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“The Special Relationship”: Margaret Thatcher and Reagan’s years

“Relations Spéciales” : Les Années de Margaret Thatcher et Reagan

Abstract:

It is during the Second World War that the United Kingdom and the United States of America succeeded in developing a very close partnership to the extent that the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill called it « The Special Relationship between UK and USA ». This latter continued after the end of WW2 and was cemented during the Cold War. It is right considering that the close personal relationship between leaders of the two nations, USA and UK, helped tighten to a great extent that partnership, and that was very obvious between the British Prime Minister Thatcher and the American president Reagan. This paper will investigate how was the special relationship during M. Thatcher premiership and the US president Reagan, the levels of cooperation between the two, and how they succeeded in implementing the special relationship as was visioned by W. Churchill.

Key words: Special Relationship, UK, USA, The Soviet Union, Cold War, Diplomatic cooperation, Intelligence, and Nuclear partnership.

Introduction:

The term « Special Relationship » entails the exceptional close political, Diplomatic, economic, and military relations between the United Kingdom and the United States of America. It was first introduced and uttered in 1946 in a speech by Winston Churchill, the British Prime Minister at that time. These two nations, Great Britain and the United States of America enjoyed what was described as « unparalleled » relationship at variant levels, namely, economic activity, military planning and execution of operations, and nuclear technology and intelligence sharing. This sample of collaboration went through hard times and knew many ups and downs through different periods of time, but it remained as the most successful example of cooperation between states in the world at all, as advocated by some critics, like Baylis, Haglund, and Turner. One important thing to mention here, is the fact that the close personal relations of leaders of both countries, in this case the Prime Minister of Great Britain Margaret Thatcher, and the US president Reagan, played a crucial role in pushing the special relationship further and making it beneficial for the two states. In this

research paper, we will shed light on the different levels of cooperation between both nations during Margaret Thatcher premiership (1979-1990) and the Reagan Administration (1981-1989), and we will make clear why some critics assume that it was the age of the fulfillment of the ‘‘Special Relationship’’, as well as, how the personal relations between the two leaders helped implement the special relationship’s perceptions as it was first forged by the statesman Winston Churchill.

First section: Common ideals and common interest

The governments of both leaders shared the same political principles of a free regime at the time which was distinct from the most radical form of Socialism, i.e.: The Soviet Union. Their respective philosophies and vision of the world drew them together and produced common goals which helped push ‘the Special Relationship’ further in opposition to the USSR. This international ideological conflict was the core of the Cold War. Following that respect, Thatcher and Reagan were strategic and put aside their historic disagreement and decided to be as partners in the front to defend the free world and to preserve liberal democracy through pragmatic foreign actions in the Cold War. In 1981, President Reagan put the cards on the table and made things clear through his note to the Prime Minister, citing out:

You are indeed right that we share a very special concern for democracy and for liberty. That is the essence of the special relationship between our two countries, and it is similarly an excellent basis for inaugurating an extended period of co-operation and close consultation between your government and my administration. ⁽¹⁾

This deep vision and understanding of the special relationship, and expression of a good will paved the way to many successes in the future by coming to good terms in defining freedom and protecting liberal democracy against the Russian absolutism. M.Thatcher, previously confirmed Reagan’s belief in the uniqueness of the special relationship by counting Britain as one of ‘‘those allies who share America’s ideal of freedom’’. Both leaders believed that their domestic and foreign policy stemmed from the same source. Reagan made it clear in 1981, that this year is the year of ‘*applying the conservative principles that i had so long exposed to national government*’.²

¹ Ronald Reagan to Margaret Thatcher, Fubuary2, 1981, The Margaret Thatcher Foundation. Accessed September 1, 2018.

<http://www.margaretthatcher.org.document/109257>.

² Rona Reagan, Speaking my mind :selected speeches, (New York : Simon and Schuster, 1989).p.60.

They both focused on setting the house in order by deregulating the private sector, promoted free trade, and reducing taxes. After that they turned their sight to international affairs. In 1982, Reagan visited Britain and cherished their support in resisting the Soviet Union and its doctrine which he labeled for the first time “an Evil Empire”. Domestic and foreign policy were linked in Reagan’s mind and he believed that a free economy was crucially connected to foreign affairs and defense. He stated that: *« Power is not only sufficient military strength but a sound economy, a reliable energy supply and credibility-the belief by any potential enemy that you will not choose surrender as the way to maintain peace ».*³

Both leaders implement fiscal policies that were both mere and radical trying to stabilize the international commercial system that had destroyed massive amounts of capital throughout the two World Wars.

The first phase of the economic reforms was a “deflationary policy” as labeled at that time, applied both in the United Kingdom, and the United States of America to face the harsh stagflation of the 1970’s. Fruitful results were achieved in 1990 after these changes in both sides of the Atlantic and the balance was repaired.

Second section: Diplomatic and intelligence cooperation (The Falklands)

After setting the house in order from within through a strong, and stable economic ground, time was finally ripe for both countries to face the fast growing foreign policy challenges. In 1982, an international crisis put the special relationship to the test, which was « The Falklands War ».⁴ A sudden invasion by the new revolutionary Argentinean government hit the islands in which 97 percent of its population was British and under British protection. Before the invasion happened, President Reagan informed Thatcher on April 1, about this hostile action and that he had to get in touch immediately with the dictator’ General Galitieri’, but that was in vain. President Reagan stood by the side of its British partner citing that:

We will continue to cooperate with the British government in the effort to resolve the dispute, both in attempting to avert hostilities and to stop them if they should break out. While

³ Kiron K. Skinner, Annelise Anderson, and Martin Anderson, Reagan, In His Own Hand : The Writings of Ronald Reagan that Reveal His Revolutionary Vision for America, (New York : Touchstone, 2001), p.9.

⁴ The Falklands are a small island chain 250 miles off the coast of Argentina settled by both the British and the Argentinians in the 1820, the British declared their sovereignty over the islands in 1833, and it has been disputed on and off ever since. BBC, « The Battle Over the Falklands. » Accessed September 02, 2018. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/199850.stm.

*we have a policy of neutrality on the sovereignty issue, we will not be neutral on the issue involving Argentine use of military force.*⁵

Britain found itself in the obligation to engage in a war to get back the islands which lasted 74 days, and many souls were lost from both sides. M. Thatcher was scared to be blamed, as head of government, that she failed to protect her own people and let them down, and her fear became greater from the reaction of ‘the United Nations’ at that time regarding Britain’s colonialist past and her breaking down one of the dearest principles of this international structure which is “self-determination”. To that respect, Reagan fully supported her instead of denouncing Britain, he stated: « *We will leave no doubt that her Majesty’s Government worked with us in good faith and was left with no choice but to proceed with military action based on the right of self-defense.* »⁶

An important point to mention is that apart from the diplomatic support acknowledged by Reagan at the international level, he provided weaponry, intelligence, logistical and satellite aid to his ally but remaining neutral while maintaining the interests of his country in the region, which was a clever move to take that shows he is an ally worth trusting and will never let his partner down under any circumstances. This strategic cooperation strained the special relationship and helped the British as well as the Americans to regain more credibility, confidence, and trust after the previous disastrous “Suez Crisis”, and “the Vietnam War” outcome, respectively, in the international landscape. As a matter of fact, ‘the Falklands War’ was, but a revelation that the Anglo-American partnership was still able to fulfill common defined goals. Moreover, this conflict helped Britain recover and maintain her national prestige, and asserted her place as a world leader with a voice worth listening.

Third section: Nuclear Issues and Partnership

Thatcher and Reagan were outstanding figures for their « Cold War » partnership, and their individual choices and their nations’ actions made all the difference in the war. In 1970, a new policy was introduced and implemented which is “the process of detente”, a potential to reduce the fear of a nuclear war that was the core of the cold war. Following that respect,

⁵ Ronald Reagan to Margaret Thatcher, April 1, 1982, The Margaret Thatcher Foundation. Accessed september 2 , 2018. <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/109401>.

⁶ Thatcher, The Downing Street Years, p. 211.

Henry Kissinger advocated that detente is a process that should be applied urgently and defined it as follow: « *an acceptance of mutual obligations and of the need for accommodation and restraint* ».⁷ He believed and urged the international community that this policy of mutual responsibility should be adapted to avoid the entire world a disastrous and undesirable outcomes; and coexistence should be accommodated worldwide to function. In that matter, an agreement of the prevention of nuclear war, and the statements of principles were signed in Moscow, and later in 1972, the Strategic Arms Limitations Talk (SALT) which limited the development of certain classes of weapons. M. Thatcher joined Reagan in his crucial confrontational attitudes towards the Soviet Union after he called it an evil empire in 1982, and he stated that: « *Marxist Leninist thought is an empty cupboard* ».⁸ He believed that the (SALT) was a trick by the Russians to hide their secret intentions to develop their weapons « *while Americans stood idle* ».⁹

In 1976, at Kensington, Thatcher made it clear that she shared Reagan's visions towards U.S.S.R, by stating that: « *The Russians are bent on world dominance* ».¹⁰

They both agreed that a strong system of defense should be developed *in* the face of the Soviet military buildup that had been going since the 1950's. One should notice that one of the greatest accomplishments of UK and USA partnership during the cold war was their nuclear partnership and Reagan support for Thatcher to maintain an independent nuclear deterrent in spite of his strong desire for disarmament. It was a "must 'for Britain to face the consistent Soviet threat. Thatcher believed, it would provide a ready defense for Britain and Europe, and « *contribute in The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Defense policy* ».¹¹ Despite the strong opposition within Britain against Thatcher for preserving the nuclear deterrent after 1980's, she succeeded in retaining it which helped her keep a strong foot in NATO. After six years period of time, Reagan met Gorbachev at Geneva in 1985 to discuss the reduction of nuclear weapons that were serious threats to the entire humanity. It was a tough nut to crack for both countries to let that goal go for it was, as i prefer to call it, an evil that must be done at that time for trust was, but a pipe dream. Following that line of thought, Thatcher said that nuclear war was indeed a terrible threat, but conventional war a terrible reality. Reagan was against the doctrine of "Mutually Assured Destruction" (MAD) for that he advocated the idea of « *missile shield* », which was known as the 'stars war 'which

⁷ Kissinger, American Foreign Policy, p. 153.

⁸ Reagan, Speaking my mind, p. 108.

⁹ Skinner et al, p. 79.

¹⁰ Thatcher, « *Speech at Kensington Town Hall* ».

¹¹ Paul Sharp, Thatcher's Diplomacy : The Revival of British Foreign Policy, (New York : St. Martin's Press, 1997), p. 131.

entails the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). Moreover, Thatcher had faith that any of the SDI development would likely have been shared with her for her country still had the privilege of sharing nuclear technology with their USA counterpart.

Reykjavik¹² Summit took place in October 10-11, 1986 in which USA and The Soviet failed to come to good terms to abolish all nuclear weapons for Gorbachev insisted on keeping the SDI restricted to laboratory, and Reagan strongly refused that suggestion.

Thatcher traveled after it to Camp David to reassess the joint position of USA and Britain. In 1984, a meeting was held to discuss the potential of S.D.I and resulted in a cut of 50 percent over 5 years to Soviet and US missiles, and ensuring Britain possession of the trident weapon. Later in 1987, the British prime minister traveled to Moscow to convince Gorbachev about that proposition in which she was sure that he would dislike. One can easily deduce from that the crucial role Thatcher played in the cold war diplomacy by means of the special relationship; she could negotiate with Gorbachev without being seen as a direct competitor for supremacy. It was that special partnership which allowed them to deliberate about issues of rearmament and present a solid common front to their Soviet rivals. She wrote to the House of Commons that « Cooperation between the United Kingdom and the United States of America was necessary ‘to thrash out’ the details of nuclear policy decided at Geneva in order to negotiate with Gorbachev ».¹³

Thatcher left office in 1990, a year after her friend Reagan, stating that she left Britain with « a standing in the world. That is deservedly high, not least because of our contribution to ending the cold war and to the spread of democracy through Eastern Europe and Soviet Union. »¹⁴ Both leaders stepped down leaving both countries with a strong economic, and achieving one of the great feats of the twentieth century, that is, the defeat of the Soviet Union by means of the special relationship.

¹² Capital of Iceland.

¹³ Margaret Thatcher, « Prime Minister’s Visit to the Soviet Union », the Margaret Thatcher Foundation, Accessed September10, 2018. <http://www.margaretthatcher.org.document/106787>.

¹⁴ Margaret Thatcher, « Confidence in Her Majesty’s Government », the Margaret Thatcher Foundation, Accessed September10, 2018. <http://www.margaretthatcher.org./speeches/display.document.asp?docid=108256>.

Conclusion:

To conclude, one may say that, a shared political philosophy was the cornerstone that constituted that special alliance which showcased a serious ideological conflict between the communist, and liberal democratic spheres. As a fact, conservatism in both The United Kingdom, and the United States resulted in the common understanding of freedom for both leaders and states which was the pillar of « the Special Relationship ». In other words, to ally based upon similar political principles and beliefs rather than temporary aims, and that paved the way for a strong cooperation on other variant levels. That belief and conception lived for a decade after M. Thatcher and Reagan left office. The sample of the successful Anglo-American relationship during that period held a significant role in the twentieth century by navigating proficiently two World Wars and the Cold War. Needless to say that, this model can serve as a template for strong future alliances. The great victory over the Soviets, and the spread of liberal democracies around the world through different levels of cooperation made the ‘Thatcher and Reagan era’, as the age of the successful implementation of the special relationship as was first formulated by the statesman Winston Churchill.

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