear-armed state. It also retained bases around the world at key strategic points, from Gibraltar to Singapore, which enhanced the projection of U.S. power.

Most U.S. policy makers still avoided the term “special relationship.” In 1950, Secretary of State Dean Acheson ordered all copies of a memo that used the phrase to be burned. He did not contest “the genuineness of the special relationship” but feared that, “in the hands of troublemakers,” the memo “could stir no end of a hullabaloo, both domestic and international.”

By 1962, Acheson believed that Britain was just about “played out” as a global power. His warning that it had “lost an empire and not yet found a role” touched a raw nerve in London, but Macmillan’s government had already decided to do as Acheson was urging and make the “turn” to Europe. Yet it did so in order to bolster the special relationship. The British cabinet concluded that “the Common Market, if left to develop alone under French leadership, would grow into a separate political force in Europe” and eventually might “exercise greater influence” on the U.S. than the British were able to do, which could undermine Britain’s position as “the bridge between Europe and North America.”

In the event, the U.K. was kept out of the European Common Market all through the 1960s by French President Charles de Gaulle, who was still bitter at *les Anglo-Saxons* for marginalizing him during World War II. Even after the U.K. finally joined the European Community in 1973, its leaders continued to see their country as a bridge between America and Europe. Their tactic was to manage disagreement with U.S. policies discreetly, in contrast with the Gaullist practice of public denunciation. Britain’s axiom, one might say, was “Never say ‘no,’ say ‘yes, but’”—with the “yes” stated loyally in public and the caveats uttered behind closed doors.

Few U.K. leaders were more Americophile than Margaret Thatcher. Her rapport with President Ronald Reagan became legendary, though she could be caustic about him in private. She supported his firmness toward the old Soviet leadership but encouraged his opening up to Mikhail Gorbachev (a man with whom she

famously decided she could “do business”). Even when furious about Reagan’s apparent readiness to sacrifice the principles of Western nuclear deterrence during the Reykjavik summit of October 1986, she responded with classic “closed doors” diplomacy. She invited herself to Camp David and “hand-bagged” the president into a public reiteration of NATO’s official policy.



President George W. Bush (right) and British Prime Minister Tony Blair at the White House, January 31, 2003. PHOTO: BROOKS KRAFT/CORBIS/GETTY IMAGES

Yet nothing Mrs. Thatcher said in private or public could stop the president from unilaterally sending U.S. troops into Grenada in 1983, even though this was a Commonwealth country and Queen Elizabeth was its head of state. And after 9/11, Prime Minister Tony Blair supported President George W. Bush over the invasion of Iraq, partly in the hope of bringing peace and democracy to the Middle East, but got little for his pains except a tarnished reputation.

Such episodes have prompted criticism that the special relationship is just a fig-leaf for the continued waning of British power. Yet the U.S.-U.K. relationship does remain distinctive in several respects. The sharing of military intelligence, dating back to World War II, has evolved into the so-called “Five Eyes” network of global surveillance among the U.S., U.K., Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

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The nuclear relationship is also truly special. No other American ally has been allowed the same access to U.S. nuclear technology and delivery

systems, in the form of first Polaris and then Trident ballistic missiles. More amorphous, but equally unique, is the habit of consultation: British and American politicians, officials and members of the armed forces at all levels find it natural to talk with their opposite numbers. The common language helps, as does the historic commonality of worldviews and political values.

In consequence, the special relationship has proved a linchpin of the NATO alliance. The U.K., along with France, is the U.S.'s only European ally with a significant "out-of-area" military capability—as seen in the recent reinforcement of British and French forces in Syria, to allow the Trump administration to pull back U.S. troops. And the British are regarded as far more reliable allies than the French. As for the European Community and eventually the European Union, Britain's membership and its trans-Atlantic bridging role have been supported by every U.S. administration from John F. Kennedy to Barack Obama.

Which brings us back to Mr. Trump and Mr. Darroch. Today, the cohesion of the West matters as much as ever in the face of a newly assertive Russia and China. Under fourth-term President Vladimir Putin, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its continued interference in the domestic politics of Western democracies threaten the stability of the postwar order. Mr. Putin has recently dismissed liberalism as "obsolete." In Beijing, President-for-life Xi Jinping has embarked

on a grandiose strategy to take control of the South China Sea and to expand China's global reach under the "one belt, one road" initiative.

In 2019, the U.S. remains the world's leading military and economic power, but its hegemony is under threat from these challengers. Arguably it needs allies as much today as it did during the Cold War. (And yes, those allies definitely need to do more to sustain the alliance.) Yet President Trump has been erratic in his attitude to NATO, hostile toward the European Union and positively jubilant about Brexit—none of which is conducive to the solidarity of the West.

The Darroch affair might seem like a storm in a British teacup. But it also matters to the U.S. Mr. Trump has made no secret of wanting a Brexiteer as British ambassador. And Boris Johnson, the man likely to become Britain's prime minister next week, pointedly refused to support Mr. Darroch in a recent TV debate. Mr. Johnson's critics have suggested that he is anxious to appease the president in the hope of a favorable post-Brexit trade deal. Mr. Johnson says that he will "leave" Europe by Oct. 31, "do or die."

Yet historically, the postwar special relationship has been most effective when Britain has had strong links with Europe as well as the U.S. If Brexit weakens the special relationship, the entire West will be weakened as well.

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