

From Partner to Power: The Dominance Shifting of Anglo-America Special Relationship in the Dynamics of WWII with the Alliance Security Dilemma

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the Anglo-American Special Relationship (AASR) through the lens of alliance theory, focusing on the interplay between the N-prisoner's dilemma and the alliance security dilemma as key frameworks for understanding the dynamics of alliance formation and power shifts. The study argues that the dominance of the US over the UK within the AASR was forged during Stage One (the N-prisoner's dilemma), a pre-alliance phase where strategic bargaining over general and particular interests set the foundation for the asymmetry relationship. Stage Two (Secondary Stitches) reflects the consolidation of this asymmetry, as the US leveraged its economic and military strength to establish itself as a global hegemon. The paper begins by introducing the theoretical framework, highlighting the relevance of the N-prisoner's dilemma and the alliance security dilemma to the study of alliances in a multipolar system. It then traces the historical evolution of the AASR, focusing on key moments such as the Atlantic Charter, the Lend-Lease Act, and the Tehran Conference, as well as the Marshall Plan, the Palestine Mandate, the UN Resolution 181 which exemplify the bargaining dynamics that characterized the shifting dynamics. By analyzing the AASR, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of alliance theory and its enduring relevance in both historical and modern contexts.

KEYWORDS

Anglo-America Special Relationship; Alliance Security Dilemma; Diplomatic Interaction

1 Introduction

The Anglo-American Special Relationship (AASR) is widely recognized as one of the most influential alliances of the 20th century, shaping the global order during and after World War II. However, this relationship was not static. The wartime alliance between Britain and the United States highlighted significant shifts in global power, culminating in the dominance of the United States. While Britain entered the war as a global power, its declining economic and military capacity forced it to depend heavily on U.S. support. Conversely, the United States, initially cautious about involvement, used the war as an opportunity to consolidate its leadership in the emerging post-war order.

The dynamics of this transformation can be understood through the theoretical frameworks of the N-prisoner's dilemma and the alliance security dilemma. The N-prisoner's dilemma highlights the pre-alliance bargaining over general (security) and particular (ideological or imperial) interests, while the alliance security dilemma explains the fears of abandonment and entrapment that shaped the wartime partnership. These frameworks illuminate how Britain's reliance on U.S. support and the United States' strategic leverage redefined the AASR.

This paper first explores the bargaining processes of the N-prisoner's dilemma during World War II, focusing on key moments such as the Atlantic Charter, the Lend-Lease Act, and wartime conferences. It then examines the post-war stage where Britain's fear of abandonment and the United States' reduced fear of entrapment solidified an asymmetrical alliance. Finally, the study reflects on the implications of this shift for alliance formation, power transitions, and contemporary geopolitics.

By investigating the shifting dynamics, this paper argues that the wartime bargaining processes and the interplay of fears within the alliance security dilemma fundamentally redefined the relationship, setting the stage for the United States' dominance in the post-war world.

2 Theoretical Framework: Alliance Formation and the Alliance Security Dilemma

Alliances are inherently complex, as they require states to balance cooperation with competing interests and strategic calculations. Two key theoretical frameworks—the N-prisoner's dilemma and the alliance security dilemma—offer valuable insights into the dynamics of the Anglo-American Special Relationship (AASR) during World War II.

The N-prisoner's dilemma, rooted in game theory, describes the challenges states face in forming alliances within a multipolar system. Before alliances are fully established, states must decide whether to ally or remain independent, weighing general and particular interests. General interests involve the pursuit of security and survival in an anarchic world order, shaped by geographical and systemic pressures. For Britain during WWII, this meant to maintain the balance of power in Europe and counter the Axis threat. And as for the U.S., it centered on promoting global stability while

avoiding overcommitment to Britain's imperial conflicts.

Particular interests, by contrast, include ideological, economic, or societal priorities that often lead to discord. Britain's priority of preserving its empire clashed with the United States' commitment to liberal internationalism and anti-colonialism. As Snyder notes, shared interests facilitate alignment, while conflicting particular interests complicate negotiations^[1]. This tension underpinned the bargaining processes that defined the AASR's early stages, including key agreements like the Atlantic Charter and the Lend-Lease Act.

Once alliances are formed, they are shaped by the alliance security dilemma, which arises from the dual fears of abandonment and entrapment^[2]. Abandonment refers to the fear that an ally may fail to uphold its commitments, leaving the other partner vulnerable. For Britain, this fear was particularly acute as its survival depended on securing consistent U.S. support. Entrapment, on the other hand, reflects the concern that an ally may drag its partner into unwanted conflicts. The United States feared being entangled in Britain's imperial priorities, especially in regions like the Middle East. These fears create a constant tension in alliances, requiring ongoing negotiation and adjustment. During WWII, Britain's fear of abandonment and the U.S.'s fear shaped both the wartime partnership and the post-war asymmetry that emerged within the AASR.

3 Historical Analysis: The N-Prisoner's Dilemma in WWII

3.1 Bargaining Over General and Particular Interests

The Anglo-American alliance during WWII was shaped by the interplay of general and particular interests, which defined the bargaining process at the heart of the N-prisoner's dilemma. Britain's general interest was clear: to secure survival by maintaining the European balance of power and defeating the Axis, which required extensive economic and military support. For the U.S., general interests were rooted in establishing a liberal international order. Roosevelt envisioned a world built on free trade, collective security, and self-determination, aligning with America's ideological goals but diverging from Britain's imperial priorities. As Ovendale argues, the United States was able to leverage its economic and military strength to assert its leadership within the alliance, while Britain's dependence on U.S. support constrained its strategic autonomy^[3]. These diverging interests led to significant bargaining. A pivotal example was the Atlantic Charter (1941), which highlighted the tensions between Britain's reluctance to abandon its empire and the U.S.'s insistence on self-determination. Churchill agreed to the Charter's principles to secure U.S. support but later remarked that the agreement was not meant to apply to the British Empire. The Charter symbolized Britain's uneasy concession of particular interests to align with America's broader vision. This bargaining process underscores how Britain's need for survival and the United States' pursuit of liberal internationalism set the stage for an alliance shaped by both cooperation and strategic compromises.

3.2 Economic Dependency and Strategic Bargaining

Britain's reliance on the Lend-Lease Act (1941) was a cornerstone of its economic survival during WWII, but it also revealed the asymmetry within the Anglo-American alliance. The Act allowed the United States to supply essential military aid without immediate payment, securing Britain's capacity to continue fighting the Axis powers. Churchill famously described it as "the most unsordid act in the history of any nation^[4]," recognizing its significance in sustaining Britain's war effort. However, the Lend-Lease Act, as analyzed by Kimball, illustrates the bargaining dynamics of the N-prisoner's dilemma^[5]. Roosevelt's strategic vision emphasized multilateralism and the establishment of a liberal international order, while Britain sought to preserve its regional influence and imperial interests.

The asymmetry in the alliance was evident during major wartime conferences, such as the Quebec Conference (1943) and the Tehran Conference (1943). At Quebec, Roosevelt pushed for global solutions to post-war governance, advocating for institutions like the United Nations that would limit the dominance of imperial powers. Churchill, however, sought to protect Britain's influence in Europe and its empire. At Tehran, these tensions resurfaced during discussions about Operation Overlord. While Britain was eager to delay the invasion of France to protect its Mediterranean campaigns, the U.S. and the Soviet Union overruled Churchill's proposals, underscoring Britain's diminishing ability to dictate Allied strategy. Ultimately, Britain's reliance on Lend-Lease and its constrained position in wartime negotiations highlighted the power imbalance within the Anglo-American relationship. This dependency not only influenced the dynamics of the alliance during the war but also laid the foundation for the post-war asymmetry that would define the AASR.

3.3 The Role of Fear

The dynamics of the Anglo-American Special Relationship during World War II were profoundly shaped by the alliance security dilemma, particularly the dual fears of abandonment and entrapment. For Britain, abandonment by the U.S.

posed an existential threat. In contrast, the United States feared being entrapped in Britain's imperial conflicts, which conflicted with its broader vision of a liberal international order. These fears influenced key decisions and negotiations during the war, particularly in wartime conferences and post-war planning.

As Britain's economic and military resources were drained by 1940, securing U.S. involvement became essential for its survival. Churchill's diplomatic efforts to build a personal relationship with Roosevelt reflected this anxiety. Reynolds claims that Churchill's strategy revolved around ensuring that the United States would not waver in its commitment to Britain's survival^[6].

The United States, while committed to defeating the Axis, was reluctant to entangle itself in Britain's imperial ambitions. Roosevelt's insistence on the principles of self-determination and free trade reflected his desire to avoid being drawn into colonial conflicts. As Vierdag observes, the Atlantic Charter was emblematic of Roosevelt's cautious approach, as it allowed the U.S. to align with Britain while signaling its opposition to imperialism^[7]. During the Tehran Conference, Roosevelt's preference for engaging directly with Stalin over Churchill further illustrated the U.S.'s efforts to sidestep Britain's regional priorities.

Overall, the fears of abandonment and entrapment often surfaced in Allied disagreements over post-war arrangements. Tension created at Quebec and Tehran, where underscored Britain's reliance on U.S. support and the asymmetry within the alliance. Together, these fears shaped the bargaining process, highlighting the fragility and complexity of the wartime AASR.

4 Post-War Asymmetry and Stage Two: Secondary Stitches

4.1 Evolving Fears: Abandonment and Entrapment

In the post-war period, the Anglo-American Special Relationship (AASR) transitioned into a stage of deep asymmetry, shaped by the evolving fears of abandonment and entrapment. As Britain's fear of abandonment intensified, while the United States, consolidating its leadership, experienced a reduced fear of entrapment. These shifts defined the alliance's dynamics during the late 1940s.

By the end of WWII, Britain's reliance on American support became increasingly critical, particularly through initiatives like the Marshall Plan (1947). The Marshall Plan not only provided financial aid but also symbolized Britain's need on the U.S. to recover and maintain relevance in a rapidly shifting global order. As it was judged, Britain's attempts to position itself as a "third great power" alongside the U.S. and the Soviet Union were continually undermined by its economic fragility^[8].

This fear of abandonment was compounded by Britain's inability to maintain control over key regions, such as the Middle East, without American assistance. Even, Britain's retreat from its global commitments confirmed its reliance on the U.S. to secure its post-war standing, amplifying the asymmetry within the alliance.

In contrast, the United States emerged from the war as the dominant global power, with little fear of entrapment in Britain's regional priorities. This was largely due to the U.S.'s ability to shape the post-war order through the creation of multilateral institutions such as the United Nations and Bretton Woods. These institutions feature America's vision of a liberal international system, allowing it to lead global governance while avoiding entanglements in imperial conflicts.

The establishment of these institutions showed a shift in the alliance security dilemma. As Eichengreen notes stated, the post-war order was firmly shaped by American priorities, with Britain increasingly reduced to a subordinate role^[9]. The U.S.'s reduced fear of entrapment enabled it to assert leadership, further marginalizing Britain within the alliance.

Together, these evolving fears solidified the U.S.'s dominance in the AASR, redefining the alliance in the post-war era.

4.2 Case Study: The Palestine Mandate

The Palestine Mandate provides a revealing case study of the shifting dynamics within the Anglo-American Special Relationship (AASR) during that period. Britain's withdrawal from the mandate, driven by domestic pressures and financial constraints, created a power vacuum that allowed the United States to assert its dominance in Middle Eastern politics, exemplifying the evolving asymmetry in the AASR.

By the late 1940s, Britain faced mounting challenges in administering the Palestine Mandate. The post-war economic crisis, combined with the rising costs of managing Arab-Jewish tensions, made continued British involvement unsustainable. Domestic opposition to military and financial expenditures further limited Britain's ability to maintain control.

Recognizing its inability to broker a solution, Britain announced its withdrawal in February 1947 and referred the matter to the United Nations. This decision symbolized Britain's retreat from its traditional role as a global power and its increasing dependence on multilateral institutions dominated by the United States.

The United States, stepping into the vacuum left by Britain's withdrawal, used the Palestine issue to assert its growing

influence in global politics. Driven by domestic political pressures and strategic interests, the U.S. actively supported the partition plan proposed in United Nations Resolution 181. The plan advocated for the division of Palestine into separate Jewish and Arab states, a proposal that Britain had been unable to enforce due to its fear of alienating the Arab world.

The U.S.'s role in securing the resolution demonstrated its ability to shape Middle Eastern politics, marking a clear departure from Britain's traditional dominance in the region. Mandate Palestine thus encapsulates the broader shifts in the Anglo-American relationship. While Britain's withdrawal highlighted its decline as a global power, the U.S.'s decisive involvement reflected its emergence as the dominant force in the alliance and the post-war world.

5 Reflection and Broader Implications

Overall, the AASR illustrates that alliances are dynamic, not static. The Anglo-American experience demonstrates that alliances are not static but evolve with shifting power dynamics, providing enduring lessons for both historical and contemporary geopolitics.

And these are particularly relevant to understanding modern alliances such as NATO or U.S.-East Asian partnerships. Similar fears of abandonment and entrapment persist, particularly as power asymmetries evolve. For example, smaller NATO members often fear abandonment by the U.S., while the U.S. seeks to avoid overcommitment in regional conflicts. By revisiting the dynamics of the AASR, scholars and policymakers can better navigate the complexities of today's alliances, recognizing how fears and interests continue to shape international cooperation.

Limitation of this paper are that the analysis centers predominantly on the perspectives and interactions of Britain and the United States, reflecting the asymmetrical nature of the AASR, and that the study relies on a selective range of archival materials and existing scholarship. For future research, comparative studies of alliances across different historical periods and geopolitical contexts would offer valuable insights

6 Conclusion

This paper has shown that the dominance of the United States within the AASR was not inevitable but was forged through strategic bargaining during the war and solidified in the post-war order. The N-prisoner's dilemma framework highlighted the pre-alliance negotiations between Britain and the U.S., where Britain's need for survival and the U.S.'s pursuit of a liberal international order often clashed. The alliance security dilemma further explained how fears of abandonment and entrapment shaped the wartime and post-war dynamics. These frameworks provide enduring insights into the complexities of alliances, offering valuable lessons for understanding power shifts in both historical and contemporary contexts. The AASR remains a critical case study for analyzing how alliances evolve in response to changing global power structures.

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