

Does Britain's Future Lie with North America, rather than Europe?

Written by Mareike Oldemeinen

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MAREIKE OLDEMEINEN, OCT 19 2012

“Britain’s Future Lies With America, Not Europe.” Discuss.

In a short essay originally published in The Wall Street Journal Europe[1], Iain Murray and James C. Bennett argue that in order to find a new, post-imperial role, “British leaders should look to North America” (Murray and Bennett, 2011). The focus of their essay is on the economic relations that exist between the two states and which, in light of Britain’s already ambiguous relationship with Europe, should be revived “to both countries’ mutual benefit” (Murray and Bennett, 2011). In order to assess the validity of this claim, this paper will first look at the underlying question of what should drive British Foreign Policy and what its aim should be. When considering this, we will also take a brief look at the historical context in which the deeper relationship – often referred to as the ‘special relationship’ – between the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US) developed and what its implications are with regard to the question of this essay. Following that will be the main discussion regarding Britain’s future with America or Europe. Here, we will first take a closer look at the claims put forward by Iain Murray and James C. Bennett, as well as Erik R. Peterson and Ray Raymond, all of whom support the idea that Britain’s future lies with America, not Europe. Then, however, the focus will shift to examining the arguments put forward by William Wallace and Christopher Coker, among others, which will serve to disprove the claim made in the title of this essay and go on to argue the paper’s main point: that Britain’s Future lies with Europe, not America.

Traditionally – speaking from a mercantilist point of view – a state’s Foreign Policy and the aims of such should reflect/be determined by the state’s national interest. Any nation’s primary interest has generally been regarded to be national security and upholding its sovereignty. When looking at this in the context of the twentieth century, which saw not only two World Wars, but also the Cold War and various other inter- and intrastate conflicts, it is obvious why this would be the case. However, it could be argued that, especially given the new, post-Cold War world order, states’ priorities with regard to their national interests are shifting. Referring to the UK, George Robertson argues that “the traditional basis of British foreign policy is no longer relevant in a less security-oriented world in which the East-West confrontation is disappearing” (Robertson 1990: 697). During the Cold War, “the alliance against the Soviet threat” (Wallace 1992: 424) to the national security of Western states provided a basis for the expansion of the ‘special relationship’ between the US and the UK, a relationship that was initially based on “wartime reciprocity” (Coker 1992: 407) during World War II. Nowadays, though, lacking a “clear common enemy – other than international terrorism” (Mangold 2002: 26), it is time for Britain to redefine its national interest and focus more on economic prosperity, stability and growth. William Wallace makes the case that the impact of technological transformation and economic growth introduces “a novel set of priorities for intergovernmental negotiation” (Wallace 1992: 430), which he claims can best be achieved through close regional cooperation in form of the European Union (EU).

In their article, Iain Murray and James C. Bennett also convey the idea that some form of ‘special relationship’ exists between the UK and the US. They claim that since the “cultures, legal systems and governing philosophies” (Murray and Bennett, 2011) that dominate the Continent are so fundamentally different from those in Britain, the only viable option for the United Kingdom is to turn to the United States as its first and foremost partner and ally. They further contend that the European Union of which Britain is part today, does not at all resemble the European Economic Community (EEC), for which the UK signed up in 1975 and that, hence, “sometime in the next few years [...] Britain

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will likely face the choice between immersion in a powerful centralized European mega-state and full exit" (Murray and Bennett, 2011). The smart way to escape the 'European dilemma', according to Erik R. Peterson, would be for the UK to focus its attention on the United States, a country with which Britain has "significant and longstanding trade, investment, and business ties" (Peterson 2006: 44). In more concrete terms, what those who support the claim that Britain's Future lies with America here refer to is the connection between both countries' "top-tier financial sectors" (Murray and Bennett, 2011). It is argued that as soon as "Britain no longer needs to adhere to EU rules", "these ties could be much strengthened" (Murray and Bennett, 2011).

Looking at current events, one aspect which, quite obviously, plays into the hands of those who support the case made above is of course the ongoing European debt crisis. As Murray and Bennett rightly observe, this "crisis will not be resolved any time soon" (Murray and Bennett, 2011) and hence the future of the eurozone is unclear, which will continue to also have an impact on the wider European Union and hence Britain. A good way to "take up some of the slack", according to Murray and Bennett, would be increased US-UK trade, which could make up for some of the decrease in US-EU trade and hence may serve to lighten the burden of the crisis (Murray and Bennett, 2011). Related to this line of thought is the suggestion made by some that, rather than focusing on its European partners, "a post-EU Britain [should be admitted] to the North American Free Trade Agreement [NAFTA]" (Murray and Bennett, 2011). It is thought that by admitting the UK to NAFTA, Britain would not only be able to revive and strengthen its trade relations with the US and Canada, but it would also escape the 'ever closer Union' of the EU and its attempt at imposing a "single social vision on its members" (Murray and Bennett, 2011). Hence, according to the above discussion, it could well be argued that Britain's Future Lies with America, Not Europe. It has been suggested that the two countries are bound together by a 'special relationship' that dates back to the wars of the twentieth century and is supported by the existence not only of a common language, but also of shared values and culture. Erik R. Peterson described it as a "relationship that bundles critical U.S. and UK political, security, economic, financial, and other interests across the Atlantic" (Peterson 2006: 43). Current events like the European debt crisis seem to only emphasise the need for Britain to look to North America in order to join the NAFTA, escape European bureaucracy and build and expand strong economic and financial ties with the United States.

However, this is only one potential and as the subsequent discussion will show, it only provides an incomplete picture of Britain's national interests and its place in the world. Furthermore, it also implies or suggests that the relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom is reciprocal, that the US regards the UK as its principal partner in financial, economic, and trade relations, just as Britain – according to Iain Murray and James C. Bennett – sees the US. That this is not necessarily the case will be shown below. We will also revisit the arguments made above, which pointed to a future for Britain that lies with America, rather than Europe, and then demonstrate how these, although partially valid, often rely on misconstructions, exaggerations and/or 'nostalgia'. By the end of this analysis, the reader will hopefully be able to see that, even though there are many links that connect the United States and Britain in a special way, the future outlook for Britain should be towards Europe and not America.

Let us begin by revisiting the 'special relationship'. There is no doubt that during the twentieth century, the United States and Britain had a special relationship "in intelligence, in nuclear affairs, in a military alliance, and more amorously, but perhaps most importantly, in cultural and intellectual life" (Rachman 2001: 8). Even today, the fact that both countries share not only a common language, but also the same legal system and simply a long history of cooperation and alliance suggests a different kind of connection than the British feel towards Germany or France. However, as pointed out above, this historical and cultural relationship is of no real concern to the present discussion regarding the future of Britain and its Foreign Policy priorities. What is more important is taking a look at current economic, financial, and trade relations maintained by both countries, which would then give us some guidance as to where each country's foci should lie. Examining the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development's 'International Trade by Commodity Statistics' (ITCS) for 2010, for example, shows that given a total value of USD 78,355,782,685[2], most of Britain's imports come from Germany. Vice versa, given a value of USD 50,601,466,824[3], Germany is second in line of countries to which the UK exports. The United States, here, with an only slightly higher value of USD 50,622,714,834 only just about holds its position as the top importer of British goods. Hence thus far, Britain's priorities with regard to its primary partners for import and export seem to be fairly balanced between a European power – Germany – and America.

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Now looking at the United States' trade relations brings to mind again a point made earlier about the supposed reciprocity of the relationship between the US and the UK. As briefly pointed out above, even though some claims that Britain should look to a future with America, rather than Europe, might be valid, this does not mean that the United States is also interested in making Britain its primary partner in trade, financial, and economic relations. According to the OECD's ITCS for 2010, the United States' primary partners for import as well as export are Canada and Mexico,[4] followed by Japan and Germany with values of USD 120,338,243,054 and USD 86,847,474,999 respectively[5]. As far as US exports overseas are concerned, it is again Japan and Germany – and notably *not* the UK – which are next up after Canada and Mexico, with values of USD 69,114,692,542 and USD 59,593,627,917 respectively[6]. Britain comes fifth on the list of countries from and to which the United States imports and exports[7]. Thus, this supports the statement made by Gregory F. Treverton that “Germany is the most important European state, and thus the most important interlocutor for the United States” (Treverton 1990: 708) and that, hence, the idea of a British future with America rather than Europe, is more of a British dream than a mutually proclaimed aim.

Finally, let us now quickly look at Britain's position and possibilities within the European Union (EU) and let us briefly consider the concerns and criticisms regarding the EU raised by Murray, Bennett, Peterson and Raymond. First of all, on the issue of Britain soon having to choose between “a European mega-state and full exit” (Murray and Bennett, 2011) it can be said that this is a very radical statement. Murray and Bennett themselves state that within the EU, “Nationalism is on the rise” (Murray and Bennett, 2011) and hence even though the EU's proclaimed aim is that of an ‘ever closer Union’, we are still far from a mega-state. Also, as Gideon Rachman points out “Withdrawal [from the EU] would clearly never be in Great Britain's economic interests because it trades so much more with the EU than with the United States” (Rachman 2001: 15). In addition, he also points out that “there has been little evidence of interest in Washington” (Rachman 2001: 16) on the issue of Britain joining NAFTA. Hence, remaining part of the EU, investing “in rebuilding multilateral relations with [its] major European partners, and in shaping the agenda of the European Union” (Wallace 2005: 65) is, at the moment, the preferable option for a United Kingdom. A case in point here is, once again, the OECD's International Trade by Commodity Statistics from 2010 which shows that the United States imports goods with a total value of USD 240,233,569,426[8] from the EU of 27, which is the second highest value of US imports, after Canada. On the other hand, the US exports goods with a total annual value of USD 326,316,443,583[9] to the EU of 27, which makes the United States the third largest importer. This is supposed to highlight that, given the new post-Cold War world order, the United States interests' are shifting away from a ‘special relationship’ with Britain focused on a common enemy and more towards building and strengthening economic relations with Asia and the European Union. The implications this has for the UK are that it has to stop “punching well below its weight” (Wallace 2005: 62) in the European Union in order to ensure that it gets its fair share of the pie that is the unparalleled US – EU economic relationship (Peterson 2006: 45).

In conclusion it can be said that making judgements about whether Britain's future lies with America or Europe is a very difficult task, given the current economic climate and the crises and difficulties that both countries face. However, especially because of these circumstances, this is not an issue with regard to which scholars or politicians can sit on the fence. This essay set out to explain the historical background of what came to be known as the ‘special relationship’ linking Britain and the United States and by doing so highlighted some of the underlying assumptions that those in favour of a British future with America might base their arguments on. The latter part of this essay then, however, showed that despite this historical heritage, it is now time for Britain to embrace its “future that clearly lies with Europe” (Coker 1992: 407). It has been pointed out that Britain's major trade links are with countries within the European Union and that, if the US were to pick a primary partner in trade and finance in Europe, it would be Germany and not Britain. In order for the UK not to be left out, it has to focus its attention on strengthening its ties with Brussels, Paris and Berlin, so that it can enjoy the benefits of the unparalleled US – EU economic relationship (Peterson 2006: 45). Rather than clinging to a past relationship that had as its foundation defence against a common threat, the British government needs to convince the nostalgic, Eurosceptic press that its future clearly lies with Europe, not America.

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Does Britain's Future Lie with North America, rather than Europe?

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[1] <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204791104577110163558996698.html>

[2] Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development StatsExtracts; accessed via the OECD iLibrary; URL: <http://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DatasetCode=HS1988>; accessed on 25.02.2012

[3] Ibid.

Does Britain's Future Lie with North America, rather than Europe?

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[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

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