

UK foreign policy in the Biden era: an opportunity for the UK to re-establish itself post-Brexit as a credible international partner



What will the Biden Administration mean for UK foreign policy? Despite Boris Johnson's political closeness to Donald Trump, [Nicholas Wright](#) argues that the opportunity exists for an important reset in British foreign policy based on strengthened UK-US ties, enabling the UK to demonstrate a renewed international commitment post-Brexit. To do so, though, the UK must also urgently address longer-term challenges that have impacted on its international credibility and relevance for the last decade.

There has been considerable speculation over the likely direction, and temperature, of relations between President-elect Joe Biden and Boris Johnson. While the Prime Minister's perceived ideological closeness to Donald Trump is not considered a positive, the fact he was the first European leader Biden called after his victory was met with relief in London, a signal that the 'special relationship' will still matter in Washington.

Biden's action should come as no surprise. He is a pragmatist, willing to reach 'across the aisle' and whatever his personal attitude towards Johnson – he previously described him as a '[Trump clone](#)' – is known not to bear grudges. He is certainly unlikely to allow personal feelings to cloud his judgement in the way his soon-to-be predecessor famously does. However, Johnson and indeed the UK face a foreign policy reckoning with the incoming Biden Administration for more profound reasons than political alignment with Trump.

A problem of relevance and credibility?

For all the talk of the 'special relationship' between London and Washington, pragmatic observers understand that the US has many 'special' relationships. While that with the UK is obviously important – particularly in defence, security, intelligence – it is primarily the UK's credibility as an international partner that determines the degree to which it matters across the Atlantic. For at least the last decade, that credibility and therefore the UK's relevance has been gradually waning.

Several factors have contributed to this:

Money. The UK's capacity to play a meaningful international role ultimately depends on the resources it is willing to commit to this. The effects of the stringent austerity policies that followed the 2008-9 global financial crisis are still being felt today. Major cuts to defence and diplomatic spending during this time, moreover, came on top of longer-term downward pressure on budgets. The Foreign Office, for example, faced many consecutive years of demands by the Treasury to do more with much less and today faces [renewed pressure on the aid budget](#) to pay for the impact of COVID-19. This inevitably impacts on the capabilities the UK is able to contribute to the achievement of a wide range of international objectives and the degree to which it can credibly match rhetoric with action.

Strategic drift. After costly, exhausting and long-drawn out commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan in the early 2000s, it is unsurprising that the UK's willingness to become involved in further international interventions has diminished. This was seen most clearly in the House of Commons vote in 2013 not to support military action in Syria, a decision which damaged the UK's credibility in the eyes of key partners, including the US. The [failure to develop a coherent strategy](#) for Libya following the Franco-British led intervention that toppled Gaddafi and the UK's absence from Franco-German efforts to secure a settlement to the Ukraine Crisis have added to the sense of a [country in retreat or adrift](#). This impression has only been underlined by the decision to leave the EU in 2016. Having for years been a multilateral power par excellence, the UK withdrawal is viewed with deep concern by partners and allies worried that it is becoming inward-looking and disengaged.

Lack of bandwidth. This third factor follows directly from the first two. Brexit has challenged the British state to an extent not seen since the Second World War and the bandwidth required to implement it has further reduced UK capacity to engage with a turbulent international environment. Meanwhile, the [merger of the FCO and Department for International Development](#) at the start of 2020 has added an additional level of complexity to the work of the UK's foreign policy-makers who are also trying to complete the long-awaited [Integrated Review](#) intended to "define the Government's ambition for the UK's role in the world and the long-term strategic aims for our national security and foreign policy". Exacerbating this has been an unprecedented level of chaos and uncertainty at the highest levels of government as it wrestles with the consequences of the Brexit decision. The willingness of the current government to countenance the breaking of international law through its [Internal Market Bill](#) places further pressure on its credibility as a trustworthy international partner.

The opportunity presented by the Biden Administration

While these challenges cannot be swiftly or easily remedied, the incoming Biden Administration offers an opportunity and the political space for at least a partial reset. There are many aspects of Biden's foreign policy platform – around climate change, the international response to Covid, revitalising the transatlantic security relationship, sustaining the multilateral system, etc – which align closely with the UK's own core interests. The Biden Presidency is almost certain to return the US to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran, a signature diplomatic success of the last decade in which the UK played a major role. Strategic concerns over Russia and China will also be an area of common ground and the UK's strong criticism Chinese actions in Hong Kong will not have gone unnoticed. In short, there is a ready-made agenda for close cooperation between the two.

Fortuitously, as president of the G7 and chair the [COP26 Climate Change conference](#) in 2021, the UK has important international platforms through which to showcase the contribution it can make to key areas of interest to Washington. It will have an obvious incentive to secure the active support of the US if it is to build the kind of consensus necessary for success, particularly for COP26. For its part the Biden Administration will wish to draw a clear line under the Trump years, burnishing as far as it can its international leadership credentials and demonstrating its renewed commitment to multilateralism. For both sides, therefore, an important opportunity exists. For the UK in particular it will have the chance to demonstrate its continuing international relevance and influence.

Time for a pragmatic choice?

The UK faces a hugely significant few months. Decisions made in the coming weeks will not only determine the nature of UK-EU relations and whether a constructive post-Brexit relationship is possible; they will also potentially determine the future of the UK itself. The Biden Administration will not be alone in watching closely, but it will clearly favour an outcome that does not further undermine the transatlantic community – or put Northern Ireland at risk. These are factors of which the Johnson Government will be very well aware.

For too long, big questions around how the UK thinks about and engages with the world, the purpose and direction of UK foreign policy, and the role it wishes to play internationally have been avoided. Alignment with the Biden Administration on key international policies will not resolve these difficulties, nor will it automatically arrest the strategic problems UK foreign policy-makers face. It does, however, present an opportunity for the UK to re-establish itself post-Brexit as a credible international partner, committed to the multilateral system on which so much of its capacity to act and exercise influence internationally depends. Whether the government will embrace this opportunity is another matter.

About the Author



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