



Brown hints at a shift in the 'special relationship'

(Published in *International Herald Tribune*, January 25, 2007)

Mark Joyce

Colaboraciones n° 1457

January 29, 2007

On Jan. 12, Prime Minister Tony Blair of Britain gave his first major speech of 2007 in a Royal Navy amphibious assault ship. Surrounded by armored vehicles and a carefully selected audience of defense-industry grandees, he outlined his priorities for British security policy.

To supporters of Britain's "special relationship" with the United States, the arguments were familiar and reassuring: The British government should resist mounting public demands for cuts in military spending; the international threat environment requires that we maintain the capabilities to fight wars as well as keep the peace; Britain must continue to assume that it will fight side by side with America.

While Blair's speech stole the headlines, Gordon Brown, the chancellor of the Exchequer - who is expected to take over as prime minister this year - was making a quieter but more significant intervention. In an article in *The Guardian* he called on developed nations to make education the overarching priority of international security policy. Ensuring that all the world's children have access to education within 10 years, he argued, makes not just moral and economic sense but strategic sense, too.

The article signaled that Brown's arrival in 10 Downing Street could be bad news for those who favor a special Anglo-American security relationship.

Brown has until now been reticent on the subject of foreign and security policy, leaving observers few clues from which to infer his likely priorities. His recent intervention is part of a broader campaign to establish his credentials as an international statesman.

Brown's political record indicates that he is an instinctive Atlanticist, preferring close relations with the United States over increasing integration into the European Union. He is critical of EU bureaucracy and was instrumental in postponing a British referendum on entry into the single European currency. He has, meanwhile, established close contacts with key figures within the Democrat establishment.

Although his relations with the Republican establishment are nowhere near as cordial, Brown is unlikely to pick a fight with the Bush administration, however tempting that might be in domestic political terms. The chancellor supported the invasion of Iraq and has several times approved extra funds to pay for the troops stationed there. He believes a British military presence should be retained for as long as it is needed.

Brown must therefore seek ways of stamping his own authority on security policy while honoring burdensome military commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan. An attempt to use British diplomatic and economic influence to make progress on education, the environment and other "soft" security issues is thought to be the answer.

Against this background, defense chiefs are increasingly concerned that the military will face serious budget cuts under Brown. Ministry of Defense documents leaked in January indicated that plans are in place to withdraw almost half of the Royal Navy's 44 warships from service.

The proposed cuts would leave the navy with a fleet considerably smaller than that of France, a bitter pill to swallow for an institution in which Anglo-French rivalry remains fierce. More important, it would greatly reduce Britain's ability to fight alongside the United States in future campaigns. As one senior military commander put it, the navy would become little more than a "coastal defense force."

Despite the new emphasis on "soft" over "hard" security tools, Brown's rhetoric in front of U.S. audiences is likely to be similar to Blair's: The relationship with the United States is central to British foreign and security policy; Britain can be relied upon to stand shoulder to shoulder with America in the fights against terrorism and extremism.

But the realities of military spending suggest otherwise. As the U.S. defense budget moves inexorably upward, Britain's ability to integrate into the American fighting machine becomes ever more difficult and expensive.

If plans to mothball half the naval fleet are executed, and if international development and education receive significant new injections of

funding, Britain will have embarked on a security-policy trajectory much closer to the EU's than to America's -

and the façade of the "special relationship" will become ever more difficult to maintain.