How “Special” is the Special Relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom from Post World War II to Present Day?

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Aristole once said that, “When two together go they are better able to both see an opportunity and take it.”¹ Great Britain and the United States saw an opportunity to benefit not only them, but also to defeat a common enemy in times of conflict. This relationship was known as the “special relationship.” The Anglo-American “special relationship” has changed within the decades of the twentieth century because of power shifts on the international stage affecting the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US). These power shifts have caused the relationship to seem genuine from the eyes of the world, but the genuineness of the “special relationship,” in the Anglo and American eyes, has fluctuated within the last decades of the twentieth century. Nonetheless, “the relationship was special, but it was also seamy. It did not arise naturally from an existential sense of community. It had to be nurtured, and above all, negotiated.”² However, within the 21st century, the “special relationship” has transformed, in the aspect of the military, economy, diplomacy, and intelligence. In this paper, I will discuss the meaning of having a “special relationship”, background of the “special relationship” from the

beginning of its namesake to the Cold War, what the “special relationship” is like from Post-
Cold War to present, the pros and cons of the “special relationship” as of the 21st century,
seminal points in the 21st century that have affected the “special relationship”, how the “special
relationship” is perceived by the UK and US, and conclude with my overall analysis of the topic.

What does it mean to have a “special relationship”?

Defining a “special relationship” analyzes the “Churchillian rhetoric of ‘fraternal
association’ and ‘kindred systems of society’, which imbued, for some at least, one of the most
important bilateral relationships in history with a natural, reflexive, and unique emotional
underpinning.”

The commonality of a shared language and cultural heritage are examples of
such associations. Examples of these associations are recognized in the relationship between the
US and the UK, and even the relationship between the US and Israel. For the US-UK
relationship, “British and American historians of this ilk combined the commonality of shared
language and Anglo-Saxon heritage with the special responsibilities of these two Great Powers
to talk of a distinctive partnership, even an “Anglo-American consciousness.”

For the US-Israeli relationship, “the relationship between Israel and the United States concede that a
common political culture binds the two nations together. An important element of this cultural
bond is the United States’ antagonism to Israel’s enemies…” However, the “special
relationship” has evolved to reflect the times showing the shifting relationship between the
parties involved. Thus, the “special relationship”, “has been invented and re-invented, imagined

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4 Marsh, Steve, and John Baylis. 2006. ”The Anglo-American “Special Relationship”
and re-imagined, ever since. It has achieved mythological status. That is an important part of its serviceability and appeal, but also contributes to its deceiving or self-deceiving quality. The mystique of the “special relationship” is hard to shake: it is intimately bound up with self-image and self-interest. Stripped bare, however, the relationship was rooted in a set of historical circumstances, which no longer obtain and cannot be reconstituted.” 6 As a final point, the “special relationship” has made transformations from the beginning of the term being coined in the 20th century.

**Special Relationship in the 20th Century**

Within the mid-twentieth century, the “special relationship” between the United Kingdom and the United States was known as a “wartime relationship.” “The most noteworthy feature of the wartime relationship from 1941 to 1945 was the way in which differences in interests around the globe were largely overcome in the face of the Axis threat.” 7 However, in 1944, London had significant say during the war. In fact, the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, coined the title of the relationship as the “special relationship” at the *Sinews of Peace Address* at Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri in March 1946. 8 He quotes, “I come to the crux of what I have traveled here to say. Neither the sure prevention of war, nor the continuous rise of world organization 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.” 9 Churchill was able to maintain the idea of a “special

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9 Martin, Gary. "Special Relationship."
relationship” with the United States because of his ability to successfully work together with President Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Relations between the UK and the US were nearly destroyed due to a shift of power favoring the United States. Power shifted in favor of the US due to its position economically after the Second World War. During the late 1940s, there was no certainty if relations would continue between the UK and the US because of a Lend-Lease agreement that was made after the Second World War. The loan was made possible by the US because it wanted to aid the UK in its recovery after the economic devastation that resulted from the war. It began what historians deemed the “special relationship” as the “Penny Farthing Relationship...The big wheel of American power drove the smaller wheel of British dependence.”

This terminology was correct, in the sense of Britain’s position, because it needed to maintain relations with the US after its strength began to diminish in the post-war world. While Britain did not enjoy the fact that it had to rely on the aid of the US, feelings were altered after the Soviet threat began to rise.

Post-War Defense

Even though Britain and the US “…revived the relationship, it did not fully restore wartime level of partnership.” Britain was fearful of the US’s impulsive nature because of intensification of the East-West conflict, Prime Minister Clement Attlee, for example, feared the United States’ response to Communist China’s attempts at controlling Korea. Prime Minister Clement Attlee visited the US regularly in order to urge the US to prevent a war beyond Korea. However, the US had different views on Britain’s conduct, in regards to its relations in the Middle East. “In their eyes, the British were not adjusting sensitively enough to the emergence

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10 Ashton, N. J. "Anglo-American Relations from World War to Cold War."
11 Ashton, N. J. "Anglo-American Relations from World War to Cold War."
of potential radical Arab forces, and were therefore, putting at risk Western interests and influence in this region.”

The US also viewed the Middle East as a comprehensive defense system because it can be used as a defense mechanism against the Soviet threat. Thus, Britain was instructed by the US “to maintain and defend Western interests in the area in the 19th century fashion.” In 1951, Britain failed to maintain oil relations with Iran because of nationalism, led by Mohammed Mussadeq. Five years later, the biggest test of the special relationship came in 1956, when Prime Minister Anthony Eden joined forces with the French and the Israelis to invade Egypt and prevent Nasser's seizure of the Suez Canal. Britain’s humiliation from the guerrilla attack at the Suez led to “…the British to decide to draw even closer to the United States.”

The US may have been a strong global power of the 1950s and 1960s, but Britain’s role globally, politically, and economically were the driving forces behind the Anglo-American alliance becoming the core Western alliance during the Cold War era.

Each duo, president and prime minister, generally showed aspects of the “special relationship” through their actions on the international stage during the Cold War era. Kennedy and MacMillan celebrated the “golden days” of the “special relationship” through the close-knit relationship that they had during the 1960s. However, even in the celebrated 'golden days' of the Kennedy-Macmillan partnership, the special relationship was tested. Dispute between both nations were caused by the Skybolt Crisis, which was when the US was ignoring the British contribution to the development of the atomic bomb and reneging on a promise made by Eisenhower, tried to divest the United Kingdom of its nuclear deterrent by unilaterally cancelling

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13 Bartlett, C. J. "Chapter Three: Similar Ends, Different Methods."
a joint project without consultation. The Skybolt crisis with Kennedy came on top of Eisenhower’s wrecking of Macmillan’s policy of détente with the Soviet Union at the May 1960 Paris summit, and the prime minister’s resulting disenchantment with the special relationship contributed to his decision to seek an alternative in British membership of the European Economic Community (EEC). However, when pursuing membership into the EEC, the UK was denied because “the French veto upon Britain’s entry into the European Common Market was based upon the assumption that Britain, once inside, would act as an agent of the essentially Non-European policies of the United States.” However, after the resignation of MacMillan and the assassination of Kennedy, the “special relationship” weakened because of the lack of experience their successors, Harold Wilson and Lyndon B. Johnson, in regards to foreign policy. This led to Prime Minister Edward Heath and President Richard Nixon’s pursuit of, what Heath claimed was a “natural relationship, based on shared culture and heritage.” Their successors, Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Regan, transformed the “natural relationship” into a “political marriage.” She called him “the second most important man in my life” after husband Denis, although she berated Mr. Reagan for invading Grenada and had to force him to back her over the Falklands. Conservative commentator Peter Robinson said: "Through sheer force of will Thatcher carried along with her not only her own government, but that of the United States as well."

The relationship between Great Britain and the United States has changed throughout the twentieth century. From power shifts after major global wars and conflicts to differences in practices of foreign policy, Britain and the US have shown that their relationship can be defined as “a bilateral relationship whose closeness had been forged by the need to confront common

enemies during the Second World War and the Cold War had lost its reason for existence.”

Multiple Anglo-American relations exist because of the link between their interests, ideology and culture. Stephen Potter argues that, “It is not our policy continuously to try to be one-up, as a nation, on the other nations; but it is our aim to rub in the fact that we are not trying to do this…” Thus, when facing a common enemy, they fight together, but when differences in opinion and lack of foreign relations experience take over, relations begin to decline. This concept plays a key role in the aspects of the “special relationship” in the 21st century, due to more factors being exposed on the international stage.

**Special Relationship in the 21st Century**

By the 21st century, the “special relationship” between the UK and the US has transformed from constant power shifts between both countries to the constant dominance of the US. Even though the US shows dominance over the UK, “American and British policies during the war presupposed Anglo-American dominance of post-war policies. Thus, Great Britain also understood that the war made the United States the preeminent partner in the alliance.”

This relationship between the US and the UK has been quite difficult to sufficiently explain, especially its remarkable endurance over the past 6 decades. “The U.S.-UK partnership flourished during World War II, deepened during the long twilight struggle with the Soviet Union, and has prospered further since the end of the Cold War. It is likely to survive any new

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16 Ashton, N. J. "Anglo-American Relations from World War to Cold War."
17 Danchev, Alex. "On Specialness: Anglo-American Apocrypha."
challenges that may loom on the horizon."19 History also reminds us that vigorous arguments between London and Washington are nothing new. There was never a golden age of Anglo-American relations free from acrimony. “The point is that, over the decades, there have been frequent strong disagreements between London and Washington, but they have never prevented us from working effectively together to achieve shared objectives so long as the disagreements were conducted in private like family squabbles. Picking fights in public with the United States is utterly counterproductive.”20 This, along with other aspects, has been determined to be pros and cons of the “special relationship.”

**Economics**

The pros and cons of the special relationship prove that the special relationship’s benefits have far outweighed the disadvantages and that the relationship has been a positive one for Britain. “Beyond the end of the Cold War and of Britain’s financial crisis, economic relations between the two countries have been kept strong by trade. They are both each other’s main foreign investors, and US companies employ about 1.3 million workers in Britain, with the majority of American firms working in Europe having their headquarters in the UK (Raymond 2006).”21 This extensive amount of trade with the world’s strongest economic power has certainly helped boost Britain’s own economy, and access to the vast American consumer markets has brought great profits to British industries. Besides having helped Britain get out of its postwar economic crisis, the US has proved to be a solid ally throughout the twentieth century, helping maintain its partner’s competitiveness in the face of rising world economies and

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20 Stuart, Douglas T. "U.S.-UK RELATIONS AT THE START OF THE 21st CENTURY."
industrial powers such as China and Japan…dependent economically, but sustains itself independently.”

There is an argument that Britain has become economically dependent on and subordinate to the capitalist world power that is the United States because of the amount of monetary support received in the post-war period and because of their current economic relationship. However, “it is important to note that despite all this, the UK has still maintained an independent economic policy, as shown by its refusal to stop trade with communists during the Cold War, its commitment to the British imperial trade preferences (later the Commonwealth preference system) and the sterling monetary area, and its resistance in the face of American pressure for more European integration in the 1940-50s (Dobson 1995).”

All of these policies caused friction between the UK and the US, but as previously noted, the elasticity and strength of the special relationship have permitted them to happen without serious repercussions.

Since World War II, they have been partners in many successful military operations and worked jointly in military research, development and training. The US has been of special aid to Britain in the area of security and helped it develop its nuclear deterrent. And, after contributing to Britain’s economic recovery in the postwar period, it has been its main economic partner and a source of investment and trade. David Cameron entered Downing Street in 2010 against background of widely expressed anxiety about the future of the US-UK ‘Special Relationship’.

“The problems between London and Washington after 2008, of course, need to be understood not only in terms of personalities, but in terms of the backwash to the Blair-Bush partnership in the context of the War and Terror and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Cameron himself used the occasion of the fourth anniversary of 9/11 to distance his own ‘liberal conservatism’ from American ‘neo-conservatism’ which drew a public rebuke from Lady Thatcher. As shadow

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22 Valentini, Giulia. “Pros and Cons of the UK-US Special Relationship.”
23 Valentini, Giulia. “Pros and Cons of the UK-US Special Relationship.”
Foreign Secretary, William Hague developed the theme of British support for the US being ‘solid not slavish’.”24 As the Cameron-Obama relationship developed, reports emerged of strains: notably in connection with American criticism of the British military performance in Iraq and in Afghanistan. “With a leftist executive in Washington and a rightist one in London, tension also developed over preferred policies for dealing with recession.”25 Washington motivated the economy, while London not only cut back aggressively at home, but also urged the adoption of contraction strategies abroad. “As the US economy appeared to pick up by the end of 2011, the US approach looked (from the perspective of Downing Street at least) rather embarrassingly superior.”26 The relationship between Barack Obama and Prime Minister Gordon Brown was stressed because the two leaders at times barely on speaking terms. “Brown struggled to build up a repartee with his American counterpart, and his first visit to the Obama White House in March 2009 was widely interpreted by the British press as a disaster, with the PM denied an official dinner or Rose Garden press conference and sent back to London with a tatty ceremonial gift of twenty-five DVDs, which couldn’t even be played in the UK.”27 Brown was disparaged again in September of that year on the fringes of the UN General Assembly, when the president declined to meet with the prime minister even after several requests, following the hugely controversial release by Scottish authorities of the Lockerbie bomber with the blessing of the Labour government. “In March 2010, the Labour-dominated House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee effectively declared the “special relationship” to be dead,

25 Dumbrell, John. "David Cameron, Barack Obama and The US-UK 'Special Relationship'"
26 Dumbrell, John. "David Cameron, Barack Obama and The US-UK 'Special Relationship'"
firmly recommending against use of the term.”

This relationship has played a role during seminal wars within the 21st century.

Military

Military closeness with the US, however, has also led the UK towards controversial decisions. “A main example of this was the 2003 invasion of Iraq. In the period after the 9/11 attacks, the UK was against attacking any country that had no clear connection with the UK on the international stage. However, British policy quickly changed in the face of America’s determination to invade Iraq in order to overthrow Hussein’s regime. The invasion was carried out despite lack of certainty over Iraq’s possession of weapons of mass destruction, and in its aftermath the view has emerged that Tony Blair, then PM, decided to become involved mainly to be in a position to influence the US. The Iraqi invasion is a “warning against excessive loyalty to American war agendas.” After a period of decline under John Major, the relationship was revived by Tony Blair, initially with Bill Clinton and subsequently with George W. Bush.

Most recently, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have come to symbolize the strength of the alliance, with ten thousand British troops currently serving alongside their American allies in the war against the Taliban and their al-Qaeda backers. In Afghanistan, the war is overwhelmingly an Anglosphere operation. More than three-quarters of the 120,000 soldiers currently serving in the NATO-led mission are from English-speaking, Anglosphere nations. More than 345 British servicemen and servicewomen have sacrificed their lives in Afghanistan since the beginning of military operations in October 2001, greater than the combined losses suffered by all other European contingents.

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28 Gardiner, Nile. "Mind the Gap: Is the Relationship Still Special?"
29 Valentini, Giulia. "Pros and Cons of the UK-US Special Relationship."
The major and most obvious ‘special relationship’ tension emerged over Libya in 2010. French and British reactions to the civil uprising in Libya contrasted with the (decidedly post-Iraq) tepid reaction in the White House to the entire Arab Spring. As of now, tensions of the “special relationship” run high, when it comes to the attacks on Syria. British ministers and officials are said to be furious about the prospect of the US going ahead and bombing Syria without the UK joining in. “They are furious because of amour propre — especially if the French joined in without the UK — but also because they think the Obama administration is angry that they cannot rely on the Brits. The British contribution would be very limited — a handful or so cruise missiles fired from a sub or long-range missiles from Tornado bombers — and its significance would be essentially political.”

The fact that Obama is forced to face his own skeptics in Congress, as Cameron and Clegg are in parliament, seems in Whitehall to be unimportant. Britain is supposed to be more reliable, the Commons more accommodating. However, ministers and officials are already concerned about repetitive complaints made by the US about the Europeans, including the UK, not pulling their weight in NATO, about Obama's "pivot" towards Asia, and Washington making it clear that it preferred an EU with Britain at the center as a viable partner. The invasion of Iraq has encouraged MPs to demand in particular to see intelligence evidence and legal advice. Thus the government decided to publish a Joint Intelligence Committee assessment on the use of chemical weapons in Syria. Its language is curiously vague. “It says: "There is no obvious political or military trigger for regime use of CW on an apparently larger scale now, particularly given the current presence in Syria of the UN investigation team. Permission to authorize CW has probably been delegated by President Assad to senior regime commanders, such as [deleted], but any deliberate change in the scale and

nature of use would require his authorization." The US, however, has a different view upon the notion of the relationship with the UK and the attacks in Syria.

John Kerry has insisted Parliament's decision to block British involvement in a military strike on Syria has not damaged the UK's relationship with Washington. "Our bond is bigger than one vote, it's bigger than one moment in history, it is about values," he said. "We have no better partner in that effort than Great Britain and we are grateful for that. Our special relationship with the UK is not just about Syria." Surprisingly, David Cameron's plan to provide military support to a United States led attack on the Syrian regime was humiliatingly derailed after Ed Miliband and Conservative backbenchers blocked parliamentary approval for action. "The defeat in the Commons led to suggestions Britain's relationship with the United States had been damaged. And despite Kerry's warm words it is deeply embarrassing for Cameron to have to watch from the sidelines while the US and France push for the use of force." Even though the intentions, according to President Obama, to "be able to hold Bashar Asad accountable without engaging with troops on the ground, and has a very limited very targeted very short term effort that degrades his capacity to deliver chemical weapons without assuming responsibility for Syria's civil war," the relationship is still in jeopardy because of conflict of interest, regarding war, especially the possible chemical warfare. This partnership has been seen through the eyes of diplomacy, but through the eyes of intelligence, it shows that it is another contributing factor to the "special relationship."

Intelligence

The idea of diplomacy cannot be achieved without the cooperation of countries through the agreement of sharing intelligence. According to the National Security Agency, “The UKUSA agreement, first called the BRUSA Agreement, was signed in March 1946, which serves as the foundation for cooperation in signals intelligence between the two nations. The agreement was later extended to encompass former British Dominions: Canada (1948), Australia and New Zealand (1956). Collaboration in various areas of critical intelligence between each of the five partner-nations continues to the present day.”35 This agreement formed an alliance known as the “Five Eyes,” which consisted of the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the US. According to the agreement, “the parties agree to the exchange of the products of the following operations relating to foreign communications: Collection of traffic, acquisition of communications documents and equipment, traffic analysis, cryptanalysis, decryption and translation, acquisition of information regarding communications organizations, procedures, practices and equipment.”36 Each country had a region to cover within its area in order to collect intelligence. The UK covers Europe and European Russia, Australia covers South and East Asia, New Zealand covers the Western Pacific, Canada covers continues to monitor the Russian and Chinese interior while managing intelligence assets in Latin America, and the US covers Middle East, China, and Russia, in addition to the Caribbean and Africa. Even though the “special relationship” has been viewed through the eyes of researchers, contributing factors of the “special relationship” can be noticed through the actual political players within the UK and US.

Prospects

The special relationship has been perceived by President Obama in a different light. Obama gave a gushing assessment of the special relationship. “The president said: "We meet to reaffirm one of the greatest alliances the world has ever known." Obama, who said the special relationship had never been stronger, pushed protocol to the limits to give the prime minister the biggest welcome accorded any world leader in Washington this year. He states that, “it is remarkable to consider that down the decades we have seen nations rise and fall, wars fought and peace defended, a city divided, a wall come down, countries imprisoned behind an Iron Curtain, then liberated. We have seen the demise of the cold war and the transition from an industrial revolution to an information age. Our world has been transformed over and over and will be again.” He also states that, "our alliance is essential: it is indispensable for the security and prosperity not only for our own citizens but for people around the world. That is why, as president, I made strengthening this alliance and other alliances around the world one of my highest foreign policy priorities. I can stand here today and say with pride and confidence – and I believe with David's agreement – that the relationship between the US and the UK is the strongest it has ever been.” On the other hand, what will be the future of the “special relationship”? 

The Future of the “Special Relationship”

The most graphic indicators of the British and American collaboration have been the military alliances formed between Great Britain and the U.S. over the past 100 years, leading to the current effort to fight global terrorism. As members of the Allied forces in World War I and

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World War II, the militaries of the two nations worked together to stop the rise of corrupt nationalism and fascism. Joint tactics, deployments and operations beginning with the Berlin Airlift in 1948-49 and continuing through the end of the Cold War in the 1980s were vital in curtailing the spread of communism. New alliances, as embodied by joint task forces coordinated through NATO, give the US and UK, together with other democratic countries the capabilities needed to meet new threats – threats such as terrorism and piracy, cyber-attacks and the use of nuclear weapons by rogue states, terrorist organizations or individual terrorists. President Obama summarized the role of the two nations with a straightforward and powerful line: “We are the nations most willing to stand up for the values of tolerance and self-determination.”

In the 21st century, there is optimism for expanded use of tactics beyond armed response and reflecting a shift towards ‘soft power’ rather than the hard power of military action. Yet, the challenges that need to be addressed are sometimes extremely complex and politically sensitive. “As borders between countries become more porous, and with increasingly transient populations, a nation’s security is only one reason for precise determination of the citizenship of specific individuals. Shared values now replace traditional, ethnic, and cultural ties.” Overall, the “special relationship” has made transformations that do not contribute to just power shifts from just the US and the UK.

Conclusion

The “special relationship” has made transformations from the establishment of its namesake by Winston Churchill to today. From the power shifts between the US and the UK

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41 Losowsky, Andrew. "The Queen and the U.S.A.: The Future of the Special Relationship."
from World War II to the Cold War era to the addition of new factors that affected the stability of the relationship from the end of the Cold War era to today, the “special relationship” has affected the international community through its participation in seminal wars and its inner personal relationship when sending and receiving intelligence. The relationship has been tested during the seminal wars of the 21st century, especially the current pursuit of ending chemical warfare in Syria. However, if the special relationship is in need of renewal, predictions of its death are greatly exaggerated. It has survived for nearly seven decades and has provided the core of the West’s defense of the free world against the forces of fascism, Communism, and now Islamist extremism. Both the US and British foreign policies are adapting to a more multipolar world, and Washington and London are seeking to build special partnerships with India, the rising power in the East, that must ultimately counterbalance the ambitions of China in Asia. But as conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and the wider War on Terror have demonstrated, the United States and Great Britain always look to each other in times of war and adversity, and that is unlikely to change dramatically in the coming decades, provided there is firm leadership on both sides of the Atlantic committed to ensuring the partnership’s success.


http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/mar/14/barack-obama-uk-us-alliance.