A Pivotal Issue

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A pivotal issue

The ‘special relationship’ in security and defence issues between the US and the UK will be challenged by President Obama’s ‘pivot to the Pacific’, writes Dr Jeffrey McCausland, visiting professor of international security at Dickinson College in Pennsylvania.

When determining strategy, UK and US policymakers have long considered the security of our two nations to be guided by the so-called ‘special relationship’. Consequently, UK policymakers were clearly concerned when the Obama administration announced its so-called ‘pivot’ to the Asia-Pacific region. It clearly raises two very important questions. First, why would the US consider a ‘pivot’ or greater emphasis on Asia in its security posture? Second, what are the implications for the British-US special security relationship?

President Barack Obama underscored the criticality of American interests in the Pacific as the United States ended its long involvement in the Iraq war and began a drawdown of its forces in Afghanistan. He observed in January 2012 that US interests were ‘inextricably linked to developments in the arc extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean region and South Asia’. This fact, he argued, created a ‘mix of evolving challenges and opportunities’ that the US must address. Consequently, the president directed that while the American military “will continue to contribute to security globally, we will of necessity rebalance towards the Asia-Pacific region”. This was not surprising. The Asia-Pacific region is “a key driver of global politics” — home to two thirds of the world’s population and its fastest-growing economies. The annual flow of US investments and exports to the region is rocketing. London’s interests in Asia have steadily grown too. In 2013, for example, Chinese-British bilateral trade surpassed $70 billion for the first time.

In the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Crimea, many may argue that the US will now discard a pivot strategy that focuses on the growing importance of the Pacific. This is unlikely to occur, absent a major conflict in Europe, for the reasons previously discussed. Washington will, however, look to the United Kingdom and its NATO allies not only to shoulder more of the security responsibilities for Europe, but also to be prepared to accept the challenges that expanded economic sanctions against the Russian Federation, in the light of its aggression, may require.

Some general comments about the pivot are important. First, almost no one in official Washington likes the term ‘pivot.’ The US seeks to rebalance its forces, but this should not suggest a wholesale departure from its European commitments. Second, while this analysis focuses on the military and security components of the pivot, that pivot must encompass all the elements of power — diplomatic, economic, political, and informational – if it is to be a successful regional strategy.

Finally, the Asia-Pacific region is not Europe. The United States wishes to maintain an essential Asian security order while improving opportunities for economic and social development in the face of new emerging problems. If this strategy is successful, it will benefit not only the US but also its European partners who have come to depend more and more on trade with Asia.

IMPLICATIONS FOR US-BRITISH SECURITY COOPERATION

Since the arrival of the current government and the end of the war in Iraq, there have been growing concerns in Washington about the overall direction of British defence policy. American security experts have expressed their misgivings in a number of areas publicly and privately. These include: British defence cuts; the impact of potential Scottish independence; possible withdrawal of the UK from the European Union; and the inability of the government to deliver parliamentary support for planned American airstrikes against Syria in September 2013.

In October 2010, the newly arrived UK Government released its Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR), Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty. This document suggested a significant cut in British military capabilities, and many US officials openly voiced their
The USS George Washington Carrier Battle Groups are a mainstay of US influence in the Asia-Pacific region.
concerns for the special relationship. The British Army, for example, will be reduced to a level not seen since the Boer War. Britain has, however, continued to meet the NATO target of spending two per cent of GDP on defence. Currently, only three European NATO members meet this goal: the UK, Albania and Greece. Despite the SDSR reductions, the UK also retains the fifth largest defence budget in the world after the US, China and Russia. Most experts seem to agree that, although the British leadership has stated its commitment to be able to deploy and sustain a brigade-sized unit anywhere on the globe, in reality this has already been compromised. The SDSR further indicated that by the end of 2014, British forces in Afghanistan would be reduced significantly in favour of a long-term relationship with Afghanistan focused on training and capacity-building following the withdrawal of US and NATO combat forces.

SCOTLAND’S INFLUENCE

The impending referendum on Scottish independence is an additional issue for American security experts. Should Scotland choose to break away, this would require a significant review and transfer of British assets at seven major bases. US observers believe, rightly or wrongly, that it could conceivably imperil the future of Britain’s independent nuclear deterrent or require significantly greater reductions in conventional forces to offset new costs.

Such developments would be detrimental to NATO’s collective defence posture and clearly send the wrong message to the Russian leadership at a critical moment in East-West relations. Lord Robertson, former NATO secretary general, has warned that Scottish independence would be “cataclysmic” and the “loudest cheers for the break-up of Britain would be from our adversaries and from our enemies”. Consequently, the question of Scottish independence is not solely a domestic issue and will have significant potential consequences for the NATO alliance and US-UK relations.

The UK Government has also announced that, if re-elected in the 2015 general election, it would negotiate a new agreement between the UK and the European Union. It would then hold a referendum to determine whether to remain in or leave the EU. So far, public opinion polls seem evenly split, and it is also very unclear to US audiences who will win the UK’s next general election.

The Obama administration has made it very clear that the US strongly supports continued British membership of the EU. American leaders are concerned that a debate that could rage for several years will undermine Britain’s voice in the EU and diminish its power at a critical moment. This could have a negative impact on NATO unity as well. Obviously, this issue has taken on a renewed importance in the light of the crisis in Ukraine. There can be little doubt, though, that Putin is counting on European disunity and fecklessness as well as America’s being distracted by problems at home and in Asia.

The foregoing does not mean that the US-British special security relationship is doomed. At the same time, however, the UK has an even greater requirement to reconsider its strategic identity and interests, both domestically (the Scottish referendum) and with regard to its relationship with the EU. Britain may be a regional military power but it has global interests. This implies a change in how the two countries cooperate to maintain the vitality of the special relationship.

NEW AREAS OF COOPERATION

Such cooperation between the US and the UK will require continued cooperation in NATO, conventional force deployments, development/use of special operation forces and so on. But it must also occur in at least two critical new areas. First, both nations should capitalise on their experience during the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq in security assistance and the training of military forces in countries. In 2008, then Secretary of Defense Robert Gates observed that from the standpoint of future American national security, "the most important assignment in an officer’s military career may not necessarily be commanding US soldiers, but advising or mentoring the troops of other nations as they battle the forces of terror and instability within their own borders". Second, the US and UK have closely cooperated for many years in the field of intelligence. This must continue and now be expanded to include the development of both offensive and defensive capabilities for cyberspace as well as strategic thinking for this and other new forms of warfare.

The special security relationship between the US and UK will be challenged by the American ‘pivot’, or rebalance towards the Pacific. This fact cannot be ignored. However, the challenges of the future clearly demand that cooperation between Washington and London will remain in the interests of both countries and may even be needed in new areas. New challenges loom on the horizon that will require more innovative thinking to confront emerging problems around the globe due to climate change, demographic trends, energy needs, water shortages, etc. As a result, those who predict the impending doom of the special security relationship might well consider the words of Mark Twain. Upon reading his obituary in a newspaper, Twain quickly wrote to the editor stating that “the report of my death was an exaggeration”. ■