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British Conservatives Must Defend the U.S.–U.K. Special Relationship

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The Anglo-American special relationship today faces one of its greatest challenges ever in rising British opposition to the United Kingdom's close ties to the United States. The resurgent Conservative Party under David Cameron must do more to counter this change in public attitudes. British Conservatives should embrace their Party's traditional pro-Atlanticist agenda and resist the temptation to adopt an anti-American foreign policy. The realistic alternative—spurning Washington in favor of closer ties to Brussels—threatens the effectiveness and leadership of both the United States and Great Britain on the world stage, as well as the progress of the war on terrorism.

Changing Attitudes

The recent YouGov/*Spectator* poll of British attitudes toward U.S.–U.K. leadership of the war on terrorism¹ should serve as an important wake-up call for policymakers in both Washington and London. While an encouraging 73 percent of respondents agreed that “we are in a world war against Islamic terrorists who threaten our way of life,” nearly 80 percent dismissed the idea that Britain and America were “winning the war against terror.” Only 14 percent of those surveyed supported the view that Britain should “pursue a foreign policy agenda closer to that of the United States;” 45 percent believed that “Britain should position her foreign policy closer to that of the European Union.”

The poll reflects a sea change in attitudes among a British public that is traditionally pro-Atlanticist

and skeptical of European integration. In part, the survey is a reaction against an unpopular prime minister, Tony Blair, who is closely aligned with Washington and whose international standing eclipses his domestic image. Blair's approval rating remains at less than 30 percent. The public's changing attitudes are also representative of a broader rejection of U.S. leadership on the world stage and rising anti-Americanism on both the left and right of the political spectrum.

Several other recent polls have produced negative findings with respect to British perceptions of U.S. foreign policy and Downing Street's support for it. A July ICM poll for *The Guardian* found that 63 percent of Britons thought the U.K. was “too close to the USA.”² In a June YouGov/*Daily Telegraph* poll, 77 percent of those polled disagreed with the view that the United States was “a beacon of hope for the world,” and 58 percent supported the description of America as “an imperial power.”³ Fully 67 percent expressed “little or very little confidence” in “the ability of the United States to deal wisely with present world problems,” and 65 percent supported the view that U.S. policies made the world “a somewhat or much worse place to live in.”

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Worryingly, anti-American views are now more prevalent in the U.K. than in some continental European countries with a far deeper tradition of public skepticism toward the U.S. In the latest *Financial Times*/Harris poll of opinion in five of the EU's largest member states,⁴ a staggering 36 percent of Britons surveyed described the United States as "the greatest threat to global security." (Just 19 percent of British respondents cited Iran as the world's greatest threat). In contrast, 28 percent of Frenchmen, 21 percent of Italians, and 24 percent of Germans shared this view. Only in Spain was the negative perception of U.S. foreign policy greater than in Britain.

The Threat to the Special Relationship

If the British public continues to move further away from the United States and slides closer to the European Union on major international issues, the long-term future of the special relationship will be in jeopardy. Britain is at a turning point in its history, faced with a choice between further political, legal, military and economic integration with the EU and a deepening of its alliance with the United States and other English-speaking allies such as Australia. As Tony Blair discovered with the Iraq war, the two competing visions are largely incompatible.

From the U.S. point of view, it would be a geo-strategic disaster if Britain leans toward Brussels rather than Washington. The most prominent casualty of a fully developed EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) would be the Anglo-U.S. special relationship, forcibly consigned to the scrap heap of history. America's closest ally would be unable to operate an independent foreign policy and stand alongside the United States where and when it chooses to do so. The consequences for America would be hugely damaging.

For Britain, there is much to lose from a weakening of the Anglo-American alliance: the further loss of national sovereignty, the diminution of British global power and influence, the loosening of defence and intelligence ties, and a weakening of the close-knit financial, trade, and investment relationship.

For both U.S. and U.K. policymakers, the defense of the special relationship should be a priority. On the U.S. side, the Bush Administration should step up public diplomacy in the U.K. Little has been done so far to effectively project and communicate America's foreign policy message to British and European audiences. In London, the Blair government must do more to explain how the alliance with America enhances Britain's national security rather than undermines it, and why the special relationship is a two-way street that brings Britain major benefits. At the same time, the British government should not undermine the alliance with America by supporting further political or defense integration in Europe.

The Resurgence of the Conservative Party

In the U.K., the Conservative Party, the home of Winston Churchill and Margaret Thatcher, should play a key role in cementing the transatlantic relationship. Traditional support for the Anglo-American alliance has been a hallmark of the Party's foreign policy for over half a century. British and American conservatives are committed to many of the same values and ideals on the world stage: the defense of national sovereignty, the projection of military power to confront tyranny and threats to international security, the advancement of free trade, and the protection of human rights. As

1. YouGov/Spectator Survey, August 14-15, 2006, at <http://www.yougov.com/archives/pdf/SpectatorPollResults.pdf>.
2. ICM/Guardian Poll, July 21-23, 2006, at <http://www.icmresearch.co.uk/reviews/2006/Guardian%20-%20July/guardian-july-2006.asp>.
3. YouGov/Daily Telegraph Survey, June 26-28, 2006, at http://www.yougov.com/archives/pdf/TEL060101010_3.pdf#search=%22you%20gov%20daily%20telegraph%2026th-28th%20june%202006%22; Anthony King, "Britain Falls Out of Love with America," *The Daily Telegraph*, July 3, 2006, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2006/07/03/nyank103.xml>.
4. *Financial Times*/Harris Poll of Adults in Five European Countries, August 21, 2006, at <http://www.harrisinteractive.com/news/allnewsbydate.asp?NewsID=1081>.

Shadow Defence Secretary Liam Fox recently remarked in a speech in Washington, "Together, America and Britain have helped remake much of the world in the image of liberty and democracy."⁵

The Conservative Party has returned as a major force in British politics. The latest poll by ICM gives the Conservatives a nine-point advantage over the ruling Labour Party, the Tories' biggest lead in 19 years.⁶ Out of power since Tony Blair swept into Downing Street in 1997, the Conservatives now are serious contenders for government when the next U.K. general election is held in either 2009 or 2010.

Blair's demise coupled with the decline in the polls for the Labour Party offer the Conservatives their first opportunity in a decade to emerge as a force in international affairs. As the Conservatives move closer to Downing Street, there is growing interest among Washington policymakers in the Conservative Party's foreign policy positions, in particular those concerning issues that have a direct bearing on the United States. The positions of British Conservative leaders on the war on terrorism, Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, and North Korea, for example, now carry far more weight than they did a year or even six months ago. They can no longer be ignored or dismissed as the statements of an opposition party far removed from political power and are increasingly seen as the views of a potential government in waiting. As such, the positions of British shadow cabinet ministers on the major international issues of the day are rightly drawing the attention of the White House, National Security Council, Pentagon, and State Department.

For the first time in a decade, British Conservatives are in a position to have their voice heard and to make a real impact in Washington, especially in terms of U.S. policy toward the European Union. British conservatives can play an important role in helping shape U.S. thinking on the future of

Europe, an issue of fundamental national importance to the United Kingdom and the United States. The message they must convey is that the increasing centralization of political power in Europe poses a fundamental threat to both the British and the U.S. national interests.

A Dazed and Confused Foreign Policy

To many policymakers in Washington, however, the Conservative Party's current foreign policy is an enigma. The newly released party manifesto, "Built to Last," makes no mention at all of the United States and fails to outline a coherent vision or strategy for fighting the global war against Islamic terrorism or confronting the growing threat posed by Iran and other rogue regimes.⁷ Nor does it address the future of Britain's relationship with the European Union.

In its public statements, the Conservative Party's leadership appears increasingly to be following the polls rather than leading public opinion, or mirroring the sort of fashionable anti-American rhetoric popular in the salons of Paris or Brussels. At times the foreign policy positions of the center-right Conservative Party resemble that of the left-wing Liberal Democrats. High-profile attacks by some Conservative MPs on the war in Iraq and America's conduct of the war on terrorism are seen as deeply unhelpful across the Atlantic. Condemnation by the Party's leadership of Israeli military operations in Lebanon as "disproportionate" provoked a backlash not only among Conservative supporters in Britain, but also widespread unease in Washington, where it was viewed as a huge shift in policy as well as a sharp jab at U.S. support for Israel.

There are echoes of former Conservative leader Michael Howard's highly confrontational and ultimately disastrous approach toward the U.S. administration that so badly damaged relations between conservatives across the Atlantic. The current thaw

5. Liam Fox MP, "Security and Defense: Making Sense of the Special Relationship," Heritage Lecture No. 939, April 27, 2006, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Europe/hl939.cfm>.

6. Julian Glover, "Tories Open Nine-Point Lead as Labour Drops to 19-Year Low," *The Guardian*, August 22, 2006, at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/frontpage/story/0,,1855567,00.html>.

7. "Built to Last: The Aims and Values of the Conservative Party," Conservative Party, August 2006, at <http://www.conservatives.com/pdf/BuiltToLast-AimsandValues.pdf>.

in relations, achieved by the highly successful visit to Washington in February of three leading shadow cabinet ministers (Liam Fox, George Osborne, and William Hague), may be edged aside by another transatlantic 'cold war' that would be in the interests of neither the Conservative Party nor the Bush Administration.

By playing to increasing anti-U.S. sentiment in the U.K., the Conservative Party risks burning bridges and alienating friends and allies, a risky short-sighted strategy that will yield little long-term gain. A poisoned relationship between the new Conservative Party leadership and the Bush Administration would undermine the influence of British conservatives in Washington. If the public attacks on U.S. foreign policy become a longer-term trend, a Conservative government would find itself in an extremely difficult position dealing with a future Republican administration. Even a Democrat-run White House would balk at the kind of language being used to describe Israeli action against Hezbollah.

There is an immediate need for greater dialogue and exchange of ideas between British and American conservatives, as well as high-level contacts between shadow cabinet ministers and officials in the executive branch of the U.S. government. The common goal should be the advancement of the special relationship and U.S.-British interests on the world stage. There will undoubtedly be strong

disagreements over policy issues, but these are better aired in frank, private meetings than sharply worded opinion pieces that can cause significant public damage.

Defending the Special Relationship

British conservatives should advance a strongly pro-Atlanticist agenda that emphasizes U.S.-British leadership on the world stage, Anglo-American cooperation in the war on terrorism, a firm determination to halt the development of a nuclear-armed Iran, support for global free trade, and concerted action to end the genocide in Sudan and human rights abuses in countries such as Burma and Zimbabwe. This should be a foreign policy based on the view that Britain, in alliance with America, is a major global player, with significant military, diplomatic, and economic clout that eclipses that of any other European country—in other words, a self-confident international power whose vision extends far beyond the narrow confines of the European Union.

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