

Edward Heath International Lecture

Delivered by Dr. Henry A. Kissinger  
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When the Tories unexpectedly won the 1970 election, Richard Nixon was so elated that he called nearly every hour to update me on the status of the returns. In terms of hierarchy, it should, of course, have happened the other way around. But I found myself in Mexico attending the 1970 World Cup without secure communications. Nixon was not about to miss the opportunity to remind me that, almost alone in our government, he had predicted Ted Heath's victory and to express how much, on the basis of previous encounters, he was looking forward to working with the new Prime Minister. The machinery of cybersecurity not yet being fully elaborated, the President of the United States and his National Security Advisor provided would-be wire-tappers an informative window into the Special Relationship.

Part of Nixon's enthusiasm for Heath's success was the comparability of their rise to office. Heath was the first Tory Prime Minister to be selected by a vote of the Conservative members of Parliament rather than the behind-the-scenes consensus of Party eminences. Both Heath and Nixon were admitted into the Establishment, not defined by it. And this awareness shaped in important ways their combination of remoteness, prickliness, and high analytical skill. In Heath's case, these qualities were combined with an extraordinary love of music, which evoked in him surprising episodes of personal warmth. I intend this comparison with Nixon as a tribute. Of the ten Presidents who honored me by allowing me to participate in the conduct of foreign policy—some tangentially, others intensively—Nixon was the best prepared and, in his impact on the international system, the most transformational.

To the Nixon administration, the wartime alliance was still personal. We respected the vision by which Winston Churchill had transformed Britain's imperial preeminence into a partnership with America, held together by intangible ties of shared history and values and buttressed through informal arrangements between leaders. In its operation, British diplomats occasionally augmented the traditional diplomatic practice of balancing interests with an element of paternal guidance—if necessary, evoking feelings of guilt to the deviations of their less sophisticated partner.

This intimacy between the two governments enabled a succession of British leaders of both parties to transform the wartime alliance into an Atlantic partnership. Churchill, in a series of path-breaking speeches, helped define the Soviet challenge in both its security and diplomatic dimensions; Ernest Bevin provided the impetus for the Marshall Plan; Harold Macmillan helped elaborate the existing nuclear arrangement between the two countries.

Ted Heath continued this tradition in the management of geostrategic issues. Relations with the Soviet Union were closely coordinated. In the Middle East, Nixon inherited an undeclared Israeli-Egyptian air battle along the Suez Canal. A Syrian invasion of Jordan followed in 1970, while terrorism made its first systematic appearance. Finally, the outbreak of the 1973 Middle East war imposed a new emphasis on diplomacy. In all these crises—two of which included partial alerts of U.S. forces—close coordination with Britain was a key element of American policy.

It was when Heath undertook the delicate passage of Britain into Europe that issues arose in the operation of the Special Relationship. The early Atlantic structure was based on the premise that, goals being uniform and agreed, operational questions would be resolved on the basis of contributions to the common effort. This stakeholder theory was, in effect, a definition of American leadership. The objective of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization was the common security of individual states based on a shared definition of both threats and of strategies to deal with them. The emerging European structure, however, strove to express a specifically European identity by way of institutions which would, over time, merge into a supranational entity. The simultaneous quests for both European and Atlantic integration were therefore not always harmonious.

International development compounded structural issues. The Nixon administration inherited a war in Vietnam, from which it sought to extricate itself at a pace that did not undermine the credibility of its alliances. Our European allies urged more rapid withdrawals to provide relief from their own domestic pressures.

That debate became symbolic of deeper issues. The Nixon administration sought to overcome the domestic obsession with the Vietnam War by putting forward a new concept of world order. It opened to China and engaged in negotiations with the Soviet Union, especially on arms control. Both these moves raised issues paralleling those of the integration debate. In Nixon's judgment, the opening to China needed to be negotiated with a minimum of external consultation to avoid a paralyzing domestic debate. For Heath, who was contemplating his own opening to China, the secrecy and suddenness of our policy implied a sense of studied preemption.

Even though he achieved his goals by a decisive move of his own along the same path, China policy illustrated to Heath some American limits to the Special Relationship. These differences in perspective might have strained any bilateral relationship, even a special one, were it not for the mutual respect and admiration felt by those responsible for its conduct, including on the ministerial level, where Alec Home and Peter Carrington provided extraordinary inspiration.

The role of the statesman is to take his society from where it is to where it has never been. Ted Heath will count among their number. The Britain he inherited first as a key figure in the pro-European wing of the Conservative Party and later as Prime Minister had been ambivalent about its options, which it defined as developing closer relations with the United States, reimagining the Commonwealth, or entering Europe unreservedly. It had rejected the Shuman Plan and the European Defense Community. Churchill argued that if the unified Europe he advocated forced Britain to choose between Europe or the open sea, it would choose the latter.

Heath rejected the inevitability of such a choice. He was ever mindful of the fate of Harold Macmillan, whose bid for entry into the Common Market Charles de Gaulle had branded an "Anglo-Saxon Trojan horse." He managed Britain's entry into Europe in a way that combined a dramatic adaptation of traditional British policies with determination to preserve Britain's core national interests. His successor, Harold Wilson, anchored the outcome among the public by a referendum indicating its approval in 1975. Heath welcomed this event with the following statement: "I've worked for this for twenty-five years...I was the Prime Minister who led Britain into the community [so] I'm naturally delighted that the referendum is working out as it is."

Over the succeeding decades, a political European Union was built and the essence of both the Atlantic relationship and the Special Relationship were preserved. But now, four decades later, the global context has changed profoundly, raising the issues of Ted Heath's time in a new and even more complex form. Then the challenge was how to maintain Atlantic unity under conditions of approaching nuclear parity and European integration. The threat was fairly straight-forward: from the Soviet Union and the Soviet bloc and a few Third World elements. Today the threat is far-reaching, ambiguous, amorphous, and posing new forms of danger.

The technology of the 1970s still threatens and has proliferated. New capabilities of technology have emerged in multiple aspects, like cyber and artificial intelligence, for which an agreed common strategy does not yet exist. They are accompanied by forms of international conduct unimagined a generation ago: terrorism, globalization, mass migration, and a

breakdown of international order. Global upheavals rend the continents from multitudinous causes where remedies may not align. The most significant global questions have become: What concept of world order can restore stability, or even establish criteria, by which to fashion a common design? Should the Atlantic Alliance conceive its reach as global? Or will the world evolve into regional spheres of influence which conduct their relations unconstrained by the Westphalian state system? And if so, will it be possible to avoid an even more cataclysmic outcome than the two World Wars of European origin?

In these circumstances Brexit, which was at first seen as a primarily British domestic issue, has taken on a more general significance. On one level, it will lead to a negotiation on Britain's relationship with Europe which will need to be close and organic, especially in the field of security. Such an outcome is in the overwhelming interest of both parties and of world order. And America's interest is to encourage that process to go smoothly and, if temporary economic dislocations occur, to consider how U.S. policy could help resolve them.

In a deeper sense, the resolution of Brexit will resurrect the issues of 1973, which Brexit did not so much cause as symbolize. In the new structure, there will be three elements: the European Union; Britain with a special negotiated relationship with Europe; and the U.S. as the custodian of common security. How can Europe forge a sense of unity without sacrificing the diversity from which its genius is derived? How can the articulation of a European identity be combined with Atlantic partnership? Can a monetary union be maintained without a common fiscal policy? How can a common strategy emerge from the deliberations of 28 sovereign states?

The founders of the European Union were thinking of a kind of political confederation. What has evolved in recent years is a multiplication of supranational bureaucratic competencies. The inevitable result has been that some European administrative decisions have grown controversial. Historically sovereign states and an ever-expanding regulatory machinery have collided with each other in the absence of agreed upon long-range concepts. Whatever the original cause of the Brexit debate and its immediate resolution, it should provide the opportunity to start a process to place the European Union and the Atlantic relationship on a basis relevant to their future.

Europe and America must not drift apart. They need to resist the siren calls of their respective neutralisms. The new centers of power all around the world should not be tempted to exploit the disputes of the Atlantic community. In the structure emerging from Brexit, Britain could perform its historical and global role: contributing to an Atlantic partnership essential

for a stable world order. The question of how to forge European unity while honoring the diversity that inspires loyalty and creativity is not a bureaucratic but essentially a moral and political one.

Permit me a few personal words. I met Ted Heath before he became Prime Minister and stayed in friendly contact with him until his death. He participated in a discussion group that I chaired under the auspices of the Aspen Institute which met in the U.S. and Iran in 1978 and in Germany in 1980. My last encounter with Ted Heath was at Katharine Graham's funeral in 2001, which he attended on his own as a token of friendship because of their common service on the Brandt Commission. I admired his integrity, his courage, his devotion to service and, strange as it may seem to those who knew Ted only as a leader, his capacity for personal warmth. He performed great services for Europe and the cause of freedom as an essential bridge between his country's past and its future. His is a legacy worthy of recognition as Britain, Europe, and America, hopefully together, face the challenges that lie ahead.