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The United Kingdom between Transatlantic Relationship and European Integration: Pragmatism Put to the Test
Table of Contents

Defining Features of Britain's Transatlantic Relationship  1
Britain's European Role  2
The Way around a Difficult Choice  5
Expounding his views in May 1953, the then Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, expressed the idea that the United States, Britain (with its Commonwealth) and a Unified Europe should be linked as “three rings that touch each other”.¹ In many ways, this picture rings true today: Britain, although one of the main players in a more and more integrated Europe, also remains somewhat apart from its EU-partners because of its “special relationship” with the USA. That Churchill did not mention the already established NATO, however, shows that he had some reservations about the idea of too close a transatlantic partnership which could restrict Britain’s room for manoeuvre. Today, NATO still embodies the main transatlantic connection between North-America and Europe and is complemented by burgeoning relations between the EU and the USA as well as Canada. In the British government’s view, the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) should add capabilities to those of the Atlantic Alliance and enable the Europeans to better act together with America, or independently if need be. In no case should ESDP compete with NATO and the United States, or create any tensions.

The UK has difficulties; some even say a dilemma, in its efforts to reconcile its particular relationship with the USA and its own European role. This paper deals with both aspects of this dilemma and concludes that there is no clear-cut general solution to this problem. Given serious differences of opinion and allegiance at a political as well as a more general level, it would be impossible for a British government to plump either for the US or for Europe. From a British point of view, besides muddling-through, the only way to overcome this dilemma is to bring the United States and the EU closer together and to try to find solutions that serve both actors so that a decision for one side or the other is avoided as long as possible.

### Defining Features of Britain’s Transatlantic Relationship

Since its founding, NATO – for the UK view at least – has been the bedrock of transatlantic security. For London, the Alliance remains the most important multilateral forum for transatlantic consultation and the central organisation for common operations. As Germany could not fully live up to the expectations which were linked to the former President George H. W. Bush’s offer of “partnership in leadership” after the end of the Cold War, Britain remained the United States’ most important ally in Europe - a position it now wants to retain. It therefore works to keep NATO as strong as possible, and together with the USA is consequently one of the staunchest advocates for additional European capabilities within the Alliance.

The American and British governments regard NATO as a “cornerstone of world security”.² This is echoed by British support of a wider Alliance role; by contrast, France tries to restrict NATO as much as possible to its task of collective defence and “high end” crisis operations for which the EU has not yet adequate and sufficient capabilities. Consequently, France contributes substantially to the NATO-led assistance to the Afghan government (International Security Assistance Force, ISAF) and to the NATO Response Force (NRF). But any less demanding mission should be dealt with by the EU and its Security and Defence Policy with its wide range of civil and military means. To underline its commitment to the Alliance, the UK is ready to take the lead in operations right from the start as was the case in Afghanistan. This, and its unconditional support for the American way of dealing with Iraq, even against strong opposition at home and from other Allies, gained the British government US-American appreciation as a very reliable partner.

After the strains of the Iraq War within NATO, Britain undertook to work for a strengthening of the commitment to the transatlantic relationship on both sides of the Atlantic.³ To achieve this aim, the British government would also use its special relationship with America. In June 2004, an additional British Cabinet subcommittee on US-UK relations was created to serve a symbolic task as well as a practical one. Blair saw it as the duty of any UK Prime Minister to maintain and strengthen this special relationship. Whereas in the past Britain proposed itself as a “link” between Europe and the USA, Blair spoke of a “pivotal role” and later began to use the notion of a “bridge”.⁴ But a

⁴ See Prime Minister Tony Blair, Britain’s Role in Europe, Speech to the European Research Institute, 23 November 2001,
bridge only serves a function if it is used. Who of the mainland European statesmen would take the detour over London to Washington? It is scepticism about continental statesmen’s readiness to take the London-detour that guides analysts to the conclusion that the European end of the bridge has simply fallen into the water.5

Churchill coined the term “special relationship” in his 1946 Fulton speech when he stressed the “great principles of freedom and the rights of man” as the “joint inheritance of the English-speaking world”.6 With a common language and common cultural heritage, their bonding qualities contribute substantially to this particularly close link.7 Britain and US-America look at the world in roughly the same way. In 2003, this relationship was termed a “unique alliance of values and common purpose” in a joint US-UK Statement.8 According to some experts, Anglo nations have a special capacity to lead the world order, because of their “capacity to project force and their confidence in war and the defence of other countries”.9

The particularly close British-American relationship had proved its value and success in cooperation during the Second World War. This included a comprehensive information exchange between the respective intelligence communities (maintained to this day), and the provision of bases for American troops in Britain. After the war, the relationship allowed Britain “to sustain the self-image of a world-power” at the price of a role as junior partner.10 Later, with regard to the nuclear deterrent, the balance tipped towards greater British dependence on the USA. This served France as a pretext to turn down the UK’s application for the European Community in 1963. President de Gaulle judged Britain as not reliably enough European but rather US-America’s Trojan horse. Six years later, de Gaulle tried to win the government in London for complete European independence from the USA, clearly without any success.

But the special relationship had its crises as well. When the UK declined to join the US-supported European Defence Community in 1953, Churchill flew to Washington to get reassurance that this decision would not affect the relationship. When forced by the USA to withdraw from Egypt together with France during the Suez Crisis in 1956, the UK drew the conclusion that it should avoid any further such humiliation through an even closer cooperation with America – just the opposite of the French reaction. Today, a growing part of the British public asks what this relationship is worth in reality. It seems to be rather one-sided, giving the UK nearly no influence over the superpower’s decisions. Britain does not even get a just return for its unequivocally supportive role in the Iraq war. The American government still refuses to share certain technological secrets of the Joint Strike Fighter with its closest ally. Prime Minister Blair’s unconditional support for the American decision to topple the regime of Saddam Hussein by force and its fall-out will probably lead to changes in parliamentary procedures, giving Members of Parliament at Westminster a greater say in decisions on military interventions.11 With this development Britain will come closer to the thinking of some of its major European allies.

Britain’s European Role

The will to guard its sovereignty and the power of the Westminster Parliament made it very difficult for the UK to assume a leading role in the EU. These concerns meant that it had to put brakes on the transfer of authority to Brussels, and more specifically, the European Parliament. Already in the discussions on the

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European Community for Steel and Coal in the early 50’s the intended supra-nationality of the Community was attacked by the Labour party then in opposition. The mistrust of an integrated Europe and decisions being taken “elsewhere”, of the “super-state” and the Brussels bureaucracy as an “unaccountable centre” is still virulent today in political parties, in the public, and perhaps even more in published opinion. The “European Army” is still a notion that triggers alarm bells in Britain, although it was once Churchill’s proposal. Although the second Blair government declared that the future of the country lay in Europe and deplored the failure of former governments not to have appreciated the opportunities of European integration, Blair, too, continued with the traditional policy favouring enlargement to help free-trade and to effectively block or dilute extensive integration. This position was welcomed by the USA and NATO alike as “conducive to the strengthening of the transatlantic partnership and of the Alliance as a whole.” The position contained in the document was as far as Britain would go, because it feared that strengthening European capabilities could lead to American disengagement in Europe as well as providing a welcome argument for isolationists in Washington. Later, this argument was reversed: To keep the United States interested in Europe it was necessary to provide more capabilities that would at the same time strengthen NATO, silence isolationists and help in the burden-sharing debate. In its end-phase, the second Major government did not have the clout to adapt its position towards European defence although the Prime Minister seemed to sense that change was unavoidable. Thus, Britain held to its concept of interlocking institutions: the WEU was confirmed as a link between NATO and the EU, a role which it never really lived up to. Nevertheless, bringing together its core members with associated members and observers, it was a real forum on European security and dearly missed by non-EU members after its demise, because this entailed a loss of influence. In keeping with the traditional British position, PM Major vetoed the merger of the WEU and EU at Maastricht and successfully advocated the NATO role. The gains further ground: “Europe as an alliance of European and national Government.”

Their preference for NATO led successive British governments to resist any form of additional European security structures, independent of NATO. The Western European Union (WEU) placed itself under the aegis of the Atlantic Alliance and was therefore closely linked to it. This remained so even after its revitalization from October 1984. The development “of a more comprehensive European defence identity”, as advocated in the WEU Platform of the Hague on European Security Interests of 1987, was to take place as a European pillar inside the Alliance. This document was welcomed by the USA and NATO alike as “conducive to the strengthening of the transatlantic partnership and of the Alliance as a whole.” The position contained in the document was as far as Britain would go, because it feared that strengthening European capabilities could lead to American disengagement in Europe as well as providing a welcome argument for isolationists in Washington. Later, this argument was reversed: To keep the United States interested in Europe it was necessary to provide more capabilities that would at the same time strengthen NATO, silence isolationists and help in the burden-sharing debate. In its end-phase, the second Major government did not have the clout to adapt its position towards European defence although the Prime Minister seemed to sense that change was unavoidable. Thus, Britain held to its concept of interlocking institutions: the WEU was confirmed as a link between NATO and the EU, a role which it never really lived up to. Nevertheless, bringing together its core members with associated members and observers, it was a real forum on European security and dearly missed by non-EU members after its demise, because this entailed a loss of influence. In keeping with the traditional British position, PM Major vetoed the merger of the WEU and EU at Maastricht and successfully advocated the NATO role. The

importance of transatlantic relations was mentioned in the Treaty on European Union.19

At first, and despite its apparently more pro-European ideas, the Blair government would only agree to more cooperation between the WEU and the EU, but not to a merger. The change of heart and politics came about during the informal EU Summit in Pörtschach under the Austrian Presidency in October 1998. Britain would go along with a European Defence Policy if it was intergovernmental, NATO compatible and militarily credible. This change of paradigm as it is assessed by most analysts led some time later that year to the Franco-British Declaration at St. Malo20.

This Declaration is ambivalent insofar as it represents a compromise between both partner’s traditions and positions. For Britain it was important to have its preference for European capabilities in the NATO framework mentioned: “...contributing to the vitality of a modernised Atlantic Alliance...”21 The French got their plans accepted; these aimed at achieving “appropriate structures and a capacity for analysis” as well as a “capability for relevant strategic planning” for the EU.22 So, constructive ambiguity did the trick in getting ESDP off the ground. The British Prime Minister had recognized ESDP as a major instrument to secure the UK a more influential role in the EU: abstaining meant marginalization, as he put it. Later Blair explained that he had seen the debate over Europe’s common defence policy developing without British input, and therefore decided not to hang back but to shape it together with France. He was convinced that the outcome would be “a policy fully consistent with NATO, with the right process of taking decisions and hopefully with a significant increase in European defence capabilities which is urgently needed.”23 Not to lose but to exert influence may also have been the motive for the Franco-British Declaration on Co-operation in Africa agreed at St. Malo too. It is “progressively translated into action” as the 2003 London Franco-British Summit confirmed.24

After the events of 9/11, however, Blair stressed more the transatlantic cooperation aspects and Britain’s friendship with the United States as “an asset for our European partners”. His vision was a “united Europe working with an internationalist USA”.25 One year later, he even stated that the success of European foreign and security policy was dependent on cooperation with the USA. In this way, ESDP essentially serves to strengthen the Alliance.26

For the British government NATO comes first and ESDP principally operates in strategic partnership with the Atlantic Alliance. Accordingly, it is still not clear what degree of autonomy ESDP can enjoy vis à vis NATO (and/or the USA), and how “complementarity” between the two can be used in the most effective way. The lengthy dealings in NATO committees about the role of DSACEUR in ESDP, especially his function as Strategic Coordinator, made fundamental differences between Britain and France - but also between Germany and France - very clear. ESDP had to be developed “in a way that is fully coordinated, compatible and transparent with NATO”, advocated President Bush and PM Blair in November 2003.27 With the conflict over the EU independent military Planning Cell, the difference of concepts had again been brought into the open. There, the diverging views of the member states went right down to the number of personnel involved: Britain’s aim was to make sure that there was not a second major Head Quarters like SHAPE28 being set up in addition to the national Operational Head Quarters that were already prepared to take on planning of autonomous ESDP operations. France instead pursued its traditional policy of restricting NATO’s role and expanding that of the EU. Consequently, the government in London feared that NATO and transatlantic relations could be damaged. It was difficult enough; it seems, to sell Washington the compromise hammered out between France, Germany and the UK and presented in Naples in November 200329 as a replacement to the plans agreed by Bel-

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21 See ref. 15, para 2.
22 See ref. 15, para 3.
23 See ref. 13.
25 See ref. 13.
26 „But the orientation of Europe towards the United States is absolutely at the core of whether Europe can become effective in foreign and security policy... unless its unclear from the outset it (European defence) is complementary to NATO, working with it, adding to our defence capabilities, not substituting Europe for NATO, then it will never work or fulfil its potential.” See ref. 16.
27 See ref. 3.
28 Supreme Head Quarters Allied Powers Europe at Mons, Belgium.
29 Chaillot Papers No. 67, From Copenhagen to Brussels, European
gium, France, Germany and Luxemburg at the unfortu-

In this case, Blair used his relationship to the White House to clear

ground. Agreeing to additional structural ele-

that situations might arise, where the USA would not

be willing to act, but where Europeans would see the

The Way around a Difficult Choice

Is Britain really left with the choice between holding

on to a traditional, but less important, special rela-

relationship, as some analysts propose, or to “go Eu-

pean” in its security and defence policy with all the

strategic uncertainties this might include?31 Or is it

best suited to reconcile the American and European

positions and strategies? Are there any middle ways?

Are new modes of cooperation possible or already

existent?

From a British point of view, NATO and EU are still

two pillars of a Europe free and secure, two organisa-

tions that should work together as closely as possible

and without geographical limits: “Europe needs to

promote peace, prosperity and democracy across all

continents.”32 This corresponds with the European

Security Strategy (ESS).33 The ESDP missions in Sudan

and Aceh are examples of its implementation. The

originally British moral impetus to be a “force for

good in the world” has been incorporated into the ESS

linked to close cooperation with the United States.

There is broad agreement on the goals of a Common

Foreign and Security Policy: the external “promotion

democracy, justice and development; the fight

against terrorism and the spread of weapons of mass

destruction; to prevent wars, to strengthen peace, and
to act against the root causes of terrorism”, as the

French Foreign Minister wrote in press articles

November 2004. Blair cited him in his Mansion House

speech that same month.34 But the agreement on the

way and means to achieve these goals might be more
difficult. The question which of the two organisations
does what needs to be decided on a case-by-case basis
taking into account the political circumstances and

the means available for the particular mission. A rigid

division of labour would be counter-productive.

“A robust transatlantic relationship is essential for

the UK’s and the world’s security and prosperity”,
says the government at Westminster and advocates a

more developed EU–USA co-operation to underpin the

transatlantic relationship. This policy needs much

more public diplomacy and a lot of persuasion be-

cause, according to an opinion poll of June 2006, as in

France and Germany a clear majority of the British

population rather prefer a more independent Euro-

pean role. Only nineteen percent of those polled spoke

out for a closer USA–EU relationship, down by 16 per-

cent on the 2004 results.35 The creation of an EU with

global reach, designed to engage constructively with

the USA, as the then British Minister for Europe put it

in October 2005, remains the government’s aim. It is

evident that, from the British perspective, the USA is

more than just another strategic partner: it is the

preferred and only one up to the task. If the EU and

America did not work together, did not head in the

direction, no answers to global challenges would

be given.36 The war in Iraq also proved that, in a criti-

cal situation, Britain will preferably side with the USA.

But the government in Washington needs also friends

and allies that can say no if the situation requires. This

will only be possible and accepted if the EU is strong

and united. Britain alone has not the weight and

power for it.

Britain wants to accord the EU a more prominent

role, and values its potential in the globalized world.

On the other hand its aim is to prevent any further
damage to NATO which it judges for the foreseeable

future as the indispensable security instrument and

forum in transatlantic relations. Hence, it hopes to

Defence, Core Documents, European Union Institute for Se-

curity Studies, December 2003, pp. 283-284, <http://www.iss-
eu.org> (viewed 27 January 2007).

30 Ibid., pp. 76-80.

31 See Whither, p.60.

32 See Alexander, p.10.

33 See Alexander, p.60.

34 See ref. 14.

35 See Prospects for the EU in 2005, The UK Presidency of the

European Union, Presented to Parliament by the Foreign Sec-


36 In UK and France 57%, in Germany 56% of those polled an-

swered, the EU should take a more independent approach

from the USA. 19% in the UK, 30% in France and 23% in Ger-

many voted for a closer relationship. See The German Mar-

shall Fund of the United States, Transatlantic Trends, Key


37 See Alexander, p.15.
minimize conflicts between both sides of the Atlantic with the development of a closer US–EU relationship and an intense strategic political dialogue and to make the best of both organisations. Its own special relationship could be instrumental in this. Britain, therefore, accepts that it is its interest to try and influence policies of both America and the EU to make them more compatible with each other. One major precondition is that the EU-3 (France, Germany and the UK) work hand in hand into the same direction.

These endeavours became even clearer when Blair in January 2007 spoke of two major alliances (America on the one hand and Europe on the other), on which British defence was founded. Whereas Washington often criticises excessive European reliance on soft power, in the Prime Minister’s opinion, Britain combines both soft and hard power “almost uniquely”. This underlines the important role Britain is playing in defence terms as an American partner and as a member of the EU. Another example for the British approach to bringing Americans and Europeans closer together can be found in the USA-UK Statement on Multilateralism of November 2004 referred to above. The text contains the term “effective multilateralism”, a key expression from the ESS. Accepting this term, the US President made at the same time a step towards the EU and, implicitly, rejected the reproach of American unilateralism by a number of European states.

Another approach to US-European co-operation leads to platforms designed to purpose in which both the USA and the EU take part in a wider context. This is the case with the Quartet for the Middle-East Peace Process (EU, Russia, UN, USA) or the negotiations with Iran on its nuclear programme (China, Russia, USA and EU-3). Britain supports this variable line-up as a pragmatic way to getting things done. A different set-up is the side-by-side operation of NATO and EU in Darfur supporting the African Union. This alternative to a formal NATO-EU co-operation under Berlin-plus was chosen as the required consensus in both organisations could not be achieved. But this cannot be a substitute for a more resolute UN action that Gordon Brown urgently demanded “to prevent genocide”.

Finally, from an organisational point of view, and taking into account the growing overlap of membership, one could argue that both NATO/USA and EU are heading towards a bipolar transatlantic partnership. It could be Britain’s role to convince the United States to react to and engage positively in this trend. For an interim period, the Alliance may regain weight at the expense of the EU because of the stronger Atlanticist weighting within the EU after the latest enlargements. But the more that coherence between the various political positions gains ground among EU member states, the more the USA would have to consult early with Brussels before decisions are taken. It remains to be seen whether America would be willing to submit itself to the rigours of consultations or whether it would prefer to play on differences between European partners (thus trying to weaken the EU but at the same time condemning Britain’s conciliatory efforts to fail). With the probable change of Prime Minister in July 2007, the British government’s conciliatory view might change slightly. If Gordon Brown gets the job, he might in certain issues be less close to the Bush administration than Tony Blair and less enthusiastic for European integration. It is yet unclear how this will translate in practical policies.

39 Ibid.
40 See ref. 3.