Kennedy and Macmillan

by Dr. Marco Soddu

Introduction

The so-called special relationship between President John F. Kennedy and Prime Minister Harold Macmillan was an intricate aspect in the formation and evolution of Anglo-American foreign policies during the presidency of JFK.1 The volume of Donette Murray, Kennedy and Macmillan and Nuclear Weapons,2 offers a detailed analysis of this special friendship and questions the impact of this relationship on the dynamics of the Cold War. About this topic, another important author is David B. Shields; he writes:

assessing the entity of this relationship contributes to a greater understanding of Anglo-American relations, and also provides a tool for understanding the complex nature of international diplomacy during the Cold War. This behind-the-scenes look at the decision-making process reveals the reality of the statecraft and personal diplomacy during the Cold War.3

It is made clear that for John F. Kennedy, interdependence meant American control over the Western alliance; for Macmillan, it came closer to the Gaullist conception of a partnership of equals, with the United States even depending on Britain for technological support and crisis management advice.4 John Dumbrell, in his book, argues:

there was some tensions between the two leaders, yet there was a genuine cordiality and understanding which lasted until Kennedy’s death. At Key West, Macmillan felt a deep sense of relief…we seemed immediately to talk as old friends.5

The Special Relationship

The Skybolt crisis of 1962 and its consequences in many ways represented both the discord and the collaboration that have characterized the relationship between Great Britain and the United States since the Second World War. As Donette Murray claims in his work Kennedy, Macmillan and Nuclear Weapons, with the exception of Suez:

Anglo-American relations were never so starkly and publicly in disarray. As during the period in late 1962 when Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara announced the cancellation of the experimental Skybolt air-launched ballistic missile, which had been slated to become the centerpiece of Britain’s independent nuclear deterrent. In turn, the Nassau agreement that followed the crisis proved to be a milestone in the subsequent development of the special relationship between the two countries.6

---

1 David Brandon Shields, Kennedy and Macmillan; Cold War Politics, University Press of America, p.9.
3 David Brandon Shields, cit., p.10.
6 Ibidem.
The episode of the Skybolt crisis and its impact on Anglo-American relations has been a central topic for the researchers, but it is important to underline, as Murray claims in her work, that new evidence continually emerges and gives the basis for a new perspective of these historic events. In particular, speaking about the Skybolt crisis, as Dumbrell argues “is not quite as startling as Murray claims at times, but she does fill some important gaps in our knowledge and offers an interesting interpretation of the roles of a number of key players in the crisis.”

The analysis of the Murray’s volume starts with the Camp David meeting (March 1960) when

President Dwight Eisenhower agreed to sell Skybolt missiles to Britain to replace the Blue Streak missile that the government of Harold Macmillan was about to cancel. As an unofficial misunderstanding, Britain agreed to provide facilities at Holy Loch for U.S. Polaris missiles.

Macmillan thought that it was an official promise (even if it was an oral declaration) in order to provide Great Britain with Polaris. “Disputes also ensued over another element in the agreement that linked Polaris with a NATO multinational nuclear force.” These important aspects of the relationship between Eisenhower and Macmillan created what it is possible to define a series of deep misunderstandings in their future exchanges.

“From the Camp David meeting until the public cancellation of Skybolt on 11 December 1960, there were frequent indications that the missile was in trouble.” One of the most relevant aspects that put an important question is “why the British government did not realize until very late in the day that Skybolt was likely to be cancelled.” The author of the volume indicates that “there was considerable wishful thinking in London and that the signals emanating from Washington were frequently confusing and ambiguous.” Murray clearly claims:

the continuing internal debate among the various departments within the administration prevented a rational, coherent and effective policy from emerging until it was too late. Poor communication, vested interests and hidden or ill-concealed agendas created a fluid situation, with Kennedy’s staff divided over how to deal with the issue and the wider problems associated with it.

It is possible to argue that McNamara, in this situation, must take “much of the blame for the poor handling of the situation on the American side.” At the same time, the British establishment was not on time in realizing the importance of the issue, and “they had no back-up plans in case the United States decided not to go ahead with the project. Not until a couple of days before the Nassau conference did the British position finally come together.”

---

7 Ibidem.
9 Ibidem.
10 Ibidem.
11 Ibidem.
12 Ibidem.
13 Ivii, p.74.
14 Ibidem.
15 Ivii, p.79.
Murray’s book supports the position of other researchers; in particular, the author (on Polaris) says that “even before the Nassau meeting John F. Kennedy and his most important advisers had decided that they would provide Britain with Polaris should this prove necessary.”

One of the most important issues that JFK had to face was that a huge number of the State Department’s officials were strongly determined to stop a “bilateral nuclear relationship and replace it with a multinational force that would help limit nuclear proliferation and encourage greater European unification.” It is clear that this also was John F. Kennedy’s position during the first sessions of the negotiations, but as Murray writes:

when it became clear to Kennedy that his opening offer of an inferior system was not acceptable to Macmillan and that a break in Anglo-American relations was a real possibility, he was prepared to overrule his advisers and provide Britain with Polaris missiles.

This kind of interpretation shows that the so-called special relationship really existed between John F. Kennedy and Macmillan, but “it undermines the oft-expressed argument that superior British diplomacy caused the president to reverse an earlier decision not to provide Britain with the submarine-launched missiles.”

As Murray emphasizes, the Nassau Conference was very important; in fact, it is possible to underline that “it produced a solution to the Skybolt crisis,” even if, at the same time, it also “created a new set of problems and difficulties for the Anglo-American alliance.” She also claims that:

although Britain had agreed to commit Polaris to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) with a let-out clause for national use, there was little enthusiasm in London for the Multilateral Nuclear Force (MLF) promoted by the Europeanist faction in the U.S. State Department from January 1963.

During the following eight months, there was a strong American pressure on Great Britain’s Government in order “to commit itself to the MLF;” this led to a “bitter debate and hostility.” Macmillan didn’t like this kind of project but the close ties between United States and Great Britain were vital for the British Prime Minister that he “felt obliged to participate in formal talks on the subject.”

if he were able to avoid making a British commitment one way or the other, the proposal would eventually be dropped due to lack of interest and firm promises of commitment from the other NATO allies.

16 Ibidem.
17 Ivi, p.81.
18 Ibidem.
19 Ivi, p.83.
20 Ivi, p.150.
21 Ivi, p.152.
22 Ivi, p.156.
23 Ibidem.
24 Ibidem.
26 Ibidem.
27 Ivi, p.157.
This was not to happen, however, until after President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in November 1963.28

This analysis also considers the works of two important authors; Nigel Ashton and the mentioned John Dumbrell29 did a relevant research of Anglo-American relations during JFK’s presidency and they share the idea that John F. Kennedy and Macmillan experienced a similar, and yet more delicate, relationship. As Dumbrell argues:

in many respects, the situation forty years ago closely resembles that of today. Just as Macmillan’s standing at home and abroad rested on American policy toward nuclear weapons, European integration, and crises in Cuba and Berlin, Blair’s political fortunes will rise or fall with the progress of Bush’s policy toward Iraq.30

A comparison shows that “Anglo-American solidarity today contrasts sharply with the dissonance of French and German antiwar diplomacy, the crisis years of 1961 to 1963 witnessed an analogous fraying of the Western Alliance due, in part, to Franco-German fears over Anglo-American collusion.”31

The analysis of the so-called special relationship has made it a popular field of study and interest for historians, above all for the relevant sequence of events during the Macmillan-JFK’s time. As Ashton himself underlines:

there was, put simply, in the years 1961-3, hardly any significant international issue that did not have some form of Anglo-American dimension to it.32

In fact, it is possible to claim that many of the crises that JFK and Macmillan had to face represented the most dangerous situations of the John F. Kennedy’s presidency and of all the Cold War (for instance Cuban Missile Crisis and Berlin Wall Crisis). Many scholars studied this special relationship, but Ashton gives a new perspective, above all for his analysis of the Skybolt issue (1962) and of the Laos crisis (1961).

The historic analysis of American-British relations (and in particular of the JFK-Macmillan’s relationship) has been dominated by a so-called functional approach that emphasizes the relevance of the domestic/national aspect.

It is helpful to highlight other important elements that it is possible to find in John F. Kennedy-Macmillan’s relationship:

- ideology;
- personality;
- bureaucracies;

28 Ibidem.
29 Ivi, p.70.
30 Ibidem.
31 Ivi, p.73.
-culture;
-public opinion;
-domestic politics.\textsuperscript{33}

As Ashton has written:

each of these factors did not by themselves exert a predominant influence upon Anglo-American relations; rather, it was a varying combination of them that determined the level of harmony or discord. To understand both the intimacy and the rancor of Anglo-American relations, one needs to grasp the differences in perception between London and Washington, not simply by diverging conceptions of national interest.\textsuperscript{34}

It is also important to underline Preston's words on Aston's volume when he writes that Ashton "pay great attention both to the extraordinarily successful personal influence the British ambassador to Washington, David Ormsby-Gore, had with John F. Kennedy in several crises, and to the importance to the British of commercial and old colonial ties in formulating a policy toward the 1961-62 crisis in the Congo."\textsuperscript{35}

In his work, Ashton claims that the relationship between United States and Great Britain it is not based on a real \textit{interdependence} and that

during the Cold War, the imbalance between British and American resources and power was so large it made any notion of interdependence a mere pretence. But this neglects Ashton’s more subtle, and intriguing, point about the ironic nature of the Anglo-American relationship. In its strict adherence to the principle of interdependence, Britain often pursued a line of policy that turned out to be inimical to its own national interests. Had the British realized that interdependence did not actually exist, and thus had they pursued an independent foreign policy, their interests and objectives would have been much better served. The British, in other words, lost much more by pursuing interdependence than they could ever gain, a very cruel irony indeed. Interdependence was not only mythical; it was also counter-productive.\textsuperscript{36}

Yet, Ashton argues that Macmillan was not able to influence John F. Kennedy’s positions on Great Britain and the Cold War:

one could infer that the Anglo-American relationship was in fact a headquarters-subsidiary relationship.\textsuperscript{37}

For instance:

-on Laos, the British wound up committing themselves to a U.S. military contingency plan “they thought unnecessary and unwise and then found themselves in the awkward position of working with the Soviets to constrain American ambitions.”\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Ibidem.}
\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Ivi}, p.27.
\textsuperscript{35} \textit{http://h-net.msu.edu/}
\textsuperscript{36} Nigel Ashton, \textit{cit.}, p.10.
\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Ivi}, p.11.
-About Berlin, Macmillan proposed a negotiated solution with Moscow and the eruption of the Wall was against his position.\textsuperscript{39}

- On Yemen and the Congo, there was a contrast between Britain’s colonial interests and American’s Cold War worries and John F. Kennedy’s positions were always more considered and implemented than Macmillan’s ones.\textsuperscript{40}

About the Nassau summit (December 1962) Ashton writes:

in the Kennedy years the nuclear relationship between Britain and America came to be seen as something of a litmus test of interdependence. When Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara scuttled the Skybolt nuclear missile program, which the United States had already promised to the British, and the Kennedy administration subsequently hesitated to replace Skybolt with submarine-based Polaris missiles, Macmillan realized just how unequal the relationship was and how superficial the concept of interdependence had become. Ashton’s conclusions about the Skybolt controversy and the decline of the British strategic deterrent also nicely describe the broader dynamic of Anglo-American relations during the Cold War.\textsuperscript{41}

Conclusion

When we speak about the \textit{special relationship}, it is really important to underline the British approach and the American one. For Macmillan, it was a complex of partnership and equality, while for JFK and for all the members of his establishment, it means an always greater centralization of control and power for the American side.\textsuperscript{42}

As John F. Kennedy stated:

there had to be control by somebody. One man had to make the decision, and as things stood that had to be the American President.\textsuperscript{43}

Ashton writes that

it was the British who put much more effort than the Americans into maintaining the relationship as \textit{special}. But the absence of interdependence should not obscure the fact that the Anglo-American alliance was, and remains, one of the most trustworthy and, despite its counter-productiveness for the British, effective in international relations.\textsuperscript{44}

Yet, about the Anglo-American interdependence:

the gap between the British and the Americans in defense expenditure and nuclear technology was huge. In the Cold War it was the leadership of the United States, and not that of Britain, that effectively determined the outcome. Although the British and the Americans had relatively few disputes about the Berlin crisis during the Kennedy

\textsuperscript{38} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibidem
\textsuperscript{42} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{43} Ivi, p.191.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibidem.
years, the United States did decide the outcome of the Congo crisis in the face of Britain’s objections to the reintegration of the Katanga province into the Congolese state. The conclusion of the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty likewise indicated that Britain's influence remained subordinate and limited. Nevertheless in this book the United States does not come across as a confident and arrogant power.\textsuperscript{45}

It is possible to understand this important aspect by analyzing the most relevant issues of the Cold War (for instance Laos, Berlin, Cuba, Congo, policies in the Middle East, Britain’s European Economic Community application, nuclear weapons’ topic and the Test Ban Treaty); it is very clear that in all these situations the American Government had a key-role in the decision-making process, while Britain Government always tried to play a more important role in the international arena. JFK's quoted words express without any doubt which was the position of his Government and, of course, his personal conviction.

Bibliography

\textit{Documents}
John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library (JFKL).

\textit{Books}


Peter Busch, All the Way With JFK? Britain, the U.S. and the Vietnam War, Oxford University Press, USA, 2003.


I.V. Scott, Macmillan, Kennedy, And The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1999, Palgrave USA.

\textit{Websites}
http://www.jfklibrary.org/

http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/

\textsuperscript{45} Ibidem.