

The Special Relationship Between the U.S. and the UK

by Michael Curtis



Just friends, lovers no more. Just friends, but not like before. Just two friends drifting apart. Is this to be the fate of the interaction between the United States and the UK?

The fall of France in June 1940, its surrender to Nazi Germany with which it signed an armistice on June 22 changed the balance of power in Europe. The Entente Cordiale begun in 1904 between France and Britain was ended and a more intense cooperation developed between Britain and the United States beginning with the creation of the Combined Chiefs of Staff in December 1941. The change was decisive, marked by remark on June 2, 1944 of British Prime Minister Winston Churchill to

General Charles de Gaulle, "Each time I have to choose between you (and France) and Roosevelt, I shall choose Roosevelt."

The term "Special Relationship" (SR) between the U.S. and UK was devised, in slightly different forms, by the half-American Winston Churchill always conscious of the link between his two countries when he said on February 6, 1944 that it was his "deepest conviction that unless Britain and the United States are joined in a special relationship ...another destructive war will come to pass." In November 1945 he stated, "We should not abandon our special relationship with the United States and Canada about the atomic bomb."

After World War II, Churchill spoke of the phrase a third time when in a majestic speech, his "Iron Curtain" speech at Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri on March 5, 1946, he asserted that the U.S. stands at this time at the pinnacle of world power. Churchill declared that "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...a special relationship between the British Commonwealth and Empire and the United States."

Churchill was optimistic about the growing friendship between "our two vast but kindred systems of society". Included in this were intimate contacts with military advisors, possession of similar weapons, interchange of officers and cadets at technical colleges, continuation of present facilities for mutual security.

Crucial problems, past and present, are inherent in the relationship. The first was whether Churchill's invention, the "special relationship," was always use more useful for the UK than for the U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson, a great believer in the value of the North Atlantic community, in a speech at West Point in December 1962 was candid, even brutal, in commenting on the declining power of Great Britain said it

had “lost an empire but not yet found a role. That role was envisaged by Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, “We are Greeks in this American empire, the new Rome.”

A second issue was the fluctuation in the warmth and meaningfulness of the SP. Much depended of the two individual leaders, seemingly friendly between Churchill and FDR, Harold Macmillan and JFK, Reagan and Thatcher, Tony Blair and George W. Bush. Less friendly was the interaction between President Barack Obama and the UK. Early in his presidency, Obama removed the bust of Churchill in the Oval Office, replacing it with one of Martin Luther King, Jr. At the end of his presidency, Obama remarked that it was German Chancellor Angela Merkel who had been his closest international partner during his eight years in office.

President Trump, perhaps overcome by the events of his state visit to Britain and black-tie dinners in Buckingham Palace and Blenheim Palace, in July 2019 gave a toast to eternal friendship between the two countries and declared hyperbolically that the SP was the greatest alliance the world has ever known.

Naturally differences emerged between the two countries. President Dwight Eisenhower opposed the British, and French, attack on Egypt in 1956. Prime Minister Harold Wilson refused in 1965 to support President Lyndon Johnson’s escalation of the war in Vietnam. Ronald Reagan was crucial of Thatcher’s decision in 1982 to attack Argentina over the Falkland Islands.

The important question today is whether the SP still exists in reality, and is relevant, and whether it exists and is limited to certain areas such as defense, especially in light of the proposal by French President Emmanuel Macron for the EU to create a European army that will present problems for the UK, U.S. and NATO.

The link between the two countries today is still strong in defense and security and some economic issues; Trident nuclear missiles and nuclear reactors, and the F-35 fast jet program. The UK is somewhat closer to the U.S. than to Europe on certain issues; the Iran nuclear deal; sharing military intelligence; NATO; the Syrian civil war; trade policy, attitude toward Putin, and Russia, climate change policy. It is less close on issues like chlorinated chicken and pharmaceutical matters.

In a 2010 Atlantic Bridge survey, 57 per cent of U.S. thought SP was the world's most important bilateral partnership. Only 2 per cent disagreed, while 60 percent thought UK was the only country most likely to support the U.S. in a crisis. Indeed, the UK was the only country to contribute troops to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. The two countries face the problem of Iran, and its aggressive behavior in seizing oil tankers as the Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps did on July 19, 2019 when it seized the Stena Imperio, an oil tanker with a British flag and its 23 member crew, though Swedish owned, and shooting down a U.S. drone. The U.S. together with the UK has to prevent Iran from controlling the Strait of Hormuz. The Strait, 21 miles wide with two shipping lanes two miles wide, allows access to the Persian Gulf, and is vital since one-third of all global oil and one-third of the world's liquified natural gas passes through it. Most of this goes to Asia, not the West, but it affects global energy supplies and prices.

Both the U.S. and UK are concerned by this aggressive behavior, by the realization that Iran is likely to restart its nuclear program, and that the nuclear deal was a mistake. It is impossible for UK to protect every ship in the Gulf from Iran forces since it has only Type 23 frigates in the region and four mine hunters. The U.S. has the 5th fleet in Bahrain, including one aircraft carrier, one missile cruiser, five destroyers, two amphibious vessels, and 2 submarines. Both the U.S. and UK are concerned to prevent any attempt by Iran to

disrupt the flow of oil through the Gulf since the U.S. withdrew from the 2015 nuclear deal.

The UK, like the Trump administration, wants to avoid military action against Iran, but both uphold the principle of freedom of navigation, and keeping the Strait of Hormuz open to all shipping. The extent of collaboration between the two countries on this and other issues has to be reevaluated in view of the Conservative politician Boris Johnson, elected on July 23, 2019 to be leader of the Conservative party, by two to one majority, and in a few days to become prime minister.

By curious coincidence Boris, like Winston Churchill, was half American, since he was born in Manhattan in 1964, until he renounced his American citizenship in 2017, largely over capital gains taxation. Johnson had the comfortable family background, elite educational training, Eton, Balliol College Oxford, and after some years as a journalist, held political positions, M.P., Mayor of London, 2008-2016, Foreign Minister 2016-2018 and supporter of Brexit.

In some characteristics he resembles Trump, brash, entertaining, theatrical manner, somewhat unfocused, unconventional, unpredictable, problems with extra-marital affairs. Like Trump's aversion from the media, Johnson terms the BBC the "Brexit Bashing Corporation." Johnson is the life and soul of the party, but you would not want to drive him home. Charismatic, he is, as one friend said, the stardust of British politics.

When Donald Trump was a candidate Johnson made some unflattering remarks about him, and worried he might become president. Since then, he has praised Trump for various policies: critic of the European Union, attitude on migrant children, bombing of Syria, for its use of gas, talks with North Korea, pressure on NATO members to increase defense spending, capital allowances for business. Trump according to Boris has many, many, good qualities. It was noticeable that

Trump tweeted his best wishes to Johnson within half an hour after Boris was elected , and hope to have good relations.

This promptness of congratulations augurs well for friendly relations and maintenance of the SR. Both Boris and Trump can join forces not only in dealing with Iran, but also with negotiations with the EU over Brexit. The UK can then continue to punch above its weight.