

# The U.S. Must Strengthen Defense Cooperation with the U.K.'s New Boris Johnson Government

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Under new British Prime Minister Johnson, and with new defense secretaries in both countries, the U.K.-U.S. defense cooperation must remain a top priority.

Secretary Esper should meet with Secretary Wallace to discuss strengthening U.S.-U.K. defense relations and confronting an increasingly aggressive Russia and Iran.

The U.S. and U.K. have the opportunity to increase defense cooperation in the Persian Gulf, in the Indo-Pacific, and across Eastern Europe.

Both the United States and the United Kingdom have new Defense Secretaries. With the new British government led by Prime Minister Boris Johnson more likely to align with the U.S. than its predecessor on major geo-political issues, it is vital that Anglo-American defense cooperation remain a top priority for both countries. Britain will leave the European Union on October 31, 2019, and President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Johnson are expected to develop a strong and close partnership. The deep-seated military-to-military cooperation and unique intelligence sharing is what makes the Special Relationship truly special, and in the Brexit era the United Kingdom will be an even stronger ally for the United States.

To further advance robust transatlantic defense cooperation, U.S. Defense Secretary Mark Esper should plan to meet his British counterpart, the

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newly appointed Secretary of State for Defence, Ben Wallace MP, as soon as possible to discuss how to strengthen Anglo–American defense relations. U.S.–U.K. defense cooperation will be increasingly vital as Washington and London face a growing threat from Iran in the Gulf, as well as a mounting Russian threat to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s (NATO’s) eastern flank in Europe.

## Defense and the Special Relationship

Winston Churchill made it clear during his 1946 Iron Curtain Speech in Fulton, Missouri, that the Special Relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom is first and foremost based on defense cooperation. More than seven decades later, the U.K. is the number one military partner for the United States. Britain is probably the only country under whose command the U.S. military will happily place American service personnel. At present, the deputy commanders of Operation Inherent Resolve (tasked with the campaign against ISIS) and the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) in Bahrain are British officers. In recent years, the U.K. commanded the NATO-led operation in Afghanistan twice.

The U.K. has the political will to deploy its forces, setting it apart from many of America’s European partners. In 2003, Britain provided 46,000 troops for the invasion of Iraq. More than 10,000 British troops fought in the deadliest parts of southern Afghanistan while many other NATO allies tucked themselves away in the relative safety of the north. During the recent fight against ISIS, the U.K. was the second-largest contributor to air operations in Iraq and Syria, behind the United States. The U.K. has been a major force in the Balkans, off the Horn of Africa, and the Persian Gulf. The U.K. also serves as a framework nation in Estonia, maintaining 800 troops there as part of NATO’s Forward Enhanced Presence to deter Russian aggression. The U.S. also enjoys access to important British military facilities, including at Gibraltar, on the Diego Garcia atoll in the Indian Ocean, and at the British Sovereign Base Areas on Cyprus.

In the past two decades, the U.K. has undergone significant cuts to its military. Even though the government is committed to meeting the NATO target of spending 2 percent of national gross domestic product on defense, the British Armed Forces have been reduced in size and capability to dangerously low levels. According to a recent report, half of all the Royal Navy’s frigates and destroyers (of which Britain currently has just 19) are out of service due to long-term maintenance issues.<sup>1</sup> The British Army currently has just 82,000 soldiers. This is down from 113,000 in 2010. Since Special

Forces are recruited from the conventional forces, it is likely that the U.K. is having trouble finding the required numbers for its world-class Special Air Service (SAS) and Special Boat Service (SBS). The U.K. does expect to have two new fully operational aircraft carriers by 2023. In addition, it has introduced new capabilities, such as the P8 Poseidon Maritime Patrol Aircraft. Crucially, the U.K. remains fully committed to replacing its aging nuclear deterrent and plans to purchase a sizable number of F-35 fighters. Even with the defense cuts of the past few years, the British Armed Forces remain the most capable in Europe, and among the best in the world.

## Recommendations for the U.S.

As the two most powerful members of the NATO alliance, Washington and London are best placed to work together to confront the rising threats from Iran and China, as well as the Russian bear in Eastern Europe. In order to set a new agenda in Anglo–American defense relations the U.S. should:

- **Host an early meeting in Washington with the new British Defence Secretary.** There is no substitute for face-to-face meetings, and the sooner Secretary Esper and Secretary Wallace meet, the better. It is important that the two new defense secretaries get to know each other and find areas of cooperation. Waiting until the next NATO Defense Ministerial meeting in October is too long.
- **Work closely with the U.K. on setting the agenda for the NATO leaders meeting in December in London.** The Anglo–American Special Relationship is a vital cornerstone of the transatlantic alliance. While not a full summit, the upcoming leaders meeting in London offers a post-Brexit opportunity for the U.K. to show that it is a leading transatlantic military power. The U.S. should work with Great Britain to develop a relevant and realistic agenda for December’s meeting. At the top of the list should be Russian deterrence and the NATO-led training mission in Afghanistan.
- **Call for an immediate U.S.–U.K. Combined Chiefs of Staff Committee conference.** Throughout the 1940s, Combined Chiefs of Staff Committee conferences were held to formulate Anglo–American military strategy for World War II and the postwar world. Since 1948, there have only been three such conferences: in 2013, in 2014, and in 2015. Such a meeting is long overdue and would help focus both militaries

on confronting shared challenges. Topics of discussion should be hybrid warfare, China, Iran, and Russia.

- **Coordinate with the U.K. to secure the Strait of Hormuz.**

Securing the strait offers the first real opportunity for the Trump Administration to work with the new Johnson-led government in confronting the Iranian threat. The U.K. is America's most trusted partner in the Gulf. In practical terms, this is the most pressing priority. Iran's recent seizure of, and attacks on, international shipping, including a British-flagged tanker, requires a bold international response. The U.S. would benefit from any international effort to patrol the strait as long as (1) the U.K. has a large command presence, (2) the patrolling is done by a coalition of the willing, and (3) international efforts are closely coordinated with the U.S. and existing naval operations under the Combined Maritime Forces in Bahrain.

- **Continue to raise U.S. concerns about the role of Huawei in the U.K. telecommunications sector.** While not strictly a competency of the U.S. Department of Defense or the British Ministry of Defence, both have an interest in ensuring that secure communications and intelligence sharing is not jeopardized. China is an adversarial power that should not be allowed to use its government-controlled companies to gain a significant foothold in the burgeoning fifth-generation (5G) wireless networks of the U.S. or allied countries. Such a presence would be a clear national security threat that could decisively compromise telecommunications and data infrastructure—including the communications integrity of the military and intelligence community.

- **Encourage U.S.–U.K. strategic cooperation in the Indo–Pacific region.** The Pentagon should work with the Ministry of Defence in finding creative ways to involve the U.K. in its Free and Open Indo–Pacific strategy. The U.K. is part of the Five Power Defense Arrangement and maintains good bilateral relations with important U.S. partners. Furthermore, there are 17 members of the 53-member Commonwealth with whom the U.K. has a close relationship in the Indo–Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) area of responsibility. Increased U.S.–U.K. cooperation on a strategic level would benefit both countries. The United States should strongly consider making more staff posts available to British officers at INDOPACOM, as is already the case at U.S. Central Command. The U.S. should also ask the U.K. to

conduct a trilateral naval exercise with India, or have the U.K. request observer status for a bilateral India–U.S. exercise, or for the trilateral Malabar naval exercise among India, Japan, and the United States.

## Conclusion

The arrival of Boris Johnson at Downing Street, as well as a new British Defence Secretary, represents a tremendous opportunity for the United States to strengthen its partnership with the United Kingdom, America’s closest friend and ally. Johnson is the most pro-American Prime Minister since Margaret Thatcher, and he is set to lead Britain into a new era outside the European Union, with the United Kingdom looking to enhance its transatlantic ties and adopting a more robust position on the world stage. U.S. and British leadership matters in an increasingly dangerous world, and now is a perfect moment to cement that partnership further.

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## Endnotes

1. Lucy Fisher, "Half Royal Navy's Gulf Defense Ships Out of Action," *The Times* (U.K.), July 24, 2019, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/half-navy-s-gulf-defence-ships-out-of-action-9wxw9rdpz> (accessed July 30, 2019).