

Brexit and the Future of Anglo-American "Special Relationship"

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The phenomenon of "special relationship"

British-American relations have a high level of military-political and financial-economic cooperation. Both countries show political will for mutual concessions. Also, they are mutually tolerant of each other's foreign policy adventures. In this regard, their cooperation often described as "special relationships." This definition appeared in the 19th century, but then it meant a common language, religious and cultural similarities of the former colonies and ex-metropolis. The political component of the "special relationship" appeared in the first half of the XX century and mainly during the Second World War. It is usually associated with the political position of British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, who had repeatedly stated the need to deepen political and economic UK-US integration.

The main factors contributing to the emergence of the "special relationship" were external challenges, initially from the side of Nazi Germany and its allies, and then from the Communist bloc. But it is also important to note that the development of cooperation between Washington and London was a part of a broader process of military-political and economic integration that encompassed the transatlantic space in the post-war period.

During its evolution, "special relationships", even as an abstract definition, have acquired some institutional and legal aspects. They appeared as an informal institution based on a wide and specific base of treaties. One of the most visible and reliable sources reflecting the development of British-American cooperation is the database of agreements and treaties presented on the official websites of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office of the United Kingdom¹ and the US State

¹ UK Treaties Online. Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Department². Their quantitative analysis allows to trace the temporal and thematic dynamics of the development of relations, both bilateral and with third states.

In absolute quantitative terms, the contractual activity between the United States and Great Britain before and after World War II changed significantly. Thus, according to the British database, for the first 150 years, from 1783 to 1938, 169 bilateral agreements were signed. For the period 1939 - 2018 there are already 568 entries. The dynamics of the development of bilateral relations in the post-war period has several peak stages that reflect the formation of military-political ties. In 1956-1963 in the field of defense and security 13 agreements were concluded. Then, during the years of the presidential administration of Ronald Reagan, 17 security treaties were concluded. Characteristic is also the decline in activity after the end of the Cold War and in time of early Cabinet of Prime Minister Tony Blair, who in the late 1990s supported the development of regional European security structures.

A new surge of cooperation took place at the beginning of the 21st century, after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, in New York. In the period 2002 - 2007 three security treaties were concluded, and the UK became the main US ally in military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. At the same time, during the activity of the Obama administration, there was practically no activity in this direction.

At the same time, the dynamics of the relations of both countries with Germany and France has its own specifics. The peak of activity, similar to “special relationship”, fell on 1955 - 1962, that is, at the time of the formation of the foundations of the security system in Europe. After the end of the "cold war" Germany and France, significantly intensified their cooperation with the United States. For example, during the presidency of Barack Obama (2009-2017), the United States signed five security treaties with France and eight with Germany.

Available at: <https://treaties.fco.gov.uk/responsive/app/consolidatedSearch/> (accessed: 10.02.2019).

² Treaties in Force (TIF). U.S. Department of State. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/s/l/treaty/tif/> (accessed: 10.02.2019).

In general, referring to the total number of treaties concluded by Great Britain and the United States with each other, as well as with Germany and France, it can be concluded that if the United Kingdom increased ties primarily with the United States, then Washington maintained a relative uniformity in the development of relations with its European allies. A similar trend is observed in individual thematic areas of cooperation.

The most important part of bilateral relations between the United States and the United Kingdom is security and defense. It may be divided into five areas: 1) bilateral and multilateral agreements on collective security; 2) nuclear weapons cooperation; 3) sharing of military bases; 4) joint military actions; 5) scientific, technical and industrial cooperation and procurement.

The US and the UK have deep scientific and technical cooperation. They are conducting joint development of more than twenty types of weapons and specialized equipment. Both countries are leaders in international organizations and global governance institutions. Their commitment to a liberal ideology contributes to the consolidation of the positions of the two partners on most issues on the global agenda. In addition, the economic component cannot be excluded from the structure of the “special relationship”.

That is a stance of London and Washington’s position on the eve of the largest territorial change in Europe since the collapse of the socialist bloc.

Brexit: The new role of Britain in Europe and in the world

The withdrawal of the UK from the European Union will entail changes in the foreign policy of the United Kingdom, in its international economic and financial relations, will affect a foreign policy potential and the role of the country in the world. With Brexit, an approach to the vision of the UK foreign policy interests will change. In a new government’s strategy, “Global Britain”, the focus has shifted from the European region to the global level. According to representatives of the government of Theresa May, this approach will help to

compensate economic and political losses from Brexit, and to expand trade and strategic advantages of the UK.

The Memorandum “Global Britain” was issued in March 2018. It emphasizes that the strategic objectives of Great Britain remain the same, except the approach to foreign policy. It is said that the UK should be active and influential in all regions of the world, in international institutions of global governance, such as the WTO, the UN, NATO, and in addressing key global issues. There is a vast number of activities to achieve these goals. It is from using a “soft power” to an expansion of the military presence in the world. The basis of the new foreign policy strategy will be bilateral agreements on the creation of free trade zones.

There are listed three centers of the world economy and political influence in which the UK will strive to preserve and increase its influence: North America (first of all, the USA), Europe and the Indo-Pacific region. At the same time, the country's interests are increasing also in other regions, for example, in Africa and Latin America.

However, the future of the UK foreign policy strategy depends, first of all, on relations with the EU. The favorable agreement will allow to minimize economic losses from withdrawal and to allocate significant funds to increase diplomatic representation in key countries, reorganize and improve the efficiency of the foreign ministries and the quality of international policy research and forecasting. This will allow the UK to update existing and create new trade agreements with the EU. The UK will be able to effectively implement the “Global Britain” strategy and will become a middle-sized country with global ambitions, creating ad-hoc coalitions.

On the contrary, “bad” Brexit deal or no deal will lead to economic costs. In this case, London will have to cut spending on foreign policy goals to stimulate the economy.

Under any scenario, the UK and the EU will seek a close partnership in foreign, security and defense issues. The parties have an understanding of the

common challenges and threats to the national security and collective security of NATO. The UK and the EU share common values, have similar objectives and approaches in international organizations and global governance institutions, which is especially important at the time of emerging polycentric world. The UK itself needs the assets of the EU Common Security and Defense Policy and seeks to unprecedentedly deep cooperation for non-EU members.

However, in the absence of the deal, foreign policy potential and the EU economy will also suffer. To reduce economic losses EU budgets for foreign policy, defense and security may be cut.

Today, the UK is one of the largest donors to the European budget and one of two EU states with nuclear weapons. It has high readiness military forces and the world seventh military budget. In addition, the UK has unique intelligence capabilities in its arsenal. Without Britain, the EU will not have sufficient strategic autonomy from the US and NATO. The EU is likely to lower its foreign policy potential by increasing its dependence from the US on security and defense issues.

At the same time, the UK withdrawal is one of the factors for the deepening of the military-political integration of the EU, which has already manifested itself with the creation of PESCO, the European Defense Fund, the Coordinated Annual Defense Review, the Center for Military Planning and Control. Now the EU is developing opportunities for third-countries participation in these initiatives. If the UK manages to use these, the degree of strategic reduction of the EU global role will be lower.

Today, the UK does not have enough power to become a fully independent center of power. Over the past decades, it has relied on allies to remain an influential player in international politics — not only on the EU but also on the US.

In the “Global Britain” strategy, the main priority in the foreign policy of the UK is given to an alliance with the USA. It is more significant than relations with the EU. Among the areas for expanding cooperation is the conclusion of a free trade zone agreement, cooperation on intelligence issues, NATO, fighting against

ISIS, confronting threats from Russia and China, the role of the two countries as leaders of the rules-based international order.

Recently, the British government has taken action to strengthen relations between the two countries. However, there are a number of differences in bilateral relations, and the government seeks to soften the "sharp corners".

The US position on the issue of "special relationship" after Brexit

The results of the Brexit referendum in the United States were perceived ambiguously. In Washington, the attitude is largely determined by the political and ideological approaches of certain groups of political elites and the expert community. Most significantly, this was reflected in the fundamentally opposite positions of Presidents Barack Obama (2008-2017) and Donald Trump (since 2017).

Obama took a negative stance on Brexit. He noted that in the event of withdrawal from the EU, London could not count on the early achievement of a bilateral trade agreement with Washington and risk being the last in the "queue" to conclude such transactions³. Obama preferred to see Britain as part of a united Europe, and with the latter, he intended to conduct a dialogue on a wide range of issues. In addition, he noted that if among the EU members there was a country with which the US had "special relationship", then it is Germany than the United Kingdom⁴.

The opposite position on Brexit was taken by Donald Trump, expressing his support for the secessionists. Initially, his attitude was determined by his own antagonism to the American political mainstream. Adhering to anti-integration logic, he supported the tightening of immigration norms and the reduction of dependence on other states. Trump took a negative stance toward multilateral trade treaties that pose obstacles in regulating bilateral relations. Trump's support for

³ Krishnadev C. Obama's 'Brexit' Plea // The Atlantic, 22.04.2018. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/04/obamas-brexit-plea/479469/> (accessed: 07.02.2019).

⁴ Allen N. Barack Obama delivers parting snub to special relationship with Britain by naming Angela Merkel his 'closest partner' // The Telegraph, 14.11.2016. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/11/14/barack-obama-delivers-parting-snob-to-special-relationship-with/> (accessed: 09.02.2019).

Brexit was determined by his restrained negative attitude towards the European Union, which he perceived as a “consortium” enjoying American advantages and opportunities and, in effect, “robbing” the United States⁵.

Despite the relative ideological closeness of the Brexit supporters and the Trumpists, the relationship between Prime Minister T. May and President D. Trump does not develop close political interaction, and the relative closeness of the domestic political situation in both countries does not address serious security issues with which The United States may face Brexit.

UK’s exit from the EU can naturally weaken Washington’s influence on European security and foreign policy decisions. Having a similar vision of international problems and challenges facing the West, the United Kingdom has traditionally had a pro-American impact on the European Union.

The negative consequences of Brexit can also affect US-British military-political cooperation. It is expected that after secession from the European Union, London will increase its activity through NATO. However, the United Kingdom may face serious economic difficulties. The possible weakening of the British pound cannot be ruled out, which will entail a corresponding reduction in the real defense budget with a nominal saving of the established expenses. As ex-Secretary of Defense James Mattis noted, in the event London’s inability to increase spending on its armed forces, he runs the risk of giving France the place of its main American security partner⁶.

Despite these contradictions, Washington’s official representatives have consistently advocated the importance of maintaining “special relationship” between the two countries. Without this, from their point of view, it is impossible to adequately confront the modern challenges facing the Western allies.

⁵ Brattberg E., Rome N. The Limitations of the U.S. Approach to Brexit // Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 28.11.2018. Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/11/28/limitations-of-u.s.-approach-to-brexit-pub-77820> (accessed: 09.02.2019).

⁶ Emmott R., Graff P. U.S. includes main ally Britain in letters demanding higher defense spending // Reuters, 03.07.2018. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-britain-defence/us-includes-main-ally-britain-in-letters-demanding-higher-defense-spending-idUSKBN1JT1S3> (accessed: 07.02.2019).

At the near future, the “special relationship” as a political idiom is likely to remain. Countries have a wide range of agreements and share common ideological values, feeling a general closeness, including cultural ones. Nevertheless, there are limits for this closeness.

In the current situation, the relations are asymmetric, the needs of both countries in each other are disproportionate. The basis of this difference is not only the factors of the current domestic and foreign policy environment, but this difference is also reflected at the system level. On the one hand, Washington is certainly interested in the strong positions of the UK on the world stage. On another, a positive attitude will continue as long as the London policy follows a course acceptable to the US. For London, seeking to adjust its future relationship with the non-Western world, restrictions may be placed.

At the same time, according to the analysis of the database of treaties, the US, building relatively proportional relations with key EU member states, retains more space for maneuver for to transferring cooperation to other leading continental powers, for example, France and Germany. At the same time, the UK, in the post-war period, purposefully was building up special strategic relations with the US, and now faces the need to maintain its relevance in the eyes of Washington.