Conference Brief Strategic Studies Institute

U.S. Army War College,
Dickinson College, and
The Defence Academy of the United Kingdom

THE U.S.-UK SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE.

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Key Insights:

- The U.S.-UK relationship is special, but should not be taken for granted. Like any close relationship, it requires constant conversation and maintenance. While the two nations are very closely related by blood and philosophy, the demographics of both are undergoing significant changes and the older forms of communication may not serve as readily as they did before.

- The United States, the United Kingdom (UK), and the European Union (EU) form a triangular relationship that simultaneously conditions and threatens the U.S.-UK relationship, as the UK must participate in European affairs. The two most salient issues among the three are those of economics and law. U.S.-UK economic ties are extensive and relatively easily managed whereas U.S.-EU economic connections are somewhat contentious, as recent merger rulings attest. EU legal rulings regarding the use of force have been deemed unacceptable by the United States and potentially threaten coalition Rules of Engagement.

- The United States and the UK need to attend to the relationship on a regular basis if its special nature is to remain. The United States is perceived by much of the British public as being particularly insensitive to the UK's need to be part of Europe and to be something more than an acquiescent partner for the United States, particularly in the use of force in dealing with international threats.

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Discussion.

On April 11-13, 2005, the Strategic Studies Institute co-sponsored a conference on "The U.S.-UK Special Relationship: Past, Present and Future," in cooperation with Dickinson College, and the Defence Academy of the United Kingdom at Shrivenham. The conference was followed by a wrap-up session hosted by the Royal United Services Institute in London. Conference attendees were primarily from the Defence Academy and its associated colleges and research bodies.

Mr. Erik Peterson delivered a pre-conference talk on the subject of "Seven Revolutions." These revolutions resulted from a macro-analysis of a broad range of trends regularly presented to U.S. Army War College classes by the annual guest "Futurist." They include demographics and globalization of information, as well as business, computational development, and material science, among others. As is usually the case when discussing futures, trend interpretation became as much the focus as the presenter's stylization of the trends into revolutions.

The first panel addressed economic issues. From an economic perspective, the UK is more heavily invested in the United States than is all of Asia; it is attempting to lead the EU out of a sclerotic economic crisis through the vehicle of the Anglo-Saxon Model which values free trade, low taxation, reliable accounting measures, and as little government control as possible. This highlights the UK's need to be part of the EU, particularly in order to shape it. All participants viewed reform of the EU economic system as necessary for the health of the global economic system. U.S.-UK economic connections are extremely deep and well-developed, and likely will remain so because of the shared economic philosophy that provides both countries an opportunity to work together on EU economic reform.

Before the next panel, an historical review of the "Special Relationship" was offered by Mr. Ray Raymond of the British Consul General's Office, New York. This included a review of times and events when the special relationship was strained, and when self-interests overrode it.

The second panel addressed political/legal issues. From that perspective, there are major strains as the UK has found it necessary to subscribe to legal norms adopted by the EU that the United States will not countenance. The United States must engage in deep dialogue with the UK and EU over issues of international law. The British public and a portion of the government see some U.S. actions as hypocritical. From a U.S. perspective, both the UK and EU fail to understand that only one nation is carrying the burden of internal law and order in any meaningful way. Resolution of differences in this realm is extremely important operationally, as these differences may easily result in dysfunctional, contrary Rules of Engagement (ROE). Further, considerable potential exists to disrupt future coalitions seriously since they, too, must have an agreed-upon set of ROE for effective operations.

The third panel considered foreign policy. From that perspective, the United States and UK share the DNA of liberal ideas such as the Rule of Law, federalism, and personal liberty. They nevertheless find themselves at serious odds from time to time, as during the Suez Crisis and Grenada.

The pre-dinner talk that followed this panel was aptly focused on "Public Diplomacy and the Special Relationship," specifically the "Role of the Media." As noted below, even though we speak a common language, we are different peoples with different self-interests reflecting the facts of geography and history.

From a security/defense perspective, which was the focus of the fourth panel, only two EU nations are capable of offering meaningful military support to U.S. actions: the UK and France. On nuclear weapons issues, it is likely the new British Government will have to decide early what to do about its nuclear weapons arsenal—an upgrade would effectively foreclose maturation of interoperability initiatives currently underway. In the area of defense discussions, three issues stood out—interoperability, doctrine, and nuclear systems. Since only France and the UK were seen as being capable of being placed in a position requiring serious interoperability capabilities, and only the UK has thus far continued to be engaged, whatever investments the new UK government decided upon would have to consider the interoperability requirement first. The most serious threat to continued progress toward effective interoperability resides in the decision over the state of the UK nuclear force. That force apparently needs significant upgrade, and the cost will impact progress toward interoperability greatly. Among the alternatives to fully functioning technical interoperability is a nearly common operational doctrine, but some conferees stated that the United States was not paying attention to UK suggestions. This opinion was strongly disputed in several quarters, based, in part, on the Operation IRAQI FREEDOM experience, but this issue is worth following.

The adage that "nations have no permanent friends, only permanent interests" comes from the British, and in the political realm, they acknowledge that as a fact of life, especially when dealing with a colossus. If the United States continues to find merit in the special relationship, it would be well for it to consider that friends do have value beyond raw interests, especially when they share basic values. It is U.S. long-term best interests to treat the UK as a special partner. At times, the UK is better situated to represent basic U.S. interests in European councils; at times the UK may be better able to represent European interests to the United States.

The conferees also participated in an "ideating" session—an exercise in semi-structured free-thinking. While that description appears oxymoronic, it is a familiar technique for generating ideas (free-thinking) on a selected subject or subject set (semi-structured). Partly because the session was a truncated exercise primarily for demonstration purposes, it generated some odd conclusions, the principal one being that the participants thought it necessary to educate both the British public and particularly British policymakers on the United States. The demonstration nature of the exercise spared the U.S. participants the pain of suggesting that it might not be a bad idea to educate the American public on themselves.

RUSI Wrap-Up Session.

The Royal United Services Institute in London provided the forum for a combined wrap-up/report-out session before an important audience that included a significant number of UK MOD officials and broad representation from foreign embassies including Iran, Italy, Finland, France, Sweden, Russia, Bulgaria, Austria, Portugal, Singapore, Slovenia, Germany, Morocco, Estonia, and the U.S. Embassy. These countries were represented by senior personnel up to and including ambassadorial rank. Each of the four original topic areas was reported on and the floor then opened for discussion. Questions and observations were of a quality characteristic of RUSI proceedings and served as an excellent conclusion to a well-managed, completely worthwhile event.

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