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The Obama–Brown White House Talks: The U.S.–U.K. Special Relationship Must Be Maintained

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British Prime Minister Gordon Brown will be the first European leader to meet with President Barack Obama when he visits the White House on March 3. The two world leaders are expected to discuss a range of issues, including the war in Afghanistan, the Iranian nuclear threat, and the global financial crisis, as well as the upcoming G-20 talks in London and the NATO 60th anniversary summit in Strasbourg/Kehl.

In addition to meeting with the President, Brown will address a joint session of Congress on March 4, making him only the fifth British prime minister to be given the honor.

A Shift Away from Britain? The Brown–Obama meeting will be overshadowed by growing concerns about a possible weakening of the U.S.–U.K. Special Relationship, tensions over strategy in the war in Afghanistan, and the threat of a renewed American protectionism.

The Anglo-American alliance is being eroded on several fronts, from falling levels of U.K. defense spending and the gutting of Britain's armed forces by the Labour government to the gradual erosion of British sovereignty in Europe and the rise of a European Union defense identity now being backed by Washington. It is also threatened by the new U.S. Administration's apathy and indifference toward the U.K.¹

President Obama's surprise decision to remove a bust of Sir Winston Churchill from the Oval Office and return it to the British government sent an early signal to London that the new Administration will

adopt a far less robust approach toward the historic Anglo-American alliance. The White House is already recalibrating the alliance as a "special partnership,"²—not a "special relationship"—a subtle play on words indicating a potential shift away from a decades-long policy of according Britain a unique status as America's most important ally.

U.S. Overtures to Europe. The Obama White House is keen to significantly strengthen America's relationship with both France and Germany, continental Europe's biggest powers, as well as with Brussels, the institutional heart of the European Union. This approach is partly the product of a distinctly pro-European outlook on the part of the new Administration following transatlantic tensions during the Bush Administration. It is also based on a naive belief that major European allies will actually increase defense spending and reduce the burden on America and that the EU will play a more supportive role in world affairs alongside the United States.

Washington is already making major concessions to France in the NATO alliance,³ with French officers reportedly in line to take two senior NATO command positions: Allied Command Transforma-

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tion (one of NATO's two supreme commands, based in Norfolk, Virginia) and Joint Command Lisbon (one of NATO's three main operations headquarters, which also commands the NATO Rapid Reaction Force).⁴

The White House is also sending clear signals that it supports a greater military and defense role for the European Union. In his speech at the Munich Security Conference in early February, Vice President Joe Biden made it clear that the United States will “support the further strengthening of European defense, an increased role for the European Union in preserving peace and security, [and] a fundamentally stronger NATO–EU partnership.”⁵

Anglo–American Leadership Is Needed. Since the Second World War, there has scarcely been a more important period for joint U.S.–British leadership. The Anglo-American Special Relationship would be imperiled if the new U.S. Administration looks to Brussels instead of London for its most important strategic partnership. Jeopardizing this relationship would be a huge mistake. The EU is obsessed with challenging American global leadership rather than working with it, and the European Project is ultimately all about building a counterweight to American power.

The Obama–Brown White House meeting will be an important opportunity for the President and the Prime Minister to establish a stronger framework for Anglo-American cooperation on the world stage, particularly in regard to key issues such as Afghanistan, the future of NATO, and the Iranian nuclear crisis.

The War in Afghanistan. Despite all the fashionable rhetoric in European capitals about Iraq being a distraction from the war against the Taliban, on the battlefields of Afghanistan almost two-thirds of the 47,000 troops currently serving as part of the 40-nation NATO-led International Security Assistance Force are from the English-speaking countries of the U.S., the U.K., Canada, and Australia. These nations have also taken roughly 85 percent of the casualties. Britain has nearly as many troops in the country as all the other major European Union powers combined, some of whom, like Germany, cower under dozens of “caveats” aimed at keeping their troops out of harm’s way. The United States has pledged to send an additional 17,000 troops, and the U.K. is also considering the deployment of further forces to boost the nearly 9,000 British soldiers already serving in Helmand province.

President Obama and Prime Minister Brown should directly challenge European complacency and indifference over Afghanistan and issue a strong statement calling on European allies to pull their weight in the conflict by sending more combat troops to the south of the country. NATO is a war-fighting alliance, not a peacekeeping organization. The stakes are extremely high, and there is a danger that the brutal Taliban, backed by al-Qaeda, will reassert control over vast swathes of the country.

Europe’s NATO members must make a no-strings attached commitment to step up to the plate and bear a bigger part of the burden. If this does not happen, the consequences for the future of the alliance will be dire. European apathy over Afghanistan threatens to tear NATO apart, and an institution

1. For further background, see Tim Shipman, “Will Barack Obama End Britain’s Special Relationship with America?” *The Telegraph Online*, February 28, 2009, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/barackobama/4885887/Will-Barack-Obama-end-Britains-special-relationship-with-America.html> (March 1, 2009).
2. The White House, statement by the press secretary on an upcoming visit to Washington by Prime Minister Gordon Brown, February 21, 2009, at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Statement-by-the-Press-Secretary-on-an-Upcoming-Visit-to-Washington-by-Prime-Minister-Gordon-Brown (March 1, 2009).
3. See Nile Gardiner and Sally McNamara, “The U.S. and U.K. Must Oppose French Plans to Weaken NATO,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 2285, February 10, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Europe/wm2285.cfm>.
4. Ben Hall and James Blitz, “Command Accord Presages French Return to NATO,” *Financial Times*, February 5, 2009, at <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/fbc2122a-f323-11dd-abe6-0000779fd2ac.html> (March 1, 2009).
5. Vice President Joseph R. Biden, speech at the 45th Munich Security Conference, February 7, 2009, at http://www.securityconference.de/konferenzen/rede.php?menu_2009=&menu_konferenzen=&sprache=en&id=238& (March 1, 2009).

that has for decades succeeded as the most effective international organization of its time could become irrelevant. It is time for French President Nicolas Sarkozy, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and other European leaders to roll up their sleeves and commit their troops and resources to winning the war against the Taliban.

The Future of NATO. In the lead-up to the NATO 60th anniversary summit, both the United States and Great Britain must take a step back and launch a fundamental, wide-ranging review of the long-term implications of French demands for the future of the alliance.

It would be a huge strategic error of judgment by the new U.S. Administration and the British government to support French ambitions for restructuring Europe's security architecture. This would ultimately weaken the Anglo-American Special Relationship as the engine of the transatlantic alliance and pave the way for the development of a separate European Union defense identity, which will ultimately undermine NATO.

Washington and London must also commit to advancing the expansion of the NATO alliance—specifically the inclusion of Georgia and Ukraine in the Membership Action Plan. The new U.S. Administration, together with Britain, should send a clear signal to Moscow that NATO expansion is an internal matter for the alliance and not open to Russian veto. A firm commitment must also be made by the Obama Administration to establish a third site missile defense system in Eastern and Central Europe, a vital part of a global defense shield that is needed to protect the West from rogue regimes such as Iran.

The Iranian Nuclear Threat. President Obama and Prime Minister Brown should issue a strong statement calling for the strengthening of both U.N. Security Council and European sanctions against Tehran. The U.S. and British leaders must push for European countries to support a complete invest-

ment freeze—including a ban on investment in Iranian liquefied natural gas operations—and the possible use of military force as a last resort against Iran's nuclear facilities.

They should reject the idea of direct negotiations with a tyranny that has threatened to wipe a key ally, Israel, off the face of the earth. This is a time for tough resolve in the face of an extremely dangerous foe—a rogue state close to nuclear capability ruled by fanatical Islamists that will have no qualms about using their power to dominate the Middle East or to arm a wide array of proxy international terrorist groups.

The EU has tried to negotiate with Tehran for several years under the guise of “constructive engagement,” an approach that has resulted in an emboldened Iran that grows closer by the day to building a nuclear weapon. The EU's policy toward Iran has been all carrot and no stick—a futile exercise that has achieved nothing but failure.

Great Britain Is America's Most Reliable Friend. The Special Relationship is vital to American and British interests on many levels, from military, diplomatic, and intelligence cooperation to transatlantic trading ties. If President Obama does not invest in its preservation, the end result will be a weaker United States that is less able to stand up to terrorism and tyranny, and project power and influence on the world stage.

Whether waging war against the Taliban and al-Qaeda, standing up to the Russian bear, or halting Iran's nuclear ambitions, President Obama should maintain the Anglo-American Special Relationship as the centerpiece of the transatlantic alliance. As nearly every post-war President has found, when it comes to securing the free world, there is simply no alternative to U.S.–British leadership

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