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The Cameron–Obama White House Meeting: The U.S.–U.K. Special Relationship Must Be Preserved

Nile Gardiner, Ph.D.

On July 20, British Prime Minister David Cameron will meet with President Barack Obama at the White House in what will be his first bilateral overseas trip since taking office in May. The visit will be overshadowed by transatlantic tensions in the wake of the Gulf oil spill and the Obama Administration's aggressive campaign against Britain's largest company, BP, which has prompted a significant political and media backlash in the U.K.

The summit also comes after a difficult period in which relations between Downing Street and the White House plunged to their lowest point in several decades. Obama and Gordon Brown enjoyed what could only be described as a stormy relationship, one that culminated in the Labour-dominated U.K. House Foreign Affairs Committee recommending in March that London drop the term "Special Relationship" altogether.¹

The new British government, although keen to build up a close working relationship with the Obama team, will be acutely aware that it is dealing with an Administration that has an embarrassing track record of undercutting U.S. allies, especially Britain, and which has so far shown little real interest in strengthening strategic alliances. There is no guarantee that David Cameron will strike up a successful partnership with Barack Obama, and he may need to look beyond 2012 and a possible changing of the guard in the White House for the long-term preservation of the Special Relationship.

Key Issues for Discussion. The Cameron–Obama meeting is likely to be dominated by dis-

cussion of the war in Afghanistan, the Iranian nuclear threat, the financial crisis in Europe, and the Gulf oil spill. Other issues that may be discussed include U.S.–U.K. defense cooperation, intelligence cooperation in the war on terrorism, the Falklands sovereignty question, and international development assistance.

There will be significant disagreements between the two leaders, especially over international approaches to the global economic downturn, but it is important that both Washington and London send a strong, united message concerning Afghanistan and Iran, the two biggest foreign policy priorities for the U.S. and Great Britain today. There should also be a firm commitment to move forward with the Defense Trade Cooperation Treaty.

The War in Afghanistan. The new British government has committed Britain to the fight in Afghanistan, which is an essential part of the global war against Islamist terrorism. It has also rejected the idea of a timeline for the withdrawal of British forces, a message that the Prime Minister should reinforce with President Obama.

The Obama Administration's ill-conceived plan to draw down U.S. forces starting in July 2011 hands the

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initiative to the Taliban and undercuts the longer-term commitment of some NATO partners, including Britain. Cameron should urge Obama to rethink his withdrawal timetable and advance a strategy aimed at victory rather than half-hearted compromise.

The Iranian Nuclear Threat. London and Washington have moved largely in tandem in recent years over the Iranian nuclear issue, but it is time to significantly escalate the political, economic, and military pressure on Tehran and bring to an end the failed strategy of engagement with the ruling mullahs. Tuesday's meeting offers a major opportunity for the British Prime Minister and U.S. President to call for an intensification of United Nations and European Union sanctions against Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's regime, as well as express strong support for bilateral measures outside of the U.N. aimed at restricting Tehran's access to the international banking system, foreign investment, advanced technologies, and gasoline imports.

The U.S. and British leaders should make it clear that the use of force against Iran's nuclear facilities remains firmly on the table if diplomacy fails. In addition, Cameron and Obama should declare American and British support for the democracy movement in Iran and call on Tehran's theocracy to release all political prisoners and end the rape, beating, and torture of opposition activists.

The U.S.–U.K. Defense Trade Cooperation Treaty. During his visit to the White House, Cameron is likely to press the case for ratification of the U.S.–U.K. Defense Trade Cooperation Treaty signed between the two countries in June 2007 but currently in limbo awaiting confirmation by the Senate.

It was raised recently by U.K. Defence Secretary Liam Fox in Washington, who pointed out that “David Cameron will be the third Prime Minister that has had to come to the United States and ask why America has not ratified a treaty that we ratified ourselves in good faith some years ago.”² It is a plea that should be actively heard by Obama, who should do all he can to speed ratification of this treaty, as well as the similar U.S.–Australian defense treaty.³

The treaty is in the firm interests of both the U.S. and Great Britain and would streamline defense-related trade between the two countries, eliminating the need for export licenses in most cases. It would likely boost U.S. exports, improve the procurement process on both sides of the Atlantic, and strengthen the overall defense and security relationship between the U.S. and U.K.⁴ Ratification would also send a message that strategic alliances matter and that Washington recognizes that the Special Relationship is a two-way street.

The Falklands Sovereignty Issue. This may not be a priority issue for the U.S., but is likely to be brought up by Cameron at the White House summit. The Obama Administration's reckless support for Argentina's calls for U.N.-led negotiations over the sovereignty of the Falkland Islands, including signing on to an Organization of American States resolution⁵ calling for talks between London and Buenos Aires, has generated considerable disquiet across the Atlantic.

Over 250 British servicemen died retaking the Falklands after Argentina invaded in 1982, and London has made it clear it will defend the islands from any future attack. Cameron should strongly

1. House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, Sixth Report, “Global Security: UK-US Relations,” March 18, 2010, at <http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmfaaff/114/11402.htm> (July 15, 2010).
2. Liam Fox MP, “Afghanistan: Standing Shoulder to Shoulder with the United States,” speech delivered at The Heritage Foundation (Q & A following speech), June 30, 2010, at <http://www.heritage.org/Events/2010/06/Liam-Fox>.
3. Ted R. Bromund, “Now Is the Time to Seek Ratification of the U.S.–Australia Defense Trade Cooperation Treaty,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 2836, March 18, 2010, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2010/03/Now-Is-the-Time-to-Seek-Ratification-of-the-US-Australia-Defense-Trade-Cooperation-Treaty>.
4. Ted R. Bromund, “The U.S.–UK Defense Trade Cooperation Treaty Merits Early Consideration,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 2542, July 13, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2009/07/The-US-UK-Defense-Trade-Cooperation-Treaty-Merits-Early-Consideration>.
5. Organization of American States Resolution adopted by the General Assembly, June 8, 2010, at http://scm.oas.org/doc_public/ENGLISH/HIST_10/AG05071E06.doc (July 15, 2010).

object to the State Department's support for the Argentine position and make it clear that Washington's backing for negotiations is deeply unhelpful and unwelcome.

Britain and America Must Prevail. In a phone call to Cameron just after he became Prime Minister, President Obama talked of "my deep and personal commitment to the special relationship between our two countries—a bond that has endured for generations and across party lines."⁶ It is time to put those words into action and demonstrate that he is sincere about his commitment to the Anglo-American alliance, not least at a time when British and American troops are fighting shoulder to shoulder on the battlefields of Afghanistan. It remains to be seen whether the White House will follow through on this pledge, but if it fails to do so, the world will be a more dangerous place.

Strong U.S.–British leadership is needed now more than ever. The war in Afghanistan and the wider war against Islamist terrorism are conflicts the free world simply cannot afford to lose. The U.S., the U.K., and their allies all have a huge stake in the outcome. Afghanistan must never again be allowed to become a safe haven for Islamist militants, who would plunge that nation back into the barbarism of the pre-9/11 era.

As Margaret Thatcher remarked in a speech at The Heritage Foundation just a year after the liberation of Afghanistan, "the West must prevail—or else concede a reign of global lawlessness and violence unparalleled in modern times."⁷

—*Nile Gardiner, Ph.D., is the Director of the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom at The Heritage Foundation.*

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6. *The Daily Telegraph*, "Barack Obama Reaffirms 'Special Relationship' as He Calls David Cameron," May 12, 2010, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/election-2010/7713131/Barack-Obama-reaffirms-special-relationship-as-he-calls-David-Cameron.html> (July 15, 2010).
 7. Lady Margaret Thatcher, "The West Must Prevail," remarks made accepting Clare Boothe Luce Award, The Heritage Foundation, December 9, 2002, at <http://www.margarethatcher.org/speeches/displaydocument.asp?docid=110687> (July 15, 2010).