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## The Bush–Brown White House Meeting: A Chill in the Special Relationship?

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British Prime Minister Gordon Brown will meet with President George W. Bush in the Oval Office on Thursday, April 17, 2008, during his second trip to the United States as premier. The talks are expected to cover a range of issues from the Iranian nuclear question to international development. During his visit, Brown will need to work hard to improve the state of U.S.–U.K. relations, which have deteriorated since his predecessor Tony Blair left Downing Street last June.

The Anglo–American Special Relationship continues at many levels behind the scenes, from intelligence cooperation to collaboration on missile defense. It is, however, beginning to show significant signs of strain over the handling of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, low levels of British defense spending, and the broader war against Islamist terrorism.

Gordon Brown has a major credibility problem, and not just in terms of the U.K. polls that show a personal negative rating of 26 percentage points. It is hard for the Prime Minister to be viewed as an Atlanticist supporter of the Anglo–American alliance when he rejects the term “special relationship” and his diplomats are discouraged from using it. Nor can he be seen as a wholly reliable military partner when he opposes increasing British defense spending and refuses to support a robust military role for British troops in Iraq. Brown is also not helped by a Defense Secretary who believes that Britain should be negotiating with the Taliban.

When he arrives in Washington this week, the British Prime Minister must demonstrate a firm

commitment to the battle in Iraq, reject any talk of softening Britain’s strategy in Afghanistan, and show strong leadership in confronting the Iranian nuclear threat. The alliance has to operate as a two-way street. At present, the United States is shouldering a disproportionate share of the burden, and Brown must show that Britain is willing to pull its weight alongside its closest ally.

**Downing Street Drops the “Special Relationship.”** In an extraordinary move, under Gordon Brown, the British government has dropped the 60-year-old phrase “special relationship” altogether,<sup>1</sup> and diplomats are strongly encouraged not to use it. In deference to the European Union, Britain’s newly unveiled National Security Strategy points out that while “the partnership with the United States is our most important bilateral relationship,” the “EU has a vital role in securing a safer world both within and beyond the borders of Europe”—giving equal footing to Britain’s relationship with Washington and its relationship with Brussels.<sup>2</sup> Ironically, while the British Prime Minister refuses to use the term, his French counterpart Nicolas Sarkozy had no qualms about using it to refer admiringly to the Anglo–American alliance when he addressed the House of Commons last month.

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**A Divide Over the War on Terrorism.** Not only has the Brown government dropped the phrase “special relationship,” but it has also dumped all reference to the “war on terrorism.” The National Security Strategy even states that “while terrorism represents a threat to all our communities, and an attack on our way of life, it does not at present amount to a strategic threat”—an extraordinary statement considering there are at least 2,000 al-Qaeda operatives in the U.K. according to British intelligence.

In contrast to the U.S. government (and the previous Blair government), the current British government under Brown does not believe that the free world is engaged in a global war against Islamist terrorists and is handling the al-Qaeda threat to British shores as largely a domestic law-and-order problem. In many ways, Britain has moved closer to the continental European model under Brown with a rejection of the U.S. view that the West is engaged in a long-term war against Islamist extremists who seek the destruction of our civilization.

This softer approach has gone hand-in-hand with the further surrender of British sovereignty in Europe. Brown has embraced the new European Union Reform Treaty, which is almost identical to the former European Constitution—and, to all intents and purposes, a blueprint for a European superstate.<sup>3</sup> He has steadfastly refused to agree to a popular vote on the treaty despite overwhelming public support for a referendum.

**The Decline of British Defense Spending.** In addition to adopting a more European approach to the war on terrorism, Gordon Brown insists on maintaining European levels of defense spending, which is rapidly undermining Britain’s position as a world power. U.K. expenditure on defense currently stands at less than 2.3 percent of gross

domestic product (GDP), its lowest level since the 1930s. This compares with U.S. defense spending at 3.7 percent of GDP. Britain’s military is massively overstretched and underfunded, with huge manpower and equipment shortages, and faces billion of dollars worth of further cuts over the next few years.

The decline in British military power is sharply highlighted by the gutting of the Royal Navy, which has been reduced from 136 ships in 1987 to just 75 today, with a fall in the number of submarines from 38 to just 13. The crisis is so great that it would be almost impossible for Britain to mount a major military operation on the scale of the 1982 Falklands War. As U.K. Shadow Defense Secretary Liam Fox has commented, “Labour has done what none of this country’s enemies have been able to do: bring the Navy to its knees.”<sup>4</sup>

For the United States, the decline in British military capability should be a huge cause for concern, both increasing the burden on America’s armed forces and reducing the force projection of Washington’s only large-scale military ally. This was amply demonstrated in the recent battle for Basra between Iraqi security forces and the Iranian-backed Mahdi Army led by Moqtada al-Sadr, where the U.S. Air Force and hundreds of American ground forces were involved in the Iraqi offensive to retake the city. British soldiers, meanwhile, were stationed outside of Basra and did not intervene with the exception of limited logistical and artillery support.

The non-involvement of British forces was the product of both dramatically weakened troop strength (down to just 4,100 men from a height of 45,000) and a lack of political will on the part of the British government, fearful of the negative impact of troop casualties on the home front as well as the prospect of having to take on Iranian-trained and Iranian-funded militias. The lack of British commit-

1. Tim Shipman, “‘Special Relationship’ Dies Under Gordon Brown,” *Daily Telegraph*, March 18, 2008, at [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2008/03/16/wspecial116.xml](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2008/03/16/wspecial116.xml) (April 15, 2008).
2. U.K. Cabinet Office, *The National Security Strategy of the United Kingdom: Security in an Interdependent World*, March 2008, at [http://interactive.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/documents/security/national\\_security\\_strategy.pdf](http://interactive.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/documents/security/national_security_strategy.pdf) (April 15, 2008).
3. See Nile Gardiner, Ph.D., and Sally McNamara, “The EU Lisbon Treaty: Gordon Brown Surrenders Britain’s Sovereignty,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 1840, March 7, 2008, at [www.heritage.org/Research/Europe/wm1840.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/Europe/wm1840.cfm).
4. Quoted in Sean Rayment, “Navy Would Struggle to Fight a War: Report,” *Daily Telegraph*, December 3, 2007, at [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2007/12/02/navy102.xml](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2007/12/02/navy102.xml) (April 15, 2008).

ment to the war in southern Iraq will ultimately force the United States to deploy thousands of soldiers to the region, picking up the slack left by the British Army and weakening America's ability to combat al-Qaeda and its terrorist affiliates in the Sunni heartlands in central Iraq.

**U.S.—U.K. Splits Over Afghanistan.** In Afghanistan, the British, with 8,000 troops on the ground, are far more engaged in military operations and are playing a major role in fighting the Taliban in Helmand Province. The bravery of British soldiers there, however, is being undercut by poor political leadership in London as well as by shortages of equipment, vehicles, and helicopters. There are also major differences emerging between London and Washington regarding long-term strategy in combating the Taliban.

In comments to London's *Sunday Telegraph*,<sup>5</sup> British Defense Secretary Des Browne called for negotiations with elements of both the Taliban and Hezbollah, saying: "What you need to do in conflict resolution is to bring the people who believe that the answer to their political ambitions will be achieved through violence into a frame of mind that they accept [that] their political ambitions will be delivered by politics." These remarks can only serve to undermine morale among British forces fighting in Afghanistan and sharply illustrate the current divide that exists between the U.S. and the U.K. about critical aspects of the war on terrorism. They followed the February revelation in the *Financial*

*Times* that the Brown government had secret plans to build training camps in Helmand for former Taliban fighters, a move strongly condemned by the Karzai government.<sup>6</sup>

**Brown Must Shore up the Special Relationship.** From the Second World War to the second Gulf War, the U.S.—U.K. alliance has been the most successful partnership of modern times, a far more effective defender of the free world than any international organization. But there is a real danger that the Special Relationship will be weakened through a combination of political indifference, a decline in British defense spending, a growing unwillingness on the part of Britain to fight a long-term global war against Islamist terrorism, and the erosion of British sovereignty within the European Union.

For the partnership to continue, there has to be a wholehearted commitment on both sides of the Atlantic, and while there is every sign that Washington is seeking to strengthen the alliance, London is adopting a *laissez-faire* approach that is weakening and undermining it. The stakes are extremely high. If the Special Relationship were eventually to collapse, not only would the security and prosperity of both the United States and Great Britain be significantly reduced, but its demise would embolden the West's enemies, leaving the world a far more dangerous place.

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5. Rachel Sylvester, "We Must Talk to the Taliban, Says Des Browne," *Daily Telegraph*, March 31, 2008, at [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2008/03/29/nbrowne129.xml](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2008/03/29/nbrowne129.xml) (April 15, 2008).
6. Jon Boone, "Kabul Furious at British Plan to Retrain Taliban," *Financial Times*, February 4, 2008, at [www.ft.com/cms/s/0/6fbdac7a-d2c3-11dc-8636-0000779fd2ac.html?nclick\\_check=1](http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/6fbdac7a-d2c3-11dc-8636-0000779fd2ac.html?nclick_check=1) (April 15, 2008).