

BRITISH FOREIGN POLICY IN THE 21ST CENTURY: PRIORITIES AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

The United Kingdom is one of the main European countries which seek to make an influence on international politics. The paper proposes two different points of view towards the existing directions of British foreign policy: the European dimension and transatlantic relations. Therefore, the aim of the paper is to define if the United Kingdom gives a preference in its foreign policy to the “special relationship” with the United States or its role’s strengthening in the European Union. The impact of British Prime Minister on choosing the direction of foreign policy is discussed and the main goals that New Labour declares are defined in the paper. Although the United Kingdom shows efforts to strengthen its role in the European Union, it seems that the “special relationship” with the United States still remains a priority in British foreign policy. For this reason the main challenge for Britain is to make a right decision choosing the direction of foreign policy which would help British to implement its national interests effectively. The priorities in British foreign policy relatively depend on Britain’s declared goals in international politics.

Keywords: *foreign policy, Prime Minister, Britain, United States, European Union (EU), special relationship*

Introduction

The United Kingdom, as one of the main countries in Europe, has an influence on international politics. The two main dimensions of British foreign policy are: European policy and transatlantic relationship. Britain’s role in Europe is often described as an important aspect of British foreign policy. What is more, it is believed that its membership in the European Union could help Britain to implement its foreign policy’s national interests. Meanwhile the term “Special Relationship” is used to describe exceptionally strong ties between the United Kingdom and the United States. The ties between two countries are not only political, economic or military but also

cultural.

Since 1997 when New Labour came to power the Labour Government shows ambitions to strengthen Britain's role in the European Union by taking a leader's position. But British are not willing to abandon its "special relationship" with the United States and a question what is more important for Britain – a close cooperation with the United States or a more active Britain's role in Europe – still remains. For this reason the aim of paper is to define if the United Kingdom gives a preference in its foreign policy to the "special relationship" with the United States or its role's strengthening in the European Union. As the United Kingdom still plays an important role in the world politics, this paper seeks to define the main aspects of British foreign policy in the 21st century. What is more, the research covers current issues which determine British Government's decisions to set certain priorities of British foreign policy.

The organization of British foreign policy and Prime Minister's role in foreign policy making process

The foreign policy in the United Kingdom is shaped in a traditional way where all the institutions which have an influence on shaping British foreign policy are incorporated in this process. The most important institutions in foreign policy making process are the Prime Minister's Office and Foreign and Commonwealth Office. But it could be noticed that all the ministries of the United Kingdom are included in this process. The Cabinet also has an important role in shaping British foreign policy. Each institution has a different role but it is important that these institutions collaborated effectively. The effective collaboration between the institutions often depends on organized work distribution among institutions.

The main role in foreign policy making process has a Core Executive. The term 'Core Executive' refers to all organizations and procedures which coordinate central Government policies. The Core Executive model suggests that Britain's Government consists of a number of interdependent, interacting actors and institutions within numerous overlapping and interlocking networks (Heffernan, 2003). Therefore all the actors in the Core Executive model are interdependent because each actor has different resources and is ready to share it with other actors. But the Prime Minister does not have an absolute power because each actor has certain resources which the Prime Minister needs in order to enhance his/her power. However the Prime Minister who is a dominant actor in the system always uses a major power and influence he/she has in

foreign policy making process. It allows the Prime Minister to be “a more powerful” or even “the main element” in the Core Executive model.

The Prime Minister’s position is strengthened by the powers he/she has as a leader of his/her Party. But it also means that he/she has more commitments than any other minister. One of the most important powers the Prime Minister has is a power to choose or dismiss the members of the Cabinet and to control subordinated to him/her officers. The dominance of the Prime Minister in the Cabinet is apparent in control he/she has on decision making process and implementation of Cabinet Agenda. As the chairman of the Cabinet, the Prime Minister “calls the consensus” (O’Malley, 2007). This gives the Prime Minister an ability to offer the Agenda to the Cabinet but the members of the Cabinet can accept or reject it. But no one can deny the power the Prime Minister has which is strengthened by the resources he/she controls which are not available to other actors (e.g. departmental ministers). The main institutional power resources the Prime Minister has are: to be a legal head of the Government; a right of proposal and veto; to delegate powers and responsibilities to ministers and departments; to set the policy agenda; a control of the Cabinet and Cabinet committee system; to organize a de facto prime ministerial department and set the Government’s political Agenda (Heffernan, 2003).

It is worth mentioning that the Prime Minister does not have a power to change the direction of foreign policy unilaterally in most cases because the Cabinet, departments and the Parliament are also included in foreign policy making process. This means that the Prime Minister has no direct policy-making function (O’Malley, 2007). But with his/her resources the Prime Minister in Britain still is *primus inter pares* (i.e. the first among equals). The power concentration in the Prime Minister’s hands is evident but there is always left a space for the increase of his/her powers in the resources exchange process with departmental ministers and other important officers.

Under the Blair Administration, the presidential thesis has come to the fore. Although the Government in Britain should be the main institution that shapes foreign policy, but in reality British Government does not have the main role in foreign policy making process as it should be in a parliamentary state. In the United Kingdom the Prime Minister usually makes the decisions on important foreign policy issues and he/she might do it by consulting only with his private advisers. For this reason it seems that the Prime Minister is the main person in foreign policy making process and public seems to accept it.

British policy towards Europe

British foreign policy still remains the most debatable issue in the United Kingdom. According to Eurobarometer report (2008), Britain still is one of the most sceptical EU member states. Even 39% of British do not see a significant benefit to Britain from its membership in EU (Eurobarometer report, 2008). But if we compared these results with Eurobarometer report made in 2007, we would see that British opinion of EU is more positive in the year 2008 than 2007 when 44 % of British did not see any benefits for their country from its membership in EU (Eurobarometer report, 2007). Generally, these results show that the ambiguity still exists in public when the benefits from EU are estimated.

With the choice to join the European Economic Community in 1973, Britain partly chose Europe. Britain's membership in EU has a positive influence on its prosperity. Britain benefits from the single market – common rules and standards for the products and services allow for British companies to be the important part of European market (Straw, 2003). Britain tries to play a more active role in Europe by initiating the EU economic reform. What is more, British aims that the competitiveness and growth were boosted by encouraging investments in transport infrastructure, telecommunications, research and development, and innovation (Straw, 2003). These examples show that Britain is determined to take an active role in EU economic area and is willing to transfer its national interests to the EU level. Although Britain was an initiator of European security and defence policy, a strong country's commitment to NATO suggests that British give a priority to NATO rather than EU in defence policy.

The United Kingdom tries to play an active role in EU decision making process by choosing the priorities in EU Agenda which help Britain to implement its national interests. But British still oppose such EU initiatives that constrict state's sovereignty. British foreign policy towards Europe in the 21st century could be characterized using the term "pragmatism". The term "pragmatism" means that Britain chooses such EU areas where it sees a potential to take a leading role which lets to implement its foreign policy's goals and priorities. It is possible to say that pragmatism in British foreign policy is a settled norm and British Prime Ministers tend to follow this norm.

The UK-U.S. "Special Relationship"

The relationship between the United Kingdom and the United States of America is

considered as a political, military and economic cooperation. A term “special relationship” was first mentioned by Winston Churchill in Fulton, 1946. He stated that “it is necessary that constancy of mind, persistency of purpose, and the grand simplicity of decision shall rule and guide the conduct of the English-speaking peoples in peace as they did in war” (Churchill, 1946). But the term “special relationship” is a problematic one because such the description of a relationship lets to assume that the relationship between the United Kingdom and the United States of America is unique by its nature but this assumption objects the traditional international relations assumption which states that a relationship between states can be only egoistic because the alliances are formed to achieve their own goals. But Britain and the United States not only collaborate because of their common interests but these two countries also share common history, culture and language.

A political cooperation between Britain and the United States partly is determined by the similarity of their national interests. Moreover, the UK-U.S. “special relationship” is described as an exceptional personal cooperation between the leaders of both countries which has an influence on political cooperation between the two countries. The most significant examples of such cooperation are: Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt, Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, Tony Blair and George W. Bush cooperation (McNamara, 2008).

In 1997 New Labour presented a programme with a “new approach” to foreign policy that suggested developing a more close relationship with European partners. What is more, it emphasized the necessity for Britain to advance a more positive negotiation position on European issues. But in reality Tony Blair’s Government still gave a priority to the UK-U.S. “special relationship” in British foreign policy. After 9/11 terror attacks in the United States, the alliance between Britain and America became as strong as ever and that could be seen in the war on terror and later in the military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan (Lunn et al., 2008).

Since World War II the United Kingdom demonstrated that it is a loyal and consistent America’s ally. Moreover, Britain recognized the leadership of America in NATO, advocated the U.S. strategic policies and was a strong “Atlanticist” voice in the European Union (Wither, 2003). An alliance with the United States still remains the core of Britain’s foreign and security policy. The UK Strategic Defence Review (1998) emphasizes Britain’s close cooperation with the United States and the United Kingdom was named as the main partner of America. The benefits from this partnership are evident for both countries. For instance, a partnership with a loyal partner – Britain – is important for Americans because Britain is a nuclear state which is strong in military area and

British have a veto right in the UN Security Council. What is more, Britain's membership in EU gives a possibility for America to strengthen its influence within Europe. Meanwhile for Britain the partnership with the United States allowed to maintain its influence in international politics and also British had a possibility to get the ballistic missiles "Trident" and "Polaris" from Americans which were necessary for their nuclear weapon and Britain can expect to get a support from the United States during foreign policy crises (e.g. it was evident during the Falklands conflict). But the critics of British foreign policy argue that when Anglo-American interests do clash, the asymmetry of power in the relationship means that Britain must accept the American position for the sake of the "special relationship" (Murphy, 2002).

A Military cooperation is one of the important segments in the "special relationship". The same approach to the threats to the national security strengthens the military cooperation between the United Kingdom and the United States. Both countries perceive the same threat to their national security: terrorism, mass destruction weapons, regional conflicts and failed (or failing countries).

A nuclear cooperation is also the important part of the "special relationship". This means that Britain has a possibility to use America's advanced technologies in nuclear field. What is more, the nuclear and intelligence information is exchanged between both countries. Although the United States undoubtedly dominate in this nuclear partnership, but Britain gets a more obvious direct benefit from this partnership – U.S. investments into nuclear weapons and submarine technologies help Britain to sustain its nuclear weapon. Such close nuclear cooperation means that Britain is the closest partner of the United States in the nuclear field and this cooperation helps to achieve the main goal – secure their national security.

New Labour's foreign policy: Tony Blair's premiership

Tony Blair was seen as the most Pro-European British Prime Minister after Edward Heath. Blair was the first British Prime Minister who proclaimed the desire that Britain was at the "heart of Europe" (Smith, 2005). Moreover, Blair declared that "for Britain to remain at the edge of Europe, rather than take up a leading role at the centre of Europe, would be to deny their historical role in the world" (Hayward, 2008). The Labour Party Manifesto in 1997 stated that Labour party "will stand up for Britain's interests in Europe and will lead a campaign for reform in Europe". The declared objective shows that New Labour was more positive on European integration question than previous British Governments. It is worth to mention that one of the main goals was to engage with

a European Agenda rather than primarily and permanently oppose to the deepening of European integration (O'Donnell and Whitman, 2007). However Tony Blair aimed that the United Kingdom was the “bridge” between Europe and the United States.

At the beginning of his premiership Tony Blair always tried to emphasize that “Britain does not seek to choose between Europeanist and Atlanticist conceptions of security policy – they can be mutually reinforcing project rather than competitive ventures” (Miskimmon, 2004). And the common foreign and security policy now represents the “ultimate compromise” for the United Kingdom in forging stronger transatlantic relations through the developing of meaningful European military capabilities (Miskimmon, 2004). But Britain actually does not tend to abandon its declared priorities in foreign policy where a partnership with the United States is the top priority. It seems that the most important goal of Britain's security and defence policy remains security and stability in Europe and the strengthening of transatlantic relations (UK Defence Policy White Paper, 2003).

9/11 terror attacks in America made an impact on British foreign policy. Tony Blair was one of the first European leaders to offer its support to Washington. “War on terror” and Iraq war showed British Prime Minister's loyalty to the United States and the question if Blair was still a Pro-European Prime Minister arose. But still Blair's Government's position regarding European question was more positive than other British Governments' approaches to EU, of course with the exception of Edward Heath's Government. Although Tony Blair at the beginning of his premiership stated that his goal is “to change Britain's public opinion on Europe” but now it obvious that there is no significant change in public opinion – Britain is still considered as one of the most euro-sceptic EU member states. Moreover Blair was unable to achieve one of his stated goals – to put Britain at the “heart of Europe”.

During his premiership Tony Blair decided not to make a choice between EU and the United States. He believed that Britain can be a consistent and loyal ally for the United States and even George W. Bush assured the Prime Minister that a close cooperation between the two states will remain. But Tony Blair's aim also was that Britain took a more active role in EU. Moreover, Britain declared its role as the “bridge” between America and Europe and tried to promote a more intense cooperation between the United States and Europe and make an influence on America's position on issues regarding the environment and the climate change (McAllister, 2001).

Britain tried to prove that good relations with EU partners are not less important as its cooperation with the United States. But European leaders looked at the UK-U.S. “special

relationship” with a suspicion and it is worth to mention that key EU member states had different points of view on Iraq war where Britain was the closest America’s ally. But later it became obvious that “special relationship” with the United States was more important for Britain than its relations with European partners. For this reason the priority in British foreign policy undoubtedly was given to Britain’s cooperation with America. But Blair was unable to use the “special relationship” with the United States as an instrument to consolidate the cooperation with America on such issues like the environment and the climate change. L. Kinnock, a former member of Labourist party, stated that “Tony Blair’s willingness to be such a strong ally to George W. Bush was partly because he had been so close to Bill Clinton, and partly because of the September 11, 2001 terror attacks” (Oliver, 2007). But it could be argued that actually Blair and Bush had common interests and among them the “war on terror” was one of the key interests.

In the speech made in May 10th, 2007, Tony Blair was defending his decision to “stand shoulder to shoulder with Britain’s oldest ally”, with no exception in Iraq war because “the terrorist who threaten us here and around the world, will never give up if we give up” (Blair, 2007). What is more, Blair took a responsibility for his actions, asking for his nation to understand that he “did what he thought was right for his country” (Blair, 2007). Despite Blair’s popularity in America and Europe, Britain’s “special relationship” with the United States at the beginning of the 21st century had also a negative effect on Blair’s image.

New Labour’s foreign policy: Gordon Brown’s premiership

Gordon Brown’s decision to sign the EU Reform Treaty without a referendum in Britain was criticized firstly by the Conservatives. The Conservatives argue that this treaty is almost the same as the EU constitution which was rejected by France and the Netherlands and for this reason Brown should have held a referendum on the EU Constitution like Blair promised. Moreover, the Conservatives stated that by signing the Treaty Brown not only gave away Britain’s some powers to the European Union but by showing disrespect to its European partners (when Brown was late to the signing ceremony), lost the influence in Brussels (Byers, 2007). This started a discussion in Britain whether Brown is suitable to be the Prime Minister.

When Brown became a Prime Minister he tried to show that foreign policy will be different from Tony Blair’s. But it seems that Brown is overshadowed by Tony Blair because the latter has unquestionable charisma and great orator’s skills. Moreover Blair not only was assigned

as a Middle East envoy for the United Nations, European Union, United States and Russia but also his candidacy for the EU Council's chairman position is considered seriously.

A big blow for Brown's Government was the municipality elections in Britain in 2008. The Conservative party received the majority of votes and the Labourist Ken Livingstone lost a post of London's Mayor to the Conservative Boris Johnson. These elections results show that British rely more on the Conservative Party now. It seems that since Brown became the Prime Minister, the power of Labour decreased significantly. A growing inflation and unemployment, tax raise and a current world financial crisis has an impact on Labour popularity rating.

Gordon Brown's Government did not made any significant changes in British policy on Europe. One of the most significant achievements of Brown was the signing of the EU Reform Treaty which means a deeper European integration. It shows that Brown follows Blair's strategy to strengthen Britain's collaboration with the EU partners and take a leading role in Europe. Brown in his speech in European Parliament in 24 March, 2009 stated that he "is proud to be European" and Britain is considered as a country which sees itself "at the centre of Europe" (Brown, 2009a). But he also emphasized a necessity for Europe to cooperate with the United States. Gordon Brown like his predecessors decided not to make a distinct choice between Europe and America but it seems that he declined Blair's emphasized role to be the "bridge" between Europe and the United States.

On the "special relationship" issue at first it was thought that Brown might want to distance himself more from Blair's policy considering the fact that the main difference between Brown and Blair was their positions on Iraq war. Gordon Brown at the beginning of his premiership declared that he would seek the withdrawal of British troops from Iraq as soon as possible. But he did not mention the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan and this leads to the assumption that Brown was determined to preserve Britain's alliance with the United States at least at the "war on terror".

During his first visit, as Britain's Prime Minister, to the United States in July, 2007 Brown tried to show that the cooperation with America is important for Britain by stating that the purpose of this visit is to "strengthen Britain's relationship with the US" (Brown, 2007). But it seems that now the relationship between the United Kingdom and America might be a little bit different since Barack Obama became the U.S. president. During Brown's visit to the United States in March, 2009, the British Prime Minister and U.S. president Obama confirmed the renewal of the "special relationship". At press conference Brown stated that the aim of this visit was to "renew a close

cooperation” between two countries and to make a commitment to deal with the current economic crisis together (Brown, 2009b). Meanwhile Obama declared that “the United Kingdom is one of the closest strongest American allies and there is a link, a bond there that will not break. The relationship between the two countries not only will remain “special and strong” but will only get stronger as it goes on” (Obama, 2009a). These speeches of states’ leaders gave a momentum to a further cooperation between the two countries. A month after (April, 2009) Brown during the press conference with Obama (which took place in London) reminded the necessity for renewal of the “special relationship” by declaring that “the relations between these two countries are not an alliance of convenience but it is a partnership of purpose” (Brown, 2009c). Meanwhile Obama acknowledged that “the relations between these two countries are more than just an alliance of common interests but it is a kinship of ideals and it must be constantly renewed” (Obama, 2009b). Today both countries have the same goal – together deal with the economic crisis. It is possible that at least during Brown’s premiership, the relationship between Britain and the United States will remain “special” and Obama with Brown will be determined to cooperate in order to deal with important issues.

Choices for Britain: a new strategy for foreign policy?

Timothy Garton Ash suggested four choices for Britain: (1) regain independence; (2) choose America; (3) choose Europe; (4) try to make the best out of relations with both America and Europe (Paterson, 2007). The first choice of foreign policy does not seem relevant since the World War II. The independent foreign policy might lead to the political isolation that would mean a significant reduction of British influence on international politics.

Although the United Kingdom is a member of the UN Security Council and one of the most important European countries, but it is not a dominant world power. Britain retained its status as a great power but the influence British had at the end of 19th century and at the beginning of 20th century had declined. The most significant cooperation between Britain and the United States is in foreign and security policy areas. Both countries are bond by common history, culture and language ties that strengthen the Anglo-American alliance. If British chose to continue a close cooperation with America, this decision would not cause any significant changes in British foreign policy because Britain always gave a priority to its foreign policy’s coordination with the United States. Moreover, the alliance with Americans gives a possibility for British to be a part of decision making

process in international politics. But Britain often is forced to approve U.S. policy in order to sustain a close cooperation with the United States. It is possible that in the foreseeable future British will not be prepared to decline the “special relationship” with the United States because without doubt Britain benefits from this cooperation a lot. Besides the U.S. president Barack Obama admitted that a relationship between Britain and the United States is unique and for this reason this relationship should be sustained.

The best choice for Britain would be to play a more active role in the Europe Union in order to implement its national interest effectively. Such important issues like the climate change, a common energy policy, a support to developing countries and the necessity of economic reform were included in EU Agenda on Britain’s request. It shows Britain’s significant influence on the formation of EU Agenda. For this reason it seems that the best way for Britain to strengthen its power in international politics would be to become an active member of the European Union and to secure its status as one of the main European powers. But Britain still struggles to achieve it. One of the reasons is Britain’s objective to secure its national sovereignty because a deeper European integration is often seen as the partial decline of the sovereignty in public while the cooperation with the United States does not require a decline of national sovereignty. Thus it seems that a dilemma what to choose – Europe or the United States – remains in British foreign policy. But it is worth to mention that the EU Reform Treaty might have a significant influence on British foreign policy because this treaty promotes a deeper European integration. This means that Britain will be obliged to coordinate its foreign policy with the EU common foreign policy.

For Britain’s interests the best choice now would be not to make a drastic choice between Europe and the United States but to seek to get the best results from its cooperation with the United States and its membership in EU. Thus Britain should preserve a balance between a close cooperation with the United States and a partnership with European partners. Moreover, Britain has a potential to enhance its influence on the formation of EU Agenda. What is more, Britain’s interests are oriented to international level and that is the reason why Britain needs the assistance from powerful allies in order to implement its goals of foreign policy. For this reason Britain needs to choose the direction of foreign policy that allows her to strengthen its cooperation with main allies.

Conclusions

Prime Ministers play a significant role in foreign policy making process in the United Kingdom. While the former Prime Minister Tony Blair's goal was to make a balance between the EU and the United States in British foreign policy, his successor Gordon Brown seeks the effective implementation of Britain's national interests. The challenge for the United Kingdom is to choose a most suitable direction of foreign policy in order to implement its national interests effectively. Without doubt, the "special relationship" between the United Kingdom and the United States is a successful example of a close cooperation between two states. Despite some tensions and frictions in this relationship, the partnership between two countries is a unique alliance based on mutual understanding that a close cooperation is more useful for them than just ordinary bilateral relations. The United Kingdom usually argues that its choice related to the relationship with the United States and Europe is determined on the economic and strategic basics. But Britain understands that it has a better possibility to play a leading role within Europe than in a transatlantic relationship, in which Britain would probably always remain America's "junior" partner. To conclude it is obvious that the United Kingdom is not determined to decline the "special relationship" with the United States despite the possibility to increase its power by playing the more active role in the European Union.

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