

# Close but Distracted: The Future of the UK–US Partnership

## Chatham House Working Group

### Challenges and Choices for the UK after 2015

#### Summary points

- Recent events, such as the 2011 intervention in Libya, the aborted military action in Syria, and the slow response to the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, have highlighted the limited ability of the UK and US to respond to complex international challenges.
- Both countries increasingly doubt the other's willingness and capacity to exercise power effectively.
- The US continues to rely on the UK as an important partner, including in defence, intelligence and as a second centre of foreign policy thinking.
- However there is concern in Washington that the UK's domestic preoccupations are limiting its ability to be an effective ally.
- There are a number of areas in which the UK could strengthen the relationship, including investing in NATO, finding new forums to build transatlantic links and remaining influential within the EU.

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## Background

This is a summary of the fourth meeting of the Chatham House Working Group on Challenges and Choices for the UK after 2015, held at the institute on 16 October 2014. The participants considered the future of the UK–US partnership. This document highlights some of the key points of the discussion, which was held under the Chatham House Rule.

The Working Group, comprising parliamentarians, policy-makers, analysts and senior journalists, will meet eight times in the lead-up to the May 2015 general election to consider some of the key international issues that will face the next government.

## Meeting summary

**A number of recent events have highlighted the limited ability of the UK and US to respond to international challenges.**

The 2011 NATO campaign in Libya failed to set the country onto a stable and democratic path. Libya today is a state beset by conflict and has become a destabilizing force in the wider Middle East and North Africa region. The US, the UK and their coalition partners arguably did too little during and following the aerial campaign to support a political transition and the establishment of a durable political settlement.

On other issues, the US and UK have also faced criticism for failing to act. To many observers, the West's decision in 2013 not to launch military strikes following the Bashar al-Assad regime's use of chemical weapons – previously deemed a 'red line' by US President Barack Obama – demonstrated weakness that emboldened the Syrian government's fight against the rebels. The US and UK have subsequently cooperated over military strikes against Islamic State (IS) in Iraq, but the response has been largely reactive, and appears to lack a broader strategy for stabilizing Iraq and Syria.

In 2014, both the US and the UK responded slowly to the Ebola outbreak in West Africa. In the case of the UK, this was despite recognition in the 2010 National Security Strategy that 'the risk of human pandemic disease remains one of the highest we face'.<sup>1</sup> However, the leadership the British and American governments eventually showed was seen as pivotal to improving the scale and effectiveness of the international response. Also in 2014, Russia continued to flout criticism from the US, the UK and their European allies over the conflict in Ukraine, despite a significant sanctions package.

Beyond crisis management, there was concern that negotiations over the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), a strategic effort to boost growth on both sides of the Atlantic, are at risk of failure due to technical and political challenges and growing public scepticism, particularly in Europe.

**Both countries increasingly doubt the other's willingness and capacity to exercise power effectively.**

In recent years, the idea that the UK is the default military partner of the US has been eroded, not least since the parliamentary vote on military action against Syria in August 2013. Many in Washington and London feel that that the vote set a new constitutional precedent – the requirement of parliamentary

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<sup>1</sup> *A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The National Security Strategy*, HM Government, October 2010, [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/61936/national-security-strategy.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/61936/national-security-strategy.pdf).

consent for military action – that undermines the UK’s ability to be a reliable military ally. There are also concerns that the UK’s declining defence budget reduces its ability to make a significant contribution to joint actions.

However, a broader narrative about Britain becoming more isolationist and wary of international interventionism does not represent the full picture. Polling conducted by Chatham House and YouGov in August 2014 found that, more than ever, the majority of the public aspires for the UK to be a great power.<sup>2</sup> If there is a degree of foreign policy fatigue, this may be short-term, and could be reversed under the right circumstances. This was demonstrated by the fact that public support for air strikes against IS moved from 37 per cent to 57 per cent in the six weeks between 11 August and 23 September 2014.<sup>3</sup>

There is a feeling in London and elsewhere that a long-term structural shift has taken place in US politics, with the president less willing and able to deploy military force. President Obama faces domestic constraints, including an obstructive Congress, a war-weary public and a defence budget projected to fall 25 per cent by 2020 from its 2011 level.<sup>4</sup> It seems likely that President Obama will be succeeded in 2016 by someone with more assertive foreign policy instincts, but the trend may still be for the US to move away from unilateralism and towards a more multilateralist approach to international security.

#### **The US continues to rely on the UK as an important partner, including in defence, intelligence and as a second centre of foreign policy thinking.**

Although it is some time since the UK brought substantial ‘military mass’ to the relationship, it makes a considerable intellectual contribution, serving as a ‘second centre of thinking’. Britain’s independent debate on foreign policy issues, such as the future direction of the Middle East, is valued in Washington.

Both President Obama and UK Prime Minister David Cameron believe that their countries’ interests are best advanced by building and maintaining an open, liberal, rules-based international system. To this end, the president has sought to revitalize America’s commitment to multilateralism and strengthen US leadership in a number of international institutions.

Despite its relative decline, Britain occupies a structurally important role in many multilateral institutions. The UK’s soft power, as well as its capacity for diplomacy and negotiation, makes it an influential and constructive player in these forums, and a valuable partner to the US at a time when Washington’s relations with other key allies, most notably Germany, are strained.

#### **However there is concern in Washington that the UK’s domestic preoccupations are limiting its ability to be an effective ally.**

The debate over the UK’s membership of the EU and the constitutional uncertainties arising from the Scottish referendum have led to a perception in Washington that the UK is going through an identity crisis. Uncertainty over the longevity of both of these unions will likely be central to British politics for the next decade or more.

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<sup>2</sup> *Internationalism or Isolationism? The Chatham House–YouGov Survey*, Thomas Raines, January 2015, <http://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/internationalism-or-isolationism-chatham-house-yougov-survey>.

<sup>3</sup> ISIS: How 57% came to favour air strikes, Will Dahlgreen, YouGov, 26 September 2014, <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2014/09/26/isis-how-majority-came-favour-air-strikes/>.

<sup>4</sup> Declining US military spending pressures defence contractors, Tate Nurkin, IHS Jane’s, September 2014, <http://www.janes.com/article/43346/analysis-declining-us-military-spending-p pressures-defence-contractors>.

Many in Washington feel that the current Westminster government has displayed a flippant attitude towards the consequences of a break-up of the UK and has underestimated the importance of the UK's membership of the EU. There is concern that the fragility of both of these unions is affecting the UK's ability to be as effective and reliable a partner to the US as it has been in the past.

At the same time, with support for the main Westminster parties in long-term decline, it seems increasingly likely that Britain has entered an era in which coalition politics is the norm rather than the exception. The resulting political fragmentation and loss of confidence among the political class could limit the UK's ability to act internationally, as some feel was illustrated by the August 2013 vote on military action in Syria.

**There are a number of areas in which the UK could invest more energy and resources, and significantly strengthen the partnership. These include:**

*Investing in Britain's diplomatic network*

The UK's soft power, and its relationship with the US, is strengthened by its extensive diplomatic network. The Foreign & Commonwealth Office has redeployed resources in recent years to reflect shifts in global power towards emerging nations. But investment remains insufficient and, as a recent House of Lords inquiry warned, Britain is in danger of spreading its diplomatic representation too thinly.<sup>5</sup>

*Strengthening and investing in NATO*

As the only institution where the US and Europe speak about security on an equal footing, NATO remains a vital diplomatic forum. As a founding member, and one of the biggest net contributors to NATO, the UK is an influential voice within the alliance. The UK should work proactively to strengthen the alliance and to encourage other members to meet their commitments to NATO's target of spending 2 per cent of GDP on defence. In this context, projections showing that UK defence spending will fall below this level in 2015 are a cause for concern.<sup>6</sup>

*Enhancing connectivity between London and Washington*

Greater interaction between government officials, think-tanks and the wider policy communities in London and Washington would bring benefits to the relationship. Regular dialogue and face-to-face interaction between elected representatives from both countries can foster mutual understanding of domestic politics and their impact on foreign policy-making. There was a sense that such exchanges were happening less frequently.

The different perspectives that British institutes and non-governmental organizations bring to international policy debates are valued by policy-makers in Washington, some of whom worry that on a number of key issues the US foreign policy community can be an echo chamber.

*Remaining engaged and influential in Europe*

In recent years the UK has lost influence within the EU. Leaving the EU would undermine the UK's soft power, and would damage its relationship with the US, which values the role the UK has traditionally played in shaping the direction of EU policy.

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<sup>5</sup> *Persuasion and Power in the Modern World*, House of Lords Select Committee on Soft Power and the UK's Influence, March 2014, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201314/ldselect/ldsoftpower/150/15008.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> *The Financial Context for the 2015 SDSR: The End of UK Exceptionalism?*, Malcolm Chalmers, Royal United Services Institute, September 2014, [https://www.rusi.org/downloads/assets/201409\\_BP\\_Financial\\_Context\\_of\\_the\\_2015\\_SDSR.pdf](https://www.rusi.org/downloads/assets/201409_BP_Financial_Context_of_the_2015_SDSR.pdf).