Britain and the US in a world on fire

Introduction

In recent years two sets of issues have dominated discussions in Britain of the nation's place in the world. The question of Britain's relationship to Europe has been a permanent fixture on the domestic political agenda. The other international issue with major domestic consequences is what was once freely called the war on terror. Britain's alliance with the United States and its participation in military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq has been highly contentious in British politics, particularly the decision to join with the US in the invasion of Iraq in 2003. This exposed, or created, a faultline in British politics around which the most intense of feelings were expressed, and which still resonates powerfully. This has been evident in the recent debates about whether or not to join with the US and France in carrying out air strikes on IS in Syria, debates in which what some claim to be the lesson of Iraq – the destructive folly of intervention – is often at the centre of the argument.

While attitudes towards Europe have been intensively polled for decades, public perceptions of the complex of issues around Britain's relationship to global disorder have been less comprehensively studied. This is not surprising as it is only relatively recently that the extent of this disorder and its potential impact on Britain has become clear, through (inter alia) 9/11, 7/7, the murder of Lee Rigby, numerous foiled al Qaeda-inspired plots, and more recently the threat posed by the 'Islamic State' and written large in the Paris attacks of November 2015. We seem now to be in a period of extensive and growing global instability, characterized by failed and fragile states, violent civil strife and the rise of fundamentalist extremisms. The security and relative prosperity Britain has enjoyed throughout the living memories of all except the over-70s have built a mindset in which economic, social and cultural issues, as embodied in the Europe question, have been the bedrock of political debate.

However, in a period of increasing and globalised insecurity this is likely to change, as the lives of British citizens become more directly affected by chaos and violence across the world. The European issue has also been partly merged into the terrorist one, through the refugee and migrant crisis and the fears it arouses about security. The proposal here is to take one subset of the questions about British public opinion raised by this developing global situation, those focussed around Britain's relationship with the US. There is deep ambivalence towards the US across the world. Gallup International polling shows that in many countries the US is widely seen as the major threat to world peace. Yet the US is also the nation most called upon to intervene in 'humanitarian' operations or to counter movements widely seen as offering some kind of threat to peace. The British public (see, e..g., some Ipsos MORI data) shares in this ambivalence.

Whatever one might think of the legitimacy or success of the still-in-force role of the US as global policeman, there is little doubt that Britain's politics, and the British public, will be deeply affected by it in the coming period. The likely escalation and/or prolongation of the intervention in Iraq/Syria will be the focus of debate, and understanding British public opinion in this area will be a key element in the communication if not the development of foreign policy. This will require a broader knowledge of the roots and contexts of opinions about the future of Britain's place in the world and its political-military alliances.

Research objectives

We proposed therefore to investigate a number of questions about the dynamics of public opinion regarding the US, Britain's relationship with the US, and British support for America's international roles. We sought to explore the following questions.

1. What is the strength of anti-Americanism in Britain today?
2. What is the strength of pro-American sentiments?
3. How is Britain's present relationship with America seen?

4. How do people evaluate recent and current American interventions across the world?

5. What strength of relationship do people want Britain to have with the US and NATO?

Research design

A 13-item questionnaire was developed to address the objectives, and administered to a UK national sample of 2007 in September 2015, as part of an omnibus survey conducted by the Opinium research agency. The questions are reproduced in the Results section below. Respondents were asked to choose one answer for all questions except number 11, where they were asked to list in order of seriousness the three greatest threats to world peace.

Whole sample results, by question

The following tables show the percentages of the whole sample which chose each possible answer.

1. Britain should fully support American efforts to combat global terrorism.

Strongly agree	21
Agree to some extent	36
Don't know or neutral	25
Disagree to some extent	12
Strongly disagree	7

There is a clear majority of opinion in favour of supporting the US in its efforts to combat global terrorism, with agreement stronger by 38% than disagreement (57% - 19%). The proportion of Don't knows/Neutrals, while arguably high at 25%, is relatively low for the survey as a whole.

2. U.S. foreign policy is dictated by its need for cheap and secure oil supplies.

Strongly agree	17
Agree to some extent	39
Don't know or neutral	35
Disagree to some extent	7
Strongly disagree	1

The idea that US foreign policy is based on self-interested, economic considerations attracts much stronger agreement than disagreement, with a net agreement figure of 48% (56% - 8%). The Don't know/Neutral figure rises to 35%, just above what became its average for the whole survey, at 33%.

3. I share the values which America represents.

Strongly agree	5
Agree to some extent	28
Don't know or neutral	37
Disagree to some extent	21
Strongly disagree	9

The sample is split roughly equally across three ways on this one. 33% align themselves to some degree with 'American values', 30% don't.

4. The 9/11 attacks were a consequence of America's foreign policies.

Strongly agree	11
Agree to some extent	30
Don't know or neutral	34
Disagree to some extent	15
Strongly disagree	10

A sharply critical view of US foreign policy is again illustrated here, with a net agreement of 16% (41% - 25%) with the idea that 9/11 would not have happened were it not for its international actions.

5. The American people feel more of a connection with Britain than with other European countries.

Strongly agree	20
Agree to some extent	43
Don't know or neutral	29
Disagree to some extent	6
Strongly disagree	2

This question shows the second largest difference of any between overall agreement and disagreement replies: 63% vs. 8%, giving 55% net agreement with the idea that Americans are uniquely attached to Britain.
6. The United States is no longer the global power it once was.

Strongly agree	8
Agree to some extent	38
Don't know or neutral	27
Disagree to some extent	21
Strongly disagree	6

A plurality of respondents here seem to acknowledge that the multipolarity of the world has moderated America's economic and military dominance.

7. Whatever Britain's relationship with the European Community, NATO will remain of vital importance to Britain's future.

Strongly agree	32
Agree to some extent	33
Don't know or neutral	31
Disagree to some extent	3
Strongly disagree	2

This question shows the largest difference between overall agreement and disagreement: 65% vs. 5%, a net dominance of 60% for the view that NATO is of vital importance to Britain. By far the largest number of 'Strongly agree' responses (32%) was recorded for this question.

8. In politics, Britain no longer has a 'special relationship' with the U.S.

Strongly agree	7
Agree to some extent	29
Don't know or neutral	36
Disagree to some extent	23
Strongly disagree	4

In contrast to number 8, the answers to this question do not show a clear preponderance of either view (36% agree, 27% disagree).

9. The United States has not left its racist past behind.

Strongly agree	20
Agree to some extent	42
Don't know or neutral	24
Disagree to some extent	11
Strongly disagree	2

The respondents were more able to take a position on this question, and in doing so to present a strong majority (62% vs 13%) of agreement with the proposition, perhaps influenced by relatively recent and high profile reports of racial tensions in some American towns and cities.

10. The United States is basically a force for good in the world.

Strongly agree	8
Agree to some extent	33
Don't know or neutral	34
Disagree to some extent	18
Strongly disagree	7

Agreement outweighs disagreement by 16% here (41% vs. 25%), suggesting that overall there is a benign view of America's global role. As discussed below, this appears to be very inconsistent with the profile of answers to other questions.

11. Which of the following do you think represents a threat to world peace today? Number all those you think are a threat, beginning with '1' for the most serious. Don't number any you think are not a serious threat, or are unsure about.

	% listing as	Any rank	1st rank
		1-3	
Russia		67	12
Iran		56	3
China		20	3
United States		23	8
Islamic State		90	72
Israel		29	1

The present preoccupation in the news with Islamic State is mirrored in the wide agreement that IS is the greatest threat today. The media image of an expansionist Russia is also reflected here. However the number of first ranks (n = 151) given to the US suggests a significant minority with intense anti-US views.

12. How similar is British society to that in the United States? (Tick one.)

Very similar	3
Quite similar	30
Quite different	40
Very different	18
Unsure or don't know	9

A clearly skewed profile of views emerged here, with a net preponderance of 25% of those inclined to see the two societies as different.

13. How would you sum up your feelings about the U.S.? (Tick one.)

Very positive	9
Quite positive	32
Neutral	44
Quite negative	12
Very negative	4

On this question requiring the most global judgment about the US, the highest number of Don't knows/Neutrals emerged, although a clear majority can be seen (net 25%, 41% - 16%) for a positive view.

Whole sample results: discussion

There is a striking inconsistency between the answers to questions 2 and 4 on the one hand, and questions 1, 7, 10 and 13 on the other. Answers to Q2 indicate a majority of 56% holding a cynical view of the drivers of American foreign policy, although this view could be linked to a conception of normative *realpolitik* rather than being a specific indictment of American policy. More seriously, answers to Q4 reflect a substantial body of opinion aligned with the view that Islamist terror is simply a response to America's international activities. In a similar vein, the answers to Q11 point to a smaller (8%) but still significant segment of the public who see the US as the biggest threat to world peace – more people than all those who put Iran, Israel or China in that position. Nearly a quarter of the whole sample put the US in the top three threats to world peace.

Yet on the other hand, there are clear majorities of overall positive opinion. 41% agree with the proposition in Q10 that the US is basically a force for good in the world (including 8% agreeing strongly), compared to 25% who disagree. Again on Q13, it is 41% who state that they have basically positive feelings about the US (9% say 'Very positive'), this time with only 16% reporting overall negative feelings.

Overall the data suggests a roughly symmetrical distribution, though swelling a little on the moderate positive side. There are approximately equal minorities (each around 10% of the public) at both ends of the positive-negative axis with strongly defined views, with the bulk of opinion occupying more moderate positions, distributed in varying proportions above and below the midpoint. On measures of general sentiment, there is more positivity, although on measures of perceived similarity, there is a roughly equal split. On analyses of America's global role, there is more negativity. The latter finding, however, contrasts sharply with the strong majorities (65% and 57% respectively) in favour of NATO and of supporting the US actions against global terrorism. This might suggest that some respondents are reserving for themselves the right to pass a

negative moral judgment on the US, while wanting it to continue providing the major international response to global terrorism.

Whether or not many individuals are holding such contradictory views cannot be ascertained from our data, but we can say that as a whole the British public has, on this evidence, a notable ambivalence towards the United States, particularly around the foreign policy and international interventions of the US. There is a minority of around 10% who are strongly against the US and all it does.

The other main overall finding is that on average a third of respondents either are neutral or do not know what to think. While this study gives no direct evidence as to which of those two categories predominates, the small variations in the numbers recorded for this middle category suggest it may reflect more uncertainty than neutrality: higher figures are for items which arguably the public may feel least competent to judge, or which are most difficult to express in a single judgment.

Demographic differences

There were noteworthy gender differences. Men were more likely than women to have positive attitudes towards the US, but they were also more likely to agree with the critical views in US foreign policy expressed in Qs 4 and 7, and to believe that the 'special relationship' no longer existed. Their views thereby seem to embody an element of a 'hard-boiled' masculinist outlook, as well as pro-Americanism as such.

Women were more likely on all questions to respond with Neutral/Don't know. This was especially so on questions requiring some confidence to offer an opinion on global current affairs, but the underlying high level of 'abstention' could equally be due to greater caution, or even-handedness, as well as greater disinterest in, or more limited knowledge of, the issue concerned. Beyond the topic of this survey, this data suggests persistent and perhaps far-reaching differences in political outlook between men and women.

Age was also a differentiating factor, being related positively to support for the US against global terrorism and for NATO, though interestingly not to overall feeling about the US. It was also positively related to agreement with the view that America today is racist, and with the belief that the special relationship is dead.

The British Left and anti-Americanism

Less than three weeks before this survey, the election for the leadership of the UK Labour Party was won by the veteran left-winger Jeremy Corbyn. An 8% subsample of respondents in this survey consisted of people who strongly approved of this new leader, and their answers were compared with those of the rest of the sample. Unsurprisingly, they were overall considerably more hostile to the US than the majority, and saw themselves as further from its values. For example, 20% of them ranked the US as the greatest threat to world peace (compared to 56% choosing IS, compared to 72% of the whole sample). However, they still registered a net positive profile in their answers to Q13 (albeit at only 8%, 36% positive compared to 28% negative). Also, across various survey items they account for only around 2-3% of the whole sample's approximately 10% core of strongly held negative views. That antipathy is therefore not confined to the ranks of the Left who, inside and outside the Labour Party, have gathered around Corbyn.

Conclusions

The survey throws up no major surprises, but offers a clear profile of current British public opinions of the United States, on the basis of which some policy recommendations for both British and American governments can be based.

There is clearly scope for American public diplomacy to address the 80% who are typically of varying but moderate opinions, or who do not report an opinion. Attitudes towards the US are at least partly shaped by the profound split in British public opinion occasioned by the war in Iraq, which as noted earlier crystallised a large opposition (albeit still a minority of the whole public) to many aspects of the 'war on terror'. However, our data suggests that many people oscillate around the fissure-line of that split, and that a large reserve of support for the US in its global role may still be available. It is possible though that some of this support may be of a very instrumental kind, in that it expresses a fear of terror which American military strength may be seen as a protection against, at the same time as other aspects of America's global presence are criticised.

Moreover, the age-related differences in opinion indicate an ongoing unravelling of traditional affinities with the US. On the other hand, today's ideological de-alignments may present an opportunity for new structures of affinity to be built. An important factor here could be the relationships of global publics with the American corporations dominant in the digital media world wherein those publics live, as could the continuing power of American music and other creative industries to resonate with non-American peoples.

From the British government point of view, our data offer further support (additional to that from other recent polling) for the present bi-partisan approach to foreign policy and the intervention in Syria. However they also throw into relief the contradictory and probably somewhat fluid nature of public opinion regarding not just the US but the present global conjuncture. While the public wants defence against terrorism, it is skeptical if not cynical about the reasons for a Western presence on the global stage. Furthermore, only a minority are prepared to assert a moral identity shared with the US which, in the long run, is likely to be the only effective basis for successful international action.