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The State of the Special Relationship
Report from the U.S.-U.K. Strategic Dialogue

October 20-22, 2010
Gloucestershire, UK

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and

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February 2011

This report is a production of a collaboration between the Defense Threat Reduction Agency’s
Advanced Systems and Concepts Office and the Naval Postgraduate School.

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Defense Threat Reduction Agency
Advanced Systems and Concepts Office
Report Number ASCO 2011 001
Contract Number MIPR 10-2538M
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:


We also thank David Hamon and William Hostyn, Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA), for lending their considerable expertise to the preparations and discussion. We appreciate their advice and willingness to help refine the project framework along with their recommendations on subject matter experts.

We are especially grateful to Al Woodson and Alison Brady for preparing the conference notes. We thank Isabelle Anstey, Angela Archambault, and their organizations, the Center on Contemporary Conflict and Kings College London, who coordinated the planning and execution of the DTRA workshop.
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Subject Matter:
On October 20-23 2010, faculty from the Naval Postgraduate School led a US-UK Strategic Dialogue “The State of the Special Relationship” which was sponsored by the Advanced System and Concepts Office of the US Defense Threat Reduction Agency and co-hosted by King's College of London. The conference evaluated the US-UK “special relationship,” explored its transformation since the 2003 decision to invade Iraq, and gathered perspectives from scholars and government officials regarding future relations between the allies.

Method of Analysis:
Participants were asked to address shared national experiences in Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan, US-UK relations and the war on terror, the state of intelligence collaboration, Counter-Proliferation efforts directed toward Iran, and nuclear force postures. Each topic was addressed by a panel of experts. These papers and presentations were then followed by a general discussion undertaken by all of the participants at the event.

Findings:
1. Members of the US defense community have expressed concerns about the effectiveness of British armed forces. Some of the cited examples were recent British tactical performance in Afghanistan’s Helmand Province involving COIN operations, the British experience in Iraq’s Basra Region, and US resentment of the perceived arrogance of some British generals. These have adversely affected the US operational and political confidence in the United Kingdom as a military partner.

2. The UK public and official political towards Britain’s role in the world have changed. The report suggests that these evolving perceptions may have stemmed from what is perceived to be a lack of UK influence on US decision making regarding the decision to invade Iraq in 2003 and a decreased appetite for foreign intervention. By contrast, US participants believe that British officials played an active and significant role in the decisions leading up to the decision to invade Iraq.

3. Former UK officials made it apparent that the British Forces face significant budgetary constraints. This decline is typified by the Iraq experience, the perceived US loss of faith in the UK armed forces, and the political imperative to extricate quickly forces from Afghanistan. This overall reduction in defense capability is reinforced by the current global financial crisis and is reflected in the United Kingdom’s latest Strategic Defense and Security Review.
4. Missions in Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan have put a strain on the “special relationship.” This was partly due to how US-UK combat operations were managed.

5. Differences in the US and UK legal frameworks have brought challenges to the “special relationship.” For instance, there is a major difference in tactics between the two countries regarding plea bargaining, which can cause delays and lack of permissible evidence in court. Taking legal action can be difficult as well because some US intercept evidence cannot be used in the UK court system.

6. Counter-proliferation and counter-terrorism efforts continue to be strong areas of collaboration between the United States and the United Kingdom.

7. It will be difficult for the United States and the United Kingdom to design or test new nuclear weapons. The ongoing financial crisis may influence how the British choose to build their nuclear program in the future.

Conclusion:
The Iraq issue will remain highly politically charged issue in British politics for the immediate future. Americans appear willing to move beyond past events while the British seem uncertain about the meaning and lasting significance of the decision to invade Iraq, which is partly due to the fact that they feel their choice to maintain a strong relationship with the United States did not protect their best interests. How we manage this divergence in attitudes will determine roles and relationships between the US and UK in the future.
SECTION 1: BACKGROUND

For over half a century, US and British officials have enjoyed a “special relationship,” an especially close form of military and diplomatic consultation and coordination that has come to be expected as a matter of course in Washington and London. Some observers have taken a dim view of the relationship; in March 2010, for instance, the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee recommended that the British government stop referring to relations with the United States as “special” because it conjured up images of subordination to Washington’s objectives.1 More recently, British Foreign Secretary William Hague noted that through Republican, Democratic, Conservative and Labor administrations, bilateral relations between Britain and the United States remained “excellent.” The special relationship continues, but it is not immune from the stresses and strains created by external threats, errors of omission and commission, and changing geo-strategic realities.2

This report offers an assessment of the “special relationship” based on the findings of a recent forum that was held at the Lords of the Manor Hotel, Upper Slaughter, Gloucestershire, UK, on 20-22 October 2010. British and American scholars and former officials from both governments were asked to address a series of themes and issues, with an eye toward exploring how these issues shape the state of the relations between the allies. Participants were asked to address shared national experiences in Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan, US-UK relations and the war on terror, the state of intelligence collaboration, Counter-Proliferation efforts directed against Iran, and nuclear force postures. The group also included several serving officials from the United States and the United Kingdom.

1 The Committee noted: “The perception that the British government was a subservient ‘poodle’ to the U.S. administration leading up to the period of the invasion of Iraq and its aftermath is widespread both among the British public and overseas,” see “Special Relationship Between U.K. and U.S Is over, MPs Say,” 28 March 2010, BBC News, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/8590767.stm
SECTION 2: GENERAL FINDINGS

Although the decision to invade Iraq and its aftermath are beginning to fade from political memory in the United States, both British officials and members of the public continue to question the political, intelligence and policy mistakes leading to the decision to topple Saddam Hussein. These issues are being kept at the forefront of public consciousness in the United Kingdom by the on-going official inquiry into the entire conduct of the Iraq campaign, ranging from the case for war all the way through to the withdrawal of UK forces several years later. The politics of the Iraq issue will remain highly charged at least until the Commission issues its report (which is not seeking to attach blame related to any decisions or their implementation but to identify lessons learned). British participants note that there is a widespread feeling across Great Britain that an obsequious attitude toward Washington’s demands led to British participation in some sort of US crusade in the Middle East. In contrast, American participants noted that British officials were willing, active and valued participants in the decision making leading up to the Second Gulf War. Americans appear willing to dismiss past events as “so much history,” while the British have difficulty coming to terms with decisions that they believe do not reflect their best tradition of level-headed and sophisticated strategic judgment. This divergence in attitudes places ongoing issues in different contexts in London and Washington.

General Finding 1

Within the UK defense community, there is growing concern over the health and resilience of the US-UK operational relationship; problems have developed and continue to arise.

An internal report circulating amongst UK defense and military officials shows a growing anxiety within Whitehall concerning the state of the US-UK military relationship. Notably, there are concerns that the relationship has begun to show signs of strain and possibly even cracks.

Areas of the report explored perceived US concerns about the quality and effectiveness of British armed forces. Examples cited included:

- Recent British tactical performance in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, in counter-insurgency operations (COIN)
- The British experience in Basra, Iraq; and
- US resentment of the perceived arrogance of some British generals

Resentment is rooted in the British idea that the lessons of Northern Ireland, and other COIN campaigns, can be broadly leveraged in support of actions in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, the US Army arguably inflicted a great deal of this friction on itself during the initial years of the Iraq campaign, as Americans flooded the UK determined to reap the lessons from British COIN history. This certainly contributed to the problem, particularly in terms of the “perceived arrogance” of senior UK officers, and it was then compounded by the failings that followed in Basra.

US reaction to the report has been to reassure the British and to attempt to dampen anxieties.

**General Finding 2**

Despite frictions over Iraq and Afghanistan it is apparent that at the *working level* – in the military, intelligence and nuclear fields – the US-UK strategic relationship continues to function effectively. It is at the *political level* where there appears to be more friction, flux and divergence of views. This may partially be explained by the fact that US officials might be taking the UK contribution to various activities for granted in a political sense. It also may involve sensitivities in Britain about the fact that the current administration in the White House is less “UK leaning” and pays less attention than its predecessor to protecting British sensibilities (e.g. the “British” Petroleum controversy arising from the massive oil leak in the Gulf of Mexico in summer 2010).

The UK has evidently been through, and continues to go through, a period of political soul searching when it comes to deploying military force, particularly as UK moral leadership since Iraq has been called into question. It is evident that the UK public and political moods have changed in terms of what Britain’s role in the world should be. Part of this due to perceptions of the lack of UK influence on US decision making in relation to Iraq and on other issues. Part of it might be due to a decreased appetite for foreign intervention, in part, as a result of how the Iraq invasion was implemented and the lack of perceived progress in defeating the Afghanistan Taliban and ongoing governance problems in that country. The upshot is that the UK government is much less instinctively supportive of Washington and this has altered the UK *political* approach to the special relationship. Whether this is an enduring trend is open to debate. All of this is compounded by wider geo-strategic changes.
Consequently it may become more difficult to maintain the coherence of the US-UK political relationship in the future if perceived interests and policy preferences begin to diverge. At one level this is a question of substance (e.g. is the United Kingdom likely to support military action against Iran in the future if the current diplomatic/sanctions track fails?). But it is also a question of process, notably: How can the British and Americans do grand strategy together in the future?

**General Finding 3**

There is a palpable sense among British and American observers that Britain is now in a serious decline militarily. This decline is typified by the Iraq experience, the perceived loss of faith in the UK armed forces on the part of its number one ally, and the political imperative to extricate forces from Afghanistan as soon as possible. These challenges have been compounded by the global financial crisis and directly influenced the United Kingdom’s recent Strategic Defense and Security Review (SDSR). The SDSR was primarily a cost savings exercise driven by the requirement for all government departments to cut spending as part of its deficit reduction plan.

The review was primarily a salami slicing exercise in terms of military capability but it will obviously result in a yet smaller set of military forces and a reduced capability in the context of NATO and in terms of contributing to other international deployments. The implications are probably multi-dimensional, for example: greater reliance on the United States; further interoperability issues with US armed forces if the United Kingdom does not invest in high technology; military intervention becoming the *very last resort* for UK governments; and increased collaboration by the UK and US with France and potentially other European countries in defense. These are just a few examples and all of these will have implications for US-UK strategic relations. There were also some very controversial decisions (some might say absurd) in the SDSR including scrapping the new Nimrod MR4 maritime patrol aircraft before it is brought into service, putting one of the two new aircraft carriers into mothballs as soon as it is built, and gapping the UK capability to fly aircraft off the other carrier.

The “perfect storm” analogy may be too strong a phrase to describe the various factors that appear to be influencing the United Kingdom’s military decline, but the context within which British officials think about and plan for defense has changed significantly in recent years and this will undoubtedly influence the US-UK relationship as a result. The UK decision to withdraw militarily from east of the Suez Canal Zone may be a better reference point when thinking about the potential implications of the SDSR.
Engaging in coalition combat operations has posed a series of challenges for the special relationship. In terms of the experience in Iraq, British-American relations were strained by alliance disagreements over the resources devoted to various operations, differing approaches to COIN, and the apparent overextension of British forces in the region. British officials also have quietly questioned the US ability to plan for and execute a long and complex engagement in Iraq. British officials were apparently fully aware of the American failure to consider various aspects of the situation in Iraq prior to the war there, but in the end followed the US lead when it came to operations and tactics.

In terms of Afghanistan, coalition efforts have suffered severe mission creep. US-UK forces are fighting the Taliban and Pashtu tribes in addition to Al Qaeda. Initially, the United States was not interested in incorporating allies into the overarching strategy in Afghanistan. As the engagement deepened, however, US officials chastised their allies for not becoming involved. US officials ultimately convinced their allies to assume greater responsibility while the US military attempted to shift its focus toward counter-terrorism operations. The allied forces were quickly left with diminished support and assets needed to accomplish their mission. As setbacks occurred, US forces returned to areas that they had previously handed over to their allies (e.g. Helmand, Kandahar, etc.) and reassumed tactical and operational oversight. This has led to hard feelings within the alliance.

**Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan Finding 1**

Securing the Basra region of Iraq is a British failure that has yet to be confronted. The UK forces struggled to commit adequate resources to both Iraq and Afghanistan. In spite of the initial successes in Basra, the UK forces failed to deliver rapid reconstruction and to manage force protection, protection of the populace, and elimination of insurgents. The UK forces refused to request US assistance, further contributing to the complexities of securing the region.

The consequences of failure in Basra led to unprecedented UK civil-military frictions and an end to the European vision of muscular altruistic liberal interventionism. British participants suggested that the United Kingdom lost credibility within the American political context, but US observers seemed to suggest that outside military circles, little notice was taken of British military performance during the occupation of Iraq, which in itself perhaps raises questions
related to the political “value” perceived to be attached in the United States to partnering with the United Kingdom, despite the long history of military collaboration.

**Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan Finding 2**

British officials faced a binary choice with regard to their decision to become involved in Afghanistan: Go or don’t go. The UK was unaware of US capability gaps, specifically those related to reconstruction and stabilization, and this lack of knowledge has negatively impacted their perception of the US military and government. There has been a general loss of confidence, especially among the political caste in British policy toward Afghanistan. Distrust between British and American officials goes both ways.

COIN and utopianism are not easy ways to generate public support in the United Kingdom. Discussion regarding future “discretionary wars” should be done in private between the two governments.

**Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan Finding 3**

Most American participants believed that the legacy of the war in Afghanistan could be similar to that of Vietnam in that US policymakers will be leery to engage in future COIN operations. If the past is a guide to the future, they also believed that the US military would be quick to abandon expertise and capabilities suited to COIN.

In the future, the United States will be required to take on more combat burdens when intervening in regional conflicts and it is not sure of what role the UK will play or should play.
The United States and the United Kingdom are confronting common terrorist threats. The air link between London’s Heathrow airport and the United States, for instance, appears to be a favorite target of terrorists. The 2006 plot to destroy airliners, the 2009 New York City subway plot and elements of the Mumbai attack shared a transatlantic link. Both countries face threats from homegrown terrorism. Diaspora populations also pose unique challenges to law enforcement and intelligence officials.

A major difference between US and UK counter-terrorism efforts is related to scale. The United States has a large number of resources to draw upon and too many agencies to coordinate.

**US-UK Relations and the War on Terror Finding 1**

Cooperation between the two countries is extensive, but they are not unified in their views of certain groups. For instance, some groups are not a priority for the United Kingdom, i.e. Hamas and Hezbollah, but are for the United States.

**US-UK Relations and the War on Terror Finding 2**

There is a major difference in tactics between the two countries regarding plea bargaining, the practice of allowing suspects to plead guilty to a lesser charge to quickly close cases. In the United Kingdom, plea-bargaining is non-existent and creating inducements to talk is not permissible. The United States has found that this restriction leads to a loss of prosecutorial intelligence.

Some US intercept evidence cannot be used in UK courts. How an interview is conducted in situations where the rule of law is not set in stone creates difficulties. The public safety exception to Miranda can create issues between the British and US legal systems. In the United States, the public safety exception is exercised to attain timely and tactical intelligence. This sort of activity is not permissible in Great Britain.
Counter-proliferation is perhaps the strongest field of collaboration between the United States and the United Kingdom. Counter-proliferation, however, also tends to be a team sport: the United Kingdom drives the European Union agenda and thus helps to keep the European Union focused on the problem of Iran. The United States tends to play a larger role in leading the United Nations to enact sanctions, although sanctions tend to factionalize the international community.

US and UK officials are better informed about proliferation matters compared to the leaders of many states. They must use this superior knowledge to strengthen the efforts of the International Atomic Energy Agency. Both countries also must continue exchanges in order to maintain a shared technical and cultural approach to the problem of proliferation.

**Countering Proliferation: Iran as the “Hard Case” Key Finding 1**

The special relationship produces the danger of British complacency regarding the issue of proliferation. British officials must recognize that they must bring substantial proposals to the international bargaining table as well as intelligence and other capabilities to the overall counter-proliferation effort.

**Countering Proliferation: Iran as the “Hard Case” Key Finding 2**

The United States and the United Kingdom must keep all parties united to take concerted action, especially by limiting procurement of nuclear materials from and through China.

The UK-China relationship should be strengthened and this may be a key area in which the UK could usefully play a role in the counter proliferation context given the less strained relationship between the United Kingdom and China compared to the United States and China.

Russia is the key to the success of United Nations sanctions. British and American officials might make a more coordinated effort to generate Russian pressure on Iran.
The United Kingdom must maintain independent capabilities recognizing that there is a
tradeoff between counter-proliferation and counter-terrorism.
The United States has committed itself in the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review to reducing global nuclear dangers. The Nuclear Posture Review illustrates the push toward nuclear net-zero. Until net-zero is achieved, however, the United States is committed to maintaining a safe and effective nuclear arsenal. The United Kingdom’s approach to its white paper assisted the United States in articulating its position. Although changes in the UK defense budget affect the US-UK relationship, cooperation dealing with nuclear issues is an especially robust element of the special relationship. The 10-year reviews of the 1958 agreement on nuclear cooperation renew the relevance of this shared heritage. Despite this profound and enduring cooperation, the United Kingdom regards its nuclear capability as operationally independent and this independence makes the United Kingdom a valuable nuclear partner.

**Nuclear Issues Key Finding 1**

The United States and United Kingdom continue to face difficulty designing and testing new nuclear weapons. There are numerous domestic and international political challenges in maintaining or replacing warheads. Control of materials will continue to be an issue. The aging nuclear infrastructure also poses significant issues.

Compounding this issue is the lack of experience amongst junior scientists – the issue of tacit knowledge -- who were never involved in the original nuclear testing prior to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). The government has lost considerable institutional knowledge and tacit nuclear expertise since the signing of the CTBT.

**Nuclear Issues Key Finding 2**

In the United Kingdom, the domestic debate regarding the fundamentals of the program centers on two principal positions: maintaining nuclear weapons or disarming. In the United States, policymakers tend to have their cake and eat it too – they talk about maintaining a strong nuclear deterrent but are willing to do so with a shrinking arsenal and nuclear infrastructure.
One of the central arguments in the United Kingdom is that given the strength of the US-UK relationship, what is the relevance of a UK nuclear force? Another British concern is that decreases in nuclear program spending increases dependency on the United States.

UK domestic support for a nuclear program is not strong when compared to most other nuclear states. This is a product of the perceived high cost of the nuclear program. Controversy over the program typically coincides with international tension and replacement cycles. The public's position on the nuclear issue in the United Kingdom is probably best characterized as apathetic, however. The 2006 White Paper is a testament to this as it did not generate significant political controversy.

The on-going financial crisis and its impact on UK defense may well influence future British decision making on the nuclear question, such as contemplation of extending the life of the current Trident submarines. This decision in itself could add momentum to arguments for a more limited deterrent capability (notwithstanding the arguments for what makes a ‘credible’ deterrent) and even for disarmament over the longer term.

Support for a nuclear program is also waning in the United States.

Please direct questions or comments to

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SECTION 7: AGENDA

Wednesday, October 20, 2010

6:00pm  Reception and Dinner
        Dining Room

7:30pm  The State of the Special Relationship at Decade’s End

Presenters:  John Dumbrell (University of Durham)
             John Baylis (Swansea University) to introduce

Thursday, October 21, 2010

8:30am  Breakfast
        Dining Room

9:00am-9:30am  Welcome and Introductions
                Conference Room

Presenters:  James J. Wirtz (Naval Postgraduate School)
             Wyn Bowen (Kings College London)
             Bill Hostyn (ASCO-DTRA)
             John Baylis (Swansea University)

Chair:  David Hamon (ASCO-DTRA)

9:30am-11:30am  Session 1: The Special Relationship and the New NATO
                Strategic Concept

Presenters:  David H Dunn (University of Birmingham)
             Beatrice Heuser (University of Reading)
             Guy Roberts (NATO)

Chair:  John Baylis (Swansea University)

11:30-1:30pm Lunch
               Dining Room

1:30pm-3:45pm  Session 2: Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan
Presenters:  Paul Schulte (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace)
Tim Wilsey (Royal Bank of Scotland)
Harold Ingram (US Department of State)
Thomas Johnson (Naval Postgraduate School)
Chair: David Hamon (ASCO-DTRA)

3:45pm - 4:00pm  Break

4:00pm - 5:30pm  **Session 3: US-UK Relations and the War on Terror**

Presenters:  John Gearson (King’s College London)
Andrew Silke (University of East London)
James Walsh (University of North Carolina of Charlotte)
Justin Tolomeo (FBI)
Chair: Wyn Bowen (King’s College London)

7:30pm  Reception and Dinner
*Dining Room*

**Friday, October 21, 2010**

8:00am  Breakfast
*Dining Room*

8:30am - 10:15am  **Session 4: Countering Proliferation: Iran as the ‘Hard Case’**

Presenters:  Wyn Bowen (King’s College London)
Jonathan Brewer (King’s College London)
Daniel Moran (Naval Postgraduate School)
Chair: Bill Hostyn (ASCO-DTRA)

10:15am - 10:30am  Break

10:30am - 12:30pm  **Session 5: Nuclear Issues**

Presenters:  Malcolm Chalmers (Royal United Services Institute)
Robin Pitman (Imperial College London)
Bob Vince (Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory)
Chair: Jim Wirtz (Naval Postgraduate School)

12:30-2:00pm Lunch
*Dining Room*

2:00pm-3:30pm *Session 6: Intelligence Collaboration after the Iraq Estimates*

Presenters: Adam Svendsen (Security Studies and International Relations)
            Christian Westermann (U.S Department of State)

Chair: Robert Dover (Loughborough University)

3:30pm-4:00pm *Open Forum*

Moderators: James Wirtz and Wyn Bowen

4:00pm-4:30pm *Closing Remarks*
US-based Presenters/Chairs

1. Angela Archambault (Center on Contemporary, Naval Postgraduate School)
2. David Hamon (ASCO-DTRA)
3. Bill Hostyn (ASCO-DTRA)
4. Harold Ingram (US Department of State)
5. Thomas Johnson (Naval Postgraduate School)
6. Sandra Leavitt (Naval Postgraduate School)
7. Daniel Moran (Naval Postgraduate School)
8. Guy Roberts (NATO)
9. Justin Tolomeo (FBI)
10. Bob Vince (Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory)
11. James Walsh (University of North Carolina of Charlotte)
12. Christian Westermann (US Department of State)
13. James Wirtz (Naval Postgraduate School)
14. Al Woodson (Center on Contemporary, Naval Postgraduate School)

UK-based Presenters/Chairs

1. Isabelle Anstey (King’s College London)
2. John Baylis (University of Swansea)
3. Wyn Bowen (King’s College London)
4. Alison Brady (King’s College London)
5. Jonathan Brewer (King’s College London)
6. Amy Burgess (Cabinet Office)
7. Malcolm Chalmers (Royal United Services Institute)
8. John Dumbrell (University of Durham)
9. David H. Dunn (University of Birmingham)
10. Robert Dover (Loughborough University)
11. John Gearson (King’s College London)
12. Beatrice Heuser (University of Reading)
13. Robin Pitman (Imperial College London)
14. Lianne Saunders (Head, Counter-Proliferation Dept., Foreign and Commonwealth Office)
15. Paul Schulte (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; King’s College London)
16. Andrew Silke (University of East London)
17. Adam Svendsen (SSIR)
18. Tim Wilsey (Royal Bank of Scotland)