OPINION

Which way for Britain – Europe or the US?

If anyone but Thatcher wins election, continental drift may be in store

By Henry B. Ryan

WITH an election around the corner, Britain again is thinking hard about its relations with Europe and the United States, and for Britain the two questions are related. Many in Britain believe that what Whitehall calls its "special relationship" with the US prevents it from developing closer, and beneficial, political links with the Continent. Indeed, Charles de Gaulle made little secret of the fact that it was the ties with the US, as well as with the Commonwealth, that led the French to blackball Britain's entry into the European Community twice in the 1960s.

The British themselves had serious doubts about the connection even with De Gaulle off the scene, and Britain admitted to the Community. Strong criticism was voiced at times by farmers, laborers, and intellectuals.

As late as 1980, a group of economists at Cambridge were seriously proposing that Britain quit the Community and go it alone, sponsoring local industry behind high protective tariffs. Today that talk has all but disappeared. Britain seems to be securely in Europe, but to what degree and with what effect on its "special relationship" with the United States remains uncertain.

Balancing American with European affairs is an old custom in London, dating back to colonial America. Although Americans rarely think of their pre-20th-century history in more than local terms, the British have always viewed American relations to a great extent in a European context.

Both the American Revolution and the War of 1812, for example, were for Britain complications in an on-again-off-again Anglo-French war that rumbled through the 18th century and into the 19th, until it finally ended at Waterloo.

Much of the present Anglo-American relationship began in World War II, even while the US was still neutral. Then Winston Churchill, backed by many, but not all, of his wartime advisers, set out to create an inseparable US-British combination.

More than an alliance, it would have linked the military and foreign policy direction of the two countries. Nor was it to be simply a wartime expedient, but was to be the real force for keeping peace in the world when the war ended.

What about the Soviet Union? It would have to deal with a US-United Kingdom bloc, like it or not. Churchill believed, however, that it would cooperate far more readily when faced with a firm front by the "English-speaking democracies," whose affairs should be "so interwoven" that they would "stand or fall together," as he once put it.

This was really the message of the Iron Curtain speech. What Churchill did not say to the Americans, but what is clear from the records, is that the Anglo-American tie would preserve Great Britain in the front rank of powers, even if only as part of a hyphenated power, "Anglo-America," let's say.

The Americans were only listening to part of the message – "confront the Soviets." Their feelings about Britain were too ambivalent – full of love and hate, admiration and jealousy, awe and contempt – to go for anything resembling Churchill's vision.

Also, they were suspicious of British diplomacy, enemies of its empire, and competitors of its industries. Whereas Churchill, for example, hoped to continue the combined US-British military cooperation of the war, Harry Truman chopped off lend-lease so abruptly at the end of the hostilities that it left British statesmen "gasping for breath," according to an official historian.

Furthermore, the United States also locked Britain out of nuclear arms cooperation. But worst of all, there was no avoiding the fate that Her Majesty's government dreaded and spoke of "ad nauseam," according to one Foreign Office official, that of becoming a "junior partner."

British statesmen hoped that even if their country had nothing like America's strength, it had other things to offer – especially experience. A little comic poem on a scrap of paper found at the Bretton Woods Economic Conference in 1944 summed it up neatly:

In Washington Lord Halifax
Once whispered to Lord Keynes
It's true they have the money bags
But we have all the brains.

But all that was years ago. What does it mean today?

For Britain a great deal. That country, in fact, has slipped more or less comfortably into the once dreaded junior partner position, becoming the key, but subordinate ally, the trusty lieutenant. It has not been a problem-free relationship – as the Suez Crisis showed – but a good one overall. It has been characterized by close consultation and cooperation generally, if far from invariably, peaking perhaps during the Macmillan and Thatcher governments.

But times are changing. The "junior partner" issue is quietly but surely coming up for review, not by the Thatcher government, but in other sectors, among people who think and write about international relations, to say nothing of the new Liberal/Social Democratic Alliance, and the Labour Party under Neil Kinnock.

The assumption is that Britain is now unquestionably part of Europe. That being so, is it not in Europe that its future lies, playing a strong regional role, perhaps even challenging France and Germany, the Continent's big boys?

Isn't that more suitable today than being wingman to a superpower, particularly when for strategic, commercial, and ethnic reasons that superpower is looking more and more to areas other than Europe? Furthermore, these are areas (Asia, Latin America, Middle East) where Britain can no longer help much, regardless of what it would like to do.

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Not surprisingly perhaps, each political party has a position on US nuclear weapons in Britain. Conservatives support it to the hilt, the Alliance calls for its gradual reduction, and Labour takes a "nukes out" stand, saying that it does not even want Britain defended by a US nuclear umbrella. But the relationship is being scrutinized in other sectors, too.

In the last decade, especially in the last year, there has been an outpouring of books and articles on the subject. They have studied the changing status of Britain in relation both to its Continent and to its superpower ally. They also have searched out in minute detail the roots of the alliance to determine how special it is, or ever was, and whether it now should be overhauled.

There is an ambivalence expressed in much of this writing. It betrays a reluctance to stay in a junior partner role that in any event is losing much of its relevance in changing world conditions, but a hesitance to leave it. A desire to move away, but a tendency to look back.

This intellectual *Angst* has been given political expression by Mr. Kinnock. He yearns to throw US nuclear firepower, the West's major deterrent force, off the island, leaving Britain to play a conventional armed role in NATO.

Not a proposal to cause rejoicing in the Pentagon or the State Department. On the other hand, however, as part of his "campaign" for the elections, Kinnock traveled twice to Washington, apparently in search of a warm and highly visible reception. Perhaps that is not totally inconsistent, but simply indicative of the Atlantic crosswinds blowing over Britain today, buffeting intellectuals and politicians alike.

Meanwhile, with Britain searching for its proper international niche, it will take a firm hand by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, the probable winner in the election, to keep it where it is now relative to Europe and America.

If there is any other outcome, it will almost surely move closer to the Continent and further from the United States than it has been since the beginning of lend-lease in 1941.

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