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The Suez doctrine of British foreign policy: the history of an unbalanced ‘special relationship’ 1956-2006

To what extent can British foreign policy since 1956 be explained by a consistent subordination to the foreign policy of the United States?

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Introduction and basic arguments: the Suez doctrine of British foreign policy

The main purpose of this paper is to introduce an explanatory model for contemporary British foreign policy. It will be argued that British foreign policy since 1956 has been dominated by what I have chosen to call ‘the Suez doctrine’: a consistent subordination to the foreign policy of the United States, ie that London has chosen to support Washington on all major foreign policy issues, and not to conduct major foreign policy initiatives on its own without US approval. This foreign policy doctrine is the result of the lessons Britain learned after the Suez crisis in 1956.

To underpin the argument that British foreign policy from 1956 to date can be explained by a consistent subordination to Washington, the paper will start off with a brief historical prologue outlining the history of Britain and the rise and fall of its Empire. The Suez crisis in 1956 will be dealt with extensively to show how it became a watershed in the history of British foreign policy. To illustrate an alternative route of foreign policy strategy, the consequences of the Suez crisis for French foreign policy will be presented briefly. Thereafter I will apply the Suez doctrine and discuss its relevance in explaining the last 50 years of British foreign policy. The historical discussion will be divided into three main time periods: from the Suez crisis in 1956 to the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 and the subsequent end of the cold war; the post-cold war period between 1989 and 11 September 2001; followed by the events from 9/11 to present. The purpose of the last section of the paper is to discuss whether closer foreign policy alignment with Britain’s partners in the European Union is a viable alternative to the Suez doctrine in today’s world.

Verification or falsification of ‘the Suez doctrine’ will depend on whether it can be documented that Britain in fact has supported the United States on all major foreign policy issues since 1956, and that no British government has conducted any key foreign policy initiatives without US approval. The object of study throughout the paper will be British foreign policy strategy, with the main focus being limited to ‘the high politics of high politics’: matters of war and peace. Other elements of foreign policy, eg European integration, will however also be brought into the discussion.

Historical prologue: loosing an empire, failing to find a role¹

Britannia, this small, rainy island in the North Atlantic once ruled not only the waves, but the prairies of America, the plains of Asia, the jungles of Africa and the deserts of Arabia.² This Empire on which the sun literally never set had been carved out in the 17th and 18th centuries by Britain's explorers and traders. Wars augmented it, but drained coffers. Attempts to make the colonial government in America to pay for itself led to the Revolutionary War (1775-1783) in which Britain lost its American colonies. Quickening industrialisation and a population explosion transformed Britain into the world's strongest economic power until the late 19th century. Under Queen Victoria (1837-1901) a vigorous policy of imperialism forged a great overseas empire, with India as its centrepiece. International tensions of 1914 and the 1930s placed Britain in a critical situation, as its prosperity and Empire were based on truly global trade. This was undermined by Germany's military, diplomatic, and economic aggression, which ultimately left Britain no option but to go to war.³ The first and second world wars devastated Britain's population and economy.⁴

Before the second world war, when Britain was relatively much stronger than the United States, there was no talk of a special relationship between the two countries.⁵ Like much else in Britain's twentieth-century history, 'the special relationship' with the United States was largely the creation of Winston Churchill.⁶ The alliance he formed with Franklin D. Roosevelt in their fight against Nazi-Germany did certainly have something special to it: During one of Churchill's many visits to Washington, Roosevelt went home to his house at Hyde Park on the Hudson River, actually giving Churchill the run of the White House until he returned.⁷ Initially, Churchill hoped that a close partnership with the United States would help Britain hang on to some of its Empire, or at least its status as a world power.⁸ Washington did however show no interest in keeping the Empire intact. As the dust settled after the second world war, decolonisation was becoming an increasingly unavoidable process, exchanging what had once been a global empire with a Commonwealth of Nations. In Britain confusion

¹ The headline is a paraphrased version of a famous quip by Dean Acheson, former US secretary of state, in a speech at West Point Military Academy in December 1962: "Great Britain has lost an empire and not yet found a role." (Quoted in Patten 2005:85)

² The opening passage is adapted from the back cover of Niall Ferguson's *Empire* (2004), an excellent account of the rise and decline of the British Empire.

³ Palmowski 2003:658

⁴ This (very) short version of modern British history is adapted from *Economist.com*, 'History in brief' (country briefings: Britain), 29 November 2005

⁵ Lundestad 2003a:14

⁶ Patten 2005:86

⁷ Meyer 2005:77

⁸ Patten 2005:87

remained both among policy makers and in the public as to what ought to be the role of Britain and its Commonwealth in the new world order. Some did, however, see clearly what was coming. As early as 1949, Sir Henry Tizard, chief scientific adviser at the Ministry of Defence, set out the true nature of Britain's position with withering accuracy: "We persist in regarding ourselves as a Great Power capable of everything and only temporarily handicapped by economic difficulties. We are not a Great Power and never will be again. We are a great nation, but if we continue to behave like a Great Power we shall soon cease to be a great nation."⁹

The impact of Suez: diverging strategies in London and Paris

Seven years later, Tizard's predictions were proven right. On 26 July 1956, following the Anglo-American refusal to finance the Aswan Dam in southern Egypt, the Egyptian president, Gamal Abdul Nasser, nationalised the Anglo-French owned Suez Canal Company. After three months of fruitless diplomatic efforts to bring the pressure of world opinion to bear on Nasser to accept multinational control of this vital artery, through which the bulk of European trade and Middle Eastern oil shipments passed, prime minister Anthony Eden concluded that the only recourse was military force. On 31 October 1956 Britain joined with France and Israel in a military intervention. Nasser was promoting Arab nationalism throughout the Middle East, the nature of which was hostile to the continuing colonial presence of France and Britain in the African and Arab world.

The Anglo-French-Israeli intervention took place at the height of the crisis over Poland and Hungary. In the words of the renowned cold war historian, John Lewis Gaddis, the invasion was "ill-conceived, badly timed, and incompetently managed"¹⁰. In Washington President Dwight Eisenhower was furious: at not having been consulted, at the distraction from what was happening in Eastern Europe, and at the appearance, at least, of a resurgent European colonialism. Eisenhower, also facing upcoming presidential elections, ordered London and Paris to evacuate Suez or face severe economic sanctions. Britain was still heavily indebted to the United States, paying interests on outstanding loans; pressure on the sterling in 1955 had even led London to consider seeking a temporary waiver of these payments. Faced with a plummeting international currency, Britain together with France

⁹ Quoted in Patten 2005:45

¹⁰ Gaddis 2005:127

agreed to a ceasefire on 6 November, and they withdrew their troops by the following month.¹¹

This humiliating put-down confirmed the loss of British and French status as great powers, as they both proved unable to act on the international scene without US support.¹² Or in the words of Anwar al-Sadat in November 1956, then chief propagandist for Egypt: “There are only two Great Powers in the world today, the United States and the Soviet Union. [...] The ultimatum put Britain and France in their right place, as Powers neither big nor strong.”¹³ The long-term effects of the Suez crisis were however quite different in the two capitals.

In Paris it was concluded that even in vital matters the United States could not really be trusted, and France therefore had to become less dependent on the US.¹⁴ Hence, the humiliation strengthened France’s determination to pursue European integration, in part to make Europe stronger, but also vis-à-vis the United States.¹⁵ Domestically the Suez crisis accelerated the collapse of the Fourth Republic,¹⁶ and the rise to power of Charles de Gaulle. He would twice veto Britain’s application to join the European Economic Community (EEC) (in 1963 and 1967) out of fears that Britain would be a ‘Trojan horse’ for American interests in Europe. In 1966 he caused serious damage to NATO by withdrawing France from its military command, forcing the removal of both the organisation’s headquarters and 26,000 US troops from French soil. Furthermore, De Gaulle successfully attacked the Bretton Woods system, which was seen as the hallmark of US economic hegemony.¹⁷ Although French-American tensions since seldom have reached the levels of De Gaulle’s presidency, even President Jacques Chirac, himself a staunch Gaullist, has repeatedly insisted on the need for a ‘multipolar world’, code for an EU that can face down the United States,¹⁸ and words that could never have been uttered by a British prime minister.

In London, the demonstration that Washington could not be counted on to back its friends in all circumstances led prime minister Harold Macmillan to precisely the opposite conclusion to that drawn by Charles de Gaulle. The lesson of Suez, as it seemed to Macmillan and the overwhelming majority of the British establishment was that Britain must never again

¹¹ The account of the Suez crisis is based on Palmowski 2003:617; Patten 2005:4-5; BBC British Timeline 2006; Dobson and Marsh 2001:97-98; Gaddis 2005:70, 127

¹² Palmowski 2003:617; Sveen and Aastad 1997:356

¹³ Anwar al-Sadat, later president of Egypt, quoted in Kyle 1991:477

¹⁴ Lundestad 2003b:115

¹⁵ Lundestad 2003b:11

¹⁶ Palmowski 2003:617

¹⁷ Dobson and Marsh 2001:61

¹⁸ *The Economist*, ‘From Suez to Baghdad’ (Charlemagne), 20 March 2003

find itself on the wrong side of an argument with Washington.¹⁹ London would repair relations by once again emphasising the importance of the ‘special relationship’ with the United States, however acknowledging its dependence on the support of Washington, thereby admitting the unbalanced nature of the relationship. Whatever their hesitations, however ambivalent they might feel about particular US actions, British governments would henceforth cleave loyally to US positions. Only that way could they hope to influence American choices and guarantee American support for British concerns when it mattered. This strategic realignment was to have momentous implications, for Britain and for Europe. Today the Suez crisis is considered to be the most significant turning point in post-war British foreign policy²⁰: Britain had made the choice never to go against the United States on an overriding issue.²¹ The Suez doctrine of British foreign policy was born.

1956-1989: the geopolitical stability of the bipolar cold war

The Suez doctrine did not mean that the two countries would always agree – over the partition of Berlin and Germany, for example, London was far more disposed to make concessions to Moscow, and this produced some coolness in Anglo-American relations between 1957 and 1961.²² Nevertheless an agreement in December 1962 would clearly signal Britain’s strategic subordination to the United States. Prime minister Harold Macmillan met President John F. Kennedy at Nassau, in the Bahamas, and accepted an arrangement whereby the US would furnish Britain with Polaris submarine-based nuclear missiles as part of a multilateral force. The agreement effectively subsumed Britain’s nuclear arms under US control.²³ It was against this background that President De Gaulle announced in January 1963 that France was vetoing Britain’s application to join the EEC. If Britain wished to be a US satellite, so be it. But it could not be ‘European’ as well.²⁴ Macmillan’s decision to apply for EEC membership had been Britain’s first major foreign policy move after the Suez crisis. European integration was an American geo-strategic objective from the very start, and Washington wanted Britain to be part of the enterprise.²⁵ US support was of course not the only reason for applying to join the EEC, but in accordance with the Suez doctrine this approval was a prerequisite for going ahead with the application.

¹⁹ Judt 2005b:299

²⁰ BBC British Timeline 2006

²¹ Lundestad 2003a:4

²² Judt 2005b:299

²³ Judt 2005b:291-292

²⁴ Dobson and Marsh 2001:61; Judt 2005b:292

²⁵ Patten 2005:3

The greatest challenge to the validity of the Suez doctrine is probably the war in Vietnam. For military and, even more, political reasons, Washington pressed its allies to contribute troops. To show that the United States was not alone, it wanted as many flags as possible represented in Vietnam. Since the symbolism was so important, President Lyndon B. Johnson suggested to London that a 'platoon of bagpipers' would be sufficient. Some of Washington's allies in Asia responded positively to its call for support, with Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines sending contingents. The British had a small military mission in Vietnam, but no troops, not even bagpipers. Although no troops were forthcoming, the American pressure generally made Britain refrain from publicly criticising US policy in Vietnam. On some critical occasions London even explicitly supported the American role, although rather grudgingly. Privately prime minister Harold Wilson was aching to contribute to a peaceful solution to the dispute.²⁶

In 1982 developments in the South Atlantic provided another test of the relationship between Margaret Thatcher's Britain and the United States under Ronald Reagan. The Falklands, a group of 200 small islands, 1800 inhabitants and 600,000 sheep between Argentina and the Arctic Circle, had become British territory in 1833. The Argentineans had long claimed sovereignty over the islands they called *Islas Malvinas*, and in April 1982 Argentine forces occupied the islands. Margaret Thatcher sent a force to re-capture the islands and won the war in June, in which around 750 Argentineans were killed.²⁷ A few weeks after the British victory, prime minister Thatcher spoke about the wide support Britain had received: "We fought with the support of so many throughout the world: the Security Council, the Commonwealth, the European Community, *and the United States*. [my emphasis]"²⁸

Most historians seem to agree that the Falklands war was conducted in accordance with the Suez doctrine: Britain did not go to war without the support of the United States. According to Geir Lundestad, the United States had tried to mediate after Argentina invaded the islands, but when diplomacy failed, Washington chose to support Britain.²⁹ American military and intelligence assistance was also invaluable for the British defeat of the Argentineans after an expedition 13,000 km halfway down the globe. Although the nine other member countries of the European Communities gave political support to Britain, it was Washington's aid that really mattered.³⁰ US foreign policy historians Alan P. Dobson and

²⁶ The account of British-American relations during the Vietnam war is based on Lundestad 2003b:156-158

²⁷ Stadlen and Glass 2004:14; Palmowski 2003:211

²⁸ Thatcher 1982

²⁹ Damsgaard 1982:93; Lundestad 2003b:218

³⁰ Lundestad 2003b:218

Steve Marsh point out that the Reagan administration provoked considerable opposition in Latin America by siding with Britain against the anti-communist military junta in Buenos Aires.³¹

On the other hand, according to a recent article by Lawrence D. Freedman,³² London was actually dismayed by Washington's lack of support during the Falklands war. As the official British historian of the Falklands campaign, Freedman has had access to all British papers on the conflict. In Freedman's view, these documents reveal the extent of the British government's frustration with the Reagan administration's efforts to find a compromise solution that, in British eyes, would have rewarded Argentina for its aggression.³³ According to Freedman, even after the British had landed forces on the Falklands and both sides had taken severe casualties, Washington argued that it was best to end the conflict through negotiations rather than through a decisive victory by one side. In London it was a shocking discovery that the Americans found it difficult to choose between a long-standing democratically and a military dictatorship (however firmly anti-communist) of recent acquaintance.³⁴ Eventually it was the US secretary of defence Caspar Weinberger (to whom Queen Elizabeth II awarded an honorary knighthood after the conflict), ignoring both military warnings that the odds were against a British victory and diplomatic advice that the United States should remain impartial, who ordered that London's request for all forms of support short of actual participation in military action should be granted immediately.³⁵

Based on Freedman's account of the Falklands campaign, it is possible to question the validity of the Suez doctrine – it might seem like Britain was indeed ready to go to war even without US support. However, the hesitation in Washington can as well be interpreted as a turf war between the State Department and Pentagon, also bearing in mind that the Falklands were considered a part of Latin America, Washington's own 'backyard'. Overall the cold war period was however characterised by the geopolitical stability dictated by the bipolar world order. Together with other Western European countries, Britain lived under the constant threat from a Red Army poised to storm through NATO's Fulda gap. In this geopolitical context it was both relatively easy and considered necessary for shifting British governments to adhere to its doctrine of subordination to US foreign policy. Thus, throughout the cold war the Suez doctrine remained intact: with the obvious exception of the war in Vietnam, London

³¹ Dobson and Marsh 2001:74

³² Freedman 2006

³³ Freedman 2006:64

³⁴ Freedman 2006:66

³⁵ Maechling 1997; Freedman 2006:67

supported Washington in all major foreign policy issues; and, notwithstanding Washington's somewhat hesitant support for the Falklands war, London did not act on its own without US approval.

1989-2001: continuity and close co-operation

The fall of the Berlin wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union was a geopolitical earthquake, but the Suez doctrine remained surprisingly intact throughout the 1990s. In the Gulf war in 1991, the United States, Britain (and France) co-operated surprisingly well.³⁶ Although both Tony Blair and his predecessor, John Major, were frustrated by President Bill Clinton's reluctance to put US troops in harm's way in Bosnia and then Kosovo,³⁷ Clinton and Blair stood shoulder to shoulder when the NATO bombing campaign against Serbia began in spring 1999. Possibly the most dramatic change in the post-cold war Atlantic security picture appeared to take place when Britain joined France in the St Malo Declaration of December 1998,³⁸ stating that the EU should develop a capacity for autonomous action, backed up by a credible military force. This step might well have been interpreted as a challenge to the role of NATO, but as Richard Holbrooke, former US ambassador to the United Nations, has described it, the Clinton administration was the "most supportive of European integration"³⁹ of any American administration in thirty years.

The continuity in American-British relations has also been attributed to the personal bond between Bill Clinton and Tony Blair. In Clinton's own words they "shared many of the same political views" and had a "common approach to economic and social problems, and to foreign policy".⁴⁰ All in all, the decade following the end of the cold war was characterised by continuity in relations between London and Washington; Britain continued to support the United States in all major foreign policy issues, and when London did act on its own – eg its intervention in Sierra Leone in 2000 – it did so with Washington's blessing.

2001-2006: 9/11, Iraq and the new world order

George W. Bush was declared president in December 2000. Like Bill Clinton he was inexperienced in international affairs, and initially wanted to concentrate on his domestic

³⁶ Lundestad 2003b:15

³⁷ Freedman 2006:62-63

³⁸ Lundestad 2003b:260

³⁹ Quoted in Lundestad 1998:117

⁴⁰ Clinton 2004:756, 778. Such a reading of history is consistent with the 'Great Man' theory, the notion that bold leaders rather than impersonal economic and social forces shape the course of history. It might be interesting to note that George W. Bush has repeatedly expressed his support for such an approach to history. (Carney 2006)

agenda of tax cuts and education reform. There were however signs of a shift away from the multilateral approach of the Clinton administration: Bush made clear his opposition to the Kyoto protocol on global climate change, the 1998 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, and international conventions on land-mines and chemical weapons. In general, Europe did however not really know what to make of the new President Bush. Then came 11 September 2001. The front-page of the left-leaning French daily *Le Monde* declared “Nous sommes tous américains”⁴¹. In London prime minister Tony Blair emphasised that the United Kingdom would co-operate with the United States to the extent that it would be permitted to; on 12 September the prime minister sent the president a five-page memo promising to help with the invasion of Afghanistan.⁴²

But the events of 11 September 2001 also transformed the world-view of the United States. To quote President George W. Bush: “Our foreign policy changed on that day.”⁴³ The war in Afghanistan was not over until Washington had a new target: Iraq. Again Britain was firmly with the United States. France, on the other hand, became the main antagonist of the US in the UN Security Council, and prevented Washington and London from getting the support of the Security Council in their military campaign against Saddam Hussein and his alleged weapons of mass destruction. In the run-up to the German elections, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder made it perfectly clear that he would offer no military or economic assistance to the United States in Iraq, even if Washington’s campaign were to be supported by the Security Council. These were new attitudes. While the transatlantic allies had disagreed heavily on Vietnam, the Europeans’ reaction had amounted to abstaining. On Iraq, France and Germany did not merely withhold their support; they worked hard to obstruct what their allies were trying to do.⁴⁴ Britain, on the other hand, having shared the European reluctance over Vietnam, was now steadfast at the side of the United States. No other country than Britain offered such unequivocal political and military support to the Bush administration in its uncompromising policy toward Iraq. Diplomatic support for the US delegation at the UN and later military contributions to President Bush’s call for a ‘coalition of the willing’ seemed unswerving, with Blair often playing a leading role in the presentation of the US-British stance.⁴⁵ Not only did the Blair government find itself with few EU allies for the Atlanticist positioning, huge antiwar demonstration and a divided parliamentary

⁴¹ “We are all Americans now” *Le Monde*, 13 September 2001

⁴² *The Economist*, ‘Axis of feeble’ (leader), 13 May 2006

⁴³ White House 2006

⁴⁴ *The Economist*, ‘Sixty years on’, 3 June 2004

⁴⁵ Mannin 2004:339

Labour party resulted in a considerable downturn in public support for the government, two resignations from the cabinet, and a powerful backbench revolt in several parliamentary votes. Praised for his courage in much of the US press, prime minister Blair was pilloried in most sections of British media for adopting such a dangerous path.⁴⁶

Although it has been argued that Blair attached himself to President Bush out of principle, not some British instinct to hold the coat-tails of the superpower,⁴⁷ it is tempting to interpret the Iraq war as the climax of the Suez doctrine: the Blair government chose to support the US despite of huge political costs both home and abroad, leaving British forces bruised and bleeding in what Winston Churchill once called “the thankless deserts of Mesopotamia”⁴⁸.

Final discussion and conclusion: isn't the Atlantic wider than the Channel?

Sceptics argue that neither Britain nor Tony Blair have gained much from the closeness between Blair and George W. Bush, as Britain has failed to advance its particular interests or influence American policy. President Bush has declared his pride in describing Britain as America's “closest ally in the world”,⁴⁹ but to many Britons the most special thing about the ‘special relationship’ is that it is specially unequal. Britain gives, America takes. In Blair's view, it does not make sense to ask what Britain gets out of the relationship. Working with the United States, Blair believes, is the only way to make the world a better and a safer place. No other country has nearly as much power to make a positive difference. What's more, as the only superpower, America cannot be confronted successfully. It can, however, be influenced by friends.⁵⁰ This has been Tony Blair's strategy; in the words of Bill Clinton's UN ambassador and secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, “Blair has consciously carved out a role for himself as the leader who can explain America to Europe and the rest of Europe to America, bridging differences between the two.”⁵¹

According to Chris Patten, nothing in politics is forever except, it seems, Britain's existential hunt for its own identity: to lose itself in Europe or to discover its post-imperial role as America's spear carrier – or at least its interpreter and apologist to the world's

⁴⁶ Mannin 2004:339

⁴⁷ *The Economist*, ‘Axis of feeble’ (leader), 13 May 2006

⁴⁸ Patten 2005:54

⁴⁹ Quoted in *The Economist*, ‘What's in it for us?’, 20 November 2003

⁵⁰ The interpretation of Tony Blair's foreign policy strategy is taken from *The Economist*, ‘What's in it for us?’, 20 November 2003

⁵¹ Albright 2003:415-416

wimps.⁵² 50 years after the Suez crisis it might be interesting to take a look at the debate that emerged after the Iraq war about the status of the transatlantic relationship, and ask where Britain actually belongs.

Robert Kagan,⁵³ an American neo-conservative, believed that the Iraq war signalled something new and deeper than the many crises in transatlantic relations that had preceded it. His view that Americans are from Mars and Europeans from Venus – that Americans believe in force, while Europeans aspire to a peaceful utopia⁵⁴ – had been made famous even before the Iraq invasion. Kagan argued that the long-held assumption of a community of interests and values binding the West together was now an illusion: “On major strategic and international questions today, Americans are from Mars and Europeans are from Venus: they agree on little and understand one another less and less.”⁵⁵ According to Kagan, the fundamental cleavage is about the all-important question of power: Americans believe that world order ultimately rests on military power; Europeans, by contrast, are wedded to a vision in which an orderly world is constructed on the basis of international law and multilateral institutions.⁵⁶ Kagan presented two main reasons for the European emphasis on ‘soft power’: First, Europeans are weak; having little usable military power, they are naturally inclined to demand an international system based on law. Second, having created ‘perpetual peace’ – to borrow the phrase of Immanuel Kant⁵⁷ – on their own continent through the EU, they want to impose a similar system of binding international rules on the world.⁵⁸ In Kagan’s view, Europeans are deluding themselves, because they are only able to reject militarism because the United States is there to take on the security challenges of the world; European are free-riders on US geopolitical might, unwilling to spend on credible defence capabilities.⁵⁹

Like all striking theses, from ‘the end of history’ to the ‘clash of civilisations’, Kagan’s ‘Mars and Venus’ has since been subjected to searching critiques, as academics have picked holes in his argument.⁶⁰ Kagan has been accused of belonging to the *terribles simplificateurs*⁶¹; it has been duly noted that post-war Europe has not always been averse to war, and that the martial United States has often shown a marked aversion to taking

⁵² Patten 2005:1-2

⁵³ His essay entitled ‘Power and Weakness’ first appeared in *Policy Review* in June/July 2002, ie before the Iraq war; the book “Paradise and Power”, an enlarged version of the essay, was published in 2003.

⁵⁴ *The Economist*, ‘The longest day, revisited’ (Charlemagne), 3 June 2004

⁵⁵ Kagan 2002:1

⁵⁶ *The Economist*, ‘The widening Atlantic’, 20 March 2003

⁵⁷ Kant 2002 [1795]

⁵⁸ *The Economist*, ‘The widening Atlantic’, 20 March 2003

⁵⁹ Moravcsik and Nicolaidis 2005:73

⁶⁰ *The Economist*, ‘The longest day, revisited’ (Charlemagne), 3 June 2004

⁶¹ Judt 2005a

casualties. In the case of Britain, Kagan's accusations of over-reliance on 'soft power' do not appear to carry much weight; in *Blair's Wars* John Kampfner has elegantly described how Tony Blair took Britain to war five times in six years.⁶² It does however seem clear that Kagan hit upon something, and during the row over Iraq, European leaders responded to Kagan's somewhat simplistic and subjective approach to history: Joschka Fischer, the former German foreign minister, lamenting the gap in understanding between his country and the United States, put it down to the fact that "the Americans had no Verdun on their continent; in the United States there is nothing comparable to Auschwitz or Stalingrad."⁶³

Kagan spoke out in favour of a unilateralist US foreign policy. Although unilateralism has always been part of America's foreign relations, it has obviously been gaining strength in recent years. Today the military power of the United States is colossal; Washington now spends as much on defence as the rest of the world added together.⁶⁴ But while America today is uniquely powerful, it also feels itself to be uniquely vulnerable. The sense of vulnerability after 11 September may make the US appreciate allies, but it also drives it to dominate. As Julian Lindley-French has argued, this is reinforced by a political culture that "seems to see security as a series of zero-sum absolutes: one either has it or one does not."⁶⁵ Therefore, unilateralism now stands stronger than in the past, partly as a result of 11 September. The half-sleeping giant has been reawakened, and has since 9/11 capitalised its 'unipolar moment' by using its vast strength much more determinedly than before.

The striking contrast between the American and European worldview is not only theoretical and ideological, it has also been expressed on specific policy issues. The most prominent examples are probably the Kyoto protocol on climate change and the International Criminal Court (ICC). Kyoto and the ICC are arguably the two most important political initiatives of our time for, respectively, the global environment and human rights. While a united Europe – absolutely including Britain and Tony Blair – has been the strongest proponents of both Kyoto and the ICC, Washington has repeatedly expressed its strong opposition to these two distinctly multilateral instruments. It is also worthwhile noticing that this hostility was indeed present before 11 September 2001, and under the Clinton administration it was always clear that neither Kyoto nor the ICC would get the necessary two-thirds support in the US Senate.

⁶² Kampfner 2004

⁶³ Quoted in *The Economist*, 'The longest day, revisited' (Charlemagne), 3 June 2004

⁶⁴ Ash 2005:261

⁶⁵ Lindley-French 2002:77

When President Bush in February 2005 visited the EU headquarters in Brussels, he could see a giant inflatable balloon celebrating the entry into force of the Kyoto protocol: a not-so-subtle message to the visitor that Europe has kept Kyoto alive, despite his opposition.⁶⁶ The ICC was also a topic of discussion during Bush's visit, more specifically regarding how to try possible war crimes committed in the Darfur region in Sudan. Americans were initially opposed on ideological grounds and would have preferred to set up an ad hoc tribunal, but the Europeans considered this an insufficient solution, and in March 2005 the Security Council voted to refer the situation in Darfur to the ICC. The United States abstained; Britain voted in favour together with the other European council members. While the debate in New York was still going on, an EU diplomat commented acidly: "The Americans seem unable to decide which they hate more – genocide or the ICC."⁶⁷ It is anyhow clear that both Kyoto and the ICC have hit central cords in the transatlantic conflict of ideology and worldview: Americans continue to argue that no legal instrument stands above the US constitution; Europeans use Kyoto and ICC as cornerstones in their mission to build a Kantian global society based on the rule of law, not the rule of force – on multilateralism, not unilateralism.

This paper has examined the validity of the Suez doctrine in British foreign policy. This study is of course insufficient to draw final conclusions, but I do however believe at this stage there are reasons to conclude that the Suez doctrine has indeed remained intact for the past 50 years; the most significant exemption being the British reluctance to participate in the Vietnam war, and the climax being Britain's participation in the Iraq war, despite of accusations that Tony Blair was acting as 'Bush's poodle'.

In this last section of the paper, I have outlined some of the current ideological differences between the United States and Europe. The interesting fact is that on all these central issues – multilateralism vs unilateralism, Kyoto, and the International Criminal Court – Britain is firmly on the side with its partners in the European Union⁶⁸: the English Channel does in fact seem to be a lot narrower compared to the Atlantic Ocean. Whether this fundamental fact should be considered a rationale for stronger foreign policy alignment with Britain's partner countries in the European Union, is however a decision that lays in the hands of Gordon Brown, presumably the next British prime minister. Winston Churchill's observation of Britain's ambivalent relations with continental Europe does anyhow still seem

⁶⁶ *The Economist*, 'Europe awaits George Bush: When style and substance meet', 17 February 2005

⁶⁷ Quoted in *The Economist*, 'Europe awaits George Bush: When style and substance meet', 17 February 2005

⁶⁸ Eg Lundestad 2006 and *The Economist*, 'What's in it for us?', 20 November 2006

relevant: "We are *with* Europe, but not *of* it [...] linked but not compromised [...] interested and associated, but not absorbed."⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Quoted in Patten 2005:44

Historiography and bibliography: the challenges of 'history of the present'

This is a work of contemporary history – or 'history of the present'⁷⁰ – bearing in mind the inherent limitations and challenges of this genre. First, there are seldom archives to go to; one has to rely on open primary sources. Second, the often-useful distance to historical events is not possible, and although there is a wide amount of literature and open sources available, there is no standard work of reference.

The primary sources used for this article have been memoirs and speeches by policy makers, interviews, transcripts from press conferences, and official publications. The works of Geir Lundestad and Chris Patten have been the main secondary sources, supplemented by a wide number of recent books and articles from newspapers and journals. The following list of primary sources and literature has however been confined to works referred to in the text. Throughout the paper, the footnotes give references for direct quotations, numerical claims, and points where I have drawn directly on other people's work.

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⁷⁰ The term belongs to Timothy Garton Ash, used eg in Ash 2005.

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