

# WebMemo



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## What President Obama and Prime Minister Cameron Should Do to Preserve the Anglo–American Special Relationship

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During his state visit to the United Kingdom on May 24–26, President Barack Obama should reaffirm the vital importance of the Special Relationship.<sup>1</sup> This affirmation should go beyond words and address the tensions in the Anglo–American alliance that have built up during the President’s first two years in office.

These tensions are the result of the fact that the United States has undervalued its key allies—including Britain—while Britain has done too little to ensure that it remains a sovereign and capable partner within NATO and with the U.S.

**The Special Relationship.** The Special Relationship rests on three pillars:

1. First, the U.S. and Britain must each desire and seek to play a leading role in the world.
2. Second, both must retain the classically liberal values on which the U.S. was founded and that have strongly influenced Britain’s politics, culture, and view of its role in the world.
3. Third, the relations that both Britain and the U.S. have with other nations must be compatible with the continued existence of the Special Relationship.

Regrettably, all three pillars are under strain, and in some cases, the strain is serious. The recent U.S. emphasis on “soft power” and multilateralism betokens a retreat from leadership, as do ongoing reductions in British defense spending. Both

countries have long since left the path of classical liberalism. Finally, the U.S. is increasingly prioritizing other parts of the world—particularly the Middle and Far East—over Europe, while Britain’s sovereignty and ability to play an independent and assertive role in the world is being eaten away by the European Union.

**The Foreign Policy of the Obama Administration.** The foreign policy of the Obama Administration feeds into and exemplifies these disheartening trends. It does not regard Europe as the most important region in the world or Britain, the leading power in Europe, as America’s most important ally. It has emphasized its desire to win better relations with undemocratic regimes and has therefore played down America’s traditional alliance relationships. Finally, by “leading from behind,” it has further devalued all of its alliance relationships, especially its relationship with the U.K.

There have been some encouraging developments in Anglo–American relations over the past two years. First, the U.S. has finally ratified the U.S.–U.K. Defense Trade Cooperation Treaty. Second, after much hesitation and many mixed

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messages, the U.S. has committed to remaining in Afghanistan beyond the Administration's nominal deadline of July 2011. Given Britain's continued commitment to the fight, it would have been disastrous for Anglo-American relations—not to mention for the region and the cause of defeating the Taliban and al-Qaeda—if the U.S. had begun a precipitate retreat. Third, in the context of the President's visit, the White House now speaks glowingly about the "Special Relationship." What has not happened is any sustained effort to make the realities of U.S. policy match this rhetoric.

**What the U.S. and Britain Should Do.** The state of Anglo-American relations is not good. The goal of both President Obama and British Prime Minister David Cameron should be to improve them. Repairing the Special Relationship will require recognizing the sources of Anglo-American friction and taking serious steps to address them. Making high-flown declarations of common purpose will not suffice.

The single greatest danger to the Special Relationship is any belief that neither nation needs to lead in the world and, thus, that neither needs allies. The first necessity for both leaders is therefore to commit their nations to a policy of international leadership conducted together in concert with their allies.

- Accordingly, Obama and Cameron should commit their nations to negotiating a timely renewal of the U.S.–U.K. Mutual Defense Agreement in substantially its current form.

The second most important danger is the material risk posed by the government debt burdens in both Britain and the U.S. Neither the U.S. nor Britain can play a leading international role if they are bankrupt or if they pay their bills by cutting their armed forces. Both nations need to recognize that their alliance relationships, economic future, and roles in the world rest on their financial and military strength. In both countries, entitlement spending is threatening this strength. They need to address and control this threat in a way that allows their econo-

mies to grow and thus fund affordable and reliable military forces.

- While Britain correctly recognizes the dangers of deficit spending, it needs to adopt a pro-growth economic strategy that emphasizes deregulation, lowers taxes, and reforms its pension system to place its finances on a sustainable footing.
- The U.S. still has the opportunity to avoid the worst of the problems that Britain must confront. U.S. deficits are too large, but the government's share of the economy is smaller than Britain's. It should act now by following the same program of deregulation, lower taxes, and entitlement reform.
- Britain should commit to restoring defense spending to its 1996 level of 2.9 percent of GDP by the end of the next Parliament. It should couple this increase with a reexamination of its security and defense strategies that is not driven by budgetary concerns.
- The U.S. should correct the under-funding of its core military budget, ensure that funding for overseas contingencies is sufficient, and find savings in the defense budget that can be redirected to procurement.

Third, and finally, both leaders should address specific causes of Anglo-American friction. The alternative is to continue the current drift to the detriment of the Special Relationship and British and American values and interests.

- The U.S. and Britain should express their exclusive commitment to NATO as the security alliance for Europe and declare their resolve to continue operations in Afghanistan, isolate and pressure Iran, and ensure that the Muammar Qadhafi regime is removed from power.
- The U.S. should stop supporting European integration and instead seek to deal with European states, particularly Britain, on a bilateral basis.
- The U.S. and Britain should cooperate to implement the Defense Trade Cooperation Treaty and

1. For further exploration and analysis of the themes in this *WebMemo*, see Ted R. Bromund, "Preserving the Special Relationship: A Conservative Agenda for President Obama's State Visit to Great Britain," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2558, May 19, 2011, at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/05/preserving-special-relationship-conservative-agenda-for-president-obamas-state-visit-great-britain>.

ensure the smooth operation and promote public understanding of the U.S.–U.K. Extradition Treaty.

- While respecting Britain’s right to make its own laws, President Obama should express concern about the long-term and unintended damage that Britain’s new immigration policies could cause to the Special Relationship.
- The President should press Cameron to state publicly that future conventional arms treaties need to be adopted on the basis of consensus on high and verifiable standards and that Britain will neither join nor lead a breakaway.

**Keeping the Relationship Special.** Just because the Special Relationship is deep and important does not mean it is immune from disruption. If the alliance between Britain and the U.S. is to remain special, its partners must treat each other specially and better than they do other states. The President and the Prime Minister have a vital obligation to pursue policies that clearly demonstrate the value that they place on the Special Relationship.

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