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At Obama–Cameron Summit, U.S. and Britain Should Take Action to Rebuild Alliance

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On March 13–14, British Prime Minister David Cameron will make an official visit to the United States complete with a state dinner, reciprocating the state visit by President Barack Obama to Britain in May 2011. It comes in advance of NATO and G-8 summits; in the midst of crises in Syria, the Persian Gulf, and Europe; and as both allies reduce their defense spending and struggle with large budget deficits and growing national debts. This visit offers an important opportunity to address issues that have caused increasing friction in the Anglo–American alliance and to take actions that will build and fortify that alliance in the years to come.

Obama Administration Actions Have Weakened the Alliance. The Obama Administration’s relations

with Britain are a study in paradox. Former Prime Minister Gordon Brown was the first foreign leader to address Congress during the Obama presidency, and Obama was the first U.S. President to pay a state visit to Britain since Dwight Eisenhower. The Administration also acted, belatedly but importantly, to steer the long-delayed Defense Trade Cooperation Treaty with Britain through the Senate ratification process. Unfortunately, on matters of both substance and rhetoric, the U.S. all too frequently has either sided against or gratuitously insulted Britain.

The Administration has relentlessly supported the creation of a federal Europe, with the U.S. Ambassador to London warning Britain in January 2011 that “all key issues must run through Europe” and warning Britain against any withdrawal from the European Union.¹ The Administration secretly gave Russia sensitive information about the size of Britain’s nuclear arsenal to persuade Russia to agree to the New START Treaty.² Publicly and controversially, it has backed Argentina’s call for U.N.-brokered negotiations over the Falkland Islands, a move that comes 30

years after the 1982 Falklands War between Britain and Argentina that conclusively settled the status of the islands.

Part of the Administration’s refusal to take Britain’s concerns seriously may stem from the fact that, simply because Anglo–American relations were close under President George W. Bush, the current Administration feels compelled to treat Britain, to quote a senior State Department official, as though there is “nothing special” about it.³

But the fundamental problem with U.S. policy toward Britain is that the Obama Administration is less interested in sustaining and building on the American role in Europe than any other post-1945 U.S. Administration has been. Its heavily publicized “pivot to Asia” in late 2011 was a belated public admission that it has devalued transatlantic cooperation. Since Britain is the U.S.’s key partner in NATO, this turn away from Europe was bound to do particular damage to U.S.–U.K. ties. Combine this with the Administration’s strong support for the European Union—to which the U.S. wrongly hopes it can transfer its security responsibilities—and the result is an Anglo–American

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relationship that is long on state visits but increasingly short on substance.

On National Security and Foreign Policy, Commit to Cooperation and Strength. The White House has announced that much of the Cameron–Obama summit will concern foreign policy, including the ongoing war in Afghanistan, the upcoming NATO summit in Chicago, the Assad regime’s brutal repression of civilian protest in Syria, and Iran’s illicit nuclear weapons program. Absent from the announced agenda, but equally important, are the unwise British decision in 2010 to impose substantial cuts on its defense budget and the even more damaging U.S. reductions announced in January 2012.⁴

The least desirable outcome of the summit would be for Britain and the U.S. to paper over these important issues and declare that the summit is a success by focusing on visuals and the drafting of an agreed communiqué. Regrettably, this is also the most probable outcome. With both governments committed to defense cuts and a steady withdrawal of combat forces from Afghanistan, neither has an incentive—or the standing—to press the other to confront the dangerous consequences of the shared and diminishing Western security commitment to their shared security. The most likely source of friction

is the Falkland Islands, where the Cameron government is firmly committed to preserving British sovereignty and the U.S. policy of support for U.N.-broken negotiations has caused intense controversy and anger in London.

At the summit, Cameron should urge Obama to publicly abandon America’s ill-considered and dangerous support for the Argentine demand for negotiations. He should also point out that while Britain and France—with substantial U.S. support and some assistance from other NATO allies—successfully aided the overthrow of the Qadhafi regime in Libya, the institutions of the U.N. and EU-led diplomacy have achieved nothing in Syria, in curbing Iran’s nuclear program, or in prosecuting the war in Afghanistan. Indeed, thanks in part to obstruction by Russia and China and in part to the importance that Germany, Greece, and other EU and NATO members attach to their trade ties with Syria and Iran, multilateral institutions have actually hindered action.

The lessons that Cameron should press are that Britain and the U.S. can achieve far more in cooperation than they can separately; that the best hope for vigorous diplomacy lies in voluntary cooperation between democracies; and that—in all cases—diplomacy without strength is a broken reed. As the example of the Falklands shows, encouraging

negotiations is, on its own, no contribution to peace: It actually emboldens aggressors.

On the Domestic and the International Economy, Commit to Free Enterprise. The Conservative-led coalition government in Britain is making an important effort to restore order to Britain’s finances, which Labour left in a disastrous position in 2010. Unfortunately, to this point, the government has focused on tax increases instead of spending cuts or supply-side reforms that would promote growth. It faces the additional burdens of being a member of the rule-imposing and growth-choking EU, demands for contributions to EU-led bailouts of profligate nations like Greece, and the even more unacceptable idea of an EU-wide fiscal union. The U.S. position is, if possible, even worse, as it has not even reached a consensus that trillion-dollar deficits as far as the eye can see are financially and morally unacceptable.

At the summit, Cameron will be in a strong position to urge Obama that U.S. deficits on this scale are incompatible with American world leadership and prosperity. The answer, though, is not the higher taxes that the British government has imposed, as Britain’s slide back into near-recession in late 2011 clearly illustrates. Rather, Cameron has illustrated the way out by refusing to participate in the EU fiscal union

1. Martin Banks, “UK Urged to Rule Out Any Chance of Leaving EU,” *The Parliament.com*, January 26, 2011, at <http://www.theparliament.com/latest-news/article/newsarticle/uk-urged-to-rule-out-any-chance-of-leaving-eu/> (March 6, 2012).
2. Ted R. Bromund, “New START and the Special Relationship: A Case to Answer,” *Heritage Foundation Foundry*, February 8, 2011, at <http://blog.heritage.org/2011/02/08/new-start-and-the-special-relationship-a-case-to-answer/#more-51868>.
3. Tim Shipman, “Barack Obama ‘Too Tired’ to Give Proper Welcome to Gordon Brown,” *The Telegraph*, March 7, 2009, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/barackobama/4953523/Barack-Obama-too-tired-to-give-proper-welcome-to-Gordon-Brown.html> (March 6, 2012).
4. Press release, “Statement by the Press Secretary on the Visit of British Prime Minister Cameron,” *The White House*, February 2, 2012, at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/02/02/statement-press-secretary-visit-british-prime-minister-cameron> (March 6, 2012).

in December and by his domestic efforts to reduce the subsidies that local governments in Britain receive from the Treasury.

The answer to the problems of overregulation, top-down direction, and ever-greater reliance on central control with high levels of taxation, spending, and transfer payments is not more of the same. It is, as Cameron should state both publicly and privately, the restoration of effective and limited spending by sovereign governments; the end of transfers and subsidies that allow individuals, firms, and nations to live beyond their means; and the maintenance of the most vital of Anglo-American institutions: the free market, operating under the rule of law.

What the U.S. Should Do. The U.S. and Britain face a number of serious issues at home and abroad. The most important need, however, is for the U.S. to demonstrate that Europe matters; that the institutions of the EU are no substitute for—and

are in fact inferior to—the legitimacy of democratic and sovereign European nations; and that, instead of seeking to reset relations with autocracies like Russia, it will give the highest consideration to the concerns of its allies.

The U.S. and Britain are close enough and important enough to each other to disagree on occasion, as they have in the past; but if Britain decides to continue the downgrading of its security role or the U.S. continues to care less about transatlantic security and political cooperation, the problem will not be an Anglo-American disagreement. It will be the slow disappearance of the Special Relationship.

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