

# The Wikileaks saga has revealed a souring of the US/UK 'special relationship', and this foreign policy distance looks set to stay.

<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/2011/02/22/wikileaks-special-relationship/?pfstyle=wp>

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*Recent coverage of Wikileaks' released materials has given us new insights into the UK/US 'special relationship'. It is now clear that the closeness shared between Tony Blair and Bill Clinton (and later George Bush) has not been continued by David Cameron and President Obama. Yet, **Chris Brown** argues that Cameron is following a pragmatic approach given Britain's size and status – he may be our first real 'post-imperial' Prime Minister.*

In his Introduction to the recent *New York Times* collection of materials on [Wikileaks](#), Bill Keller comments on the way in which the newspapers involved shaped the leaks in accordance with their own agendas. Thus, the *Guardian* gave extensive coverage to [leaked US army accounts](#) of civilian casualties in Afghanistan, reflecting their scepticism about the war; the *New York Times*, on the other hand, took the view that they had already given front page coverage to all the major incidents and so gave this matter [much less emphasis](#). There is no doubt that the *Guardian's* perspective was much more in line with that of Julian Assange, but that hasn't prevented a [major fall-out](#) between Wikileaks and the *Guardian*, and so now, rather incongruously, the *Daily Telegraph* has become the major recipient of [new Wikileaks material](#), and it is interesting to see what they have made of it, where their emphasis lies.

The short answer seems to be that they are interested in highlighting the extent to which Anglo-American relations have soured in recent years. This partly comes through in the material on Libya and the release of [al-Megrahi](#) in 2009, which could be seen as serving a Conservative agenda given that it was the last Labour government that [behaved disingenuously](#), but it also goes further than that. We have also been told how the [US spied on the Foreign Office](#) and gave British nuclear secrets to the [Russians](#). The implication is that for the *Telegraph* the 'special relationship' is no longer very special and they are happy to advertise this fact.

What makes this of wider interest is that it fits with other straws in the wind. Consider, for example, the obvious lack of any personal chemistry between President Obama and David Cameron. This isn't particularly surprising as they have very little in common apart from the possession of first class intellects. But what is rather surprising is that the government doesn't seem to be concerned by this distance. Tony Blair clearly regarded establishing a personal relationship with whoever was US President as part of the job-description of the British Prime Minister, and most of his predecessors would have agreed, but not Mr Cameron. There is a fascinating contrast here between the Prime Minister's attitude and that of President Sarkozy, who has gone out of his way to [ingratiate himself](#) with the US President, a role-reversal which has left French public opinion bemused and a little irritated.

Nor is this simply a matter of personal chemistry. Foreign Secretary William Hague's briefings on his recent tour of the Middle East have been very critical of Israeli belligerence in a way that opens up a more substantial gap between British and American policy on the region than has been apparent for a long time. The contrast with Tony Blair's position on Israel's war with Hezbollah in 2006, where Blair was alone among European leaders in refusing to call for an early cease fire, is striking.

It may be that we are witnessing a real moment of change in Britain's foreign policy as the distance grows. We should be clear that this doesn't amount to a re-orientation towards a European as opposed to an Atlantic identity; even though Cameron has better personal relations with both Sarkozy and Angela Merkel than he has with Obama – and it's difficult to think of any time since 1945 when something similar could be said of a British Prime Minister – there is no intention to change in a fundamental way the semi-detached attitude towards Europe characteristic of British governments. Nor will we cease to be loyal allies of the US in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Rather, it is a case of a genuine reassessment of Britain's power in the world and a willingness to abandon at least some of the illusions of grandeur that for so long have survived the end of empire and the loss of real great-power status. David Cameron may actually be the first British leader to have a genuinely post-imperial attitude towards the world, someone who is comfortable to be the Prime Minister of a middle-power and who doesn't need to have his or his country's self-esteem boosted by American approval. In a rather confused way, the recent Defence Review reflected this position; it was confused because clearly the Defence Secretary is unreconstructed, but the effective scrapping over time of the new aircraft carriers, and the delay in replacing Trident can be seen in this light.

But what of the Tory Party? This is where the *Telegraph's* handling of Wikileaks is interesting. It clearly suggests a scepticism about Britain's relations with the US, but does it indicate acceptance of a new, lesser but more realistic, understanding of Britain's place in the world? We will find out over the next few years.

*This article first appeared on the [Duck of Minerva](#) blog on 9 February.*