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## Britain's Mechanism of Tolerance in the AASR's Role Sharing: Case Study of UK-US Conflict of Interests in Iran\*

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### Abstract

WWII and its consequences served to bring a new era of extensive cooperation between the United Kingdom and the United States, leading to the birth of the Anglo-American special relationship (AASR). However, the two countries' global widespread interests led to inevitable conflicts of interest, mostly favoring the US. Here, the question arises: Why did postwar Britain maintain its attachment to the AASR in times of conflicting interest with America? The paper, motivated by Giddens's definition of ontological security, discusses that the consequences of WWII not only generated for the UK physical security concerns, but also ontological insecurity. In this respect, postwar Britain, accepting an inferior role, sought a special relationship with the US to consolidate this mutual partnership in order to mitigate its ontological insecurity in the postwar world order. The paper then, by investigating two cases of British-American conflicting interests in Iran, and raising a material-ideational debate, aims to identify the advantages of ontological security theory in explaining Britain's "mechanism of tolerance" in preserving the AASR. Otherwise stated, through the proposed conceptual framework, the paper explores the way in which ontological security needs shape the postwar UK's behaviors to prioritize its close relations with the US, regardless of the costs.

**Keywords:** Alliance, Identity, Ontological Security, Routines, Special Relationship

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## 1. Introduction

Narrowed down to a medium-sized country in Western Europe, postwar Britain faced a noticeable erosion of its international standing, as decolonization unraveled the Kingdom that had once been the Earth's largest empire. Struggling to come to terms with the aftermath of the war, British policymakers endeavored to pursue a robust global power policy despite the relative decline of the Kingdom's world role. This study focuses on the ideational consequences of WWII for Britain and aims to demonstrate the way in which postwar British foreign policy was influenced by a dominant discourse of identity. In other words, British policymakers were obsessed with regaining the 'greatness' of the Kingdom's glorious past. The long-standing recognition of Britain as a 'global hub' or 'pivotal power' served as a double-edged sword for postwar Britain. On the one hand, it fostered a shared sense of belonging and unity among the people, inspiring them to band together. On the other hand, the new world order after WWII, when decolonization and events like the Suez Crisis confirmed the Kingdom's diminishing position in the global system (Brendon, 2007, p. 660), triggered a sense of ontological insecurity for the Kingdom. Throughout the centuries leading up to WWII, being a 'major global player' had been a crucial aspect of British identity. Despite the numerous cultural, social, and political consequences of WWII both domestically and internationally, the Britons habitually desired to view their state as one of the world leaders in the new order. This continued aspiration for global prominence persisted even after six years of global war.

In the aftermath of WWII, the UK's discourse power diminished compared to its pre-war influence (Rolland, 2020, p. 11). Terms like 'leading nation', 'global Britain', 'global hub', 'major global

player', 'at the top table', and 'pivotal power' (Vucetic, 2021, p. 1) lost prominence on the world stage. The crises of the post-war era disrupted Britain's dominant biography, a state that once held the largest empire in human history (McCarthy & Richter, 2020). Dean Acheson, the former US Secretary of State, famously remarked, "Britain has lost an empire and has not found a role yet" (Wallace, 1991, p. 65). Amidst these circumstances, Great Britain sought to correct its conventional wisdom and maintain its greatness after WWII. The British elites and policymakers were determined to find a solution to regain a strong global policy despite the visible erosion and relative decline of Britain's international position. The answer they sought was to once again become one of the leading nations through alliance with the United State: Forming a close alliance with the United States, the new order's hegemon, seemed fitting due to their shared narratives and identity affinities. As Vucetic (2021, p. 10) suggests, Britain's post-1945 global foreign policy was not merely a function of the ruling class; rather, it developed from the evolving ideas about "self" and "Others" within broader British or English society.

The study employs descriptive case study and conceptual analysis methods. Focusing on the nationalization of the Iranian oil industry (1952) and the US withdrawal from JCPOA (2018), the descriptive case study method allows an in-depth data collection and is particularly suitable for studying infrequent cases. Otherwise stated, the findings not only shed light on the reasons for which postwar Britain sustained its alliance with the US despite conflicts of interest, they also offer insights applicable to broader cases of international alliances based on shared ideational factors. Additionally, the paper also proceeds from a conceptual analysis to illustrate the way in which Britain's ontological insecurity after

WWII arises from crises in its narrative ‘identity’ and historical ‘routines,’ and how the Anglo-American special relationship serves as a source of ontological security to mitigate these anxieties.

Therefore, the paper utilizes ontological security theory in international relations as the suggested theoretical framework. Starting with the basic notion of ontological security, it scales up to the state level of analysis to explore the way in which long-standing national identity shapes British foreign policy after WWII. The study presents two cases of UK-US conflicts of interest to understand Britain’s political behaviors and asymmetric power relations in the partnership with the United States. By critically examining the realist and liberal perspectives on the AASR endurance, the paper highlights the advantages of ontological security theory in explaining Britain’s reasons for preserving the relationship even at the expense of its material interests.

## **2. Thematic Literature Review**

There have been numerous studies focusing on international relationships, referred to as ‘special relationships.’ Some of these studies include historical analyses (Reynolds, 1985; Little, 1993; Dumbrell, 2001); others examine the current status of special relations (Wallace & Phillips, 2009). While these studies offer valuable empirical and analytical insights into the specific relationships, they often tend to lack a strong theoretical basis on a case-specific relationship as well as broader reflections on how special relationships influence the foreign policies of states. In other words, academic contributions that examine different instances of ‘specialness’ or provide general theoretical insights about special relationships as an analytical category are relatively

scarce. Therefore, the present study aims to address these limitations by focusing on a theoretical examination of the 'AASR.' By taking ontological security as the theoretical approach, the study intends to illuminate the underlying dynamics of this partnership and its implications for endurance, particularly in times of conflicting interests among its members.-In this regard, we aim to thematically examine the research background and review the literature in the two following areas:

### **2.1. Ideational Factors and the Formation of IR Alliances**

In *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991, p. 38) Anthony Giddens refers to ontological security as a sense of continuity and order regarding an individual's experiences. Ontological security is a stable mental-psychological state that results from a sense of continuity about various events. In this sense, meaning is found in experiencing stable and positive emotions by avoiding anxiety and chaos. According to Giddens's concept of ontological security, actors' high confidence in normal social relations with another actor with predictable behavior is a source for achieving ontological security. Therefore, to study the role-sharing of 'leader' and 'follower' in the AASR from this perspective, it must be said that ontological security for Britain can be considered as a mechanism of tolerance to act as the inferior member of the AASR. In international relations, the concept of ontological security, similar to Giddens' sociological concept, means that in addition to physical security (such as maintaining territorial integrity), countries also seek to ensure their ontological security to the extent that governments may even jeopardize their security or physical interests (Steele, 2008, p. 24). As a result, ontological security in

international relations can be considered an appropriate answer to certain fundamental questions about understanding the reasons of acceptance of being the 'junior partner' in unbalanced alliances.

In *Identity, Interest, and Action*, Ringmar (1996, p. 128) argues that the construction of "self" and "other" in international relations is largely determined by shared narratives, which serve to establish a sense of ontological security. This concept refers to the assurance that a state's existence is meaningful and that it is recognized by others. Shared narratives, therefore, are essential to building strong alliances, especially when there is a power imbalance. In the case of the Anglo-American special relationship, the idea of Englishness or Anglo-Saxonism has been used to rationalize the alliance, even though these shared qualities are constructed by the UK itself. This shared narrative has been crucial in maintaining the bonds between the superior and inferior parties, ensuring that the latter remains committed to the alliance. While material realities can potentially alter these constitutive stories over time, Englishness or Anglo-Saxonism has been a powerful and enduring narrative, perhaps even more so than material interests.

In his book, *Stories of Peoplehood* (2003), Smith argues that all members of a community valorize a shared narrative (constitutive story) because of their innate participation in a valuable common identity to secure a sense of self-respect or self-worth, for example, one of a 'master race,' 'God's chosen people,' a historic people or great culture (Smith, 2003, p. 69). Accordingly, shared narratives can promote a sense of shared identity through alliance members (for example, their ethnicity, culture, ancestry, language, or history) constitutive of a group to which they belong. Such narratives thus profoundly define the past, the present-day, and even the future 'self' of a state. In line with Smith, Wallace (2009) writes that the

existence of the special relationship for the Britons is a constructive and significant aspect of their foreign policy identity.

## 2.2. The Asymmetric Power Relations in the AASR

David Reynolds (1985) argues that the special relationship was a deliberate British invention created by Churchill to serve as a diplomatic tool. Reynolds views the AASR as a means by which a declining power took advantage of a developing superpower to further its interests, even at the cost of ignoring the UK's former leadership role in the international system. The British policy towards the US was characterized by the phrase "Never say no; say yes, but..." according to Reynolds (Reynolds, 1985, p. 98). Therefore, the creation of the AASR required restrictions and sacrifices on the part of the smaller party: the United Kingdom.

In *Alliance Politics* (1997), Snyder presents the AASR as an example of an unequal alliance characterized by an accepted role-sharing between the dominant and subordinate actors. Snyder contends that the United States has taken the leadership position, while Britain is expected to play a supporting role. Accordingly, Snyder posits that there has always been a significant assumption in the British foreign policy that the country must reassert its commitment to the special relationship to prevent the risk of US withdrawal from the alliance. Echoing Snyder's views, Dumbrell (2004) argues that successive generations of British policymakers have viewed such commitments as essential for preserving the quality of the AASR.

In his work *When the Shooting Starts: Atlanticism in British Security Strategy* (2004), Tim Dunne, similar to Reynolds, argues

that British governments have consistently exercised caution to avoid direct confrontation with the United States on critical issues and have pledged to the alliance more fervently than their American counterparts. According to Dunne, this has been an integral part of the AASR, which has enabled British policymakers to ensure that their interests are taken into account in Washington. Consequently, the reason behind Britain's eagerness to contribute to US security interests, extending beyond conventional public and diplomatic support, is its commitment to the subordinate position it has accepted within the AASR.

In *The Transformation of British Life, 1950-2000: A Social History* (2004), Rosen highlights the enduring significance of Britain's glorious historical legacy, which contributes to a persistent perception of distinctiveness and sets them apart from their European counterparts. This sense of exceptionalism, coupled with shared Anglo-Saxon cultural affinities, has played a pivotal role in forging closer ties between Britain and the United States over time.

In *Narrative and the Making of US National Security* (2015), Ronald Krebs, referring to the acceptance of the US-UK role sharing in the special relationship, argues that such arrangements are often part of special relationships. These arrangements are a means of overcoming crises and a factor to ensure mutual commitments by alliance parties to restore the validity of the alliance in times of uncertainty; an assurance that can be a source of ontological security for the alliance members. Like Krebs, Whitman (2016) also argues that the priority of all British governments in maintaining the AASR has always been to reassure the US of Britain's unwavering commitment to the special relationship.



In his recent publication, *Greatness and Decline: National Identity and British Foreign Policy* (2021), Vucetic characterizes the British economic and credit collapse following WWII as a widely acknowledged and recurrent theme. Vucetic contends that postwar Britain's pursuit of greatness in the international system was a habit, where Britain accepted a subordinate role within the AASR to secure its position in the new world order. The author identifies British history as a discourse that shaped the national identity and influenced foreign policy when it was at risk after WWII, which created an ontological insecurity for Britain. This ontological insecurity was remedied by Churchill's forging of a special relationship with the United States.

Our preliminary literature review and findings suggest that the UK's quest for sources of ontological security may be the primary impetus behind the establishment and continuity of the Anglo-American special relationship. This need arises from the uncertainty surrounding the post-WWII international system and the ambiguity surrounding British foreign policy identity within it. As a result, the UK has sought to maintain a stable alliance with the United States as a source of ontological security, allowing for a 'tolerance mechanism' required to accept a subordinate role within the partnership.

### **3. Conceptual Framework**

Coined by RD Laing in individual psychology studies, ontological security refers to the drives of social actors to establish continuity for their self-identity throughout their lifetime (Laing, 1965, p. 40). Developed by Anthony Giddens, ontological security refers to an actor's "stable sense of identity" that comes from a "sense of order

and continuity in actions and events” (Giddens, 1991, p. 54). He draws on the initial trust between mother and infant to emphasize the way in which maintaining habits and practices evolved into an established framework can favor existence and durability (Giddens, 1991, pp. 38-9). Giddens argues that this framework has advanced as a security barrier that enables individuals to ask existential questions about the basic elements of their lives, such as the nature of existence, the distinction between human life and the outside world, the existence of ‘identity’ and ‘other people’ (Giddens, 1991, pp. 48-55). He emphasizes: “all human beings create a kind of ontological security framework [a protective cocoon] based on their different routines and habits, which enables them to ask questions about themselves, others, and the world to maintain and continue their daily activities of life.” (Giddens, 1991, p. 188). Accordingly, any element that disrupts the routine habits of individuals and groups will trigger their reaction, regardless of the cost.

Focusing on the role of routines and narratives in shaping self-identity, certain scholars have embraced the adaptation of ontological security theory to the realm of international relations. This adaptation involves both researchers who center their analysis on the individual level (Kinnvall, 2004; Browning, 2018) and those who shift attention to the state as their units of analysis (Mitzen, 2006a; Steele, 2008). As mentioned, being ontologically secure depends on our ability to have faith in routines and social narratives in which we are surrounded and through which our self-identity is formed (Giddens, 1984, p. 37). Such narratives (whether existential, cultural, legal, etc.) enable actors to reflect upon and keep their thoughts together with their decisions, and provide them with a certain measure for a sense of identity or a sense of agency

by which actors can engage socially. In international relations, narratives are a key political process in mitigating ontological insecurity for international actors. In this regard, at times of threats and crises to state securities, narratives are activated selectively to provide a 'cognitive bridge' between policy change that resolves the challenges to the physical security (like territorial threats), together with preserving the country's ontological security by providing a sense of routine and autobiographical continuity (Subotić, 2016, p. 612).

These selective narratives that are similar to states' historical routines help justify states' costly, seemingly irrational, or exceptional actions to mitigate their existential anxieties and provide a stable focal point for states' actions and behaviors. In other words, for the states seeking ontological security, narratives are crucial, because they supply continuity with the 'good past' through autobiographical justification. These past memories serve as orientation devices that make a state's actions meaningful by providing a sense of where they have come from and what they have been through (Berenskoetter, 2012, p. 270; Mälksoo, 2015, p. 223).

In this context, international actors are in need of ontological security, because it reduces uncertainty and stabilizes the states' cognitive environment, both of which are necessary preconditions for determined action and behavior. It means that ontological security protects actors from being incapacitated and paralyzed due to underlying anxieties of coping with unspecified risks and threats by external events. In other words, not knowing which dangers to confront and which to ignore, leads to ontological insecurity in the anarchic world (Mitzen, 2006a, p. 345). On the contrary, awareness of the unpredictable and limitless dangers that actors may

encounter at any moment makes it less complicated for them to take reasonable action. Accordingly, ontological security for social actors, like physical security, is a fundamental need because it constitutes their actions' capacity (Mitzen, 2006b, pp. 272- 273). While OST, as a multilevel framework, offers the capability to examine the AASR at both individual and unit levels between various societies or states (Vucetic, 2011, p. 17), our proposed theoretical framework primarily centers around state-level analysis, driven by the significant role of state sovereignty within the broader context of ontological security studies.

The current paper uses the concept of ontological security and its recent applications in international relations to analyze why and how the AASR has survived despite conflicts of interest between its two members. Although these bilateral conflicts might threaten the UK's national interests or even physical security, the continuity of the AASR has provided answers for UK's ontological questions regarding the basic parameters of life, 'being,' 'self and others,' and 'identity' that enable the UK to have consistent self-narratives. In other words, the special relationship with the US has become a source of ontological security for the UK despite sometimes overshadowing the Kingdom's physical security or national material interests.

#### **4. Discussion and Findings**

After WWII, the United Kingdom was facing a relative decline in its international position due to the decolonization process that diminished the Kingdom's once-great empire. The new situation posed a significant challenge to post-war British policymakers, whose concern consisted of restoring the 'greatness' of their nation

and preserving their global power. This ontological insecurity resulted in a desire to form a close alliance with the United States, which they viewed as the new order's hegemon and a state with which they shared significant narratives and identity affinities. This led to the creation of the Anglo-American special relationship, which the UK sought to maintain despite conflicts of interest with the US. In other words, the United Kingdom, in comparison to the United States, had limited alternative sources for ontological security after WWII, which rendered it more susceptible to the uncertainties of the post-war global order. Consequently, the UK experienced a heightened need for ontological security, with the special relationship with the US serving as a critical means of safeguarding its self-identity. The collective identity and shared narratives, such as historical ties, democratic values, a common language, and cultural connections with the US, played a pivotal role in empowering the UK to uphold its self-perception as a prominent power. Therefore, the AASR and its alignment with US-led global order not only furnished the UK with a sense of continuity and relevance in the post-WWII era, but also allowed it to regain its sense of greatness by facilitating an active and impactful participation on the global stage.

Put differently, the UK sought to preserve its identity and security by forging a strong relationship with the US. The AASR was founded on shared values and affinities between the two nations. For the Britons, the Americans were crucial partners in maintaining their global power and prestige. The continuity provided by the AASR was deemed essential for the UK's sense of identity and security in a rapidly changing world. Britain's adoption of a new foreign policy trajectory was significantly influenced by its subordinate relationship with the United States.

This alignment can be understood as a form of selecting a similar narrative, as discussed by Subotić (2016), in which the Kingdom's historical imperial experiences were recontextualized within the framework of the emerging informal Anglo-American empire (Panitch & Gindin, 2009, p. 9). Therefore, actions like accepting a subordinate role in the partnership or making sacrifices that might seem irrational from the perspective of traditional theories (such as realism and liberalism) can be seen as efforts to safeguard the UK's ontological security after WWII through the lens of ontological security theory.

#### **4.1. British-American Conflict of Interest**

##### **4.1.1. Nationalization of the AIOC**

One example of the UK sacrificing its national interest for the AASR was during the nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian oil company (AIOC) by the Iranian Prime Minister, Mohammad Mossadegh in 1951. As mentioned earlier, the UK, experiencing significant changes in its global status after WWII, was no longer the dominant global power it once was; changes in the new world order were threatening the UK's traditional sources of identity and security. The nationalization of the AIOC in 1951 presented one of the UK's major challenges after WWII. The AIOC was the largest British company operating in the Middle East and controlled Iran's oil resources, which were critical to UK's post-war economic recovery (Abdelrehim et al., 2011, pp. 831-34). In this regard, and despite opposition from the United States, the UK implemented strict economic and oil sanctions against Iran, engaged in legal measures to discredit the Iranian government, and even made threats of military intervention (Abrahamian, 1982).

In the book *Oil, Power, and Principle: Iran's Oil Nationalization and Its Aftermath* (1994), Mostafa Elm highlights the criticisms of American officials regarding the British response to the oil conflict with Iran. The lack of constructive action by the British to resolve the issue was viewed as highly disappointing and blameworthy. Additionally, the Americans strongly objected to the possibility of British military intervention in Iran and took measures to prevent such an outcome. British efforts to impose severe economic sanctions, or what was referred to as "keeping the Iranians hungry", were also vehemently opposed by the Americans. The latter believed that such actions could potentially push Iran towards becoming an ally of the Soviet Union (Elm, 1994).

During the Abadan Crisis, American politicians held a perception that Britain's insistence on pursuing its oil interests in Iran would lead this important country toward the Soviet Union (Marsh, 1998). This belief was based on the view that Britain's efforts to maintain control of Iran's oil resources could lead to a destabilization of the region, which could then be exploited by the Soviet Union to increase its influence in the Middle East. In this era, especially during the Eisenhower's administration, the US's key decisions were mainly made in ways that did not always suit London's interests like before. According to Heiss (2000), US interests dominated the negotiations, which destroyed all British hope that the AIOC might regain its former position as controller of Iranian oil operations; according to Britain's growing dependence on the United States, the Kingdom had no choice but to adhere to the US. Heiss believes the Anglo-American conflicting interest in Iran was one of the first cases in the process by which the United States came to assume the mantle of the British Empire in the new world order (Heiss, 2000, p. 86)

However, despite Britain's concerns about the Americans' efforts to establish new oil fields in Iran in favor of the US oil companies position (Abdelrehim et al., 2012, p. 835) and disagreement over US supportive policies for the nationalization of Iranian oil, the UK was still willing to make significant sacrifices to maintain the AASR with the United States (Marsh, 1998, p. 143). The AASR represented a vital source of continuity and stability (ontological security) for the UK in the new world order, which was considered more important than physical security. After WWII, when the Kingdom was no longer the dominant force it once was, and its former colonies were gaining independence, these changes threatened the UK's traditional sources of identity and security. Under these circumstances, a close alliance with the US as a country with the most shared narratives represented a symbolic affirmation of the UK's status as a great power, and the country was willing to take extreme measures to maintain this relationship. That is why, even though the US policies on the nationalization of Iranian oil were not aligned with the UK's national interest, the UK was willing to sacrifice its interests for the sake of the AASR.

It is worth mentioning a different popular narrative surrounding the Iran-UK oil dispute, which assumes that Britain exerted pressure on the US and cooperated with it to overthrow the Mossadegh administration. However, it can be argued that while Britain did encourage the US to support a coup against Mossadegh, the outcome did not align with the UK's interests. The UK's main concern was the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) and its control over Iranian oil operations. The UK hoped that removing Mossadegh from power would allow the AIOC to regain its former position. However, the subsequent developments and US policies did not support this objective. The US did not prioritize reinstating



the AIOC's control and pursued its own interests instead. As a result, the US policies did not align with the UK's objectives, leading to the erosion of the UK's position on the AIOC. The UK found itself compelled to align with the US due to its growing dependence on the US and the changing geopolitical dynamics. In other words, while the UK may have initially urged the US for a coup, the subsequent developments and the influence of US policies did not serve the UK's interests regarding the AIOC. Instead, the UK's reliance on the US led to a shift in its position, aligning with US interests and policies to avoid any tensions with its close ally.

Therefore, the UK's willingness to prioritize the AASR over its national interests has been based on the understanding that the special relationship provided a source of stability and continuity in the face of uncertainty, and highlighted the complex interplay between identity, ontological security, and political behaviors. In other words, understanding the role of ontological security in the UK's behavior during the nationalization of the AIOC can provide a deeper insight into the dynamics of the AASR and its importance in shaping the British foreign policy.

#### **4.1.2. The US Withdrawal from the JCPOA**

Another instance of the UK prioritizing the AASR over its national interest was during the US withdrawal from the JCPOA<sup>1</sup> in 2018. The UK's need for ontological security after WWII and the its attempts in preserving the AASR can provide a clear framework to understand its behavior during the US's unilateral withdrawal from Iran nuclear deal in 2018. The JCPOA, aimed at limiting Iran's

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1. Also known as Iran Nuclear Deal

nuclear program in exchange for the lifting of economic sanctions, has been a multilateral agreement between Iran and six world powers, including the UK and the US. The agreement, in fact, was seen as a significant achievement of multilateral diplomacy and a step towards reducing tensions in the Middle East. However, in May 2018, President Trump, unilaterally withdrawing from the deal imposing sanctions on Iran, effectively killed the JCPOA. Despite the UK's support for the nuclear agreement, it finally followed the US in imposing sanctions on Iran, and again, raised questions about its commitment to multilateralism and its own national interest.

The US's unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA presented a challenge to the UK's national interests. The UK had invested significant political capital in the agreement and saw it as an important tool for reducing tensions in the Middle East and promoting global security. The US's withdrawal threatened to undermine the UK's efforts and put it in a difficult position in terms of its own commitment to multilateralism as well as its national interests (Mohammadpour & Saeidabadi, 1400 [2021 A.D.], pp. 119-126).

According to Bassiri Tabrizi et al. (2018), the difficulties faced by the UK in expanding its trade with Iran after the JCPOA can be traced back to the United States after its unilateral withdrawal from the deal. Specifically, the hesitation of British and European banks and institutions to facilitate and increase banking transactions with Iran is due to the US-imposed sanctions on Iran and the uncertain long-term prospects of investing in Iran. Such reluctance puts the national interests of these countries at risk. An illustrative example of this phenomenon is the \$1.1 billion fine imposed on the British bank Standard Chartered for violating sanctions against Iran (Bassiri Tabrizi et al., 2018).

Under these circumstances, British officials engaged in lobbying efforts to support the JCPOA and convince President Trump to maintain the agreement like Prime Minister May's discussions with Trump; despite the alignment of the UK with the US Secretary of Defense (who stated that Iran was in compliance with the terms of the JCPOA), Trump's decision to decertify the deal was not influenced by the UK's efforts. The author argues that the UK eventually followed the US unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA as a multilateral agreement to avoid endangering the close relationship with the Americans. This is what Michaels' chapter title may suggest: *You Don't Hear the Word Britain Anymore* (Michaels, 2019, p. 88).

In response to the US's withdrawal, the UK faced a difficult choice. It could have taken a principled stance in support of the JCPOA and against US unilateralism, or it could have followed the US in imposing sanctions on Iran in order to avoid tensions in its close relations with the US, and ultimately, the UK chose the latter course of action, which was against its national interest. In this regard, the AASR was subjected to even more strains for the UK during President Trump's foreign policy than ever before, and largely conflicted the country's national interests. However, according to the cohesive underlying institutional relationship between the two countries, the UK, despite its reluctance, eventually chose to follow America's lead in withdrawing from the JCPOA and confronting China (Xu & Rees, 2021).

Viewed through the lens of ontological security, the UK's seemingly irrational behavior can be described as an attempt to meet its needs for identity and continuity (Zarakol, 2016, p. 13), which has been secured with a close relationship with the US as a source of ontological security. In other words, the AASR has been

a cornerstone of the UK foreign policy since WWII and has provided a source of continuity and stability in a rapidly changing global order. The UK has viewed the AASR as a way to maintain its glorious past as a global power, and to preserve its sense of identity and security in a post-colonial world.

The section presents two instances in which the UK prioritized the Anglo-American Special Relationship (AASR) over its national interest: during the nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) in 1951 and after the US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018. After WWII, the United Kingdom experienced ontological insecurity due to a decline in its international standing resulting from the process of decolonization. This insecurity fueled a strong desire to establish a close alliance with the United States, which was perceived as the dominant power in the new global order and a nation sharing significant narratives and identity affinities. The AASR provided a sense of continuity in this changing world, which was deemed crucial to the UK's sense of identity and security. The nationalization of the AIOC in 1951 posed a significant challenge for British foreign policy, leading to conflicting interests between the UK and the US. The US clearly disagreed with the UK's strategies, such as implementing a naval blockade and oil embargo against Iran, which were perceived as contradictory to the UK's national interest (Mohammadpour & Saeidabadi, 1400 [2021 A.D], p. 113). When analyzing this situation from the perspective of ontological security, the seemingly irrational behavior of the United Kingdom in aligning itself with the United States can be understood as a deliberate attempt to protect its sense of identity and ensure continuity. This behavior was motivated by the perception of ontological insecurity experienced by the UK in the aftermath of the WWII, during a period characterized by significant

uncertainties in the emerging global order. Consequently, the UK sought to establish and maintain close relations with the US as a means to mitigate its ontological insecurities and preserve a sense of stability and self-identity in the postwar era.

Similarly, the US's unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 posed a significant risk to the UK's national interests. The UK had invested significant political capital in the agreement, viewing it as an important tool for reducing tensions in the Middle East and promoting regional security. The US's withdrawal threatened to undermine the UK's efforts and put it in a difficult position in terms of its commitment to multilateralism. However, the UK ultimately followed the US in imposing sanctions on Iran, raising questions about its dedication to multilateralism and its own national interest. By doing so, the UK attempted to maintain the AASR, which has been a cornerstone of UK foreign policy since WWII, providing the Kingdom with a source of ontological security and continuity in the transformed postwar global environment.

In summary, this section highlights the UK's behavior during the nationalization of the AIOC and the US withdrawal from the JCPOA, viewed through the lens of ontological security. This concept refers to the need for individuals and states to maintain a sense of continuity and stability in their identities and narratives amidst a changing order. The following section raises a debate between ontological security theory and traditionalist theories (realism and liberalism) concerning the Anglo-American special relationship. It demonstrates the way in which the paper's proposed theory offers deeper insights into Britain's mechanism of tolerance in preserving the AASR during times of conflict of interest with the US.

#### 4.2. A Debate on the AASR: Ontological Security versus Traditionalism

In his argument for Britain's neutrality during the America Civil War, Brent J. Steele states that "when agents choose a series of actions compatible with their sense of self-identity, they are ontologically secure" (Steele, 2005, p. 526). Ontological insecurity is, then, the state of existential anxiety arising when events deviate from predictable patterns, leaving uncertainty and perceiving the world as threatening. States with low trust in their environment and others are more prone to ontological insecurity during times of significant changes.

In response to such changes and anxieties, states, as ontological security seekers, exhibit two types of behaviors: (1) relying on routines and (2) seeking collective identity or relationship. Holding onto routines helps stabilize their cognitive understanding of the environment and alleviates the fear caused by changes, as argued by Mitzen (2006a, p. 364), challenging the rationalist notion that such decisions are consciously made (Mitzen, 2006a, p. 347). Additionally, states can routinize their relations with 'significant others' by forming cooperative or even conflictual relations both serving a similar purpose (Mitzen, 2006a, p. 341). In this context, ontological security serves to illuminate the stability of social relationships, encompassing the two mentioned types of relationships that Mitzen labels as the "mode of attachment" (Mitzen, 2006a, p. 343).

To explain the AASR's stability, we spark a debate over whether ontological security theory or traditional paradigms can provide a confirming explanation of the emergence and endurance of the partnership. In other words, we believe that the endurance of the AASR in times of conflicting interest between the two allies seems to be able to incite a heated debate in the IR

theories in which ontological security theory may have a horse in the race.

For the moment, the paper, focusing on the traditional perspectives, tries to unveil the ways in which realism and liberalism face disconfirming evidence for the AASR's stability, and offer at best poor explanations for the initialization of the UK-US relationship after WWII. Thereafter, we try to substantiate the advantages of ontological security theory on the AASR, not only for what it reveals about the nature of this partnership, but also for demonstrating the way in which this debate is necessary for the theoretical goals of this study. Table 1 presents a concise comparison of the key distinctions between ontological and physical conceptions of security before diving into the debate:

**Table 1. Physical and Ontological Conceptions of Security**

	<b>Physical Security</b>	<b>Ontological Security</b>
<b>Security of:</b>	Territory and state	Identity and being
<b>Source of insecurity:</b>	Physical threat	Massive changes in status quo
<b>Response to insecurity:</b>	Identifying threats and mobilizing resources against it	Selecting narratives and routinizing relationships

Source: Manan, 2015, p. 6

#### **4. 2. 1. Traditionalism's Failure in Explaining the AASR Endurance**

Still, no one can seriously deny the fact that realism and liberalism, as IR traditionalist theories, overlook the role of narratives and historical routines in states' foreign policies. For them, relative gains or economic goals are the more important elements in

international interactions, which is evident in most of their formulations for studying international relations (Haglund, 2019, p. 131). In such contexts, the Anglo-American special relationship is considered a political project rather than an outcome of collective identity, stemming from shared narratives, common culture, ideology, or a combination of these factors. These approaches tend to maintain a materialist view, adopting an objective perspective towards the social world of international relations. As a result, there is a theoretical gap in understanding the material and ideational aspects of relationships (Basu, 2019). This 'material objection' to ideational analyses (Sørensen, 2008, p. 11) leads to biases in these approaches and renders them inadequate in capturing the complexities of the AASR as an unbalanced yet stable alliance.

Starting with the realist perspective, it should be noted that realists emphasize national interests, the distribution of capabilities, and relative gains. However, these variables do not seem to fully explain the stability and continuity of the AASR. Realists hold a pessimistic view, believing that sustained interstate alliances or international cooperation are extremely difficult because (a) states are more concerned about relative gains than absolute ones, (b) people are selfish and aggressive, and states are guided by this nature, making war essentially inevitable (as the international system lacks a sovereign authority to prevent wars), and (c) there are severe penalties for being too optimistic about others' intentions (Clackson, 2011, p. 1). Realism, therefore, portrays an international system where states' primary motivation is 'self-help' (Walt, 2017, p. 2).

Consequently, for realists, the UK's efforts in establishing the special relationship can be explained by British national interest and material purposes after WWII. In contrast, the British remained



committed to the special relationship even when American policies during the 1950s Iran-Britain oil dispute were in direct conflict with British national interests (Mohammadpour & Saeidabadi, 1400 [2021 A.D.], p. 113). In other words, the AASR continued to thrive despite conflicts between its members, revealing a limitation in the realist account's ability to comprehensively evaluate the reasons for the partnership's stability.

Turning to liberal perspectives, liberals focus on business ties and mutual benefits. According to liberalism, in particular its commercial assumptions, the hypothesis would suggest that the special relationship is a result of bilateral trade and other corporate collaborations. However, this reasoning becomes implausible when considering the asymmetry of commercial exchanges. For instance, Britain's total trade with the EU is about three times that of the US (Chen, 2018), meaning that the EU, not the United States, is the Kingdom's most important trading partner. Additionally, the UK ranks seventh on the list of trading partners of the United States (Amoros, 2022). Consequently, a UK-US conflict of interest would cause comparatively fewer externalities to the British industry than UK-EU relations. Thus, Brexit demonstrates that shared economic goals, as liberal variables, cannot provide a convincing explanation for the stability of the AASR, particularly for Britain's unwavering commitment to this partnership.

In conclusion, the traditional mainstream approaches in international relations appear to be inadequate in convincingly explaining the emergence of the AASR after WWII. Their materialistic focus disregards the significance of social factors and thus fails to comprehensively understand the stability of the AASR during conflicts and the mechanisms that sustain the partnership. Both the realist and liberalist perspectives would expect the UK, as

the junior partner, to prioritize its physical security and national interests within the AASR. However, conflicts often arise, unfavorably impacting the Kingdom. In simpler terms, while traditional approaches analyze alliances and their members' behaviors based on general principles of cost-benefit or mutual benefit, there are cases where the material costs of membership may outweigh the gains and threaten a member's national interests. The efforts made by the Britons to preserve the special relationship, despite several UK-US conflicts of interest, reveal that these traditional general principles cannot fully explain the overall stability of the Anglo-American special relationship. In this context, the ontological security theory in international relations offers a more reasonable explanation for the partnership's stability during times of conflicting interests. By considering sociological implications and analyzing the AASR and the UK's seemingly irrational behaviors, this perspective emphasizes the role of shared identities and narratives in shaping states' actions and decisions within the realm of international relations, and therefore, provides valuable insights into the mechanisms that sustain the enduring partnership between the UK and the US, even amidst conflicts.

#### **4. 2. 2. Advantages of Ontological Security in Explaining the AASR Endurance**

The theoretical departure of ontological security scholars from IR's traditional theories traces back to traditionalism's emphasis on the states' physical security. OS literature's central idea then discusses that states seek both ontological security and physical security. The former is considered more important: states who face potential existential threats to their identity might adopt seemingly irrational policies – for instance, entering an unbalanced alliance or

triggering a conflict – to address the state of uncertainty concerning their identity (Mitzen, 2006a, p. 342). The ontological security dilemma, as Mitzen posits, provides a deeper understanding of the reasons for which states with shared narratives may continue to remain attached to an alliance even in times of conflict of interest, whereas the physical security dilemma, as assumed by realists, fails to explain such irrational behavior. Forming an alliance with states that share common narratives can provide a sense of identity and continuity, which in turn contributes to a feeling of security (Steele, 2008, p. 20; Mälksoo, 2015, p. 224). This explains the reason for which the United Kingdom has chosen to remain in the AASR despite certain conflicts of interest with the United States; the alliance helps the Britons define their sense of identity. In a nutshell, the proposed theoretical framework as an emerging scholarship highlights three central arguments that demonstrate the advantages of ontological security theory over the two traditional perspectives in explaining the enduring nature of the AASR.

One of the key insights provided by the ontological security framework is that states are driven to form special relationships because of the sense of ontological security they offer. Particularly in times of upheaval, trauma, or uncertainty, states seek stability and a reaffirmation of their self-identity (Kinnvall, 2004, pp. 752-7). Special relationships provide a sense of belonging and a shared narrative that helps states navigate the complexities of the international arena. By offering ontological security, these relationships become attractive mechanisms for states to cope with existential anxieties and maintain a sense of continuity amidst global changes.

Moreover, the ontological security framework explains the reasons for which states remain committed to their special

relationships even when faced with challenging circumstances. The routines and established patterns of cooperation embedded within these partnerships create a sense of attachment and familiarity. During critical situations or ‘ontological stress’ (Subotić, 2016, p. 654), when crises that threaten a state’s self-identity, the stability of the special relationship becomes even more crucial. States are motivated to preserve these alliances, not merely for material or normative gains, but to safeguard their ontological security (Steele, 2005, p. 538). This commitment often transcends short-term fluctuations in material interests, as the deeper sense of belonging and shared identity takes precedence in preserving the relationship.

Finally, the framework emphasizes the role of political discourse in upholding special relationships. The mutual affirmations of ‘specialness’ and ‘exceptionalism’ within the routines of these partnerships strengthen partners’ ontological security needs (Löwenheim, 2009, pp. 544-5). Such discourse helps (re)constitute the special relationships and reinforces the sense of value and importance attached to these alliances (Subotić, 2016, pp. 612-5). By perpetuating the idea of a unique and exclusive bond, political discourse plays a critical role in maintaining the enduring nature of special relationships.

Consequently, ontological security framework contributes significantly to our comprehension of special relationships in international relations. It elucidates the motivations behind the formation of these partnerships, explains their stability in times of crisis, and highlights the influence of political discourse in reinforcing partners’ ontological security needs. By providing a deeper understanding of the intricate dynamics at play within special relationships, this framework contributes to a more

comprehensive and nuanced analysis of state interactions in the global arena.

## 5. Conclusion

In international relations, valuable insights can be found in the realist and liberal approaches, which delve into the causes of interstate cooperation and alliances on a broader scale. These works are essential reading for scholars seeking to understand and categorize various instances of cooperation. However, the predominant focus on physical threats and material interests as the driving forces of cooperation poses challenges for realists and liberals when attempting to explain states' seemingly irrational behaviors or sacrificing national interests to maintain certain alliances. In other words, while the assumptions of the two traditional paradigms, such as 'rapprochement' in realism and 'security community' in liberalism, are explanatory for international alliances during peaceful periods, they may fall short in providing a comprehensive answer for enduring alliances during times of conflicts.

On the other hand, ontological security scholarship discusses the ways in which states construct identity-related autobiographical narratives to attribute meaning to their international actions and comprehend their behavior within the international society. Therefore, OST offers a different perspective than the mentioned traditional approaches, emphasizing the importance of states' biographical narratives and historical routines in fostering cooperation, international partnerships, and their endurance over time. In this context, states must have a positive sense of self and be confident in their historical policies and actions to maintain continuity in their role within the international system. As a result,

they continue to engage and interact, increasing the likelihood of developing shared bonds and collective identities with other countries that share similar narratives and histories, which pave the way for a longstanding partnership.

In this study, the focus is therefore on comprehending the logic behind the enduring nature of the UK-US relations particularly in times of conflicting interests; a relation, which is claimed to be 'special'. The paper takes an approach that places ideational dynamics at the core of the analysis. In simpler terms, the ontological security theory, when compared to traditional mainstream theories like realism and liberalism, provides a more robust explanation for UK's resilience and tolerance in sacrificing its material national interest to preserve the Anglo-American special relationship.

The study findings provide a basis for broader implications, suggesting that the United Kingdom's apparent irrational behaviors, characterized by the sacrifice of its national interests to uphold the AASR, highlight the significance of comprehending the ontological security needs of states in shaping their behavior in international relations. In other words, by recognizing the significance of ontological security in shaping states' behaviors and understanding the intrinsic value they attach to their alliances, we gain deeper insights into the mechanisms driving the enduring partnerships between nations. This nuanced approach enriches our comprehension of international relations and helps better appreciate the complexities of states' decision-making processes in the realm of cooperation and alliance-building. By adopting an ontological security lens, scholars can explore profound ways that explain to what extent ideational factors such as identity and narratives shape the actions of states in the international arena.

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