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## Evidence to Parliament

# UK Government Foreign Policy Towards the United States

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## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

- The UK-US relationship is 'essential' and 'special' but not 'strategic'. More effort needs to be focused to ensure the two nations understand one another's strategic long-term interests rather than just dealing with the urgent fires.
- With a more strategic perspective, there are huge opportunities for the UK and US to realize opportunities in their wider foreign policy and also avoid potential pitfalls when their interests don't align so closely.
- The UK brings three principal benefits to the US: a) a voice in the European Union with similar interest; b) assets (military, diplomatic, intelligence and economic among others); and c) a different perspective. The UK should give itself more credit for what it brings and the importance of these to the US.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was a submission by Xenia Dormandy to the Foreign Affairs Committee of the UK House of Commons in connection with the committee's evidence session on its new inquiry into Government foreign policy towards the United States.

## CHANGES UNDER THE COALITION GOVERNMENT

The UK-US relationship has for some decades (at least since the Reagan-Thatcher era) depended in large part, and relied on, the rapport between the two leaders. Relations, largely regardless of their political orientation, have been close and notwithstanding the traditional strong bureaucratic interactions between the two governments in various departments (whether diplomatic, military or intelligence), issues have often risen to this level as needed. However, what has been lost by depending on leader-to-leader engagement has been a deeper strategic understanding between the two sides which would lead to more opportunities for collaboration and help avoid potential pitfalls where interests diverge.

The Coalition government appeared to recognize this inadequacy and tried to address it with the announcement, in May 2011, during President Obama's visit to London, of a Joint Strategy Board that would facilitate regular interaction between the two National Security Advisors. Unfortunately, according to senior officials on both sides (privately) this initiative has largely failed in its objective. The meetings are rare and typically focus, as in the case of most other bilateral links, on the urgent issues rather than the strategic longer-term (and often vitally important) ones. In this important respect, the Coalition government's relations with the US Government remain unfortunately unchanged from that of its predecessors.

In the day-to-day engagements between the two sides, relations have continued to deal with issues of mutual concern and interest. There have been a number of challenges in recent years, particularly in the security realm (e.g. extradition, judicial decisions affecting US intelligence, and more recently, the NSA allegations) that have caused some tensions but they have been managed effectively and collaboratively and don't appear to have resulted in any long-term damage. Given the unique and very close cooperation in the intelligence realm, this should not be underrated.

The other area of particularly close UK-US interaction has been in the military arena, notably in Afghanistan and Iraq. The benefits of the close working relationship between the two militaries have played out more recently in Libya, as seen in the speed with which the UK was able to bring the US to support NATO operations there despite its concerns. While at a senior level, relations are extremely close, on the ground there do appear to be some challenges, particularly with regards to a lack of understanding on the part of the US military over different British Rules of Engagement and capabilities. This has, occasionally, tarnished the otherwise great respect in which the two forces hold one another.

While the 'essential' or 'special' relationship is not questioned in the US, this is not the case in the UK where constant debate takes place over whether this remains true and its implications. In the early days of the Coalition the public rhetoric suggested a more independent Britain that was able to stand alone rather than either with the US or EU. This perception has changed, particularly in light of the debate about UK membership of the EU where, rhetorically at least, some in the UK have suggested that leaving the EU would result in a closer relationship with the US. From the US perspective however, as Philip Gordon, then-Assistant Secretary of State for Europe stated candidly, this scenario is of significant concern to US policy-makers who strongly value the UK presence in the EU. While it would be overstating the fact to suggest that this development (were a referendum to be successful in 2017) would have a significant impact on the UK-US relationship over the immediate term, the longer-term effect could be more concrete.

Finally, some reference should be made to the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), which is likely to be the most significant initiative the US engages with Europe on (including the UK) in the coming years. TTIP is a priority of both the US and UK, and the US would like to see a strong UK negotiator driving the agenda for the EU. Thus the current British wariness of the latter causes some regrets.

## **INCREASED FOCUS OF UK ON RELATIONSHIPS OUTSIDE THE TRANSATLANTIC AREA**

As noted above, the UK-US relationship lacks a robust strategic perspective in lieu of focusing on the more urgent items (such as the Eurocrisis, Egypt and Syria policy). This limits the effective collaboration that the two nations could realize on broader international initiatives, both with regards to opportunities as well as challenges.

The Coalition Government, and in particular, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), has made it clear that its attention internationally is on building stronger commercial relationships with both established partners and newer ones. To that end, its resources have been rebalanced from embassies in developed nations (such as Paris) to smaller ones in parts of Africa and Asia.

This focus, while understandable given the recent recession, has caused some concern in the United States which considers itself to have a more 'strategic' foreign policy that encompasses commercial and trade interests, but places them in a broader context (to include security interests). This disparity in perspectives has played out in, for example, China, where the US 'hedges and engages' while the UK largely 'engages'.

There is significant opportunity for the UK and the US to work more effectively together internationally. The current Obama Administration has made very clear its interests to operate more multinationally and through partnerships. Where the UK and US have mutual interests, there is the will and desire to work closely together, also including other parties, as was the case with the military operation in Libya. This holds true even, or perhaps especially, where the capabilities the two nations bring to the table are different. It is in these situations in particular where there is great potential to realize greater benefits through collaboration. Where the interests aren't so closely aligned, there is also the chance, at a minimum, to ensure that the two states' actions don't undermine one another and that both are prepared for predictable policy disparities (such as in the Middle East Peace Process). There is no reason why an independent UK foreign policy beyond the transatlantic cannot still be an avenue for benefit to the transatlantic relationship (and vice versa). Again, in large part due to the lack of strategic engagement, this is not taking place except in an ad hoc manner.

## **RESPONSE TO US 'PIVOT TO ASIA'**

The US pivot to Asia, while the right policy, was badly implemented (as many in the US administration will agree). It has led to much confusion both in the region as well as, in particular, in Europe. The intention – to reassure America's Asian allies and partners that the US was going to maintain its presence and focus there – has largely been unsuccessful as those in the region have suggested a 'pivot towards' could be followed by a 'pivot away'. Subsequent rhetoric by senior US policy-makers such as that regarding the Scarborough Shoals in 2012 and the Senkaku Islands in 2013 has not reassured. Meanwhile, China has reacted badly to what it perceives as a more assertive America in its region.

While the policy has also led many in Europe to question whether it will mean a 'pivot away' from their region, the consequences for European security of the pivot and the force downsizing should not be exaggerated. While the US is pulling two of four combat brigades from Europe, nine others (intelligence, logistics etc.) are staying. In 2001, the US military had 420,000 troops; as of last year it had 580,000 and the planned downsizing will take the force down only to 470,000. Due to its geographic location and secure environment, Europe will continue to be a base for the US in its global operations.

Thus, with regards to its own regional security, it is in this context that the UK should consider America's Asia rebalancing policy. At the same time, as noted above, there are also opportunities for the UK to work with the US on the pivot, something that, during his tenure, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and the Pacific, Kurt Campbell, tried hard to implement (he held weekly meetings with European Embassies in Washington to try to build engagement).

Similarly to the US, Asia is a region of great strategic importance to the UK. It is, today, a significant driver of global economic growth and is likely to become more so (by 2020 it is estimated that 53% of the global middle class will be in the Asia-Pacific region). The direction of China's development and its internal stability has consequences globally and it is a necessary partner for a broad range of initiatives from the environment to North Korea and Syria policy. Supporting India's economic growth (and reform) to ensure the growth and engagement of another large democratic power is a high priority, as is the reversal of North Korea's nuclear program.

Over the past approximately two years, the UK government has promoted an increasingly more nuanced strategic vision for Asia rather than the more limited scope commercial objectives. This policy is one that should be

supported. Closer engagement with the US on this initiative would further both nations' goals in the region. At the same time, the FCO should continue to bring other European member states on board (the French and Italians are slowly heading in this direction). Collaborating together on a joint policy to approach the major challenges and opportunities in Asia, particularly with respect to countries such as China, India and Burma, is far more likely to have impact than working individually. And, while it is true that the UK (and Europe) do not have sufficient military assets to be a significant power in the region, engagement in Asia is far more than just security-related. In diplomatic, economic, intelligence and other areas, Europe and the UK have much to bring to the table.

## LESSONS FROM POST-2001 INTERVENTIONS

This is an area that is ripe for fruitful collaboration, with both immediate and long-term implications. While ISAF is winding down operations in Afghanistan, it is important to remember that the UK and US are working with NATO as it continues performing operations in the Balkans, off the Horn of Africa, and the Mediterranean. The question of how to maintain the collaboration and operational lessons learned is at the top of the agenda for many NATO member states, including the UK and US – particularly as defence budgets shrink on both sides of the Atlantic. The challenge, therefore, is building on the lessons of the past ten years of operations in Afghanistan and Iraq and integrating them into how the UK does business with the US today – and into the future.

Iraq and Afghanistan made the need to improve interoperability between the US, UK, NATO and NATO Partner nations abundantly clear. For example, simple matters such as sharing information – as well as intelligence – with nations that are not part of the five-eyes arrangement was difficult and to some degree constrained operational effectiveness. Technological fixes and multilateral defence procurement are necessary but not sufficient to improve interoperability. Rather, multinational interoperability improvement is a mindset that we need to adopt across the spectrum of how our defence establishments operate, especially as both the US and UK militaries are expected to do more with less. This must also extend to the “civilian” ministries (FCO, DFID, and the Stabilisation Unit and their respective US counterparts) as they will likely operate alongside each other in future complex contingencies.

While there have been many positive operational lessons learned, the militaries have also learned things that should not be repeated or that were inadequate. As in the case of Libya, when the French and British came together to drive a military response, it was quickly apparent that their assets were insufficient to get the job done and US intelligence, heavy lift, and armaments, among other things, were needed. However, it was also clear during this operation that the UK, alongside the French, were able to take the lead in international operations and push others to contribute (a role typically held by the US). The United States is demonstrating much more cautiousness when it comes to intervention operations, and is therefore likely to be comfortable playing an enabling role for UK and European operations in the future – this would be greatly facilitated with more strategic understanding between the two sides.

It is clear from this and other such operations that the assets and capabilities that each nation brings to the table are different, but that there is great potential for sharing the burdens of leadership and implementation. It is certainly not necessary for the UK to take a backseat.

At the strategic level, in the case of Iraq and Afghanistan an analogous lesson should be learned. Had the US perhaps listened to the UK more, both efforts could have played out quite differently. The UK, given its history and experience, and thus its different perspective, has a valuable voice that provides a different outlook on problems.

This raises a more profound and broader conclusion that is relevant for the wider UK-US relationship. The UK offers three main benefits to the US: a) a partner in the European Union that has similar goals and therefore pursues objectives of common interest to the US; b) its assets, whether intelligence, defence, economic, diplomatic or other; and c) a different perspective on, and understanding of, challenges. These three legs of the relationship are extremely important to the US and should not be underestimated. And yet, so often, the UK does so, and in so doing, weakens its position and influence and does not do justice either to itself or to the transatlantic relationship.