

The special relationship will soon turn sour

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At a private meeting, a top Foreign Office official laid out the major goal of British diplomacy in the New Year: to persuade President Barack Obama not to ask Britain for anything it cannot or will not do. This is a version of the American military's policy towards its gays: "Don't ask, don't tell." Persuade Obama not to ask, so we don't have to tell him "No".

The Obama foreign policy team members are unlikely to be fobbed off with kind words of support, but no action. They know that their commander-in-chief has committed himself to reversing the downward spiral in Afghanistan, even if that involves military strikes across the border in Pakistan.

They know, too, that the 20,000-30,000 additional troops which Defence Secretary Robert Gates says he can round up for duty in Afghanistan are far too few to accomplish very much. This means that Obama will be turning to America's European allies for help, and help now.

Therein lies the problem. Stories of German soldiers, 40 per cent of them overweight, confined to their barracks at night lest they get shot at, drinking enormous quantities of beer and wine, have not gone down well in Washington. Neither has recent

experience with the post-Blair British foreign policy.

The Pentagon is still fuming over the British cop-out in Basra, where good soldiers were ordered to stay in their barracks and leave the hard, dangerous work to the Americans and Iraqis. And now those troops are to be withdrawn because the British Government was unable – unwilling, seems a more apt description – to negotiate a deal with the Iraqi government that would have allowed them to stay after the summer.

That is forcing America's generals to redeploy already stretched forces to Basra. To make matters worse, America's military leaders have found British commanders, with their sneering attitude towards the battle-worthiness and tactics of the Americans, beyond insufferable. There was, of course, some of that during the Second World War, but the nations' leaders at the time were able to stifle the bickering that Andrew Roberts records so brilliantly in his *Masters and Commanders*, and force their generals to get on with the job of defeating the Axis powers. Where are they now that we need them again?

So, absent some major policy reversal by Number 10, the Obama foreign policy team – Hillary Clinton, Jim Jones and Bob Gates



Britain's refusal to reinforce Afghanistan will enrage America, says
Irwin Stelzer

– is preparing to hear a "No" from the Brown government when it asks for significantly more troops. It is well aware that Britain, which has launched an unprecedented spending spree to help stimulate the economy, has nevertheless forced the postponement of the construction of two aircraft carriers, and has left those troops it has sent to Afghanistan begging for helicopters, armoured vehicles, communication equipment and the other matériel they need to complement their bravery and fighting skills.

And Obama knows that no democratic government can

sustain a major military effort without the backing of its citizens – Vietnam taught that, the downturn in Tony Blair's popularity because of Iraq emphasised it, and the plunge in Bush's popularity into previously unplumbed depths when the Iraq war turned sour brought the point home.

It is clear that having to go it more or less alone in Afghanistan, while the Germans drink, the Brits turn a blind eye, and the other allies begin to withdraw as they are threatening to do, will sap Americans' taste for this particular battle. That will give the Left of Obama's party the ammunition it needs to pressure him to abandon his Afghanistan policy, and bring the troops home. Remember: Democratic leaders in both Houses of Congress see military spending as a diversion of funds from domestic spending programmes.

There is worse. An increasing number of foreign policy hawks – men and women who supported the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, and cheered the surge – are whispering that the Petraeus strategy won't work in Afghanistan. The goal in Iraq was to strengthen the central government at the expense of sectarian militias. But, in Afghanistan, the local chieftains want no part of such a strategy.

They do not want to cede power to Karzai's government and will fight anyone – including America – who tries to transfer power to Kabul. It's not that they like the Taliban, a leading member of the foreign policy establishment told me; it is that they don't like anyone who aims to dilute their local authority.

Put all this together, and it is a prescription for disaster in Afghanistan, leaving an even greater residue of American animosity towards Britain, or at least towards its government. Which is a real pity. There are those of us who believe that the "special relationship", warts and all, has contributed towards the maintenance of a more civilised world.

Yes, we Americans have too often made it a one-sided affair, as we did after the Second World War, when we elevated ingratitude to policy by calling in Britain's IOUs on excessively harsh terms. And, yes, Britain saw fit to turn down Lyndon Johnson's plea for aid in fighting the communists in Vietnam. But all families go through rough times. And remain intact. We can only hope that proves to be the case with the Anglo-American family.

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