

U.S.-U.K. Diplomatic Differences On the Oil Spill

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The repercussions of the Macondo Well oil spill were felt in many different spheres, revealing the complexity of contemporary systems. The breach opened in diplomatic relations between the United States and Great Britain was noteworthy, as was the importance of confirming that diplomacy can be understood as a space in which conflicts are managed mainly symbolically. In this case, these conflicts involved the environment, pensions, companies, terrorism, war, alliances, and the economy, among other issues.

The United States and Great Britain share a unique diplomatic cooperation agenda that after World War II Winston Churchill dubbed the “special relationship.” Questions like

diplomacy, defense, nuclear cooperation, containing communism, and the United Kingdom’s mediation between Europe and the United States have filled out this simple, ambiguous term that nonetheless hides a more complex meaning.

This “special relationship” has been uneven and marked by disloyalty and imbalances. Great Britain profited from it to remain a world power even after losing its colonies and its economic power had shrunk. During the Cold War there were cracks in it: the Suez crisis; Korea and Vietnam; Granada and Libya. But at the end of these processes, the relationship was bolstered. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher asked President George Bush to act decisively during the Arabian Persian Gulf crisis, and Tony Blair got a reticent William Clinton to commit to intervene in the Kosovo conflict. September 11, 2001 brought them closer together; George W.

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Bush himself told the U.S. Congress that he did not have a truer friend than Great Britain. And, in effect, Prime Minister Tony Blair would completely back the “war against terrorism.”

Although there has been a good understanding between statesmen of conflicting positions (Conservative Harold Macmillan and Democrat John F. Kennedy; Republican Henry Kissinger and Labor Party member Jim Callaghan; Republican George W. Bush and Labor Prime Minister Tony Blair), today’s inverted political geometry brings Democrat Barack Obama and Conservative David Cameron’s differences face to face.

THE CONTEXT OF THE OIL DISASTER

Nevertheless, the context in which the oil disaster took place in mid-2010 was not the best: Obama was dealing with the biggest crisis of his first 18 months in the presidency. His popularity and the expectations about his administration began to blur in the face of profound economic, political crisis and the worsening of the war in Afghanistan. The three key reforms he had fostered were running into problems: the economic package had transferred big benefits to the banks; the health reform subsidized the private insurance industry; and the financial reform was not going well. In addition, the Republicans were accusing Obama of being a socialist and trying to change the U.S. political system.¹ Different polls showed a drop in both Obama’s and his party’s popularity in the face of the approaching November elections.

For his part, David Cameron had just taken office after a long crisis that had finally ejected the Labor Party from Number 10 Downing Street. According to some analysts, his most difficult task was to find the role Great Britain should play internationally after 50 years of a hazy profile. He was facing heavy public spending cutbacks because of the European crisis, and even so had to deal with a complex global agenda.

On May 14, during his first trip as head of the Foreign Office, William Hague met with Hillary Clinton, hoping to demonstrate the new Conservative government’s Atlanticism.² He expressed his confidence in the “special relationship” and his desire that it would be less dependent than under Tony Blair, saying that, while it was undoubtedly true that the two countries could not agree on everything, Great Britain continues to be the U.S.’s indispensable partner in matters of intelligence, nuclear issues, international diplomacy, and what the two countries are doing in Afghanistan.³

During the U.S.-British conflict around Macondo, there were three moments: the attack on British Petroleum, the jewel in the crown; the emphasis on its being British; and the terrorism factor.

One of the main effects of the explosion on the Deepwater Horizon platform was environmental damage, one of the most sensitive topics for President Obama’s policies, as well as the impact on the economic situation of both oil workers and the Gulf of Mexico. For this reason, the answer was immediate: two days after the explosion, Obama said that his “number one priority” was to deal with the disaster. His strategy focused directly on the company. During the conflict, there were three moments: the attack on British Petroleum, the jewel in the crown; the emphasis on its being British; and the terrorism factor.

Given the lack of a decisive response by the companies involved, Barack Obama insisted on the need to find alternative energy sources, reaffirming one of his campaign issues. In addition, the United States began a criminal investigation into the explosion. On June 8, Obama reproached BP, saying he talked to experts about the spill so he would know “whose ass to kick,” a typical American expression heard around the world. This attitude sharpened with the statement about keeping the boot on the neck of the oil corporation and that he would have fired Tony Hayward, the company’s CEO. This aggressive rhetoric can also be explained by the fact that Obama was facing the no less harsh criticisms about his administration’s handling of the oil spill crisis alleging that his response was slow in coming and halfhearted.

The next day, in the midst of the 16-percent plunge in BP stock prices on the New York Stock Exchange, Obama demanded that the corporation cap the well and clean up the disaster and the crude spilled into the Gulf, in addition to paying reparations and appropriate compensation to its workers and everyone affected, mainly fishermen and businesses in the tourism industry. At the height of the crisis, as Obama raised the tone of his criticism of the British corporation, Cameron was being pressured domestically. The media tension had forced both statesmen to show how good their relations were.⁴ But, in this context, Chevron Oil criticized its British rival saying that with “best practices” the sea of oil could have been avoided.⁵

Later on, the U.S. president compared the spill to 9/11, using the name “British Petroleum” in the same statement, although the company had changed its formal name to BP in 2001. This was interpreted as an attack on Great Britain, even though most of the consortium’s activities are concentrated in the United States. Chris Blackhurst pointed out that “BP has not called itself British Petroleum for more than 10 years....It’s not the only one to not use its full name. Barack Hussein Obama is another.”⁶

Another factor that upset even the best intentions of repairing the “special relationship” was the 2009 release of Libyan agent Abdel Baset Al-Megrahi, sentenced to life in prison for the 1988 mid-air explosion of a Boeing 747 over Lockerbie, Scotland, with a 270 death toll. *The Times* had reported that two years before BP had led a campaign to obtain Al-Megrahi’s release to sew up a contract for developing Libyan oil. Hague stated that BP had had nothing to do with Al-Megrahi’s release, and the Scottish government said the oil giant had not contacted Edinburgh authorities, which are independent in judicial matters. BP admitted having spoken to the British government about an agreement to exchange prisoners between Great Britain and Libya, but denied any participation in the discussions that led to Al-Megrahi’s release.

The counterattack was not long in coming in this diplomatic crisis. The response came from three main kinds of actors: British diplomats, the information media, which were harsher in their reaction, and businessmen. Malcolm Rifkind, former foreign minister, wrote that President Obama’s aggressive rhetoric was exaggerated and ran the risk of dividing the two countries. Christopher Mayer, former ambassador to Washington, expressed concern about pension plans that had invested their funds in BP stock. For its part, the *Daily Mail* denounced Barack Obama as a hypocrite, saying he himself had fostered deepwater exploration, and, along with the *London Evening Standard*, underlined the environmental disasters caused by U.S. companies off British coasts. Philip Stephens of the *Financial Times* remembered that the United States, with one-twentieth of the world’s population, consumes one-fourth of the world’s oil. *The Daily Express* and the *Daily Telegraph* also counterattacked.⁷

Outstanding among the business community to respond were Richard Lambert, director of the Confederation of British Industry;⁸ Miles Templeman, director of the Institute of Directors; and John Napier, president of the RSE insurance company, who accused Obama of being anti-British, as did

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London’s Conservative Mayor Boris Johnson. All of this pressured David Cameron to try to get the U.S. president to tone down his discourse.

Amidst this crossfire of accusations, the French daily *Libération* talked about a human, ecological, and economic catastrophe that was beginning to turn into a diplomatic crisis. Cameron’s government decided to help BP resolve the situation, recognizing that the company should do everything possible to respond effectively. On June 11, Cameron, returning from Afghanistan, underlined the importance of BP continuing to be a strong, stable company, both for Great Britain and for the United States and other countries, and clearly stated his concern about the oil spill’s environmental damage. The next day, in a more conciliatory tone, Obama communicated to Cameron that BP was a global, multinational corporation, that the frustration about the oil slick had nothing to do with British national identity, and that there was no interest in pushing down the company’s share value.⁹

The first official meeting between Barack Obama and David Cameron, July 20 in the White House, was a chance to smooth rough edges. There were points of agreement (global security, Afghanistan, and Iran’s nuclear program) and others of difference (the solutions to the economic crisis and the oil spill). Cameron defended the interests of the British pension funds that owned the oil company; plus, he asked that the issue of the oil spill not be mixed with the case of the Libyan terrorist, recognizing that his release, which he dubbed “completely wrong,” was not due to BP.

Certainly, part of this diplomatic distancing has to do with the profiles of the two politicians. In contrast to his predecessors, Barack Obama, of Kenyan descent, does not have personal ties to Great Britain. He was raised in Hawaii and Indonesia, which is why he is considered the United States’ “first Pacific president.”¹⁰ Cameron, for his part, is the first prime minister elected since the war in Iraq began, and his priority is to contribute to European economic recovery. It is the case, then, that the two statesmen do not share either

a political agenda or an ideological perspective, so the Atlantic gap continues to widen.¹¹

If we look at this case as a whole, we see a U.S. politician concerned mainly about his national situation, who responds to domestic problems on an international sounding board. This may be due to a certain degree of diplomatic inexperience or to something that has characterized U.S. politicians: a certain amount of imperial arrogance. There was political uncertainty and the latent threat that what had been achieved during his first year could be lost; nevertheless, there was still a certain degree of diplomatic incapacity on the part of the United States. For his part, David Cameron displayed better management of the crisis and was able to deal with both internal and U.S. pressure, given that he was in a better position politically, but above all he understood that the risk of destroying the oil company could spread to the United States itself, where the attack would boomerang and blame him for not having averted the consortium's bankruptcy.

In this case, it was interesting to observe how different actors (diplomats, businessmen, and, increasingly, the media) intervened in this diplomatic crisis, and also how old issues, for example global corporate interests, superimposed themselves on emerging topics like the environment. In addition, it is interesting to note how the importance of local governments has grown, such as in the case of the Scottish court's decision about the Libyan terrorist.

The question that must be asked is, if the United States and Great Britain have a "special relationship," what is special about it and what impact did Macondo have on it? Behind an idealist vision are big interests, mainly economic, military, and global security interests, and this crisis affected economic agreements and changed the rules of the game. Both countries forgot that the companies are global and that the severing of national ties in production also brings the severing of national ties in risks, costs, and responsibilities. This crisis was the regulatory valve for the interests of big powers. Nevertheless, undoubtedly the United States has no better ally in its

global war than Great Britain, and cooperation in international political matters will continue in coming years.

One way or another, David Cameron assured this when he said the relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom was simple, that it is strong because it benefits both countries, and that the alliance is not sustained by historical ties or blind loyalty, but that it is a voluntary partnership that serves both countries' national interests.¹² ■■■

NOTES

¹ Paul Harris and Anushka Asthana, "Barack Obama in Crisis as David Cameron Arrives for First Official Visit," *The Observer, The Guardian*, July 18, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/jul/18/barack-obama-david-cameron>.

² Atlanticism is the philosophy of cooperation among Western European and North American nations—specifically the United States and Canada—on political, economic, and defense issues, with the purpose of safeguarding their security and protecting the values that unite them: "democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law." One who shares the idea of Atlanticism is known as an Atlantist or an Atlanticist; the name derives from the Atlantic Ocean that "connects the two continents," and ultimately from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). [Editor's Note.]

³ Walter Oppenheimer, "La nueva diplomacia británica se estrena en Washington," *El País*, May 14, 2010, http://www.elpais.com/articulo/internacional/nueva/diplomacia/britanica/estrena/Washington/elpepiint/20100515elpepiint_6/Tes.

⁴ Yolanda Monge, "Obama exigirá a BP fondos para pagar los daños del vertido," *El País*, June 14, 2010, http://www.elpais.com/articulo/sociedad/Obama/exigira/BP/fondos/pagar/danos/vertido/elpepisoc/20100614elpepisoc_2/Tes.

⁵ Sonia Delesalle-Stolper, "Convoqué chez Obama, BP soigne son profil bas," *Libération*, June 15, 2010, <http://www.liberation.fr/economie/0101641437-convoque-chez-obama-bp-soigne-son-profil-bas>.

⁶ "UK Media Attack Obama for Comments about BP," CNN, June 11, 2010, http://articles.cnn.com/2010-06-11/world/uk.media.gulf.oil_1_bp-oil-rig-explosion-deepwater?s=PM:WORLD. [Editor's Note.]

⁷ Walter Oppenheimer, "Cameron pide garantías para la compañía," *El País*, June 17, 2010, http://www.elpais.com/articulo/internacional/Cameron/pide/garantias/compania/elpepiint/20100617elpepiint_1/Tes?print=1.

⁸ Sonia Delesalle-Stolper, "Quand Londres se lasse du ton de Washington," *Libération*, June 12, 2010, <http://www.liberation.fr/terre/0101640995-quand-londres-se-lasse-du-ton-de-washington>.

⁹ AFP, "Obama à Cameron: les critiques contre BP ne visent pas Londres," *Libération*, June 12, 2010, <http://www.liberation.fr/economie/0101641085-obama-a-cameron-les-critiques-contre-bp-ne-visent-pas-londres>.

¹⁰ Gideon Rachman, "Love and Loathing across the Ocean," *Financial Times*, June 14, 2010, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/8974d0fe-77e8-11df-82c3-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1BJuv5dBZ>.

¹¹ Matt Browne, "¿Hacia dónde va la relación Obama-Cameron?" *El País*, July 21, 2010, http://www.elpais.com/articulo/opinion/va/relacion/Obama-Cameron/elpepiopi/20100721elpepiopi_5/Tes.

¹² Antonio Caño, "Obama y Cameron certifican la solidez de sus relaciones bilaterales," *El País*, July 20, 2010, http://www.elpais.com/articulo/internacional/Obama/Cameron/certifican/solidez/relaciones/bilaterales/elpepuint/20100720elpepuint_21/Tes.

The U.S. president even compared the spill to 9/11, using the name "British Petroleum" in the same statement, although the company had changed its formal name to BP in 2001. This was interpreted as an attack on Great Britain.