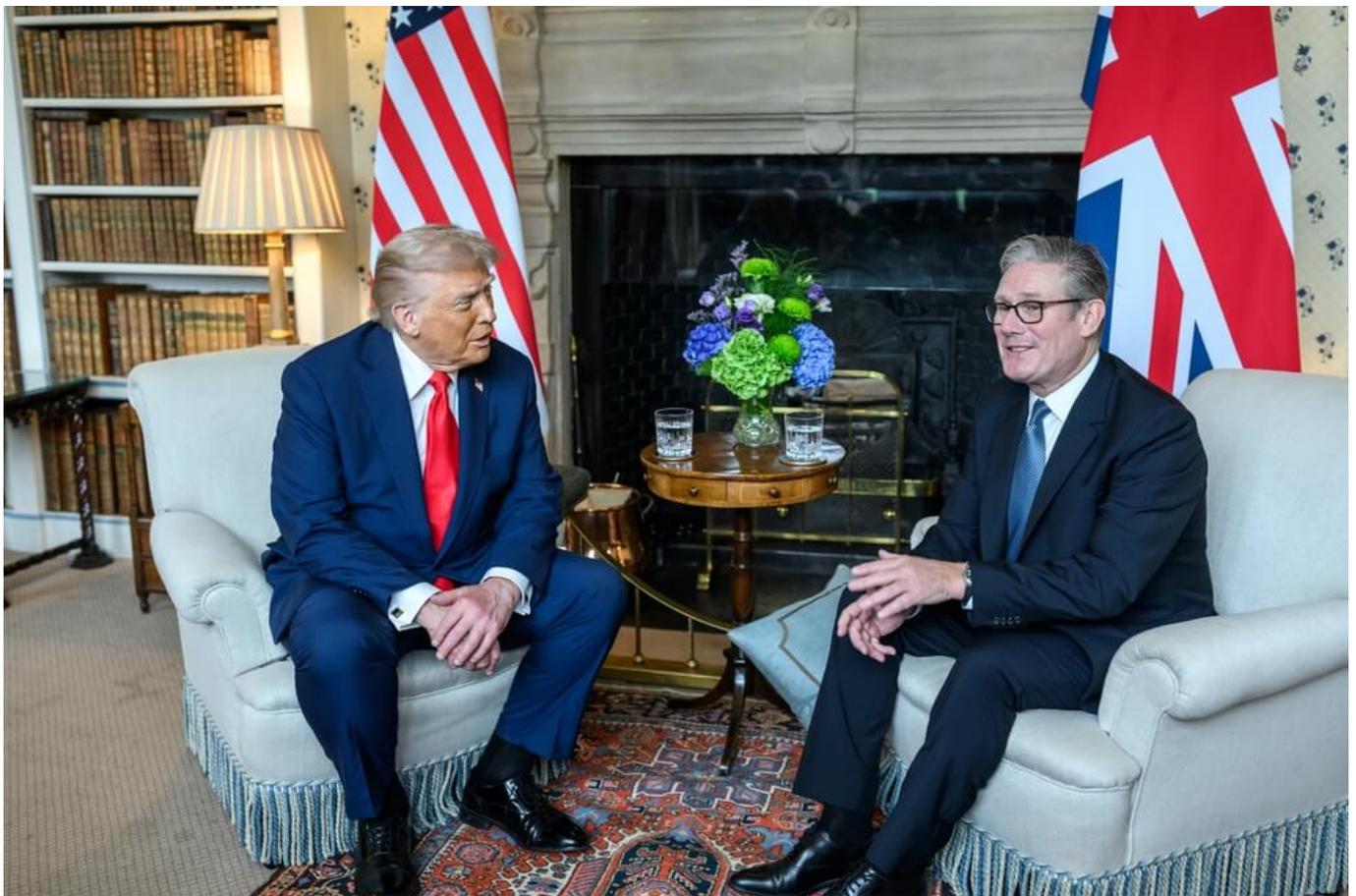




By: *Harvey Morris*

Echoes of the past in latest UK-US rift over Iran



The gods of coincidence apparently ordained that the latest crisis in the much-vaunted 'special relationship' between the US and the UK should erupt exactly 80 years since the concept was framed.

Donald Trump may have missed the irony of his insult that Prime Minister Keir Starmer was "not Winston Churchill" coming in the week the two allies mark the anniversary of Britain's wartime leader coining the label for their unique ties.

Does the UK government's initial decision to stay out of Trump's war on Iran and to deny the US the use of British bases in the US-Israeli campaign mark the final demise of an unwritten pact conceived eight decades ago?

Starmer insists it does not. Speaking on March 5, the prime minister said the special relationship, of which Churchill had spoken on the same day in 1946, remained intact and was "in operation right now".

He was referring to his subsequent decision to authorise "defensive" operations against Iran from bases jointly operated with the US and to share round-the-clock intelligence with Washington.

That appeared to do little to appease the US president. Referring to the UK as "our once great ally", he posted on social media that "we don't need people that join Wars after we've already won!"

Although critics on the right have accused Starmer of dithering, his decision to defy Trump and put UK interests first was a rare issue on which the prime minister appeared to be in tune with British public opinion.

It may nevertheless mark the end of his already waning campaign to establish his own special relationship with Trump.

At the heart of the special relationship

The unlikely bonhomie established from the start of the president's second term was already under strain, given Trump's stance on the Ukraine war, his threats against Greenland and his belated opposition to the UK's planned transfer of sovereignty of their joint base in **Diego Garcia** to Mauritius.

The sharing of military resources was very much at the heart of the special relationship that Winston Churchill outlined in Fulton, Missouri, in 1946.

In a speech in which he also coined the term '**Iron Curtain**' to describe a divided post-war Europe, the former prime minister - Labour had unseated him the previous year - spelled out his vision.

Under successive US administrations and UK governments, such bilateral security co-operation was integral to the Western defence stance in the Cold War

The special relationship "between the British Commonwealth and Empire and the United States" would involve the joint use of all naval and air force bases in the possession of either country all over the world.

"Already we use together a large number of islands," Churchill said. "More may well be entrusted to our joint care."

Under successive US administrations and UK governments, such bilateral security co-operation was integral to the Western defence stance in the Cold War, extending to other states with the creation of NATO in 1949.

A one-time superpower

Even in the era when the Soviet Union was the main antagonist, the course of the special relationship did not always run smoothly, particularly when, as now, it involved developments in the Middle East.

US President Harry Truman recognised the state of Israel on the day it was proclaimed in 1948. It took the UK, the former mandate power closely embroiled in the affairs of Arab states, a tense two years before taking the same step.

The debacle has since come to be regarded as the final confirmation of the UK's eclipse as a one-time superpower

In 1953, the US conspired with its British ally - a re-elected Winston Churchill - to oust the Iranian prime minister Mohammad Mosaddegh after he nationalised UK oil interests.

But three years later, Washington refused to endorse the Anglo-French Suez adventure in which the two European powers joined Israel's invasion of Egypt in a bid to reclaim the recently nationalised Suez Canal.

The debacle has since come to be regarded as the final confirmation of the UK's eclipse as a one-time superpower, one no longer enjoying the luxury of acting globally without at least the tacit consent of its American heir.

The myth of the special relationship

Despite the periodic tensions, both Washington and London have officially clung to what many contemporary commentators would regard as the myth of the special relationship.

Some doubters, however, claim that even before the latest rift over Iran, it was already dead.



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During a series of interviews, former senior NATO commander **Richard Shirreff** defended Starmer's stance but described the special relationship as a political fantasy.

While politicians on the Conservative and Reform right argued that Starmer has weakened the country by alienating its closest and most powerful ally, Shirreff said: "Britain has to do what is right for Britain."

Politicians and officials on both sides of the Atlantic regularly pay lip service to that same proviso whenever the issue of the special relationship is raised.

As **US ambassador Warren Stephens** told British parliamentarians last month, referring to Churchill's Fulton speech: "We may not, and do not, always agree. That's ok - the reality is that close friends don't always agree."

The businessman and Trump ally set out a series of economic issues in which the two countries were in tune, while taking a familiar snipe at the Labour government for its green, anti-oil and gas agenda.

He was speaking before the latest Iran crisis. But perhaps the final word - sincere or not - should still rest with him:

"May God bless both our countries and continue to bless our very special relationship."