In 2017 the United Kingdom will be conducting a referendum to decide whether or not to remain a member of the European Union. If the UK decides to remain within the EU there will be much relief all round most obviously in the United States where successive administrations have backed continued British membership of ‘Europe’. However, if the vote goes the other way – which is not excluded – then this will not only have massive consequences for Europe and the UK but also for the so-called “Special Relationship” which exists between the US and the United Kingdom and indeed between the US and Europe more generally. In the summer of 2015 President Obama could not have been clearer. Washington, he noted, had much greater confidence in the transatlantic union with the UK as part of the EU. But if it were to leave the EU, then that confidence would be severely dented. Another former US official in off-the-record briefing in London in October 2015 was even more direct. As long as the UK remained in the UK, the United States - the official noted - felt comfortable with Europe. Without Britain the US would feel a good deal less comfortable.

Thus what to many in the United States must look like a very European debate that has little to do with the US has in fact huge implications for America’s position in the world – a world in which Chinese power is on the rise, where the Middle East is becoming daily more unstable, and where many are beginning to ask whether or not the West has a future in a world likely to be dominated by Asian economies over the next decades.

In broad terms this course will help students understand the background to the current situation in Europe and why Britain’s relationship with Europe has always remain so fraught with difficulty. The course will deal with several key questions. In the first part it will take an historical look at the origins of Britain’s ‘offshore’ attitude towards Europe: why on the one hand it has intervened on at least four occasions over two centuries to maintain the balance of power in Europe, but why on the other its main interests have always remained outside of Europe. In the next part, the course will examine the origins of the UK-US Special Relationship and how this key relationship has been so crucial to the way the UK has viewed Europe since the end of World War II through the Cold War and beyond. It will look in depth at this relationship through three key political figures: Winston Churchill, Mrs Thatcher and Tony Blair. In the third part, the course will explain why the UK was ultimately compelled to
join ‘Europe’ and why France opposed British membership. We will then go on to examine how the end of the Cold War changed Europe and why many in the UK were concerned about the changes which then occurred. The course will then conclude with a discussion of Britain’s many interests in the EU, the arguments for and against remaining in the EU, and how the referendum outcome (either way will impact on the world in general and the United States in particular.