

## A “Bridge” between the “Two Wests”? The British Identity Dilemma in a Post-Atlanticist Age

### I. Introduction

There is a growing consensus that the transatlantic community<sup>1</sup> is undergoing a substantial change, albeit the type and degree of transformation remains disputed (Hellmann 2006). Assuming that intra-Western<sup>2</sup> cohesion has been declining in recent years, I argue that this process of change has put the United Kingdom in a particularly awkward situation. This awkwardness stems from the fact that the self-image of the UK as a “manager” of NATO, as a “mediator” in transatlantic disputes, and a “bridge” between the American and the European pillars of the transatlantic community is a central element of British identity<sup>3</sup> and firmly connected to the notion of the UK as a Great Power.<sup>4</sup> The prospects of internal conflicts irrevocably eroding the inner cohesion of the transatlantic community therefore represent a threat to the core of Britain’s ontological security. The ensuing identity dilemma results from at least two interrelated factors: transatlantic cohesion is simultaneously undercut on the inter-state and on the societal level. On the one hand, British foreign policymakers, faced with a decline of the “special relationship” find it harder to act as “mediators.” On the other hand, European (including British) society reacts sharply to US violations of Western “core norms” during the “war on terror” and increasingly questions America’s place in the Western community of values, thereby withdrawing legitimacy from potential “mediation” efforts. This dual-layered crisis is exacerbated by the fact that alternative sources of identification and symbols of Great Powerdom

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<sup>1</sup> The term transatlantic “community” is used to highlight that transatlantic relations display a higher degree of institutionalization and a broader convergence of values than is the norm in international society. It includes, but is not limited to the inter-state/alliance relationship codified in the North Atlantic Treaty. The transatlantic community constitutes a pluralistic security community, which encompasses an inter-state dimension (governed by a set of tight alliance norms, including the non-admissibility of using the threat of the use of force, close consultation, multilateralism etc.) and a transnational dimension (Risse-Kappen 1995).

<sup>2</sup> The West is a political construct whose membership extends beyond the states of the North Atlantic region. This paper nonetheless uses the terms synonymously insofar as the current crises in Euro-Atlantic relations are seen at least partly as the result of a questioning of the normative foundations of the West.

<sup>3</sup> In the paper, I will focus on identity as a unit-level variable (cp. Abdelal 2006), broadly and loosely defined as a state’s dominant sense of self from which a degree of perceived ontological security is derived. This definition is neither meant to suggest a static or essentialist notion of identity, nor do I intend to downplay the significance of the interaction of unit-level and system-level factors in identity formation (Wendt 1999).

<sup>4</sup> “Manager,” “bridge,” and “mediator” etc. will be used synonymously in this paper. The term “great power” will be capitalized when it refers to the self-perception of the British foreign policy elite. In that sense, the UK is clearly a Great Power (without necessarily being a great power).

are lacking given the relative political unimportance of the Commonwealth and the crisis of “ethical” foreign policy with its penchant for “humanitarian” intervention. As a result, the British foreign policy elite is likely to fail to appreciate as well as to deliberately downplay the degree of change the transatlantic community is going through while trying to continue acting as a “bridge” in US-EU relations.

The paper is divided into two parts. The first section discusses the self-image of the United Kingdom as a transatlantic “bridge,” which rests on the twin pillars of the “special relationship” with the US and Britain’s standing as a key European player. The second part explores the extent to which the current crisis of the transatlantic community represents a British “identity dilemma.”<sup>5</sup>

## II. The UK Approach to Euro-Atlantic Relations – Of Transatlantic Crises and British “Bridges”

*“The idea that we have to choose between Europe and the US is a myth. We are stronger with the US because we are in Europe, and a bridge between the two.”*  
Tony Blair and Gordon Brown (1999)

The concept of the United Kingdom as a “transatlantic bridge” or “mediator” in Euro-Atlantic relations is a *leitmotiv* of British foreign policy after the end of the Second World War. Successive governments have declared the highly ambitious role of acting as “mediators” as one of their top foreign policy goals (Dumbrell 2001: 25, 82 *et passim*). Originally coined by Harold Macmillan, the concept has gained in importance in recent years, becoming “the cornerstone of Tony Blair’s grand strategy” (Kramer 2003: 90, Deighton 2005: 13). This section analyzes the “bridge” approach and relates it to another influential concept – the idea of an Anglo-American “special relationship.”<sup>6</sup>

During the Cold War, the “mediator” strategy was two-fold: on the one hand, “British premiers [...] offered themselves as potential interlocutors between the superpowers. This was the self-image of Churchill, Eden, Macmillan and Wilson” (Reynolds 2000: 265).<sup>7</sup> On the other

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<sup>5</sup> In contrast to a mere problem (i.e. something that actor A can solve by using strategy x), the term “identity dilemma” is used to denote an obstacle which is unlikely to be overcome without sacrificing elements that constitute A as an actor, e.g. A’s sense of self.

<sup>6</sup> The literature on Anglo-American relations is – on the British side – enormous. The classic historiographical yet fairly sentimentalist account is H.C. Allen’s study of 1954. Particularly useful are the collection of essays edited by William Roger Louis and Hedley Bull (1986) and the historical overview in Dumbrell (2001, 2006). David Reynolds (1985, 1988/89) and Alex Danchev (1996, 2006) add conceptual insights to an otherwise “under-thought and under-theorized” idea (Danchev 1996: 746). The remarkable resilience of the relationship is aptly scrutinized by Marsh/Baylis (2006).

<sup>7</sup> On Wilson’s “mediation” attempts, see the Foreign & Commonwealth Office’s (1997) *Documents on British Policy Overseas*, Series III, Volume I: Nos. 7-9.

hand, British leaders thought it crucial “to stay close to the United States and engineer a role as support and mediator, and a bridge to continental Europe” (Deighton 1998: 894).<sup>8</sup> Due to its close ties to Washington, London felt that it was well placed to act as a “manager” of the Atlantic alliance by brokering compromises on issues of intra-Western difference (Clarke 1992). Nurturing alliance cohesion was not only seen as an adequate way of increasing the West’s bargaining power in its dealings with the Soviet bloc. It was also a way of preserving Britain’s seat at the “top table” of the international hierarchy in an era of relative material decline (Kaiser 2001). Britain’s foreign policy elite therefore perceived it in London’s best interest to cultivate close links between North America and Western Europe and to avoid taking sides when divisions arose as far as possible.

Winston Churchill’s “mediator” approach was guided by his doctrine of the Three Circles (Deighton 1995), which specified the Anglo-American “special relationship” and the ties to the Commonwealth and to Western Europe as the main bases of British influence. In theory, the British would not be forced to commit to any Circle exclusively; on the contrary, they could “operate as a swing power: not totally integrated into any one circle but wielding power as a fulcrum within a wheel” (Dumbrell 2001: 7).

Whereas Churchill had envisioned that Britain would not have to commit itself entirely to Europe,<sup>9</sup> it fell largely upon Harold Macmillan to adjust British foreign policy to the material realities of decline of which the Suez debacle was the most drastic example. As with Gaullist France, notions of grandeur – the need to conceive of Britain as more than “just” a European power and to be perceived and treated as such – spilled over into the post-colonial era (Mangold 2006). But Macmillan’s grudging commitment to European integration reflects his awareness of the need to sketch out new strategies to advance British interests in view of dwindling resources. As Anne Deighton and Piers Ludlow (1995: 123) aptly put it, “‘Europe’ had to be the other side of the ‘End of Empire’ coin.”<sup>10</sup> It is therefore, no coincidence that Macmillan first used the concept of Britain as a “transatlantic bridge” during the debates concerning the United Kingdom’s first entry bid into the European Community. By acceding to the Treaty of Rome, Britain would enable itself to play a historic role. In the words of the Tory leader, the United Kingdom would act “as the bridge between Europe and North America” (quote in Mangold 2002: 93.) This conceptual reworking of Britain’s role formed part of the way Macmillan managed Britain’s transition “from power to influence,” as Henry Kissinger (1994: 538) put it.

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<sup>8</sup> For a case study of by and large successful British “bridge-building” between the US and the European Community (EC) during the negotiations of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), see Hebel 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Churchill thought of Great Britain as a benign bystander to the Franco-German efforts at European integration he advocated.

<sup>10</sup> On relative British decline, see Reynolds (2000); for an account of how the US “succeeded John Bull,” see Watt (1984).

In contrast to Churchill's grand design, Macmillan's "bridge" metaphor acknowledges that Britain could not afford to stand outside of the European "Circle" anymore. At the same time, the notion of a "mediator" catered to lingering great power aspirations – as a bridge-builder, Britain would play its part in Europe without being "just" one among several EC members. The "bridge" idea was also attractive because it provided conceptual linkage to the traditional reliance on the Anglo-American "special relationship." With the exception of Edward Heath, British leaders from Macmillan to Blair have emphasized that Britain's "special" ties with Washington are an integral part of the "mediator" approach. In one way or another, they have asserted that the British "bridge" rests on the mutually supporting "pillars" of the "special relationship" on the one hand and London's standing and active role within Europe on the other. According to this logic, London's ties across the Atlantic and across the Channel constitute assets that British leaders could combine to broker compromises on points of transatlantic difference.<sup>11</sup>

## **From the "Special Relationship" to the "Transatlantic Bridge" – A Short Sketch**

*"[T]he fraternal association of the English-speaking peoples [...] means a special relationship between the British Commonwealth and Empire and the United States."*

*Winston Churchill (1946)*

It is crucial to understand the material as well as the ideational significance of the "special relationship" for British thinking on foreign policy in order to appreciate the importance of the concept of Britain as a "transatlantic bridge" for the self-image of the British foreign policy elite. Both concepts form integral parts of Great Britain's "strategic culture" (cp. Johnston 1995); as such, they are central elements in the "ideational milieu that limits behavioral choices" (Elkins/Simeon 1979: 130-1). This milieu filters the population of conceivable policy choices before a "rational" decision-making process, a weighing of costs and benefits has even started. This section provides some historical background to this environment.

As was previously mentioned, the basic idea behind the "bridge" concept is simple: it rests on two "pillars," the "special relationship" with the US and close relations with Britain's European partners. Macmillan and his successors argued that the British could use their relationship with both sides as assets in brokering agreements within the Atlantic alliance. This

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<sup>11</sup> Britain's "special" closeness to the US, assumed an asset by the "bridge" concept, often led London's European allies to doubt British credibility. Hence De Gaulle's allegation of Britain as America's "Trojan horse" in Europe (cp. Mangold 2006, Kissinger 1979: 937) or the reproach, often attributed to Gerhard Schröder that, during the Iraq crisis of 2002, the "traffic across Blair's bridge always seems to be in one direction" (quote in Riddell 2003: 142).

would enable London to keep “punching above one’s weight,” as Douglas Hurd (quote in Krönig 2004: 8) famously put it.

The evolution of this view towards transatlantic relations was anything but simple and straightforward. It is ironic how Britain’s perceived strategic dependence on “special relations” with the US gave rise to the “bridge” notion. Anti-European elites had traditionally argued that the “special relationship” with the US was incompatible with accession to the European Community. Though initially successful in gaining exemption from American plans for European integration in the second part of the 1940s, American pressure to play a more active role in European integration efforts eventually became impossible to ignore (Mangold 2002: 83) and British ideational as well as material reliance on the “special relationship” – the “sheet-anchor of British foreign policy“ (Mangold 2002: 71-2) – were certainly a major incentive for Wilson’s European bid. In that context, the notion that London could play a “mediating” role and act as a “transatlantic bridge” made entering Continental commitments easier. It provided conceptual linkage between the traditional connection to Washington and the pragmatic commitment to Brussels, which had initially been seen as incompatible. The self-image as “bridge-builders” thus helped to reconcile British reliance on the American tie with the rather unpopular “necessity” of setting a reluctant country on its path towards European integration. Steve Marsh and John Baylis (2006: 202) aptly summarize the evolution in strategic thinking from the time of Churchill to the present: “the strategy of three concentric circles shrank to that of twin pillars following the retreat from empire, and from a position aloof of European integration British governments, Conservative and Labor, now vie to put Britain at Europe’s heart.” This readjustment is reflected in the way the most influential metaphors of British foreign policy strategy were altered: the image of Britain as a “transatlantic bridge” succeeded Churchill’s Three Circles and Macmillan’s Greeks-Romans analogy. Ideally, the British could have their “special” American and their European cake and eat it, too. Voices cautioning that “[t]he danger of falling between the Atlantic and European stools is [...] real (Mangold 2002: 171) are marginalized by the kind of optimism evident in statements by Tony Blair and others:

“It’s absurd to imagine that, for Britain, there is a choice between the relationship with Europe and that with America. On the contrary, the real value to the US of the British role in Europe lies in the influence we can and will exert to keep Europe firmly linked to the US in defence, outward-looking, open to trade and investment, and open also to the inclusion of the new democracies in Central and Eastern Europe” (Blair quoted in Riddell 2003: 71).

### III. An Identity Dilemma?

This section discusses current challenges to Britain's self-image as "mediators" in transatlantic relations, leading to an identity dilemma. I argue that London's erstwhile remarkable influence on American foreign policy has declined sharply. Despite Tony Blair's enormous efforts, the Anglo-American "special relationship" is a shadow of its former self, a high degree of functional cooperation notwithstanding. Meanwhile, on a societal level, disagreements of fundamental Western norms threaten to undercut the legitimacy of retaining "special" ties with the US.

#### A) Dilemma I – The Decline of the "Special Relationship"

In the light of Tony Blair's premiership, it would be easy to join the familiar choir and proclaim, once again, the death of the "special relationship." Indeed, the degree to which the "special relationship" "dominate[s] British thinking on foreign policy" (Mangold 2002: 71-2) is reflected in the innumerable speeches, articles and books about its (potential) demise. Before the Iraq crisis and war of 2002-3 sparked yet another heated debate about that topic, the last wave of death calls to close Anglo-American cooperation had been linked to the end of the Cold War. In view of the breakdown of the "Yalta division" of Europe, many commentators espoused the structural argument that the end of bipolarity was bound to erode the basis for an intimate UK-US partnership. This line of thinking is neatly expressed in John Dumbrell's (2001: 220) *bonmot* that "The writing of the 'special relationship' was on the Wall as it fell." Yet, not least to Dumbrell's own surprise,<sup>12</sup> more than one and a half decades after Germans had danced on the Berlin Wall, the "special relationship [...] remains embedded in the public image of international relations" (Deighton 2002: 118). Does the persistence of public rhetoric and Tony Blair's staunch support of American foreign policy after 9/11 indicate that the "special relationship" is valid? This is notoriously difficult to answer given the conceptual confusion surrounding the elusive concept. Looking back upon an intellectual history spanning six decades, the idea remains "radically under-thought and under-theorized" as Alex Danchev lamented in 1996 (Danchev 1996: 737). The problem arises from the fact that the term is what Wolfram Hanrieder (1995: x) calls a "political abstract," i.e. a concept "imposed on diplomatic parlance and the public debate by the makers and not the observers of historical events." As with other painfully elusive concepts, the term "special relationship" has been strategically employed to suit the varying

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<sup>12</sup> In the second edition of his useful survey of Anglo-American relations during the Cold War, Dumbrell tries to explain his failure to predict the longevity of the "special relationship." In his view, institutional inertia, culture and Tony Blair's personal belief system are the major factors which have prolonged the relationship (Dumbrell 2006: 273).

political demands of the day. The resulting malleability of the term has created considerable confusion to which academia has not been immune. The problem is compounded by the propensity on the part of the media and historiography to focus on high politics and the personal relationships between the respective heads of state, often to the detriment of the more subtle, low key workings of the relationship.

In order to shed light on the validity of the idea of a “special relationship,” I first clarify the debate by addressing one of its fundamental weaknesses: the failure to adequately take the multidimensionality and complexity of Anglo-American relations into account. This mistake typically leads critics as well as champions of the “special relationship” to two connected misperceptions. First, by failing to discriminate between different functional dimensions of the UK-US partnership, one overlooks that there are various layers of cooperation and that the degree of “specialness” varies widely between them.<sup>13</sup> For example, the partnership has been very close and relatively stable in regard to intelligence cooperation while Washington and London are frequently at odds with each other in the economic sphere.

Secondly, the “special relationship” discourse often lacks an understanding of the complexity of the partnership, i.e. the fact that cooperation within each functional domain is relatively autonomous from other layers. This is in no small part due to what one could term the “bureaucratic politics of the special relationship.”<sup>14</sup> Anglo-American cooperation is sustained by large bureaucracies, which have been dealing with each other rather intimately over a long period of time. Having incorporated this partnership into their institutional routines and organizational culture, close cooperation in one area usually ticks on, largely immune to events in another dimension as well as to the current state of relations between the respective heads of state (cp. Reynolds 1985: 16). It is therefore not uncommon that both partners fight trade wars over, say, steel tariffs, dragging each other to the WTO while simultaneously fighting “real” wars as brothers in arms. Hence the “Lazarus-like quality” (Baylis/Marsh 2006), often precipitately assigned to the Anglo-American partnership as a whole, needs to be carefully dissected by taking each of the various layers seriously.

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<sup>13</sup> A similar argument is made by Reynolds (1985).

<sup>14</sup> The classic exposition of the “bureaucratic politics” model is Allison’s “Essence of Decision” (Allison/Zelikow 1999: chapter 2). Regrettably, there seems to be no comprehensive study of the bureaucratic dynamics of Anglo-American relations.

## Dimensions of Cooperation

*“Identity of interests is the surest of bonds whether between states or individuals.”  
Thucydides (quote in Morgenthau 1948: 10)*

In order to flesh out the components lumped together under the blanket term “special relationship,” this section looks at three dimensions of Anglo-American relations: military and intelligence cooperation and foreign policy coordination.

### Military Cooperation

British and American forces can look back on a long and successful history of fighting common enemies alongside each other. Despite Washington’s belated entries into the conflicts, the two World Wars laid the groundwork for subsequent cooperation in security-related areas. In both cases, military cooperation had been tightly organized under the umbrella of UK-US Joint Chiefs of Staff. Quarrels over how to conduct the two campaigns notwithstanding, Anglo-American collaboration was effective. Faced with the formidable threat of the Axis powers, this collaboration reached a new intensity in the early 1940s. Although Danchev’s (1996) claim that both powers were absolutely interdependent in 1941 seems somewhat exaggerated, it makes sense to date the birth of the “special relationship” back to that year. The abrupt cancellation of Lend-Lease notwithstanding, American leaders did not revert back to semi-isolationism after 1945 the way they did after the First World War. They instead institutionalized their commitment to their European partners, including the UK, in the Brussels Treaty and NATO.<sup>15</sup> The generation of political and military leaders that had twice prevailed over a common enemy played a crucial role in shaping the Anglo-American military alliance. Mutual defense agreements, programs of military exchange and the evolution of a norm that made mutual consultation imperative were put into place in the spirit of these victories.

This impressive record seemed to continue seamlessly with the first major international war after the breakdown of the Soviet Union – the Gulf War of 1991. Anglo-American forces (and their partners) yet again proved successful in a joint operation. Following France’s departure, Britain and the US worked jointly to contain Iraq militarily by controlling the “no fly” zones in Iraq, thereby supplementing the UN sanction regime. Iraq continued to be a test ground for the persistence of the military “special relationship” in the post-Cold War era. Despite heavy domestic and international opposition, Tony Blair decided to join the US in the invasion of Iraq

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<sup>15</sup> The reference to NATO is an indicator of a general fact: the close Anglo-American wartime partnership became increasingly embedded in the larger multilateral alliance framework of NATO. Yet both fora are overlapping and reinforcing rather than congruent (cp. Risse-Kappen 1995: 210-2).

of March 2003 and the ensuing occupation regime (cp. Dyson 2006). The British were the only major power to contribute significantly to the war and, despite a tangible sense of disillusionment, the Prime Minister has followed the British tradition of refraining from public criticism of his principal ally.

Yet these apparent continuities should not obscure the fact that the post-Cold War environment strained UK-US relations due to several developments. With the Soviet threat gone, Europe has lost in geostrategic importance to American military planners. The closing of bases, the reduction in military personnel as well as the American reluctance to get involved in Bosnia and later Kosovo were consequences of that development. Although the Blair government played an important role in getting the Americans involved in the Balkans, the British found it increasingly difficult to get their views heard in Washington.

Furthermore, while the Gulf War may be seen as reaffirming the “special relationship,” it also had the somewhat paradoxical effect of rehabilitating the option of unilateral large-scale warfare in the eyes of American military planners. The lesson learned by numerous hawks on the American side, including many who later served in the administration of George W. Bush, was that America could also have “gone it alone.” Despite the relatively high standard and effectiveness of British forces, the UK was not regarded as an exception. This shift in strategic thinking culminated in Donald Rumsfeld’s (2003) breathtakingly undiplomatic statement that British participation in Iraq would be dispensable.

Another obstacle to the military “special relationship” is America’s growing sense of frustration with European performance in the aftermath of the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo. This led to a weakening of NATO, “the most sacrosanct institution of the Atlantic alliance” (Gordon/Shapiro 2004: 136) and one of the central institutions of British military and foreign policy. This dissatisfaction has contributed to Washington’s preference for “multilateralism à la carte,” resulting in the tendency to bypass NATO in favor of “coalitions of the willing” as witnessed in Afghanistan and Iraq (Riddell 2003: 117).<sup>16</sup> Significantly, the United Kingdom is the only NATO member, which played and continues to play an active role in both campaigns. Apart from the French military, the British seem to be the only European member of NATO determined to make a substantial effort to close the widening capability gap which increasingly threatens “interoperability” with American forces.

Even though these developments burdened UK-US relations, it needs to be emphasized that the Anglo-American military machinery kept working well. The United Kingdom proved

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<sup>16</sup> The “Bush revolution” (cp. Daalder/Lindsay 2003) certainly brought about a pronounced leap away from multilateralism, only vaguely disguised by a “coalition of the willing” fig leaf. However, one of the most remarkable studies of American post-Cold War foreign policy across a wide range of policy fields has found that Washington has steered a more unilateral course before George W. Bush was elected to the White House (Khong/Malone 2003).

valuable to its American ally in two ways. First, the British provided “muscle” to the wars in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan, and made the second largest troop contribution to all three Iraq campaigns. Having flown the most sorties of all European forces in Kosovo, the British were the only Western ally involved in the first part of the American intervention in Afghanistan and the only ones contributing substantially to “Operation Iraqi Freedom.”

Apart from these tangible contributions, the fact that these operations were conducted jointly had the somewhat less obvious benefit of increasing the perceived legitimacy of the intervention. Even for a military superpower like the US, allies have been a way for officials to strengthen their card in domestic negotiation (cp. Risse-Kappen 1995), particularly since the legacy of Vietnam still looms over the public deliberation on the large-scale use of military force.

In addition to these highly publicized activities, the routines of UK-US military cooperation proceed largely unnoticed. The two armies uphold exchange programs, consultations are being held regularly and the US makes extensive use of its bases on British soil. In short, the institutional inertia of the long-established mechanisms of routine cooperation keep providing the bones to Anglo-American cooperation, even in times when America and Europe seem to be drifting apart.

### **Intelligence Cooperation**

*“Although no one is a complete friend in the intelligence world, with Britain and America it is as close as it gets.”  
James Woolsey, former director of the CIA (quote in The Economist 2001)*

After the end of WWII, the United Kingdom and the United States formalized wartime signal intelligence cooperation in the 1947 “UKUSA Agreement” which created the “Echelon” project. Although the treaty is still officially secret, pieces of information have leaked so that nowadays it is well-known that its membership extends to Canada, Australia, New Zealand and possibly other states (The Economist 2000). In terms of closeness, the intelligence dimension of the “special relationship” can compete with the military sphere of Anglo-American cooperation. Post-Cold War insecurity, the question whether the US and Europe would drift apart<sup>22</sup>, does not seem to have affected this particular dimension of cooperation. Even outspoken critics of the current state of the “special relationship” affirm its continuing relevance: “It’s the core of what continues,” William Wallace concedes.<sup>17</sup> It remains an area where the British can make an important contribution in an otherwise asymmetrical relationship. Without major listening stations on British soil like Cheltenham or outposts as on Cyprus, US intelligence would be much more fragmented. Especially at a time when US intelligence services are generally seen as

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<sup>17</sup> Conversation with the author, London, March 25, 2003. Wallace’s statement is all the more noteworthy given his long-standing conviction that the commitment to the “special relationship” has led the UK to miss several opportunities to participate in European integration (cp. Tugendhat/Wallace 1988: 114 et passim).

dysfunctional by many Americans, reliable external intelligence becomes even more crucial – and the British seem reliable as well as secretive suppliers. One of the more recent (and publicly known) examples when British intelligence proved crucial to American foreign policy was the involvement of the MI6 in the discovery that Pakistan’s chief nuclear technician, Abdul Qadeer Khan, had leaked information concerning his work to North Korea, Libya and Iran (Woodward 2004: 45). The US government reciprocates British support with financial contributions to the United Kingdom’s Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) in Cheltenham. British-American closeness in that delicate area of interstate cooperation has repeatedly given rise to tensions among Britain’s European partners. Following a session of the European Parliament on espionage, the French politician Jean-Claude Martinez protested publicly against “Echelon.” In an article titled *Those Perfidious Anglo Spies*, The Economist (2000) quotes Martinez as decrying “Echelon” as “an Anglo-Saxon Protestant conspiracy.” It is not hard to hear echoes of De Gaulle’s famous criticism of the UK as an American “Trojan Horse” in statements like this one, a reminder that the danger of falling between the stools is indeed real.

Apart from demonstrating vividly that the “special relationship” can produce considerable tension with its European partners, this episode shows that the “special relationship” is working well in highly sensitive and secretive areas requiring a considerable amount of mutual trust and bureaucratic fine-tuning. Yet, for obvious reasons, this “success story” cannot be used to make a public case for the “special relationship.” In that respect it resembles the nuclear dimension of UK-US cooperation. The result is that instances in which Anglo-American relations are obviously anything but “special” – the Suez Crisis, the US invasion of Grenada, the American “partners in leadership” offer to Germany in the early 1990s etc. – are highly publicized while its mutually beneficial elements are less visible.

### Foreign Policy Cooperation

*“British leaders instead tenaciously elaborated the “special relationship” with us. This was, in effect, a pattern of consultation so matter-of-factly intimate that it became psychologically impossible to ignore British views. They evolved a habit of meetings so regular that autonomous American action somehow came to be seen to violate club rules. Above all, they used effectively an abundance of wisdom and trustworthiness of conduct so exceptional that successive American leaders saw it in their self-interest to obtain British advice before taking major decision.”*

*Henry Kissinger (1979: 90) on the differences between the French and British post-Suez stance towards the US*

Cooperating with the American superpower on foreign policy issues has been a difficult undertaking with mixed results for the United Kingdom. Britain found it hard to get its views heard exactly because the partner to be dealt with was *American* and a *superpower*. The idiosyncrasies of the American foreign policy decision-making process posed a specific hurdle while the power gap between a superpower and a great power represented a structural obstacle.

One of the leitmotifs of British foreign policy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been to manage the decline from international primacy and to accept it psychologically (Mangold 2002: 10; Reynolds 1991). Dean Acheson's famous comment on the British having "lost an empire but not yet found a role" expresses this problem. The policy of the "special relationship" which combined partnership in defense-related areas with foreign policy cooperation represents one strategy to cope with the loss of international primacy. Acting as the closest ally of the US was seen as a promising rationale for cushioning Britain's decline while retaining global influence. The self-image of the British foreign policy elite in the early phase of the "special relationship" (roughly speaking the period between 1945 and the Suez crisis of 1956) is best summed up in Harold Macmillan's often-cited Greeks-Romans metaphor. The British Prime Minister asserted that "[t]hese Americans represent the new Roman Empire and we Britons, like the Greeks of old, must teach them how to make it go" (quote in Danchev 1996: 740). In an attempt to save face, the British political elite tried to make up for their country's post-war weakness by conceiving of themselves as the mentors to the fledgling superpower. However, London's attempt to retain some of Britain's imperial grandeur ran the risk of being perceived as condescension and hence little welcome in Washington (Mangold 2002: 80). It was the Suez crisis which painfully demonstrated the limits of Britain's (and France's) freedom of action when faced with US opposition.

British and French foreign policy learned two different lessons from Suez (Risse-Kappen 1995: 211, 213-4; Gordon/Shapiro 2004: 26-7). These two approaches are often discussed with the crude vocabulary of Realist theory as instances of bandwagoning with the dominant power (the UK) in contrast to ("soft") balancing (France). They should be more appropriately understood of ways to further institutionalize or deinstitutionalize alliance ties, as Risse-Kappen (1995) has persuasively argued.

The end of the Cold War made the already complicated process of foreign policy cooperation even more problematic for the British. During bipolarity, US power was contained by the Soviet Union and the overriding imperative of holding "the West" together (Mangold 2002: 82). In the post-Soviet era, a new diplomatic constellation emerged. Part of this new scenario was that traditional safeguards against undue American pressure were lifted as Bill Clinton's interference in the Northern Irish peace process demonstrates (cp. Dumbrell 2001: chapter 9). The American administration gave in to the pressure of the Irish American lobby and issued a visa to Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams who used his stay to collect money and rally support for his party's cause. The Daily Telegraph's commented on this British-American dispute as the "worst rift since Suez" (quote in Dumbrell 2001: 210). Though this may be pushing the envelope too far, the episode does show a new degree of tactlessness on the American side. If "it

was now unnecessary even to invoke core American interests to justify uninvited dabbling in the international affairs of Washington's closest ally" (ibid: 219), UK-US diplomatic cooperation had moved onto new ground. In reference to Kissinger's statement cited at the beginning of this section, the end of bipolarity obviously did make it *psychologically possible* to ignore the British views. However, this structural change did not make it necessary to do so, either. The Gerry Adams incident was the result of deliberate American decisions just as much as it reflected the failure of the British embassy in Washington to neutralize the Irish American lobby.

To John Major's successor, the disagreement over Sinn Fein revealed the need to invest even more time, energy and political capital in the "hug them close" approach (cp. Riddell 2003). In contrast to Major, Tony Blair managed to establish good personal relations with Bill Clinton as well as with George W. Bush. Yet the severe domestic crisis over Iraq, which saw two resignations of senior cabinet members and during which Blair put his political life on the line, shows that upholding close UK-US relations has become more difficult and costly for the UK after the end of the Cold War.

In spite of the failure to mediate over Iraq, Blair's early success to position the UK as a "bridge" should not be overlooked. After the European failure to negotiate a commonly accepted line with the US on ESDP at the Nice Summit of 2000, the British played a crucial role in striking a transatlantic bargain: "In return for [the UK's] support over missile defense, the Americans accepted British assurances that European plans for a rapid reaction force were not intended to undermine NATO" (Riddell 2003: 138). Moreover, the former Prime Minister, while failing to exert tangible influence in Washington on issues of European concern such as the Kyoto Protocol (cp. Kampfner 2004: 99-102), were influential in changing the Bush administration's early stance on Russia (ibid). This helped to pave the way for the NATO-Russia Council (Dumbrell 2004).<sup>18</sup>

In addition to the pursuit of (narrowly defined) national interests, the British approach towards the US is driven by the belief that the United States would abandon cooperative forms of international interaction, if its political machinery were left to its own devices. This belief, often ascribed to Tony Blair (Riddell 2003: 139), was perhaps most clearly expressed by Peter Mandelson. Shortly before "Operation Iraqi Freedom" was launched, Mandelson wrote that it would be a

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<sup>18</sup> It should come as no surprise that observers tending to generally view the UK as a satellite, e.g. Müller (2003) do not mention any British influence in particular instances like these. Hence it often gets lost how British influence at times helped to shift the power balance within Washington. Previously, with Rumsfeld and Cheney opposed and Powell and later Rice in favor, the British government was again capable of advancing an Anglicized version of European interests by shifting opinion within the US administration in favor of a rapprochement towards Russia (Kampfner 2004: 126). Especially because Müller (2003: 139) praises the new American approach vis-à-vis the Russians as one of the few positive achievements of US diplomacy post-9/11, paying more detailed attention to how this change came about would have been a worthwhile undertaking.

“tragedy for America to fight alone and victory to be handed on a plate to the unilateralists in Washington, with much wider and longer lasting consequences to the world than the fate of Saddam Hussein” (quote in Kramer 2003: 101).

In contrast to the French (and in the Iraqi case, German) approach, “solidarity” with the US, coupled with the attempt to further increase the institutionalization of transatlantic ties, is seen as a way of influencing American foreign policy and keeping the Euro-American divide “bridgeable.”

Obviously, over the issue of Iraq crisis, both the Franco-German and the British strategy failed. London’s “bridge” concept, while hardly put to the test during the Afghanistan intervention (which was widely supported throughout Europe), collapsed in early 2003. Until approximately the end of January when the “Letter of Eight” went into press, the Prime Minister pursued a dual-track approach. On the one hand, London joined the US in steadily increasing pressure on Iraq.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, Tony Blair, unlike George W. Bush, did not stop to personally engage with Chirac and Schröder.

His mediation efforts notwithstanding, Blair persistently gave preference to UK-US unity over the establishment of a common European position (Riddell 2003: 228). There is no indication that the British government seriously considered opposing Washington on a fundamental issue concerning Iraq. Having said that, there is also no evidence that, as Harald Müller (2003: 150) claims, Tony Blair deliberately pursued a “Spaltungsstrategie” (a deliberate strategy of splitting the European Union), thus neutralizing potential European opposition as early as possible. Given the former Prime Minister’s self-confidence in his persuasive skills (Kampfner 2004: 127), Blair probably did believe in his ability to bridge existing divides until shortly before the breakdown of UN negotiations.<sup>20</sup> However, following the publication of the “Letter of Eight,” Müller’s assertion of a “Spaltungsstrategie” is hardly refutable. “Tony Blair’s transatlantic bridge” did not simply “collapse in early 2003,” as Riddell (2003: 225) maintains; the Prime Minister actively participated in dismantling it. Although the idea which led to the “Letter of Eight” did not originate in Britain, London soon participated actively in the initiative (cp. Gordon/Shapiro 2004: 128-31). Whereas the text, mainly written by the Spanish, is uncontroversial, the timing and the style in which the project was pursued led to divisions in Europe. France and Germany and other states opposed to a war against Iraq were not informed; neither was Greece, which held the EU presidency at the time. High-ranking officials of the European Union like Romano Prodi and Javier Solana were equally left in the dark (ibid). Robin

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<sup>19</sup> In late November, American and British diplomats announced that they would view the launch of ground-to-air missiles against the US and British airplanes patrolling the no-fly zones as a breach of Res. 1441 (Kampfner 2004: 224).

<sup>20</sup> Despite their differing assessments of numerous aspects of Blair’s policies, Kampfner (2004: 127) and Riddell (2003: 233) are united in their view that Blair’s self-confidence and optimism borders on “self-delusion“ (ibid).

Cook (2004: 302), leader of the House of Commons at the time, described Blair as being “gleeful” on the day after the letter was published. The Prime Minister was reportedly outspoken about his delight in the initiative which, Blair maintained, demonstrated how “isolated” France was on the question of Iraq (quote in Cook 2004: 303). This was accompanied by a public relations initiative, orchestrated by Alistair Campbell, to blame the failure of UN negotiations wholly on France: “Newspapers, previously exhorted to show Britain at the heart of Europe and to refrain from Euroskeptic xenophobia were prompted to say whatever they wanted. [...] Ministers were given ‘the highest authority’ to lay into the French” (Kampfner 2004: 288).

The fact that Tony Blair deliberately reinforced the very sentiments he had been trying to contain since having taken office in 1997 shows how the traditional logic of the “special relationship” eventually prevailed while the “bridge” concept was actively abandoned and de facto reversed. Unfortunately for Blair, his efforts were not reciprocated by the Bush administration. On issues of British concern, e.g. the Middle East peace process or the environment, London’s influence of the domestic game in Washington is negligible. The story of the occupation regime (in which the British, represented by Sir Jeremy Greenstock, were officially the No. 2) shows the same pattern.<sup>21</sup>

In the post-WWII phase, the notion of the “special relationship” flourished and Anglo-American relations can rightly be seen as “special” in quality as well as in importance to the world at large (Reynolds 1985). Throughout the Cold War, the British maintained a standing and retained influence with Washington, which was increasingly incommensurate with London’s material power resources (Risse-Kappen 1995). British politicians and diplomats often managed to become legitimate players within the inter-agency debates in Washington and were thus able to influence the formulation of policy before the final decision was communicated to other allies. This stands in stark contrast to Iraq and other issues of fundamental importance where Blair was confronted with decisions that were already made. When the “bridge” strategy was beginning to fail, Blair used the traditional “special relationship” approach, hoping to be able to influence Washington on the details of the invasion. However, the UK was regarded as a highly welcome but essentially dispensable partner and was treated accordingly. From an inter-state perspective, London’s dilemma is that Britain’s foreign policy elite is unwilling or unable to abandon the “special relationship” *as a policy* even though the overall “specialness” (defined as the quality<sup>22</sup> and the international importance of the relationship), which has traditionally marked the relationship,

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<sup>21</sup> It should be noted, however, that reliable evidence on UK-US interaction in the post-invasion period is scarce.

<sup>22</sup> One way to assess the quality of the relationship might be to use Robert Keohane’s concept of “empathetic interdependence” as a yardstick. This denotes a state of interaction in which there is a fundamental departure from the “usual” give-and-take between two allied states. It points to the “possibility that, in limited ways, interests could be interpreted empathetically. In such situations, self-interests would by no means have disappeared. Rather, they would have been redefined so as to depend on the welfare of others being realized as well” (Keohane 1984: 124). For an application of the concept to UK-US relations after 9/11, see Hebel 2004.

is on the decline. Dense cooperation in some functional areas notwithstanding, it has become psychologically possible, even natural, in Washington to ignore British counsel. The UK nonetheless acts as a close, though dispensable partner to the US, while alienating key European players, thereby reviving or deepening suspicion about its oscillating foreign policy<sup>23</sup> – in other words, it falls between the American and European “stools.” The decline of the “special relationship” and Blair’s squandering of political capital with his European partners represents a severe crisis of the grand design of Britain as a “transatlantic bridge” as Britain’s standing within one “circle” is to a large extent dependent on its standing with the other “circle.” This crisis has the potential of turning into a full-fledged dilemma because no alternative grand design seems attractive to British foreign policy makers, including the new Prime Minister, and because societal pressure is in the process of turning the American link into a political liability.

## **B) Dilemma II – The Othering of America after 9/11**

From a state-centric perspective, it would be naïve to assume that the intra-Western rows after 9/11, especially over Iraq, were disputes between Europe and America. Obviously, the dividing line on Iraq ran right through Europe, splitting it into “old” and “new.” From a societal perspective, however, European public opinion was overwhelmingly opposed to the Iraq war. Even though British society is an outlier insofar as it was fairly evenly divided into a pro- and anti-war camp (Borger 2002), the UK nonetheless witnessed one of the largest mass protests in recent history. In addition, British society reacted sharply to American (mis)conduct of the “war on terror” during which the Bush administration. The widespread solidarity with the US in the aftermath of the terrorist atrocity on September 11, 2001, memorably captured by *Le Monde*’s headline “Nous sommes tous Américains” (Colombani 2001), soon blended with a sense of unease. The British “cringed” at President Bush’s stark religious rhetoric when he declared the launch of a global “crusade” against terrorism, which would bring the perpetrators to “infinite justice” (Ford 2001). This fusion of civil religious rhetoric and politics was one of the first reminder that “we” (Europeans) might not be Americans after all. Much of the growing sense of alienation experienced by Europeans at the American conduct of the “war on terror” crystallized around Guantánamo Bay. In the UK, respected members of the legal profession were outspoken in their stark opposition to this “legal black hole” (Steyn 2004), while the unlawful detention of British citizens by the UK’s “special” ally aroused public sentiment. The shift in public opinion

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<sup>23</sup> According to news reports, then-Chancellor Gerhard Schröder remarked during the Iraq crisis: “The traffic across Blair’s bridge always seems to be in one direction” (quote in Riddell 2003: 142).

was captured in various opinion polls which asked respondents to voice their threat perceptions. One of the more reliable surveys found that out of 3,200 Britons 32 percent believed George W. Bush to “pose a greater threat to world peace” than Saddam Hussein (Borger 2002). Highly publicized events such as the torture scandal at Abu Ghraib and other prisons or the controversy about the CIA practice of extraordinary rendition nurtured doubts about the “Western” credentials of the Bush administration and, by extension, American society as a whole. To many Europeans, including the British, it not only seemed as if the Bush administration had “violat[e]d” constitutive norms on which the transatlantic community has been built over the years, namely multilateralism and close consultation with allies” (Risse 2003: 3); more fundamentally, it seemed as if the US had abandoned core elements of Western identity – basic human rights, the rule of law, the non-admissibility of torture – into question (cp. Gamble 2006: 3, 5 et passim; Diez 2004: 328, 330). As this norm was consistently/repeatedly called into question by American action, a discourse about whether the West has actually split up into “two Wests” ensued.

From a British perspective, Guantánamo Bay seems especially important in this regard as the controversy lies at the intersection between the inter-state and the societal level. On the one hand, the unlawful detention of foreign nationals violates core principles of international society in general and of the transatlantic community in particular, while also exposing the lack of “specialness” in UK-US relations. On the other hand, the severe mistreatment/torture of the detainees violates core norms that “civilized” Western states are expected to follow. In this context, Guantánamo Bay has become a powerful symbol of injustice, which is invoked in processes of European identity construction vis-à-vis the US (cp. Diez 2004: 330). Symbols like Guantánamo are all the more powerful as they can become implicated into more longstanding US-European disagreements over “civilized” behavior, such as the recurrent rows over capital punishment in which the execution of minors and mentally disabled have proven particularly divisive.<sup>24</sup> These processes of Othering indicate that the transatlantic crisis of inter-state relations, e.g. of NATO multilateralism, is accompanied and exacerbated by a crisis in which Western societies question their cohesion. It is typical of the British approach to transatlantic relations that Tony Blair has attempted to downplay the issue, e.g. by calling Guantánamo an “anomaly” (New York Times 2006), thereby defining it as an aberration, a special case that troubles an otherwise

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<sup>24</sup> It would be naïve and, from a European point of view, unduly self-congratulatory to depict these divergences solely as the result of European moral outrage at American immorality. Europe’s long-standing dependency on the US has created a high awareness on the part of many Europeans of American double standards. This often leads the European media to scandalize political events in the US, while European society indulges in a high degree of self-righteousness, thereby fostering a rather blunt and undifferentiated anti-Americanism. The current fixation on the alleged sexual misbehavior of Senator Larry Craig or the scant attention paid to European complicity in CIA activity are cases in point. (It is no coincidence that the European media currently presents the Craig scandal alongside distinctly critical commentary on the final American verdict on the US soldiers implicated in the Abu Ghraib scandal and consistently bad news from Iraq. (See, for example, [www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland](http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland); *Tagesschau*, ARD Television, 1 September 2007.)

intact community of values. It remains to be seen whether this traditional emphasis on a cohesive Western identity, coupled with the assumption of a “special” place for Britain as a “hinge,” is capable of “bridging” the divides that are likely to shake the transatlantic community in the future. As long as British acknowledgement of a fundamental change in transatlantic relations heralding a “post-Atlanticist age” is not forthcoming, it may make sense to speak of a latent identity dilemma.

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