



PISM | POLSKI INSTYTUT SPRAW MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH
THE POLISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

BULLETIN

No. 6 (946), 20 January 2017 © PISM

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Prospects for the UK–U.S. Special Relationship

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The British government will try to deepen the country's cooperation with the U.S. in the area of security and defence to offset the negative political and economic effects of Brexit. However, Britain will face the risk of a further decline of its military potential and serious differences with the administration of Donald Trump on major foreign policy issues, including NATO and Russia. In effect, the UK might be forced to focus on strengthening European security at the cost of supporting the U.S. in other regions.

The reaction of the British government to Donald Trump's victory in the U.S. presidential elections was much more positive than that of many other European countries. UK officials indicated the opportunities for strengthening the "special relationship" with the United States, especially in trade, security and defence. The calls for even closer UK cooperation with the U.S. are in line with Theresa May's government announcement of a more active policy on a global scale, aimed to offset the negative political and economic consequences of Brexit. However, moving cooperation with the U.S. to a new level may be difficult to achieve, even though Trump has repeatedly stressed the importance of the special relationship with Britain, traditionally recognised by American political elites—especially Republicans—as a leading ally in Europe. The relations between the two countries may be weakened if the new U.S. administration tries to implement policies suggested by Trump, mainly regarding Russia, NATO and Iran. The uncertain future of British military capabilities—significantly reduced in recent years—could further limit the potential for cooperation.

The Special Relationship. The Anglo-American "special relationship" is based on historical-cultural and economic links, as well as the willingness and ability to defend shared values and interests. The major pillar of this relationship is defence cooperation. American support plays a key role in the maintenance of the UK's operationally independent nuclear deterrent. Military bases on UK territory and overseas installations, especially in the Indian Ocean, South Atlantic and on Cyprus, support American global power projection. Traditionally, the UK has actively engaged in the largest U.S. military interventions, most recently Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003). Both allies have unique cooperation on intelligence and have developed close defence industry links, which include privileged access for British companies to the U.S. defence market and technology and significant procurements of American military equipment by Britain.

The Obama administration consistently emphasised the importance of the special relationship with Britain, but the real significance of the ally for the U.S. has been declining. Following the global financial crisis, Britain reduced its defence budget by about 8% in 2010–2015, which led to, among other moves, decommissioning both of its aircraft carriers, one in 2010 and the other in 2014. It was only in 2014 when the government confirmed it would replace the vessels not with one—which had been the earlier consideration—but by two Queen Elizabeth-class ships, which are expected to be fully operational in 2020 and 2023, respectively. The traditional British willingness to support U.S. military operations was questioned in 2013 when parliament did not approve participation in attacks on the Syrian regime after it had been accused of using chemical weapons against rebels and civilians. As a result, the U.S. strengthened military cooperation with France, which, along with other countries, supported intervention in Syria in 2013 and was the first European country to join the American airstrikes against the so-called Islamic State (IS/ISIS/ISIL) in September 2015 (two months before the UK started). At the same time, the British preoccupation with internal affairs, such as the independence referendum in Scotland in 2014, pushed the U.S. to turn toward Germany as its key political partner in the EU, especially in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Before the in/out EU referendum in Britain, Obama's administration—unlike Donald Trump—warned that Brexit could weaken the position of the UK and

undermine European unity. U.S. officials also emphasised the importance of British influence on the decisions taken within the Union.

British Military Capabilities. To enhance the UK's credibility as an ally, the British government committed to increase defence spending. According to the National Security Strategy (NSS) and the Strategic Defence and Security (SDSR) of 2015, defence expenditures should be maintained until 2020 at the level of at least 2% of GDP, in line with the NATO commitments. SDSR assumes an increase in investment and modernisation of equipment in 2015-2025 by £12 billion to the level of £178 billion, and an increase in the overall defence budget from £34.3 billion in 2015 to £39.6 billion in 2020. These plans are based, however, on the assumption that the economic growth will be maintained, which may not be possible due to Brexit.

The new investments are supposed to strengthen the ability of the British armed forces to conduct a full spectrum of operations. To regain some capabilities lost after the 2010 reforms, the UK will purchase nine P-8 Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft. It plans to accelerate the purchase of some of the 138 F-35 multirole fighters on order so that in 2023 it should have 42 aircraft, including 24 based on aircraft carriers. By 2025, the size of the UK's expeditionary force is to be increased to 50,000 troops, compared with the previously planned 30,000. At the core will be a land forces division, including two mechanised "strike brigades" formed from existing units. The UK will spend an additional £2.5 billion on its intelligence and security services and £2 billion on equipment for its special forces. Plans include a twofold increase in investment in cyber capabilities (up to £1.9 billion by 2020.). The number of armed drones will grow from 10 to 20. The military will also modernise its reconnaissance and transport aircraft.

However, the implementation of these plans will not completely offset the earlier reductions and some important programmes have been delayed. The armed forces, which were cut by 30,000 soldiers since 2010 will be maintained at the level of about 145,000 troops. The number of Challenger 2 tanks will be reduced from 227 to 170, with the lighter Ajax combat vehicles replacing the heavier equipment. Instead of the 25 frigates and destroyers available in 2008, the navy will maintain 19 large vessels with the possibility to increase the number in the 2030s. Plans to replace four submarines armed with Trident nuclear ballistic missiles are delayed, with the first vessel expected to enter service after 2030 instead of 2028. The cost of the acquisition programme will increase from £25 billion to £31 billion. Additionally, according to British nongovernmental and parliamentary reports, the UK will be able to maintain its defence spending from 2015 onwards at the 2% of GDP level largely due to the inclusion of new items that are not part of the MoD budget, such as war pensions and intelligence activities.

Possible Areas of Cooperation and Divergence of Interests. It will be a priority for the UK to maintain the U.S. commitment to NATO, although Trump has conditioned this on an increase in defence budgets by European allies and better adaptation of the Alliance to fight terrorism. Therefore, the United Kingdom, which by the end of 2016 had conducted the highest number of airstrikes, after the U.S., against IS in Syria and Iraq, would be a natural American ally in the intensified fight against terrorism announced by Trump. The UK plans to increase its political and military involvement in the Persian Gulf region. In December 2016, it announced it would strengthen cooperation with regional partners in combating terrorism and the influence of Iran, including through expert support. In 2016, it opened a naval base in Bahrain and plans new military facilities in Oman that will support maritime and land-based activities. The British government also announced it will support the U.S. in the Asia-Pacific region through an increased military presence after 2020. New aircraft carriers are to patrol international waters and participate in exercises in the region, which may be important in the context of Trump's firmer stance towards Chinese territorial claims.

At the same time, the British government opposes the normalisation of relations with Russia, which seems to be one of the major foreign policy aims of the new U.S. President. Although British authorities recognise the need for dialogue with Russia, they support the sanctions introduced after Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Britain is also significantly engaged in strengthening of Eastern Flank of the Alliance, where British troops will lead a battalion-sized battlegroup in Estonia, one of four such units to be deployed in the region. In addition, the UK government supports the agreement restricting Iran's nuclear programme and would like to maintain pressure on the Assad regime in Syria to end the conflict and solve its humanitarian issues, whereas Trump has suggested changes in U.S. policies in those areas. Such a divergence of interests may lead to tension that could weaken the special relationship between the two countries.

Conclusions. The UK maintains significant military potential, which is unique in Europe. However, in recent years it has been visibly weakened. Should Brexit bring negative consequences for the British economy, the planned reconstruction of some lost military capability could be difficult to achieve. This would limit the potential for British cooperation with the U.S. The relations between the two allies will depend to a large extent on U.S. policy toward Russia and NATO. Attempts to make concessions to Russia and reduce U.S. engagement in the Alliance could force the UK to increase investments in European security through both NATO and cooperation with the EU. As a result, the UK's ability to shape global security and offer operational support to the United States in Asia-Pacific and the Persian Gulf would not be significantly enhanced, which could result in decreasing British attractiveness as a U.S. ally.

Poland and the United Kingdom hold a similar perspective on the future of transatlantic relations, the U.S. and Russia. They also belong to a small group of NATO states that meet their financial obligations with regard to defence spending and invest a substantial part of their resources in modernisation of their military. This creates the scope for closer cooperation, especially since the British authorities will seek ways to strengthen the UK's political position in Europe after leaving the European Union. The aim of Poland's policy should be to solidify the UK's military presence in Central and Eastern Europe and enlarge the number of high readiness troops in NATO, which is crucial for credible deterrence and collective defence missions.