

# Five Eyes in Our Time

by George Friedman - August 1, 2023

A few years ago, I was invited to a military meeting in Australia. When I walked into the room, I expected to see Australian officers. Instead, the room was awash in American and British uniforms, plus smaller numbers of New Zealanders, and I thought I could make out a couple of Canadians in the distance. It drove home to me that the Five Eyes was not just an agreement on intelligence sharing but a functioning military alliance without the paperwork or, more precisely, with much paperwork that taken together achieved uncertainty. The members of the Five Eyes, for different reasons, did not want to formalize what existed in practice.

The Five Eyes, without the cool name, originated in World War II. Having common enemies, the five nations created a set of alliances to defeat them – and obviously, to share intelligence. Before joining the war, the Americans supported Britain. The Australians also sent forces. In our house, we have a picture of my Australian wife's cousin, who was shot down on a recon mission flying with the Brits over Germany. After Pearl Harbor and the British defeat in Singapore, the United States became the center of gravity of the Pacific war, with the Australians providing forces and bases in Australia, along with New Zealand. The Canadians had aligned early with Britain. Other nations were involved, but these five had the advantage of having a common language, if not quite a common culture. The American forces grew larger than the British, and many warm discussions were held between British and American commanders. Mistrust still existed, just as it does between and within all services fighting the same war.

War has its foundation in intelligence, in knowing the enemy. The British excelled at human intelligence in Europe and code-breaking. The Americans similarly broke the Japanese code, but they did not have intelligence in Japan or in the island chain they were fighting for. Australia could not provide human intelligence from Japan, but it could provide coast watchers in the Solomons and other islands, reporting on the movement of Japanese warships and Japanese landings. The Five Eyes coordinated operations, from invasions to logistics, but in many ways, the key was the intelligence that they could provide.

The relationship was not formalized. It was simply essential. It remained in place after the beginning of the Cold War based on a simple formula. Any of the five members would share intelligence, if not methods of collection, with the others.

The military side of the Cold War saw intense cooperation between the British and the Americans, with the British holding northern Germany and the Americans the central front. Fearing a potential Soviet nuclear attack, the Americans needed to detect incoming missiles as far away as possible. So, the Distant Early Warning Line was built in northern Canada, and the North American Aerospace Defense Command, based in Colorado, was established, giving the Canadians access to U.S. intelligence and methods for protecting North America. To face off against China, the Australians developed a navy to join the U.S. in the Pacific, where the British were always present. The New Zealanders chose to be prickly, denying U.S. access to their ports unless the U.S. certified that no nuclear weapons were on board its ships. The U.S. refused.

The point I am trying to make is that the Five Eyes was from the beginning, even before the term existed, a military alliance designed to fight in World War II and to collaborate in the Cold War. Each country had other alliances and sometimes shared alliances, but the Five Eyes constitutes a unique relationship of shared interests. At the beginning of the Cold War, the United States became the center of the Five Eyes. But the point is that the alliance members shared the American burden, however ill-advised they may have thought the venture. When the United States invaded Iraq, the British took responsibility for southern Iraq. New Zealand refused combat but did send troops to Afghanistan.

There is an economic dimension to this relationship that is rarely noticed. The Five Eyes nations combined have about 7 percent of the world's population but over 28 percent of its gross domestic product. There is no common Five Eyes market, but there is a series of bilateral trade agreements intense in joint ventures of various sorts. Obviously, the American economy is the largest, but on a per capita basis all of the countries should be seen as economic successes, domestic grumbling noted.

In practice, the Five Eyes has never been simply an intelligence-sharing agreement. It also entails cooperation as a military-political force. We see this in Ukraine, where Britain and the U.S. are playing roles together, and in the Pacific against China, where the U.S. and Australian navies – including, in time, nuclear submarines – operate, in addition to coordinating economic pressure. The U.S. Congress is in the process of authorizing the implementation of the trilateral AUKUS agreement to, along with the U.K., give Australia nuclear-powered submarines. This would mark a further deepening, operationally and technologically, of the cooperation between three members of the Five Eyes. Additionally, Australia and the U.K. are pushing for more cooperation on other technologies such as hypersonic weapons and quantum computing.

As I said, each country has many allies. But in history, military capability and economic power, the Five Eyes is unique. They have come together out of geopolitical imperatives, but one can't ignore that the Five Eyes countries are the heirs of English culture. All nations have immigrants and histories of oppressing minorities. Nevertheless, the Five Eyes became a combined global power because, as much as they irritate each other, they also understand each other as only heirs of a tradition could. That creates an international cement that is not present in NATO or in the Chinese-Russian alliance.

I was comfortable at the meeting because I understood the jokes being told. I don't always get them in Hungary, where I was born. Understanding snide remarks is not a bad foundation for alliances.

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