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The U.S.-UK White House Summit: End of the Bush-Blair Partnership?

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British Prime Minister Tony Blair meets President George W. Bush at the White House this week in perhaps the last major Washington summit between the two world leaders. Blair's latest Washington trip, his eighth U.S. visit since 9/11, will likely be dominated by discussions over the future of the American and British troop presence in Iraq. The growing threat posed by the Iranian nuclear program will also be high on the agenda, as well as broader discussion of the war on terrorism, including tensions between London and Washington over the U.S. detention facility at Guantanamo Bay.

The summit may be overshadowed by the British Prime Minister's declining popularity at home, where his approval rating has fallen to just 26 percent,¹ and his erosion of power within the ruling Labour Party. The recent local elections were a disaster for Blair and his government and have prompted growing calls for the prime minister to stand down in favor of his Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown. While Blair, possessing a Houdini-like ability to survive in the most difficult of circumstances, may weather the immediate political storm, it is increasingly

likely that he will depart Downing Street in mid to late 2007.

This week's White House meeting may prove a watershed moment, marking the beginning of the end of the extraordinary political partnership between Bush and Blair, the driving force behind the wars against Iraq and Afghanistan as well as the Anglo-American war on terror. But it should not though be viewed as a "lame duck summit" or a meeting of the "axis of the feeble."² Rather, it is an important opportunity for the United States and Great Britain to discuss issues of common concern that have a direct impact on international security and the defense of the West. While the Bush-Blair alliance is drawing to a close, it will remain a formidable force on the international stage until Blair exits office.

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Iraq

The summit takes place just days after the formation of a new Iraqi government following months of political turmoil and mounting violence between Shias and Sunnis. Although the key interior and defense posts have yet to be filled, the appointment of a new cabinet with the backing of all ethnic groups is a significant development that London and Washington hope will avert the threat of a civil war. This Thursday's White House press conference, together with Blair's major policy speech in Washington on Friday, will provide an important opportunity for a robust defense of the decision to remove Saddam Hussein from power and of continued U.S.-UK support of the fledgling Iraqi democracy.

A critical issue for discussion is how long U.S. and British forces will remain in Iraq in the face of growing public opposition in both the United States and Britain. In a joint press conference this weekend with Tony Blair, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki revealed that two of the four British-run provinces in the south of the country, Muthanna and Maysan, could be transferred to Iraqi military control later this summer. Al-Maliki and Blair stated that "by the end of this year responsibility for much of Iraq's territorial security should have been transferred to Iraqi control." Downing Street sources have suggested that all coalition forces could exit Iraq by 2010.³

In light of these latest pronouncements, Britain could conceivably withdraw around a quarter of its 8,000 soldiers from the country later this year, though it is highly unlikely that Britain will be able to move its troops out of Basra, the base of most British forces in Iraq, where Iranian-backed militias pose a growing security threat.

It remains uncertain how these latest signals from Baghdad will affect U.S. planning for the 130,000 U.S. troops in Iraq, and Washington has firmly rejected any talk of firm timetables for the withdrawal of its own forces. Still, this week's summit will likely prepare for a coordinated Anglo-American approach to any scaling down of Western troops in Iraq.

Iran

On Iran, the focus will be primarily on U.S. and British efforts to push through an aggressive sanctions regime in an effort to block the development of nuclear weapons. London and Washington will be looking to carefully coordinate their diplomatic offensive this summer at the UN Security Council, with the goal of forcing concessions from Russia and China, Iran's key strategic allies. At the same time, the U.S. and British leaders will explore possible measures outside of the Security Council, including the building of an international coalition of the willing to impose an array of political and economic measures against Iran. There is also likely to be a frank discussion of the possible use of force, as a last resort, to disarm the Iranian regime.

Significantly, Blair has refused to rule out the possibility of strikes against Tehran, keeping all options on the table. Blair was greatly angered by Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's threats against Israel and hinted at military action to halt Iran's nuclear development. In October, Blair warned Iran's leaders that they were making "a very big mistake" if they believed the West would not respond forcefully to Tehran's talk of wiping Israel "off the map."⁴ In the clearest sign yet that Blair will push an aggressive line on the Iran issue, he acted decisively against his foreign secretary Jack Straw in a recent Cabinet reshuffle, axing him from his post following a series of remarks in which Straw described military action as "inconceivable."

The War on Terror

The White House summit will provide an important opportunity to underscore U.S.-British leadership in the global battle against Islamic terrorism. Britain is currently playing a lead role in NATO military operations in the Helmand province of southern Afghanistan, with 4,000 British troops fighting on the front line against Taliban guerrillas.

The U.S. detention facility at Guantanamo Bay will continue to be a source of tension between the American and British Governments. While Blair has shied away from direct criticism of Guantanamo, preferring to call it an “anomaly” that must eventually be addressed, some members of his administration have been far more outspoken—a sign that Blair’s control over his own ministers is beginning to slip. In a speech to the Royal United Services Institute, Britain’s Attorney General Lord Goldsmith called the Guantanamo camp “unacceptable,” stating that it had become a symbol of “injustice” that tarnishes the image of the United States.⁵

In the wake of Goldsmith’s comments, as well as the latest UN report calling for Guantanamo to be closed,⁶ Blair faces immense pressure from his own Labour Party to raise the issue of the long-term detention of terror suspects.

Blair’s Precarious Position

While Tony Blair remains a powerful leader on the international stage, as this week’s Washington summit will demonstrate, domestically his position is extremely weak. The UK’s May 4 local elections were a political earthquake that dramatically altered the electoral landscape in Britain. The ruling Labour Party placed third in the polls, with just 26 percent of the national vote, and lost over 300 council seats. The opposition Conservative Party polled 40 percent, gaining 300 seats—its best performance in 14 years. In the opinion polls, the

Conservatives have established a clear lead over the Labour Party, with support for Labour standing at its lowest point since 1992. Fully 65 percent of British voters now believe that Labour will lose the next general election, which must be held by 2010.⁷

There is open talk in the Labour Party of a rebellion, even ‘civil war,’ with potentially catastrophic effects for the party. At least two letters have circulated in the past month among Labour MPs calling for Blair to set a date for his departure. Dissent is growing not only among the anti-New Labour left wing of the party, but also among more moderate MPs, who consider Blair a liability. While the Prime Minister has firmly rebuffed calls to set a timetable, he has reportedly agreed to stand down in 2007 in favor of his Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown.⁸

Planning for a Post-Blair Future

As Tony Blair enters the twilight of his premiership, strategists in Washington must look to a post-Blair government and consider how it will impact U.S. foreign policy. His heir apparent, Gordon Brown, is unlikely to fundamentally transform the nature of the Anglo-American alliance. He will, though, adjust its tempo and alter the dynamics that drive it. Brown, with a large base of support on the left of the Labour Party and whose ties to Washington are mainly to Democrats, will be unlikely to emulate the close friendship that Blair has developed with Bush. Nor is he likely to win the kind of adoration from the American public that the Prime Minister gained after 9/11.

Brown’s approach will be less sentimental than Blair’s, based on a sharper-edged analysis of what he defines as the British national interest, including more open confrontation with Washington over issues such as international development assistance, poverty reduction, trade, and global warming. He will be less likely than

Blair to spearhead international efforts in the war on terrorism and may be less inclined to keep British troops fighting in Iraq.

On the Iranian nuclear crisis, perhaps the dominant international issue of the next few years, Brown's views are unknown, which will complicate U.S. strategic thinking, especially if the use of force is contemplated. Britain will be a critically important ally for the United States as she confronts the Iranian nuclear threat, and the timing of Blair's handover of power could influence Washington as it contemplates military strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities as a last

resort. While Blair is likely to side with the U.S. in the event of a conflict with Iran, Brown's position could be far less hawkish.⁹

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¹ "Blair is Most Unpopular Labour PM," *The Daily Telegraph*, May 10, 2005.

² See "Battered Lame Ducks Meet to Protect Their Place in History," *The Times*, May 18, 2006.; "Axis of Feeble," *The Economist*, May 13, 2006.

³ "Blair Visits Baghdad To Sketch Out Timetable for Withdrawal," *The Times*, May 23, 2006; "Troop Pull-Out From Iraq to be Speeded Up," *The Guardian*, May 23, 2006.

⁴ "Blair Hints at Military Action After Iran's 'Disgraceful Taunt,'" *The Times*, October 28, 2005; "We Will Use Force, Blair Warns Iranians," *The Daily Telegraph*, October 28, 2005.

⁵ "Significant UK Shift on Guantanamo," *BBC News Online*, May 11, 2006.

⁶ UN Committee Against Torture, "Conclusions and recommendations of the Committee against Torture," May 19, 2006, at <http://www.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cat/docs/AdvanceVersions/CAT.C.USA.CO.2.pdf>.

⁷ "Support for Labour at Lowest Level Since 1992," *The Times*, May 9, 2006 at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2-2171574,00.html>.

⁸ "Blair: I'll Quit Next Year – Trust Me," *The Daily Telegraph*, May 9, 2006.

⁹ For further background on British strategic thinking on the Iranian nuclear issue, see Nile Gardiner, Ph.D., "Forging a U.S.-British Coalition to End Iran's Nuclear Weapons Program," Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 1047, April 24, 2006, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/MiddleEast/wm1047.cfm>.