

Mr. Brown Comes to America:

The U.S.-British Summit

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Brief Analysis

On July 29-30, just over a month after taking over from Tony Blair, new British prime minister Gordon Brown will meet with President Bush at Camp David. It will be the first opportunity for direct, substantive discussions between the two leaders and is widely expected to be a difficult summit. Brown is seen as wanting to establish a very different -- and cooler -- relationship with Bush. Although the effect of this public distancing on longstanding U.S.-British cooperation is uncertain at the moment, the change in substance and style will no doubt have implications for current policies in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the way the two leaders relate in the event of future crises.

The Contrast with Blair

When newly elected President Bush met Blair at Camp David for the first time in 2001, the British leader had already been in office for four years and had developed a close working and personal relationship with President Clinton. Asked by the media what he had in common with Blair, Bush appeared to be at a loss and famously replied that they both preferred the same brand of toothpaste. But the September 11 attacks served to bring the men together in an extraordinary partnership, which some have characterized as a shared perception of challenges, while others argue that the British leader was overawed by Washington and failed to articulate his own country's self-interests.

It is difficult to imagine Bush greeting Brown in the exceedingly casual "Yo, Blair" style he was once overheard using with the former prime minister. And it is even more difficult to imagine that Brown would tolerate such relations. Although Brown's friends say he is a warm and amusing person, he seems a dour and cold character to the British public and his political detractors. When he is not discussing economic theory, he likes chatting about British soccer -- neither an obvious pick for small talk with Bush. Brown does enjoy visiting the United States, however, and reportedly has spent many summers vacationing near Cape Cod. But it is noteworthy that Brown's American friends are apparently Democrats, and this year at least, according to the official Downing Street spokesman, Brown will be summering in Britain -- suggesting he wants to avoid criticism from anti-American circles at home.

A Special Relationship

The coming summit will no doubt serve to reopen the perennial discussion on the nature of the U.S.-British relationship, labeled as "special" ever since the Roosevelt/Churchill World War II era. In terms of military and intelligence coordination, the relationship is likely to remain as close as ever, and certainly at a higher level than cooperation with other allies such as France or Germany. But the rapport between the leaders is a crucial component, and President Bush may well decide that he has more in common with German chancellor Angela Merkel or French president Nicolas Sarkozy than with Brown.

Agenda

The White House statement announcing Brown's visit described the bilateral relationship as "uniquely close," casting Britain as "a resolute partner in addressing the key strategic challenges facing our two nations and promoting peace and prosperity in the world." Accordingly, the summit will involve consultations on "a broad range of shared goals, including progress in Iraq and Afghanistan, preventing Iran from obtaining the means to build nuclear weapons, ending the genocide in Darfur and protecting our homelands from the threat posed by terrorists."

Notably unmentioned was Arab-Israeli peacemaking. This is not because the issue is deemed unimportant -- in fact, U.S. officials have argued (perhaps implausibly) that it is at the top of the president's priorities. At the same time, the White House does not want to offend Brown, who has long resented being in the shadow of political rival Blair, now the special Middle East peace envoy for the Quartet (the United States, European Union, Russia, and the UN). Indeed, Brown is thought to have opposed Blair's appointment to that post.

Iraq is likely to spark one of the most challenging discussions. Britain seems determined to pull its forces out of the region around Basra, both because its army is overstretched there and in Afghanistan, and because of public opinion against the war. With the prospect of ceding influence in southern Iraq to Iran, it will be difficult for Brown to depict a British withdrawal as either a victory or a mission accomplished.

Timing of Meeting

Brown's visit is widely believed to be earlier than originally planned after several perceived warning signals about the relationship between London and Washington. Brown's new cabinet includes senior figures who publicly opposed the Iraq war. He also appointed Mark Malloch Brown -- a former UN deputy secretary-general who is an outspoken critic of the Bush administration -- as a Foreign Office minister. Perhaps the greatest concern was a July 12 speech in Washington by one of Brown's closest associates, International Development Secretary Douglas Alexander, which was seen as a rebuke to U.S. unilateralism and a call for greater use of multilateral institutions such as the UN and the World Bank. British officials downplayed the reporting of the speech, even though one of Alexander's aides had emphasized to journalists the points to be regarded as significant. (It should be noted that, after Camp David, Brown will speak at the UN on August 1.)

President Bush will want to use the Camp David meetings as an opportunity to discuss how both countries can work together in the last eighteen months of his administration. Brown, though, will want to show his supporters at home that he will have a different relationship with Bush than Blair did, while at the same time showing Washington that Britain still values the relationship. Inevitably, this will be an awkward story for him to spin. In light of the uncertainties and possible tensions surrounding this transition in U.S.-British relations, it could well be an advantage that the political machinery in both countries will soon close down for the remainder of the summer.

Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program at The Washington Institute. ❖

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