US Centre Summer Research Grant

Recipient Name: Alexander Jake Davies

Project Title: Domestic Drumbeats, Distant Echoes: Assessing Alliance Credibility from the 'Outside-In'

Summary of project:

My research explores how states assess the credibility of their ally's military commitments towards them, with specific reference to how domestic politics (foremost of all, political polarisation) impacts this. My argument is that credibility assessments of allied states depend on more than the allied state's signals of capabilities, interests, and resolve: they also depend on how foreign leaders judge the (unstated) domestic context that signals are issued within. My work constitutes the first major foray into the topic, presenting a timely analysis of a highly relevant subject.

To make this case, I conduct an in-depth analysis of the Anglo-American alliance (with occasional reference to the Anglo-France alliance) from 1950 to 2026. This long period is split into three chapters, covering 1950-1969, 1980-1996, and 2008-2026. I rely on three sources of data to make my case. The most important pieces of data are archival documents, as these provide the entirety of the data for the first two time periods. For the latter time period, I rely on media analysis with the occasional elite interview where able. I requested the Phelan Centre grant to help me gather the relevant archival data.

Research Report

With the generous support of the Phelan Centre, I was able to continue my research throughout the summer at the British National Archives. Unlike other US-centred projects (and in contrast to previous work on credibility), my evidence base necessarily comes from British sources who have received American signals rather than from American sources about the signals being sent. This allows me to understand how, in practice, signals pertaining to credibility were received and how assessments of American credibility were actually made. As I do not live in London, however, the repeated trips to the archives had been presenting quite the financial burden, and being able to have these trips subsidised by the Centre enabled me to cover far more documents (and collect far more data) than I would have otherwise been able to do. I am immensely grateful for this. This particular summer, my research centred on the period of 1980 to 1995, a time of great change for the Anglo-American relationship. I am still processing the vast number of documents I uncovered during the time (ranging from annual reports to transcripts of private meetings between state leaders), but some initial findings are as such:

1) Confirming my thesis that changes to the structure of American politics shook the Anglo-American alliance, **Reagan's 1980 landslide was read by British officials as evidence of structural realignment and taken incredibly seriously**. The FCO's post-election analysis explicitly weighed whether the result was "simply the repudiation of a failed administration or something deeper," and concluded that it was indeed a rightward drift that had been building since the 1960s. Multiple reports were written in response to this movement and received buy-in from analysts and ministers across the FCO. The clearest evidence cited was the arrival of fifteen new Republican senators, "at least half" tied to the extreme right, which British officials treated as a durable signal that a shift in American politics was occurring. This was tracked throughout the coming years and the implications of it for the alliance and for Britain's defence were carefully monitored, something that existing theory would not predict and cannot account for.
2) Similarly, **a polarised Congress was assessed as a direct credibility risk to the alliance, independent of the president's own intentions**. Officials worried less about Reagan than about what his coattails had swept in, and made it a priority to maintain strong support for the alliance at a Congressional level. In the archives, reference is made to a private speech made by Professors Wallace and Hill, who observe that "the disjointed structure of policy-making in Washington [make] it difficult for Europeans to assess the drift of American policy"; in other words, a fragmented Washington was considered far less reliable looking into the future.
3) **Reassurance, when it came, rested on bipartisan consensus rather than confidence in any individual.** By mid-1981 British anxiety over Reagan's election and the structural changes had somewhat eased, but notably this was not because reservations over Reagan had been assuaged but rather because both parties were seen to affirm the alliance and the need for a "stronger

United States and stronger western defence." To restate, it was explicitly noted as cause for relief that both parties had unambiguously endorsed the alliance, which put to rest many of the doubts that British ministers and defence analysts had. Credibility, in this telling, was once again being directly relocated from the executive to the broader political system, a shift that made the alliance's durability conditional on cross-party consensus holding rather than on Reagan's individual competence. As the consensus did appear to be holding (and the British rather made sure of this, repeatedly and often), questions about American credibility once again subsided. This is a particularly interesting piece of data because of the relevance to Trump in 2016 and 2024.

4) **The Falklands crisis provides ample evidence to suggest that that bipartisan Congressional and public opinion, and not the executive branch, was the more reliable seat of American credibility and was being given great weight to by the British in their credibility assessments.** In a large retrospective report by Ambassador Henderson's on the role of the United States in the Falklands Crisis, the Ambassador notes how American support was "not something that was inevitable or could have been taken for granted," and was won only by treating Congress and public opinion as something to be actively cultivated. Henderson noted how he conducted over sixty media interviews, wrote personal letters to sixty members of Congress, was in daily contact with committee chairmen, all while the executive branch was, in Henderson's words, held back by "factional manoeuvring" (the Latino lobby, Kirkpatrick's pro-Argentine sympathies) that made it "a poor place to place one's hopes." Credibility, in other words, a resource that had to be manufactured and carefully maintained, and the best place to mine it lay in the broader structures of American politics. Henderson also noted how broad-based domestic goodwill towards the British was an essential part of the alliance being so strong, once again due to the effects it had on the structure of the political system.
5) **Grenada demonstrated that the bipartisan goodwill won during the Falklands was a depletable asset, and that the British were careful to not overplay their hand during interactions with the Americans directly to avoid reducing pro-British structural sentiment**. Within eighteen months of the Falklands, American unilateralist sentiment had become powerful enough to supercede the Congressional and public credit the British had accumulated through the Falklands Crisis. Wright's advice to Thatcher to "space our rows" and conserve bipartisan sympathy for matters of real substance treated alliance credibility explicitly as a finite resource subject to shifts in the American domestic scene, and adds additional fuel to another part of the thesis that has been developed over time: that the British believed that they were responsible for the level of credibility that the Americans possessed, and that better British behaviour would result in a more credible America. In an interview I conducted over the summer with a senior British political figure involved in defence, this tracked to the modern

day (this particular figure strongly advocated for joining the war in Iran on the basis that not doing so would make the Americans less likely to fulfil their commitments to Britain).

I had also intended for the grant to be used to access American archives for cross-referencing purposes, however much of the material I needed to access was digitised. Once I get to the end of my current data, I'll consider a trip to the United States for this material should it be needed.

In all, I am immensely grateful for the financial support of the Phelan Centre. It was fantastic to be able to afford a much deeper and richer exploration of the archives than I would have otherwise been able to, and it personally very enriching as well.