

By Lee Bruce

One of the most compelling myths propagated in public life is the presentation of the UK as an American 'poodle'. Before hammering the nails into the coffin of the UK-US partnership, politicians and their public should not dismiss the sheer historical resilience of the relationship, nor avoid the immutable limitations of an integrated European defence platform. Co-operation between the transatlantic partners will be essential given the potential for a rapid and game changing deterioration in the security context either in Europe or perhaps as a consequence of an extension of the conflict in Afghanistan. Assuming British statesmen wish to play a role in stewarding an international system broadly sympathetic to UK interests they need to hold close to the US. Dispelling the 'poodle' mythology is essential if Britain is going to rediscover a credible defence posture and emerge from the terrible mess many believe her grand strategy to be mired in. The forthcoming Strategic Defence Review (SDR) is an opportune moment for the new government in London to demonstrate this subtlety of hand and save Britain from being relegated to a third rate power.

Criticism of the Special Relationship has penetrated all areas of public discourse. Rebutting this sloppy thinking will be vital if the SDR is to retain the Special Relationship at the fulcrum of the UK's defence and diplomatic postures. Opponents complain that America has a tendency to marginalise allies by acting unilaterally. Some question the rationale of the relationship, believing instead that the UK could secure better terms through closer European integration at both the political and military levels.

Regrettably politicians and those in Whitehall are reinforcing these assumptions. The House of Commons FCO Select Committee report into UK-US relations serves as a good illustration of this point. It argued that the phrase Special Relationship is 'misleading' because the UK is only one of many partners, that rendition through Diego Garcia raised 'disturbing questions,' and characterisations of Britain as a 'poodle' were, regardless of the truth of the claim, 'damaging'. In essence the Committee proposed that the relationship is less 'special' because the US has other allies, that the US should be less rigorous in defending their citizens from international terrorism and the British government should be accountable for the media narrative. Perhaps most disturbingly given that a UK spending review is on the horizon, the Committee reported that the financial climate would have implications on the British defence posture and her ability to sustain the level of commitment to the US.

This lazy thinking has diminished the quality of the public debate on the notable achievements of the transatlantic partnership. One example will suffice as a demonstration as to why prevailing opinion as expressed in Parliament needs revision. Counting the amount of bilateral partners a state is engaged with as a means of deciding whether a relationship is 'special' appears a questionable methodology. Are we to assume that former Soviet satellites had a 'special' – as the Committee defined the terminology – relationship with Moscow and other states loyal to Russia on the pretext that they only held formal alliances within the Iron Curtain?

Surely a better method for testing the 'worthiness' of a partnership is to analyse measurable strategic outcomes: does the Special Relationship bolster the British position in Europe, is the UK able to influence areas of the globe that would otherwise be beyond her reach because of her alliance to the US and is the alliance cost effective?

Preserving the balance of power in Europe is a long standing grand strategic priority for Britain. Since the end of the Second World War NATO has been pivotal in guarding Europe from a return to the strife of great power politics. Unsurprisingly, the MoD believes the alliance remains central in the UK's deterrence posture. It must be remembered that NATO exists because of the willingness of successive American administrations to station troops in Europe. During the second half of the twentieth century 52 per cent of US troops were deployed in Europe, including an accumulation of 10 million troops in Germany between 1950 and 2000. Without doubt the US army acted as a ballast against Soviet expansion and the re-emergence of the German security threat.

A withdrawal of the American military from the European map could accidentally impose German hegemony on the continent. The reaction of the other European states – especially France and Russia – to this dramatic reconfiguration of the geopolitical landscape may not be benign if the historic record is anything to go by. In practice this guarantees a marked increase in defence spending and the forward deployment of British military assets to reassure allies concerned by the vacuum created by an American departure. Neither should analysts be tempted into believing that fifty years of peace in Western Europe has ended inter-state rivalry. As recent diplomatic conflagrations demonstrate, security competition has not disappeared. Russia, for example, flexed her muscles by rejecting the extension of the US nuclear shield in former Soviet satellites and redrawing parts of the map in Eastern Europe through the forceful re-conquering of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia. The EU's insipid response to the aggression was inline with previous failures in the former Yugoslavia, and brings to the fore the weakness of the European's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). A combined European defence platform has proved unable to achieve military decisions meaning that the US retains a significant role in helping safeguard stability in Europe. From this vantage point it is fair to conclude that the Special Relationship does bolster the British position in Europe.

The neo-liberal foreign policies of the Blair and Brown governments in the Balkans, Africa and the Middle East show that Britain believes itself to be an interventionist power. Notably this type of assertive foreign policy needs the support of the US. In Afghanistan, British counter-insurgency warfare in the Helmand province has been a limited success. During Operation Panther's Claw a British led force pressed south into the green zone – the area between Lashkar Gah and Gereshk – with the aim of countering terrorism, reducing the flow of narcotics and developing governance structures. The mission was stifled by a lack of equipment – Britain borrowed six American Chinook helicopters – and a failure to co-ordinate security and development objectives. With the British army unable to deploy enough troops to hold the villages and towns, many of the Afghan population decided it was simply too dangerous to vote in the elections. The reticence of the Afghans to vote was a marked indictment on the success of the operation especially in light of the UK government's declaration that supporting democratic institutions was the reason behind the British occupation.

Counter-insurgency requires boots on the ground, a lesson learnt by the time of Operation Moshtarak where 10,000 troops were deployed in Helmand compared to the 3,000 used at the outset of Panther's Claw. Indeed, a simple comparison of troop deployment across NATO members is instructive. The US have committed 62,415 troops to NATO operations in Afghanistan, Britain has 9,500 and the nearest thereafter is the German army with 4,465. The UK and her European allies are quite simply dependent on the support of the US if they are going to have any role in shaping the international security environment. Only a close relationship with Washington can give Britain access to areas of the globe precluded to minor powers.

The Special Relationship remains at the kernel of Britain's capacity to protect stability in Europe and shape the operational environments in more distant theatres such as Afghanistan. The next question is whether these achievements represent value for money. Charting UK defence expenditure since 1988 illuminates how reliant the British are on the US. As the Cold War ended the British reduced expenditure from an average of 4.1 per cent of GDP in 1988 to 2.6 in 1997, a figure at which spending was broadly fixed for the next ten years. However, between 1988 and 2008 the core defence budget actually fell by 9 per cent in real terms. New analysis shows that the consequence of these cuts was profound. The same period saw a fall in the number of ground formations by 28 per cent, a reduction in available aircraft by 33 per cent and reduction in major vessels by 47 per cent.

Meanwhile governments in Eastern Europe realise that the security dilemma has not disappeared and therefore spent the last decade preparing for any new threat. By 2008 defence expenditure in Eastern Europe was 174% more than the comparable figure for 1999. It is not beyond the realms of possibility that the contagion of great power politics will begin to spread westward, and within this context a diminishing American commitment to NATO could force Britain to massively expand its defence portfolio and introduce new, crippling, spending commitments. Set within this context retaining the Special Relationship appears the cheapest, but also most effective, option.

Debates on the value of the Special Relationship are not decided in a vacuum from other political calculations. The UK is moving into an historic year during which the entire defence establishment will be reviewing military performance and agreeing objectives for the future. This review will be held against the backdrop of a crisis in balancing the public finances: a crisis that could force the UK government into genuinely tough spending choices. Meanwhile the US commitment to Europe, and by extension the UK, is not assured as evidenced by the distinct lack of a European dimension in Washington's Quadrennial Defence Review. Demonstrating the importance and viability of the Special Relationship will be essential if Britain is to remain a serious geopolitical entity. At a time when the UK government spends nearly as much on servicing the interest on the national debt as it does on the armed forces, the SDR is a decisive turning point at which Britain can demonstrate her intent to renew the Special Relationship. Only then can the UK government be satisfied that Washington is being accorded the priority it rightly deserves.

About the author:

Lee Bruce studied History to Masters level at the University of Leeds, and has subsequently published a book on British political and military strategy in Northern Ireland.