

Close but Distracted: The Future of the UK- US Partnership

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Robin Niblett

Welcome to this podcast, talking about challenges and choices for the UK after 2015 and we're focusing this morning specifically on the future of the US-UK partnership. With us this morning are Steve Erlanger, who is the London Bureau Chief for the *New York Times*; Liam Fox, MP for North Somerset and Secretary of State for Defence 2010-2011; Mike Gapes, MP for Ilford South, Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee for five years up until 2010 and still a member of the committee. Thank you very much, gentlemen, for joining us this morning for this conversation about what is always a perennial topic, when one gets to UK foreign policy.

Steve, let me start with you, if I may, a little bit about how as an American based in London but somebody with great experience of US foreign policy in Europe as a whole, how do you see the context for the relationship? What are the biggest challenges facing the US-UK relationship today?

Steven Erlanger

Thank you, Robin. Right now, it seems to me rather shaky. The United States is concerned. We're worried. We're looking at the UK having a kind of long identity crisis that is not going to end soon. Will it stay inside the European Union? Does it want to play a major role in the world? We're looking at it rather like a concerned friend who's in the middle of a personal crisis. What do you say? Are you simply being supportive? Or do you urge them to get their act together?

The second question really is for both countries, because there's a bit of loss of faith in American leadership from the UK as well, which is are both countries willing as they have been in the past to exercise power? That's the first question. Secondly, are they both cutting back on their capacity to do so?

Robin Niblett

Thanks for those points, Steve. There certainly seem to be structural problems, rather than simply ones of the moment. Liam Fox, what do you think the structure of the relationship with the US-UK is? Are we going to be whipsawed from crisis to crisis? Or is there a kind of underlying solidity and consistency to the relationship, whether through institutions or through the structure of the bilateral relationship?

Liam Fox

Well, there's a basic solidity in the core of the relationship, which is an intelligence relationship and that is as solid today as I think it's ever been. When it comes to military capability, both countries are having to deal with big deficits which will have an implication in the longer term about our capabilities.

When it comes to the wider institutions, clearly NATO lies at the centre of that and the trouble is that far too many of our NATO partners will not put their money where their mouths are. They seem to want to get the insurance policy without paying the premiums. There's a limit to the patience of American taxpayers on that, but at the same time, there

ought not to be a laziness on the part of Washington that regards the EU and NATO as being in any way synonymous.

Here I think it's a problem, because there's not going to be business as usual with Europe. Europe is not homogeneous, faces a potential eurozone crisis at any point, and is not a security architecture. I think that the idea in Washington that they simply want a phone number for Europe is a fantasy that will never be fulfilled.

Robin Niblett

In other words, the relationship remains as important bilaterally... In other words, you can't base the US-UK relationship upon just other institutions. We're going to have to sustain a very close bilateral relationship to be important.

Liam Fox

In a world where we do not drive events, but are largely driven by events, we're going to have to learn that we have to have multiple symmetrical relationships. We have to have our bilateral relationships. We'll have to have coalitions of the willing. We'll have to be able to operate within wider architecture that's already established and establish new architecture as it's required. Agility and flexibility will be the key to success in the global era.

Robin Niblett

Thanks very much for those points. Mike Gapes, just turning to you quickly. How good a partner do you think the UK can be to the US today? Are we in the right psychological frame of mind – given we've just had a Scottish referendum, there's some doubt about the future relationship with Europe – is there a deeper problem here?

Mike Gapes

There is. I agree with Steve about the nervous breakdown identity crisis, but I also think there is a political issue here about political leadership and public opinion. Clearly there is a danger that we have what could be referred to as the Germanization of British politics in the sense of inward looking, self-obsession and at the same time, lack of confidence and reluctance of the public to support intervention or an external role that we've had historically.

I think this is not going to be resolved easily. I would like to think that the next general election might be a cathartic moment, but I sadly don't think that will be the case and therefore this could be with us for some time.

Robin Niblett

Let me pick up two specific issues, if I can just turn back to each of you just for a quick comment on each one. There are particular aspects in the calendar that could strengthen the US-UK relationship. One has been this discussion of a transatlantic trade investment partnership, which the UK has put great store on in particular, both to help the

transatlantic relationship, but also the US-UK relationship. What do you think the prospects are for that, Steve?

Steven Erlanger

I'm afraid they're declining, partly because of the American electoral cycle, and also because in Europe, there is a growing reaction among consumer groups against what's perceived as a favour for corporations. So something that I think could help jobs in both countries, I fear may fall by the wayside.

Robin Niblett

Liam, if I could turn to you. The intelligence relationship, when people have talked about 'the special relationship', quite often they've actually had quite a narrow concept. We've disagreed on many aspects of foreign policy, but there's been like an underlying strength. How confident with the experience you've had in government that that key building block – the intelligence, the military, the counterterrorism – is that going to remain a key aspect of the US-UK relationship in the future?

Liam Fox

When people use the term 'special relationship', they very often forget that it was first used by Churchill in his Fulton, Missouri speech. That was a wartime leader who understood the sharing of information as being absolutely central to shared security. That relationship is the same today. It poses some tensions with some of our other partners on the European continent, the fact that we have this closeness of relationship. But it is central to keeping our people safe and I believe it will be central to the relationship between the US and the UK for the foreseeable future.

Robin Niblett

Let me just put in a last question, Mike, again to be very specific, right now we are dealing with the crisis of the rise of IS or ISIS in both Iraq and Syria. The United States has seen this as a joined up conflict. ISIS doesn't respect borders. It's fighting in Iraq and in Syria. The UK seems to be willing to take a different approach, which is saying, 'Look, Iraq, yes, we'll get involved. We understand. But Syria, different thing.' Is this going to be a source of increasing tension? Does it reflect something deeper?

Mike Gapes

I think the prime minister is reluctant to go to Syria following the vote or the lost vote last year. Personally, I can't see the logic of trying to defeat a caliphate which clearly operates across the border, has its centre in Raqqa, in Syria, and has ambitions not just for Syria and Iraq, but to create its caliphate in Lebanon and Jordan and elsewhere. Frankly, it has to be defeated and driven back wherever it is. We and others should be playing a role in doing that in Syria and elsewhere, in my opinion.

Robin Niblett

Well at least, if I can finish on that optimistic note, this points to an area where at least you, Mike, and obviously some of your colleagues in the House of Commons would be agreeing with the approach that the Obama administration appears to be reluctantly backing itself into.

We're not going to end this conversation about the future of the US-UK relationship here. Chatham House will be putting out reports on this topic as we lead up to the next election. Please let me thank very much Steve Erlanger, Liam Fox, Mike Gapes for taking the time to share a few thoughts with us this morning. Thank you very much.