Where do we go from here?: Transatlantic Relations after New Labour

Introduction

David Cameron once claimed to be the ‘heir to Blair’. But what exactly was he heir to? The cornerstone of Blair’s foreign policy was to bring together the American and European sides of the Atlantic in the name of mutual benefit. The success of this was proved in the case of Afghanistan after 9/11 and shown to fail in the case of the invasion of Iraq. The Atlantic Bridge did not end with Blair. His successor Gordon Brown also tried to unite the US and Europe in reaching a solution to the global economic crisis. Brown’s final plea in the televised leader’s debate on foreign policy was that he was best suited to act as the Atlantic Bridge which had to be maintained for the benefit of the UK. Cameron’s own views do not distance him from these positions. He clearly states that there were many aspects of New Labour’s foreign policy that he believed in (Cameron 2010). The purpose of this paper is to explore New Labour’s policy of an Atlantic Bridge and whether Cameron wanted or was able to follow it. The paper will examine the evolution of the idea of an Atlantic Bridge, its use between 2001 and 2010 in meeting crisis situations, and ask what traction has it found in a coalition government implementing austerity measures made up of parties battling Euroscepticism.

What is the Atlantic Bridge?

Since World War II, Britain’s attraction to the United States and dedication to the Special Relationship has been at the centre of her foreign policy. The discipline surrounding the Special Relationship has therefore been dominated by British scholars and policy makers who have developed a distinctive vocabulary and discourse of themes and motifs concerning the Special Relationship (McCourt 2011: 146). Previous prime ministers like Winston Churchill and Harold Macmillan have contributed to Anglo-American scholarship with concepts such as ‘hands-across-the-sea’, ‘three circles’ or ‘Greeks and Romans’ which scholars have further explored. While these expressions were created to highlight the parallel position of two powerful countries, in fact, they reveal an asymmetry in the perception of the relationship which has been the subject of many enquiries. One concept which attempts to address this asymmetry is the idea of an ‘Atlantic Bridge’ which has been attributed to prime minister James Callaghan in the 1970s (Hood 2006: 186) It stipulates that Britain sits between the two powers of America and Europe and is uniquely positioned to bring the two together. By acting as a bridge the UK would provide a use to the US that would ensure a close working relationship with Washington.

Roland Quinault suggests that the idea of an Atlantic Bridge can be traced back to the 19th century and Prime Minister William Gladstone. In Quinault’s interpretation, Gladstone believed that England stood between the feudal, class based system of Europe and the American society based on equality (Quinault 2000: 128). The notion that the UK was able to identify with society on both sides of the Atlantic demonstrates Gladstone’s belief that Britain had something that could appeal to both the US and Europe. More recently, Michael Ancram the Lord Lothian has described the Atlantic Bridge to the Global Security Forum as
‘the nexus through and around which world events have been developed and actioned’ (Ancram 2012). This has certainly become a popular view with British politicians and leaders who seek to inflate the position that the UK has with relation to the United States and Europe by implying that the UK is somehow separate from yet crucial to both. To maintain this position British policy makers since WWII sought to reinforce this middle-man ability. It has been noted, however, that while Britain may be an important partner to the US, she is a full member of the European Union and has been since the 1970s (Manon 2010: 2). Other authors are suggesting that the UK should be more committed to Europe than to the US, an idea that is recurrent in the literature on the Atlantic Bridge (Dimbelby and Reynolds 1988: 333; Baylis 1997: 223; Brown 2011). The question of Britain’s membership in Europe has been the subject of debate and criticism within the UK as a large portion of the population is Eurosceptic, which is fuelled by an overtly Eurosceptic press and political parties. Wallace and Phillips note that this level of scrutiny of the UK’s position in Europe has not been extended to the Special Relationship (Wallace and Phillips 2009: 56). Therefore, for policy makers and the electorate the possibility of moving closer to Europe has not been easy to accept especially in the light of the Special Relationship.

Other critical views have expressed concerns that the result of Britain’s attempts to shape both American and European policies hindered her efforts to strengthen her own position. Instead, it resulted in an almost complete lack of policy direction. One of the most critical of the UK’s over affections toward the US has been William Wallace, the Liberal-Democrat peer and academic. He argues that without the common threat of the Soviet Union that once drew the US and Europe together, the two will inevitably drift apart (Wallace 2005: 60). This divide between Europe and America, according to Sheppard, has led to a policy drift in the UK where policy makers think of Britain as an Atlantic Bridge or Global Hub and do not recognise the limited role she actually plays (Shepard 2010: 56). Harbouring these kinds of misconceptions may result, and some would argue has resulted, in the pursuit of unstable foreign policies. Clark has argued that by trying to be the main power that ties the US and Europe together, the UK would be torn in two (Clark 2007: 28). There also appears to be a large consensus in the literature suggesting that the US and the EU are firmly on divergent economic, security and diplomatic paths (Rees 2009: 129). Previous attempts by British prime ministers to lasso the two powers together have not been successful and even weakened the British position. Macmillan, for instance, failed to juggle the British application to join the ECC and British missile defence contracts with the US. Ted Heath in the 1970s attempted to take Britain further into Europe than any other British prime minister while relations with America became strained over the Yom Kippur War (Dimbelby and Reynolds 1988: 264). More recently, former Prime Minister Sir John Major explained the damage to the UK that a weakening US-Europe relationship could cause. He surmises that the US expects the UK to push Europe toward some of the views shared between Britain and America but does not want Britain to become America’s proxy in Europe. Britain’s role, therefore, is to be a voice for these shared values and if removed from Europe, Britain would lose her value to the US (Major 2012: 7). Major’s views are similar to the position that the US government has put forward. A congressional research report from 2007 states that a Britain more involved in Europe may strengthen US-EU relations (Congressional Report
2007: 30). This view has also been recognised by the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee who commented on how the US would like to see Britain playing more of a leading role in Europe (House of Commons Report 2010: 75). This has proven a difficult task to accomplish as many have reservations on the nature of the EU and its influence over British society which has existed for decades. These conceptual and policy issues are the product of the evolution of British foreign policy since the end of World War II. However, the more recent events under the New Labour government have had a direct impact on the policies that the Cameron government have been able to pursue.

Blair’s heirs

The first important remark one can make on the recent nature of the Atlantic Bridge concerns Tony Blair’s period as prime minister and his government’s relations with the US. When Blair came to power in 1997, he had yet to articulate a foreign policy on a scale that he would become remembered for. What was known about Blair was his desire to take Britain further into Europe. Dunn speculates that Blair’s agenda of taking the UK closer to the European Union was to strengthen Britain’s relations with the US and secure her position as the Atlantic Bridge (Dunn 2008: 1133). Others like Richards state the alternative that the reason Blair got so close to the US in effect was to give him cover to move Britain closer to Europe (Richards 2010: 178). These perspectives demonstrate the difficulties when one is trying to pin down New Labour’s, and Blair’s own, foreign policy position. The events of the 21st century forced Blair into clearly defining the future of British security policy and crystallising the role Britain should play in the international arena. After the devastating attacks of 9/11 Blair took on the role as Atlantic Bridge for the US by delivering the support of major European leaders under Article IV of the NATO charter as he said he would stand ‘shoulder to shoulder’ with the US (Raddice 2010: 148-149). After holding over fifty meetings with heads of states, included a sceptical France and Germany, Blair was able deliver European support to the Bush administration who were preparing to take action on those responsible for the attacks (Seldon 2004: 120). Despite the initial success on establishing a joint approach to this security crisis it was the clear division between the US-UK and Franco-German alignments over the handling of the War on Terror that would show the weakness of the Atlantic Bridge hypothesis.

The Iraq War illustrated the limitations of Blair’s ability to hold the US and Europe together. On the one hand, he was able to rally support from Italy and Spain as well smaller states from ‘New Europe’ (Lynch and Singh 2008: 229). Yet, on the other hand, it was the powerful axis between Paris and Berlin which diminished Blair’s credibility as an Atlantic Bridge. The French and the Germans were brought together at this time by their mutual distrust of where Blair and Bush were going with Iraq, providing France and Germany with new energy in foreign policy. This was displayed with the French opposition to a second UN resolution on Iraq in March 2003 which halted Blair’s final attempt to seek global approval for the invasion of Iraq (Baylis 2006: 107). The final rejection of Blair as an Atlantic Bridge came after he left office. Blair’s attempt to become the first President of the European Council ended with a whimper rather than a bang due to the opposition from France and Germany. Their concern was how Blair would handle this new and powerful position in Europe, and feared he would
take Europe too close to the US (Rawnsley 2010: 676). Blair, after all, was the first international figure to meet Barack Obama after he entered office led to fear that he would continue his preference for working with the US on another campaign like Iraq. Riddell claims that the US-EU balancing act depended entirely on maintaining control (Riddell 2003: 59). Blair and his dealings with the US on Iraq showed to the other European powers that he had little restraint when he felt his cause was morally just.

The legacy that Blair left has brought into question the durability of the notion of Britain as an Atlantic Bridge. It has been suggested that since the Blair years other European statesmen have tried to side-line Britain as America’s entry point to Europe (Dunn 2008: 1139). Dumbrell has claimed that after Blair left office, Paris and Berlin were seeking to undermine Britain’s proximity to the US. Similarly, Dunn claims that Sarkozy has tried to supplant Britain’s proximity to the US with France as the closest European nation to the Obama administration (Dunn 2008: 1139; Dumbrell 2009: 71). Some come to the defence of the Atlantic Bridge from the American point of view. Gilbert suggests that the US needs the UK to act as the Atlantic Bridge and Washington should avoid forcing Britain to choose between the US and Europe. By contrast, a survey of literature has suggested that for Britain to be most useful to the US she would need to be more involved in the EU (May and Treverton 1986: 181). This would prove to be a difficult challenge for those who followed in Blair’s footsteps as prime minister. The premiership of Gordon Brown saw another attempt by the Labour party to work between Britain and America, this time on the economic catastrophe of 2008.

Though there were significant differences in the Anglo-American and Franco-German approaches to the economic crisis, Brown’s efforts to create a global consensus with the US and the EU gained him respect on both sides of the Atlantic in a way that Blair was never able to accomplish. The 2009 G20 summit on the economic crisis saw Brown bring the French and German governments on board to a recovery package based on Anglo-American financial principles (Seldon and Lodge 2011: 177). In preparation for the summit Brown followed a similar approach to Blair after 9/11 by meeting with the leaders of the major countries affected by the crisis (Rawnsley 2010: 624-625). From here he was able to work between the European powers and the new Obama administration to find a global financial settlement. The reason for this success may be that Brown never attempted to appear as an Atlantic Bridge as Blair had. Instead, his goals were more orientated toward creating a consensus which he achieved by bringing the different countries of Europe together first and then working to convince the US to follow a matching strategy on the financial crisis. Richards suggests that it was Brown’s connections in the Democratic Party that gave him the knowledge and ability to gain Obama’s support (Richards 2010: 384). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s Brown developed close relations to the Democratic Party and had the opportunity to meet senior members such as Ted Kennedy and Bill Clinton’s advisors Bob Shrum and Chairman of the Federal Reserve, Stan Greenberg during his frequent holidays to the US (Bower 2007: 181). According to Rawnsley, these contacts gave Brown an authoritative influence over the US that led to the European leaders finding faith in Brown and his recovery plan (Rawnsley 2010: 621). This constellation of influences displayed what
appeared to be the embodiment of the Atlantic Bridge: a British prime minister bringing both sides of the Atlantic together in order to coordinate a mutual response to a common problem.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Brown relied on this position in the 2010 leadership debate on foreign policy presenting himself as the only leader who could work with the US and European powers. By asserting his credibility on economic affairs, using his long history with the US and influence in the EU, Brown was able to utilise a unique position to reach his goals. Where Blair lost credibility due to his closeness with the US, Brown gained standing due to his relationship with America. These examples also highlight the significance of the executive in coordinating action. The strategy and efforts of Blair and Brown was the dominating theme and highlight how the vision and credibility tied to the British prime minister is crucial for pursing an effective foreign policy. Nevertheless, despite Brown’s success and appearance as an Atlantic Bridge, his efforts did not prove to be enough to see him reflected. The results of the 2010 general election saw a coalition between the Conservative and Liberal Democrats under the premiership of David Cameron, who would have his own foreign policies to pursue.

Heir to Blair?

Given that Cameron’s premiership only began in 2010 it is unsurprising that the academic literature surrounding him is still in its infancy. Also, given the strong domestic policy agenda that Cameron has pursued it is equally unsurprising that the literature on the foreign policy of the Tory led government still has a long way to go. However, there have been some attempts which have already begun to highlight some important themes in analysing Cameron’s time as prime minister. The theoretical and ideology approach of ‘Liberal-conservatism’ and the direction of key British foreign policy areas such as the transatlantic relationship have undergone some investigation and revealed some useful insights. Similarly, the political history of the UK has also been drawn on to explain Cameron’s leadership.

The impact of the Thatcher and Blair governments has provided some traction for scholars in their assessment of Cameron’s leadership. The length and significance of both of these governments created a legacy for Cameron to live up to or to move away from. Evans, for one explains how Cameron’s primary aims as leader of the Conservatives was to rebrand and change the public perception of the party by moving away from some of the right wing images left over from the 1980s (Evans 2010: 326). Others, such as Heppell, have pointed out the difficulty in trying to accomplish this as much of the Parliamentary Conservative Party (PCP) still hold onto Thatcherite social conservative policies (Heppell 2012: 1). Heng contributes to this discussion by pointing out the influences of the Blair government’s security and strategy policies. Heng identifies the Blair’s policy on the Kosovo crisis in 1997 as being similar to Cameron’s handling of the Libya crisis in 2011 (Heng 2012: 571). Given this point and that Cameron has openly explained the similarities between his own foreign policy beliefs and that of New Labour’s, as seen in his Lord Mayor’s Banquet of 2010, the central theme of the Special Relationship remains an important facet of the Cameron government. Any differences of positions between Cameron and New Labour are reflected in the political theoretical positions that Cameron’s government followed.
A significant position of the Blair government’s strategic policy was the concept of liberal interventionism. Heng argues that the resulting unpopularity of the Iraq War led to Cameron dropping this position (Heng 2012: 569). From a domestic point of view Beech explains that the domestic influences on Cameron which encouraged him to move towards the position of ‘liberal conservatism’. He explains that as part of the rebranding of the Conservative party Cameron had to introduce some new structures that highlighted the change from Thatcherite political philosophies (Beech 2011: 26). Similarly, many in Cameron’s party held views associated with the neo-conservative theory of international relations which is associated with interventionism and the unpopular Bush administration resulting in another issue that Cameron had to address (Daddow 2013: 7). These neo-conservative views were held by key Tory ministers such as Michael Gove, who convinced Cameron to stand for the Tory leadership, and Foreign Secretary William Hague and played an instrumental role in the development of liberal-conservatism (Daddow 2013: 7; Dodds and Elden 2009: 350). It has been suggested that New Labour’s foreign policy was a combination of many different positions to create an ethical foreign policy that would encourage the British government to use force to intervene in humanitarian crises, in a similar way to neo-conservatism (Bevir, Daddow and Hall 2012: 5-6). Oliver applies this point to the Cameron, as the strongest figure in the party pushing for change, called for an adaption to the interventionist position by merging realism with idealism in order to pursue ‘liberal conservatism’ (Oliver: 13). According to Evans, however, this can be a real challenge given that he identifies more than 70 per cent of the PCP as retaining right wing, realists based, political thoughts (Evans 2010: 328). Key foreign policy areas such as Europe or the UK-US relations become especially relevant in measuring Cameron’s success in pursing his liberal conservative course.

Tony Blair’s interventionist stance relied on and was enhanced by the relationship between the UK and the US. Similarly, the government of Margaret Thatcher was characterised by a close relationship with the government in Washington DC. Although, as many academics have pointed out, Cameron’s own political positions had connections with these previous prime ministers, the legacy of Iraq and the appearance of sub servitude to the US has made following similar courses difficult. Beech describes how this Atlantic tendency is apparent in the Tory’s 2010 manifesto which places the ‘Atlantic Alliance’ at the heart of the UK’s strategic relations (Beech 2011: 354-358). In his discussion on Britain’s role in the world, and issues facing the British government in the 21st century, McCourt discusses which way UK foreign policy should be directed. He debates whether the UK should move away from the US toward Europe or vice versa and concludes that Britain is stuck between these sides of the Atlantic (McCourt: 161). McCourt’s point is exaggerated by the difficulties Cameron faces heading a largely Eurosceptic party. Simon Hix criticises this situation claiming that at times Cameron has been held hostage to following these Eurosceptic views for the sake of the PCP (Hix 2011). Heppell explains further that 88.2 per cent of Conservative ministers hold Eurosceptic views and explains that it will be the role of the new and future intake of Tory MPs to change this (Heppell 2012: 9). Cowley and Stuart however, disagree with some of Heppell’s arguments. They claim that many of the problems Cameron faces come from the new intake of Tory MPs. They draw on the example of the 2011 backbench rebellion on the EU referendum which showed 49 out of the 81 rebels were from the 2010 intake (Cowley and
Euroscepticism appears to be a substantial part of the Tory party. However, what is significant, as Cowley and Stuart argue, is the type of Euroscepticism, whether it is hard or soft (Cowley and Stuart 2012:404). As Lynch points out, Cameron had to appeal to the Eurosceptics to win the leadership race for the Conservative party which, while in opposition, led to Cameron keeping a united front on Europe (Lynch 2012:74-75). While in power divisions in the party emerged on the level of Euroscepticism, between the hard and soft approaches. This, according to Lynch, is the real coalition Cameron has to hold together (Lynch 2011: 221-223). Cameron identifies himself as a ‘soft’ Eurosceptic, yet given the constraints of history and the further complication of a weaken defence budget, he will find it hard to stay close to the American side of the Atlantic as Blair did and his party wants. Similarly Lonsdale points out the European Defence and Security Policy risks undermining NATO and thus the US’ connection to Europe. Yet Cameron’s Euroscepticism has not yet led to him calling for removal of the EDSP (Lonsdale 2009: 157-158). If Cameron really is the ‘heir to Blair’, would it be possible uphold the Atlantic Bridge under these circumstance?

Libya

The Coalition government that Cameron formed was based on austerity and budget cuts, which included the defence budget. All three branches of the British military suffered significant cuts, and although the previous government was planning also to make cutbacks to defence spending, a gap has begun to emerge between the cuts and the implementation of new technology such as the Queen Elizabeth aircraft carriers (Martin 2011: 192). For this reason one of Cameron’s first foreign policy initiatives was pooling military resources with the French government (BBC News 2010). The Anglo-French treaty was finalised after the significant budget cuts in both countries. Up until that point it was part of British policy to invest heavily in defence research and technology to remain useful to the Americans and NATO. This new security relationship with France coupled with the American criticisms of Britain’s operations in Afghanistan reveal a shift in Britain’s foreign policy under Cameron’s leadership. In terms of security, Britain appeared to be moving toward Europe in an attempt to cut defence costs. It was the Arab Spring which tested this new arrangement and the sustainability of Cameron’s foreign policy.

While European states reoriented their foreign policies the US also took stock of where their foreign policies were aimed. In 2011 when US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton published an essay overtly stating that the US would begin to refocus its foreign policy on the Asia-Pacific region (Clinton 2011). This sudden pivot has been an attempt by the Obama administration to address the shift in power from West to East by realigning US interests away from Europe and the Middle East and moving away from the legacy of the War on Terror. As Dumbrell explains, this Pivot has been a strategically defendable decision that has moved to address security concerns emanating from the region (Dumbrell 2013). However, the case of Libyan uprising has identified the precarious security position Europe finds herself in.

As the Arab Spring escalated and Libya fell into civil war many within the international community were inspired to support the rebels in the removal of Col. Gaddafi. This feeling was particularly strong in some European states as Libya was classified as an EU neighbour
state and had a direct impact on EU foreign policy (European Commission 2004). States such as Italy that rely on Libya for large amounts of energy supplies were reluctant to intervene while other powers such as Germany were also more hesitant to act in an intervention (BBC News 2011). The result was the EU as an institution looking aloof and unable to coordinate a coherent policy. The Obama administration was also less than willing to get entangled in military operations and in a possible regime change due to her previous intervention in Iraq (Obama 2011). The EU as an organisation failed to make any significant opposition to the Gaddafi regime’s use of violence against Libyan rebels. Furthermore, Baroness Ashton, the EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, was not able to build a consensus among member states, nor was she able to pursue any hard solutions in dealing with the Gaddafi administration. As an alternative to the institutions of the EU, as in the response to the financial crisis, it was Britain and France that pursued a direct course and attempted to bring the Americans on board (Brown 2011). Within the UN Security Council, Britain and France were able to build a consensus to gain a resolution that introduced a no-fly zone in Libya. Military forces made up primarily of Britain, France and America implemented the no-fly zone which gave the Libyan rebels the opportunity to push out from their Eastern strong holds and move toward Tripoli (Brown 2011). The implementation of the no-fly zone helps to highlight how British, French and American views on the handling of the crisis began to drift.

An analysis of the operations can reveal a significant difference in the approaches of the US, the UK and some European powers to intervention in Libya. Data compiled on the efforts different countries put forward for tackling the Libya issue indicates the difference in approaches the US and Europe took. In terms of troop commitment the US provided more than double of the resources that all European forces provided. Similarly, the total number of sorties flown and bombs dropped by American forces was considerably higher than Europe’s efforts. However, this is in stark contrast with the length of commitment displayed by European forces, namely the British and French militaries. This was clear by the fact that by early May 2011 British and French forces had flown as many sorties over Libya as the US (The Guardian 2011). The hard and fast approach of the US displayed a significantly different strategy and emphasis on Libya compared to her European counterparts. This helps to demonstrate the effectiveness of Cameron’s role in working between America and Europe.

After the no-fly zone had been successfully implemented, the Libyan rebels were able to make progress in their attack across the country. However, this progress began to stall as the ill equipped rebels began to lose the cities they had gained in the previous months. In April 2011, as the rebels struggled to hold the city of Benghazi, British and French security advisors were sent in to assist the rebels in their military planning (The Guardian 2011). While the British and French governments were prepared to send troops to Libya, Obama took a hands-off approach. He wanted to avoid any danger of ‘mission creep’ which could lead to operations requiring more of a commitment from the US. Once the no-fly zone had been successfully implemented in March 2011, Obama announced that the US would no longer engage in military action and would specifically avoid direct involvement in regime change. In a joint press conference with Cameron, Obama justified limiting US involvement
to implementing the no-fly zone and then stepping back to allow other allies to take on a stronger, more prominent role (Obama and Cameron 2011). The Libyan conflict shows a far clearer division of labour between US and European forces compared to earlier operations in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the different parties maintained that a shared and balanced effort had been taken by all. In a joint letter with Sarkozy and Cameron, Obama stated:

“Together with our NATO allies and coalition partners, the United States, France and Britain have been united from the start in responding to the crisis in Libya, and we are united on what needs to happen in order to end it.” (The New York Times 2011)

The American military commitment, however, stands in sharp contrast with this statement as the Obama administration took a hands-off approach in military affairs and in diplomacy at the time. This was even more palpable as Obama was the only major leader not to attend the Paris conference on Libya which recognised the new Transitional National Council of Libya (NBC News 2011). Honeyman offers a different perspective by explaining Cameron and Obama were aware of the Blair-Bush legacy and wanted to avoid another Anglo-American invasion (Honeyman 2012: 132). However, the recent US criticisms of budget cuts to the British armed forces and critiques of her efforts in Afghanistan raise strong issues on the nature of British and American collaborations. The separation of policy directions lends credence to the idea of Atlantic drift. One explanation for this drift could be Cameron’s engagement with France on security matters such as the defence treaty. Another possible explanation could be that the Obama administration has grown frustrated with Europe’s efforts and military burden sharing which is one of the reasons why he has redirected US foreign policy toward East Asia.

During the Libya crisis Cameron made no strong effort to draw Europe and America closer together. Under the UN mandate there was a collective effort from both parties on either side of the Atlantic. However, there was no lobbying for a visibly collective effort from Britain as there had been on the economy under Brown or the War on Terror under Blair. This may be due to the vastly different political environment Cameron found himself in. A year later an article published by Cameron and Obama gave a revealing insight into the nature of the Anglo-American security relationship. The article published in the Washington Post discusses the mutual aims and interests of both countries and the collective efforts on human rights and global security. However, the article lacks any real definition of the relationship under either government or any coordinated effort on contemporary issues such as the crisis in Syria (The Washington Post 2012). As the security situation seems stretched between a US more interested in East Asia and a Britain and Europe weak on funds, there appears to be a sense of Atlantic drift. It is worth, therefore, analysing Cameron’s current position in Europe to determine if he can still appeal to the US as the Atlantic Bridge.

Financial Crisis

Following the events surrounding the Arab Spring, Cameron relations in Europe have also begun to stall. Recently, Cameron’s party has come under electoral pressure with the rise of the Eurosceptic party UKIP which has begun to draw support away from the Conservative
Party. Similarly, the growing problems between Cameron and the hard euroseptics in his own party have led Cameron into action that has seriously undermined the relationship between the UK and Europe. These concerns were seen by many as the reasoning behind Cameron’s 2011 veto of EU action to address the growing financial crisis in Europe. Many, including Secretary of State Vince Cable, criticised this position as a party political stunt which as Hix argues could result in Britain being left isolated in Europe (BBC 2011b; Hix 2011). These concerns were further exacerbated by Cameron’s announcement to hold a referendum on Britain’s membership in the EU. Despite the success of working together on security, Cameron’s approach to the EU has led to a deteriorating relationship between Britain and Europe.

Since his move to veto the 2011 EU economic programme many have waited for Cameron to set out his position on Britain’s involvement in the EU. In January 2013 he finally explained his vision and plan for Britain in the regional organisation. Although he wanted to keep Britain in the EU, he desired her continued membership to be on different terms.

“I never want us to pull up the drawbridge and retreat from the world.

That is why I am here today: To acknowledge the nature of the challenges we face. To set out how I believe the European Union should respond to them. And to explain what I want to achieve for Britain and its place within the European Union.

The next Conservative Manifesto in 2015 will ask for a mandate from the British people for a Conservative Government to negotiate a new settlement with our European partners in the next Parliament.” (Cameron 2013)

The position that Cameron set out in his speech is one that directly challenges Britain’s involvement in Europe. He argued that if a new settlement could be negotiated then he would campaign to stay in the EU. Therefore, if a settlement could not be negotiated he would aim to take Britain out of the EU, an argument that has split politicians, academics and commentators. Many saw the speech as a reliance on ‘familiar Eurosceptical fallacies’ and presenting ‘half-baked ideas’ to navigate through an ever increasingly difficult situation (Priestley 2013; Wright 2013). On the other hand, others were less sceptical about the nature of Cameron’s speech. Isabel Hardman of The Spectator pointed toward Cameron’s style of avoiding the easily caricatured EU directives and focused on bigger issues such as working hours for doctors (Hardman 2013). Similarly, academics Hix and Derviş argue that given the current domestic situation Cameron was able to make a reasonable speech that correctly emphasised the need for change in Europe (Hix 2013; Derviş 2013). In comparison, Michael Emerson’s argument that Cameron’s course could impact on Britain’s relationship with Europe and America is an argument that is worth considerable attention (Emerson 2013). As seen above, the relationship between Britain and America relies on the UK’s involvement in the EU. Yet, the different views on the success of Cameron’s speech highlight the concerns for the US.

On the 17th January 2013 the Brookings Institute issued a memorandum for President Obama advising him on the potential dangers of the current situation in Europe and what impact the
withdrawal of Britain might have on both Europe and America. In it Vaïsse and Wright argue that a British withdrawal could fracture the EU, thus damaging the world’s second largest economy and close trading partner of the US. They recommend that, if necessary, a senior official should speak publicly on Europe to emphasise the important of the UK in Europe (Vaïsse and Wright 2013). A week before this memo was released Philip Gordon, the US assistant secretary for European affairs in the State Department, called for Britain to remain as a strong voice in the EU (BBC News 2013). It is questionable to what extent this memorandum and the actions or Gordon are linked; however, it does show how serious the US took the situation. There have been very few times that the US has directly commented on the strengths and weaknesses of a British domestic policy (New York Times 2013). Following this, in Obama’s Stat of the Union address, he announced a new bilateral trade and investment partnership with Europe (The White House 2013). If Britain is not in the EU when this deal is reached, she risks losing both easier access to American imports as well as a key position close to the US. Emerson uses the example of a referendum and the importance of the Special Relations to Conservative leaders to highlight the precarious path that Cameron is on (Emerson 2013). On a similar note, others have raised concerns how Cameron’s speech has jeopardised relations with European states. Some German parliamentarians referred to Cameron’s position as blackmail, while Nordic and Benelux states are reported as appalled at his decision which could risk losing British influence in Europe altogether (New York Times 2013; Emerson 2013). It is likely that the Europe issue will dominate Cameron’s premiership as he struggles to boost his domestic position, which appears to have more precedent than appearing as an Atlantic Bridge. The consequence of these actions may result in damaging the Atlantic Bridge to point where Britain is left stranded between America and Europe.

**What’s next?**

The experience of previous prime ministers and the reports and comments from the US government have all concluded that to be a useful ally to the US the UK needs to be an active member of Europe. However, the constraints and beliefs that Cameron works under demonstrate the difficulty in trying to maintain the transatlantic bridge which has been a cornerstone of 21st British foreign policy. The Libya crisis did highlight a workable relationship between Europe and America however; the continued violence in Syria highlights the limitations of coordinating security policies between these powers. Similarly, the economic challenges facing Europe and the US are fundamentally different despite originating from the same problem. While Europe battles to restore control in the Eurozone the US is still coming the terms with the ‘fiscal cliff’ she narrowly avoided at the start of 2013. For Cameron himself, trying to follow in Blair’s footsteps to recreate the Atlantic Bridge in these circumstances is difficult. It is even more difficult once his domestic political situation is taken into account.

A case can be made that by reasserting the British position in Europe, Cameron would gain more international leverage, leadership in Europe and support at home. However, his proposed EU referendum appears to be coming from a position of weakness. The problems of holding his own party together coupled with his generally poor relationships with heads of EU member states indicates that any attempt by him to re-establish Britain’s place in Europe
is going to be thwart with difficulties. The idea that he will be able to play a leading role in Europe after 2017 is difficult to see. If this does turn out to be the case it is difficult to tell how Britain could exercise influence on either side of the Atlantic, let alone both. With all this in mind it is worth pondering on the questions: where do we go from here? British foreign secretary William Hague has indicated that drawing closer relations with Commonwealth countries will be an important factor, while Cameron himself has embarked on trade missions to East Asia to develop ties with the UK. However, given the close proximity, history and political relationship to the two largest economies in the world it is difficult to imagine how Britain would be able to cope with out a strong position with either of them.
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