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Last charge of the knights? Iraq, Afghanistan and the special relationship

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Abstract

At the heart of the ‘special relationship’ ideology, there is supposed to be a grand bargain. In exchange for paying the ‘blood price’ as America's ally,

Britain will be rewarded with exceptional influence over American foreign policy and its strategic behaviour. Soldiers and statesman continue to articulate this idea. Since 9/11, the notion of Britain playing 'Greece' to America's 'Rome' gained new life thanks to Anglophiles on both sides of the Atlantic. One potent version of this ideology was that the more seasoned British would teach Americans how to fight 'small wars' in Iraq and Afghanistan, thereby bolstering their role as tutor to the superpower. Britain does derive benefits from the Anglo-American alliance and has made momentous contributions to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Yet British solidarity and sacrifices have not purchased special influence in Washington. This is partly due to Atlanticist ideology, which sets Britain unrealistic standards by which it is judged, and partly because the notion of 'special influence' is misleading as it loses sight of the complexities of American policy-making. The overall result of expeditionary wars has been to strain British credibility in American eyes and to display its lack of consistent influence both over high policy and the design and execution of US military campaigns. While there may be good arguments in favour of the UK continuing its efforts in Afghanistan, the notion that the war fortifies Britain's vicarious world status is a dangerous illusion that leads to repeated overstretch and disappointment. Now that Britain is in the foothills of a strategic defence review, it is important that the British abandon this false consciousness.

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