

# Congressional briefing paper highlights US/UK tensions

Richard Tyler  
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The “special relationship” with the United States has been seen by British governments of all political stripes as a counterweight to the challenge it faces from its major European rivals, particularly Germany—enabling the UK to punch above its weight in world politics.

Growing conflicts around the globe over trade, resources, transit routes and geo-political hegemony are now placing such long-standing political relations of the post-war era under enormous strain.

A report prepared by the Congressional Research Service concludes, “The UK may not be viewed as centrally relevant to the United States in all of the issues and relations considered a priority on the US agenda.”

The paper sets out a range of issues for US policymakers to consider in light of the upcoming UK general election on May 7. It finds that the US-UK political relationship is “likely to remain close”, and that the “‘special relationship’ will remain strong on many vital issues in which the UK is a crucial US ally.”

However, it points to the fact that many policy analysts in the US “believe that some reassessment of the ‘special relationship’ may be in order” due to changes in its “geo-political setting.”

The report notes that the 2015 general election is “likely to result in the second hung parliament, with no absolute majority of seats for any party.” This could lead to a “period of ambiguity, constitutional uncertainty and competing interpretations.”

In return for continued US support, the paper presents a list of “concerns” on which it wants reassurance.

One crucial area of concern is Britain’s relation with the European Union, where the UK has largely pursued policies that have bolstered American interests on the continent.

“Should Cameron be re-elected, the referendum

campaign and the possibility of a ‘Brexit’ [British exit from the EU] are likely to become central preoccupations of British and EU politics,” the document states. British membership is “essential for efforts to develop more robust EU foreign and defence policies”.

Britain is regarded as “the strongest US partner in Europe, and a partner that commonly shares US views”. Its departure could, therefore, “change the economic character of the EU because the UK generally acts as a leading voice for economic liberalism in EU debates about trade and the single market.”

The paper states “senior Administration officials have reportedly conveyed their concerns that a UK break from the EU would reduce US influence in Europe, weaken the EU’s position on free trade, and make the EU a less reliable partner on security and defence issues.”

In March, Labour leader Ed Miliband began his party’s official campaign for the general election with a speech to corporate heads at Bloomberg’s London headquarters, where he insisted that a Labour government was best placed to avert the “clear and present danger” facing the UK economy from a referendum on British membership in the EU.

His appeal was also clearly directed at Washington. Launching Labour’s business manifesto, he stressed, “If you care about prosperity, then Britain must be a committed member of a reformed European Union.”

The unspecified reforms raised will, like Cameron’s own demands, focus precisely on issues relating to “economic liberalism” and “free trade.” On the military front, the document continues, British support “has often helped add international credibility and weight to US policies and initiatives.”

While this had been the case in 2003, in the US-led war against Iraq, the Obama administration's plans for a war against Syria in 2013 were derailed when the British parliament voted against supporting this military adventure owing to a combination of public hostility to the planned imperialist aggression and concerns within the military over the level of preparation.

Britain's defence spending is another area where there are major anxieties in Washington. "US officials have been expressing their growing alarm about the potential effects of cuts to UK defence spending and reductions in the size and capabilities of the British military."

The paper points to the close collaboration of the US and UK on defence industry cooperation and procurement, with the two countries "engaged in more than 20 joint equipment programmes". US foreign military sales involving the UK totalled nearly \$700 million in 2013, with direct sales to the UK amounting to another \$208 million.

However, while Britain was "one of the few NATO countries to consistently exceed the alliance's tacit defence spending benchmark of 2 percent of GDP," it notes that "Prime Minister Cameron has thus far declined making a commitment to maintain defence spending" at this level.

"Further reductions in defence expenditure would damage the UK's credibility as a military ally," the paper concludes.

The Conservative/Liberal Democrat government has sought to reassure Washington of its support for the policies it is pursuing against Russia. Not only is the UK a staunch advocate of sanctions, but it is fully engaged in NATO's plans to strengthen its military presence in Eastern Europe and is currently part of a major naval exercise simulating war against Russia.

However, in the section headed "Political relations", it records that the political fall-out in the UK as a result of Tony Blair's support for the Iraq war exacted a "high price with the British public and within his own Labour Party."

It cautions that "future British prime ministers might think twice about boldly supporting controversial US policies or whether they might make more explicit demands of the United States as the price for support."

"Some British observers became anxious to assert

that British national interests come first in deciding British policy, that these interests are not always identical to US national interests, and that the UK should not be overly deferential to the United States in foreign policy issues."

This alludes in particular to the most recent and bitter fall-out between Washington and London over the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Ignoring American entreaties, Britain signalled its intention to join the Chinese-led financial institution, unleashing a flood of other sign-ups, with over 40 countries joining the AIIB.

The section in the report dealing with economic relations is the shortest—under half a page in a 20-page document. Nevertheless, the figures it presents point to the mutual importance of the US-UK bilateral investment relationship, "the largest in the world." Any significant worsening of US-UK relations could threaten nearly one trillion dollars in foreign direct investment and over \$7 trillion in corporate assets, affecting the employment of over two million workers on both sides of the Atlantic, it states.

The document's conclusion also insists that the UK's usefulness to the US depends on the determination of its ruling elites to continue to impose tax cuts for business paid for through savage austerity measures targeting the working class. "Many observers assert that a significant degree of the UK's international influence flows from the success and dynamism of the British economy," it states, "further raising the stakes on whether the UK can sustain stronger economic growth while continuing to pursue ambitious fiscal consolidation."



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