

The Indispensable Junior Partner

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It is a commonplace to say that the United States of America has been Great Britain's most important ally since the end of the Second World War. Countless books and essays have been written about the Anglo-American relationship. Some have emphasized the "specialness" of this alliance; others have dismissed this concept by pointing at the frequent disagreements and frictions between the governments of the two countries. On one thing, however, there seems to be widespread agreement: that the United States has always been much more special to Great Britain than Great Britain has been to the United States. This perception results, in part, from the great discrepancy between British and American military might and economic power during the Cold War. After 1945, the argument goes, Great Britain, faced with economic decline and a rapidly disintegrating empire, could only be a junior partner to the American superpower and self-proclaimed leader of the "Free World". This assumption is just as problematic as it is persuasive, because it can result in a tendency to overlook the role Great Britain and its empire played in the geopolitical thinking and strategic planning of the US Government. Great Britain may have been only one out of many American allies during the Cold War, but that does not mean that its cooperation was at certain times and in specific regions not essential from the American point of view. In other words, a junior partner can be – in spite of his relative unimportance in comparison to the more senior one – a *sine qua non* to the success of a project.

An example of a region where the US Government regarded British cooperation as essential to safeguard important American interests was the Persian Gulf during the 1960s. Until 1971, Great Britain maintained a special position in this area; a position that was based on a significant military presence as well as political treaties with the local governments. Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar and the seven Trucial States (today's United Arab Emirates) remained under Great Britain's protection against foreign aggression. Throughout the 1960s, the US Government attached great importance to the preservation of this British presence in the Persian Gulf. The great American expectations in this regard were put in a nutshell by the US Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, when his British counterpart, George Brown, informed him in January 1968 that Great Britain intended to leave the Persian Gulf as part of its general military withdrawal from East of Suez: "Be British, George, be British – how can you betray us?". Greatly angered and dismayed by the British withdrawal plans, the Johnson Government

tried to make Great Britain's Prime Minister Harold Wilson and his Cabinet change their minds, but to no avail. The Anglo-American relationship had reached a low point.

The reason why the US Government was so keen to see Great Britain's special position in the Persian Gulf preserved was its firm conviction that this presence had an important stabilizing influence in an area that was of great strategic and economic significance during the Cold War. The relevance to the Western Bloc of the Persian Gulf and its rim states, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Iraq, lay in the vast regional oil reserves. The principal consumers of this oil were Japan and the Western European countries, who imported 75% and 60%, respectively, of their annual oil requirements from the larger Persian Gulf area. Their great dependence on the regional oil reserves made it imperative for the US Government to ensure that the Persian Gulf was not controlled by a hostile power. From the American point of view, the worst imaginable scenario for the Persian Gulf was to fall under the domination of the Soviet Union, which would then be able to use access to the oil reserves as a bargaining tool to hold the Western Bloc to ransom. In addition to these Cold War considerations, the US Government also had direct commercial interests in the Persian Gulf region: to protect the substantial and extremely profitable investments American companies had made in the local oil industry.

During the 1960s, the US Government – supported by the State Department and CIA – remained convinced that the larger Persian Gulf area was an inherently unstable and insecure region. Saudi Arabia, Iran and Iraq all had territorial ambitions which threatened the integrity of the smaller Gulf States. At the same time, the rivaling character of these ambitions seemed to entail the risk of a greater regional conflict, which was – from the American point of view – bound to eventually lead to Soviet intervention. The US Government, therefore, expected Great Britain to continue to act as a protecting power to the smaller Gulf States and prevent the development of a dangerous power vacuum. This was something which the United States felt neither willing nor able to do itself. The State Department regarded it as politically impossible to establish a US presence in the Persian Gulf that was comparable to Great Britain's special position of influence. The British relationship with the smaller Gulf States had evolved and grown since the middle of the 19th Century and was therefore not easily replaced. Another important reason for the US Government's unwillingness to get involved in the defense of the Persian Gulf was that the United States found itself becoming more and more embroiled in the Vietnam War as the 1960s progressed. With its forces tied up in Southeast Asia, the United States could not afford to establish a substantial military presence in the Persian Gulf region. Faced with increasingly severe domestic criticism because of the Vietnam War, President Johnson also believed a continued British world role to be essential for presentational reasons. Both Johnson and Rusk regarded it as politically disastrous if the American people gained the impression that the United States had been abandoned by Great Britain in its effort to police the "Free World".

The example of the Persian Gulf proves the value of analyzing the Anglo-American relationship from the perspective of the US Government. Great Britain's special position in the Persian Gulf was, until 1968, an important factor in the US strategy to contain communism in the Middle East and deny the Soviet Union access to local oil resources. When the British Government decided to withdraw from the Persian Gulf, President Johnson did not find a way to make up for this significant loss. It was left to his successor, Richard Nixon, to find a solution.

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