WHEN YOU COME TO A FORK IN THE ROAD, TAKE IT…..DEFENCE POLICY AND THE “SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP”

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The famous American philosopher and baseball player, Yogi Berra, once said that when you come to a fork in the road – take it. There is common agreement that Britain today finds itself at a juncture with respect to the defense aspects of the special relationship that it has enjoyed with the United States since World War II. Should Britain seek to strengthen its relationship with the US or should it take a more assertive role in shaping a truly EU defense policy in future?

While leaders in America and the United Kingdom may privately agree on the relevance of this question¹, it is curious that national defense and Anglo-American relations played practically no role in the American presidential elections in 2004 and British elections in 2005. British politicians reflected the public’s clear interest on immigration, health care, crime, and education. American politicians seem focused on Iraq, the American economy, health care, etc. It is imperative as we approach the 2008 Presidential elections that American and British leaders quickly address four areas of fundamental importance if this special relationship is to flourish now and in future. They are:

- Grand strategy
- Military operations
- Defense capabilities
- Security organizations
This paper will examine these four areas with respect to the special relationship and speculate on the direction that Prime Minister Gordon Brown may take in their formulation.

Former Prime Minister Tony Blair said on several occasions that the role for Britain was to be closely allied with the United States and in the heart of Europe.² He (like his predecessors) argued repeatedly that the United Kingdom must be a bridge between the US and continental Europe. PM Blair accomplished this task with great skill, as he managed to have an excellent personal relationship with both President Bill Clinton and his successor George Bush. Prime Minister Brown echoed this sentiment in his first visit to the United States as Prime Minister. Brown noted that the US-UK relationship was based on “the joint inheritance of liberty, a belief in opportunity for all, and a belief in the dignity of every human being”.³

But can the United Kingdom continue to do this in defense matters? This would seem daunting and perhaps even contradictory in the coming years that will now require re-consideration of the EU Constitution as well as a possible European desire to establish common approaches on defense and foreign policy. As one observer succinctly stated: “can Britain continue this triangular relationship or ménage a trois”?

**Grand Strategy**

Strategy is the art of the possible. It requires successful management of three variables – ends, ways, and means. Consequently, any discussion of strategy and the special relationship must confront several fundamental questions. What is the end state
or future American and British leaders are attempting to shape? What are the defense policies or ways they agree upon to achieve a common vision? And finally what are the means or resources both countries are able and willing to devote to this effort?

So what goes into to achieving a common strategy? Throughout history the presence of a commonly agreed threat has been fundamental to achieving agreement on strategy. For example, Benjamin Franklin said upon signing the Declaration of Independence, “We now must all hang together or we will surely hang separately”.

The US and UK relationship has “hung together” in the face of threats to national survival. Initially, it opposed imperial Germany, subsequently confronted fascism, and finally met the threat posed by the Soviet Union and communism. During this time the US accepted the basic principle that despite overwhelming American power, the United States needed allies for the capabilities they provided as well as the legitimacy gained from collective action. Britain and America might have periodic severe disagreements such as over Suez, Vietnam, the Falklands, and Grenada, but both knew that the common threat was so great that reconciliation was likely if not certain in their aftermath.

This common view ended with the collapse of the Berlin Wall and demise of the Soviet Union. But in terms of defense links this experience of seventy-five years established certain fundamental relationships that are now routine and almost taken for granted. These include unparalleled sharing of intelligence, regular consultations on military doctrine, American support for the UK nuclear deterrent, robust liaison teams in both the Pentagon and Ministry of Defense, and now at several American regional combatant commands. Furthermore, American and British officers regularly cooperated
on a host of issues at NATO headquarters and during conflicts in Iraq, Bosnia, and Kosovo over the past twenty years.

In the aftermath of September 11th many in continental Europe, however, did not appear to share the view that 9/11 changed the way in which America should perceive the world and evaluate threats. In spite of the attacks on Spain, Greece, Turkey, and now even the United Kingdom; it appears, from the American side of the Atlantic at least, that many Europeans still view 9/11 as fundamentally a US problem that somehow Europe can avoid if it chooses. Still in terms of the special relationship President Bush observed following the attacks in London in July 2005, “…just as America and Great Britain stood together to defeat totalitarian ideologies of the 20th century, we now stand together against the murderous ideologies of the 21st century”.

Many Americans worry that Europeans have failed to grasp adequately the enormous impact 9-11 has had on the American psyche. Clearly many in Europe and the UK would find the opening line of the US Defense Strategy that was released in March 2005 troubling: “America is a nation at war”. This view is not shared in Paris, Brussels, Berlin, or by many in London. Consequently, can Britain maintain its historical defense ties with the US while forging new closer ties within the European Union consistent with the St. Malo agreement that called for greater European defense integration? How have British public attitudes been affected by the horrific events of July 2005 and the near catastrophic attacks during the spring of 2007?

Strategy begins with an analysis of threats, and Al Qaeda and its associated groups do not provide as coherent a face as did the Soviet Union. Both Britain and America agree on the threats posed by nuclear proliferation, cyber terrorism, weapons of
mass destruction, bioterrorism, international crime, failed states, etc. But many in the UK were unsettled and rightfully so by the US “global war on terrorism” for its lack of definition. Many defense experts in both Britain and America have argued since 2001 that terrorism ultimately remains a technique as opposed to an entity. Consequently, establishing a common grand strategy to confront terrorism as a shared threat is challenging. Such a strategy must both reflect and cement public support for policies. In this regard it is interesting to note that at least in the immediate aftermath of the London attacks in 2005 pro-US feeling actually increased in some polls in the United Kingdom.6

Prime Minister Brown appears to view the war on terrorism in somewhat different terms than his predecessor. Brown argues that this conflict must be prosecuted more by police, intelligence agencies, etc. than the military. He further argues that the values of Western civilization are critical to this overall effort and has called upon nations to respond with a more aggressive effort to root out the causes of terrorism such as poverty, illiteracy, etc.7 This is reflected in many of those Brown has appointed to senior positions in his government. His new security minister, Sir Alan West, has shown some disdain for the term “war on terror” and argued that it “demeans the value of war”.8 He further appointed Mark Malloch-Brown as junior foreign affairs minister. Malloch-Brown served as a deputy to former UN General Secretary Kofi Annan and had several fierce confrontations with former US Ambassador John Bolton.9 Finally, Gordon Brown appears to believe that Afghanistan rather than Iraq should be the primary effort. During his visit to the United States in July 2007 the Prime Minister stated that Afghanistan was the “front line against terrorism”.10 This is in stark contrast to President Bush who has consistently called Iraq “the central front in the war on terror”.

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Military Operations

Cooperation between the American and British militaries is unparalleled not only with respect to US relations with other states but perhaps even in the annals of alliances. No other state has the daily involvement in the planning and preparation of operations that the UK has with the US. US and British forces have cooperated well in Iraq and adapted quickly to the changing conditions on the ground as the war evolved from its initial conventional phase to counterinsurgency operations. Still some British experts observed that many in Britain worry that this may occur only at the tactical level. They are concerned that British influence at the operational level or on doctrinal development in the US is limited.

Both Washington and Whitehall are concerned that the coalition in Iraq is less a coalition and more a clear partnership. The major European troop contributors to Iraq removed their forces by the end of 2005. Outside NATO there are no countries with military force contributions that compare in size to the United Kingdom. Pentagon and Whitehall experts frequently suggest that he January 2007 “surge strategy” or British Operation Sinbad in the south have shown some progress in military terms. But privately they all also agree that continued political progress along with sustained increases in the size and sophistication of Iraqi security forces will be crucial if the insurgency and Al Qaeda are to be defeated.
Even the most optimistic analysts in both countries agree that a large-scale presence by the US and UK in Iraq for the foreseeable future is inevitable. British troops have steadily been reduced from a high of over 40,000 during the invasion to only about 5500 by the summer of 2007. Overall the United Kingdom contributes approximately 6800 personnel for operations in Iraq and the Persian Gulf. This includes not only the British Army but also the Royal Navy and Air Force.

It also seems clear that reductions will continue in the near future though PM Brown may wish to avoid a precipitous withdrawal. He noted during his visit with President Bush that any decision to reduce British forces “will be made on the military advice of our commanders on the ground”. This may be due to a desire not to embarrass President Bush and bring about a serious disruption of the Anglo-American relationship. Still two realities are clear. First, while the performance of British forces in the three provinces that has been their responsibility has been exemplary, success in their overall efforts in Basra is problematical at best. Many believe that the “overwatch” position British forces are now moving to may result in watching a civil war between rival Shia militia groups and criminals for control of this critical city to the economy of Iraq.

Prime Minister Brown must respond to popular discontent over the war in Iraq in Great Britain and realities in his own party. The election of Harriet Harman, a critic of the Iraq War, as the Labor Party’s deputy leader will obviously have an impact on future policy. He also offered a post in his new government to John Denham, a former minister who resigned from the Blair government in 2003 to protest the invasion of Iraq. It is
also uncertain whether he would back a more aggressive strategy towards Iran and would likely oppose any US attempt to use military force against Tehran.\textsuperscript{16}

Still in every dilemma lies the seeds of opportunity, and this may be the case now. Some reports suggest that a possible reduction of British forces from Iraq might result in a subsequent deployment of additional British troops to Afghanistan to lead NATO forces in the south of that country.\textsuperscript{17} Such an effort would clearly serve British interests in trying to be a bridge in the transatlantic relationship. It would also be more supported by the British population and consistent with a rising attitude in the United States that America’s approach to the war on terrorism has not insured a vigorous prosecution of the war in Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{18}

\textbf{Defense Capabilities}

The eminent British historian Sir Michael Howard once observed that, “capabilities lead to opportunities which lead to options and perhaps even intentions”. This aphorism should remind us that vision without resources is a fairy tale. Former Defense Secretary Hoon framed the challenge for the United Kingdom when he observed that the first principle of British defense planning was to be interoperable with the US forces. Here both the US and the UK confront major budgetary choices.

At the top of the list may be the future of the British independent nuclear deterrent. The UK has managed to maintain its nuclear forces and the ability to project significant conventional forces abroad even following the reductions in defense spending that occurred as part of the peace dividend at the end of the Cold War. In the aftermath
of the 2005 elections the new Blair government announced its intention to continue a British independent nuclear deterrent. Defense Secretary John Reid opened talks with the United States on a successor to Trident following the election. Reid appeared determined to maintain a British submarine-launched system as he frequently argued that it was “invisible and invulnerable”. This was an apparent shift from his predecessor who seemed willing to consider other less expensive options, such as ground or air-launched cruise missile systems. The full cost of developing the Trident replacement is estimated to be 25 billion to 35 billion dollars.

So far at least Prime Minister Brown and his defense minister, Des Brown appear supportive of this approach. This investment will make even marginal increases in the size and continued technological improvements in conventional forces increasingly difficult. If the Brown government continues this course the question remains whether or not there will there be sufficient funds to accomplish this task and support British conventional forces for global deployment? Obviously, this problem has become even more complex following the attacks in London and Glasgow that will likely demand renewed investments in homeland security. British strategic planners at a minimum must decide how to fund a modernized nuclear force, complete the construction of the two new aircraft carriers that the Blair government began, reequip/refurbish British forces following extended deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan, and insure adequate funds are available to recruit and retain professional military forces.

Some have even suggested that the seizure of British sailors by Iran in March 2007 was precipitated by the Royal Navy’s desire to promote its contributions to the British public in the advent of an impending budget struggle. One expert reported that
the helicopter dispatched to provide additional security for the ill-fated boarding party was ordered back to the ship because the journalist on board was scheduled to interview the captain for a BBC story on the Royal Navy in the Persian Gulf.

Finally, four other issues of capability deserve mention. The first is the American Global Restationing Plan. This will result in a significant reduction of American forces from continental Europe over the next few years while retaining, (consistent with UK agreement) air bases in Great Britain. These bases as well as the strategic British island of Diego Garcia may in fact take on even greater importance to American defense planning. Second, the US has begun the initial deployment of anti-ballistic missiles in Alaska and California. This will continue with additional forces being readied for sea-based deployment in the near future. There has been close UK-US cooperation on this effort to include an American communications site at Menwith Hill in Great Britain that will route satellite warnings about missile launches to British and American officials. Anglo-American discussions will continue on future UK participation in this ballistic missile defense system. This will not only require the parties to the special relationship to determine costs and deployments but also an appropriate bilateral command and control process for these forces. Third, with respect to defense industrial cooperation there is a serious disconnect in the United States between the executive branch’s longstanding desire for close defense and security cooperation particularly with Great Britain and congressional restriction on foreign participation in U.S. defense programs. Finally, it remains to be seen how the Brown government and its EU partners react to the announcement that the United States intends to provide billions of dollars in advanced
weaponry to Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Israel in an effort to bolster their defenses to growing Iranian influence in the region.\textsuperscript{20}

\textbf{Security organizations}

Finally, the Bush administration has shown a clear skepticism about the relevance of NATO. This was in part due to the dramatic reductions in European defense spending over the past decade that have brought most European conventional forces to the brink of irrelevance. This was demonstrated in the tepid acceptance of the NATO countries’ offer to support the US under Article V after September 11\textsuperscript{th} and continued with very unfortunate comments by Secretary Rumsfeld about “old Europe”. Common agreement exists amongst defense experts that these events coupled with the tragedy of Iraq has done severe structural damage to the transatlantic bridge. At the onset of the second Bush term efforts were made initially by Secretary of State Rice to repair this relationship, consult more frequently, and use NATO as not only a source of military capability but also expanded discussions and planning. But it is still unclear whether her positive statements translated into long term improved relations.\textsuperscript{21}

This has been worrisome to British experts who have long held to the comment by a British diplomat in the 1950’s who observed that the purpose of NATO was “to keep the Americans in Europe and the Russians out”. This divergence on the future of NATO has clearly been part of British/French discussions, as Paris has long held to a belief that Europe must create an alternative to its reliance on American power. This was reflected in former German Chancellor Schroeder’s comments at Wehrkunde in 2005. Schroeder suggested that NATO may have outlived its usefulness and a new organization needed to
be envisaged to manage the transatlantic relationship. In many ways, he may have been speaking less to the Americans than he was to the continental Europeans and the British. So what is the future of NATO from the standpoint of the special relationship and what collectively should British and American leaders do to move the organization in a direction they deem appropriate?

In answering this question, existing NATO operations must also be considered. The Alliance conducted major out-of-area operations in the last decade. For example, NATO still has significant forces and its credibility deployed in the Balkans. Unfortunately, the final political decision on the future of Kosovo has never been made, the independence of Montenegro remains possible, and Macedonia will continue to confront enormous challenges. All of these raise the real possibility of a future crisis.22 If another Balkans crisis occurs, two things might happen immediately. First, the United States, confronted by global overstretch, might well announce that this is essentially a European problem. Second, this decision would cause major problems for an already damaged transatlantic relationship.

Former Secretary of Defense Harold Brown and NATO Secretary General Lord George Robertson have provided another opportunity for Britain and America to provide leadership for the Alliance. Both have endorsed the need to create military capabilities and doctrine to take better advantage of network-based operations. They observed in a recent study that “the era of static, large, armored forces, in place to confront and deter the adversary’s massed formations, is over. The era of forces that train and exercise together, but are rarely used, is over as well”.23
A Final Word

Britain may be at a fork in the road as it tries to be the transatlantic bridge while possibly both shorelines recede. But the special relationship may also be at a crossroads. There is a greater need than ever for enhanced consultation by leaders on a range of important issues that lie ahead and a need for leaders on both sides of the Atlantic to celebrate this relationship frequently and publicly. As we approach the 20th anniversary of the end of the Cold War the current generation and those who focus on international politics are aware of the special relationship’s value. But both countries must attempt to underscore its value more broadly to their respective populations now and in future. This will be the challenge for Prime Minister Gordon Brown and whoever occupies the White House in the aftermath of the 2008 elections.

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17 Ibid.
22 Ibid.