At the Tehran Conference in November 1943, a dinner was given in celebration of Winston Churchill’s 69th birthday. Seated on the prime minister’s left was Joseph Stalin, on his right, Franklin D. Roosevelt. The president had not brought a dinner jacket to Persia, but he nevertheless wore a black tie with his pinstripe suit. Dining though he was with a Bolshevik, he would observe the proprieties so far as he was able to.

That Roosevelt and Churchill belonged to the upper crusts of their respective countries undoubtedly helped them to establish a rapport. The president could affect a hearty bonhomie in any company, but his wife was probably right when she observed that “Franklin is not at ease with people not of his own class.” He regularly circumvented the official chain of command to confide business into the hands of such patricians as Averell
Harriman and Sumner Welles, who spoke the same language he did and would understand him instinctively. Less creditably, he liked to cultivate European royalties.

Class sympathy played a part in the friendship between the president and the prime minister, but so, too, did similar ideas of geopolitics. Both Roosevelt and Churchill subscribed, in some form or another, to Halford Mackinder’s belief that Eurasia and Africa form a “world-island” containing the greatest part of the planet’s treasure. Under this theory, the English-speaking nations — Britain, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand — are lesser islands floating in the waters that wash the shores of the great island; if they would preserve their distinctive liberties, they must be wary of any power seeking the global jackpot of a Eurasian hegemony. Roosevelt argued that, should the Axis powers obtain dominion over the natural and human capital of the Old World, America itself “would be at their mercy.” Speaking at the University of Virginia in June 1940, he rejected the

delusion that we of the United States can safely permit the United States to become a lone island … in a world dominated by the philosophy of force. Such an island may be the dream of those who still talk and vote as isolationists. Such an island represents to me and to the overwhelming majority of Americans today a helpless nightmare of a people without freedom — the nightmare of a people lodged in prison, handcuffed, hungry, and fed through the bars from day to day by the contemptuous, unpitying masters of other continents.

Roosevelt’s doctrine was an extension of a policy Churchill had lived his whole life. For centuries, the English sought to preserve a balance of power on the Continent designed to prevent any single state from commanding sufficient resources to build a navy that could rival England’s own. The policy underlay Churchill’s resistance to Hitler; it is the burden of his biography of his ancestor, John Churchill, first Duke of Marlborough, the captain-general of the Grand Alliance against Louis XIV.

“It is fun to be in the same decade with you,” Roosevelt cabled Churchill in 1942, and in its worldly consequences theirs was surely the most important entente of the century. “My whole system is founded on friendship with Roosevelt,” Churchill said. “No lover ever studied every whim of his mistress as I did those of President Roosevelt.” Yet the friendship has been excessively romanticized, and toward the end it went downhill. In Churchill, Roosevelt & Company, Lewis Lehrman, the distinguished investor, student of Lincoln and of monetary policy, and Republican and Conservative candidate for governor of New York in 1982, has written an invaluable and notably unsentimental account of the relations between the two leaders and their respective staffs.

Lehrman cuts incisively through nostalgia to lay bare the tensions that threatened the Anglo-American alliance. The Americans still remembered the War of 1812 and the unhelpful part played by Britain in the American Civil War. They foresaw their wartime aid being used to underwrite a bankrupt empire at odds with America’s (somewhat theoretical) anti-colonial ideals. (The Philippines, after all, did not obtain independence from the United States until 1946.) The British, for their part, resented what seemed to
them the Americans’ slowness and penny-pinching in their offers of assistance, and the mandarins of Whitehall were often contemptuous of the amateurish statecraft practiced by their American counterparts.

Churchill maintained that, in the First World War, the cause of the Allies was hindered by conflict between the “brass hats” (the military men) and the “frocks” (the politicians). No such simple formula, Lehrman shows, can account for the fractiousness that undermined the Allies’ conduct of the Second World War. The bureaucracies were more numerous, and so, inevitably, were the jealousies, dissensions, and recriminations. Yet in spite of this the Yankees and the Brits managed to work together, and, inspired by the personal intimacy of the chiefs, the alliance reached its zenith in 1942, America’s first full year in the war.

It then began to decline. In 1943, Lehrman writes, FDR began to “edge toward Stalin, away from Churchill.” The prime minister found himself, at times, “intentionally ignored” by the president. “There I sat,” he said, “with the great Russian bear on one side of me with paws outstretched, and, on the other side, the great American buffalo.” He thought of himself as the “poor little English donkey . . . the only one who knew the right way home.” Yet he bore Roosevelt no resentment for his changed status; indeed he became “angry when he heard criticism” of his friend, whose now visibly declining health once moved him to tears. “I love that man,” he told his daughter Sarah.

Roosevelt’s anti-colonialism played a part in the decline of the friendship, but the real stumbling block, Lehrman argues, was Stalin. Churchill was more viscerally alive to the evils of Bolshevism than Roosevelt, and at all events he was, by 1943, thoroughly alarmed by Stalin’s designs on Mitteleuropa. “Germany is finished,” he told Harold Macmillan as they flew to Tehran. “The real problem now is Russia. I can’t get the Americans to see it.”

Stalin worked artfully to detach the president from the prime minister. The great commissar “particularly distinguished himself,” Milovan Djiłas tells us, “by his skill in exploiting people’s weaknesses,” and he soon discerned FDR’s. The president was vain of his personal charm, with which he had won over so many opponents and pacified so many quarrels. He would sit down with Uncle Joe for what Harry Hopkins called a “heart-to-heart talk”; together they would work it out. The president’s vanity, Lehrman writes, “combined with his ever-present desire to be liked, enabled Stalin to take advantage” of him.

The other element in Roosevelt’s by this time erratic thinking (he was now a very sick man) was his faith that the United Nations, when duly established, could manage the territorial aspirations of Russia. He was therefore willing to make extravagant concessions to Stalin in order to ensure Russian cooperation in setting up the new league. This was folly; not even the most inspired lawgiver could have arranged an institutional machinery that would be acceptable to Stalin and at the same time a bulwark against the philosophy of force he embodied. It was also vanity. The president’s hero, Wilson, had conspicuously failed to get his country to endorse the League of Nations; by bringing the United States into the U.N., Roosevelt would outstrip his mentor in the race of glory.
Lehrman writes with a deep knowledge of the period that is productive of much insight; the only significant flaw in his book is its method of organization, which makes for a certain amount of disorienting repetition. But his portrait of “an intimate, effective Anglo-American alliance” is not only illuminative of a finest-hour chapter in the history of nations that carry on the English tradition of liberty, it also moves the reader to ponder the future. The world-reach of Germany and Russia, which gave Churchill and Roosevelt such difficulty, is today considerably diminished, and China is now much the greatest of the Eurasian powers. Its massive infrastructure investments, both in Eurasia itself and in Africa, would seem to betoken a state ambitious of influence over Mackinder’s world-island.

What will be the policy of the English-speaking peoples toward the new Eurasian power? Before 1945, their traditions of freedom and constitutional government flourished only sporadically on the Eurasian landmass. Since then they have done a bit better, mainly in Europe, and mainly under the aegis of American arms; but the greater part of Eurasia continues to be ruled by philosophies of force. There is little reason to think that the rise of China will ease that pressure.

Geopolitics makes for strange bedfellows. In the 19th century, Britain sought to maintain the balance of power in Eurasia by propping up the Ottoman Empire, that unappetizing sick man of Europe, as a counterweight to the Russia of the czars. Between 1941 and 1945, the two Anglo amigos, Churchill and Roosevelt, sought, through their Lend-Lease gifts of matériel, to prop up Stalin’s Russia as a counterweight to Germany. In an irony that Stalin himself would hardly have appreciated, the time may yet come when the free states will again seek to prop up Russia, this time as a counterweight to the power of a revivified Middle Kingdom.

– Mr. Beran is the author of Pathology of the Elites and Forge of Empires, 1861–1871, among other books.