# MAKING THE 'SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP' GREAT AGAIN?

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**Even before Donald Trump won the US presidential election he left an indelible mark on US politics and on views of the US in Britain and around the world. His victory means those views will now have to be turned into policy towards a president many in Britain feel uneasy about. Current attitudes to Trump can be as contradictory and fast changing as the president-elect's own political positions. They can be a mix of selective praise and horror. He has in the past been criticised by British political leaders from the Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson to the Mayor of London Sadiq Khan. In early 2016 a petition of over half a million signatures led Parliament to debate (and reject) banning Trump from entering the UK. Yet he has also drawn the support of politicians such as UKIP leader Nigel Farage, and polling showed support amongst the British public for his 2015 proposal to ban Muslims from entering the US. After the presidential election British ministers were quick to extend an olive branch. Johnson himself refused to attend a hastily convened EU meeting to discuss Trump's election. Instead he called on the rest of the EU to end its collective 'whinge-o-rama'.**

Coming to terms with Trump will not be easy. Trump will be the fourth candidate and the second this century to win the presidency without winning the popular vote. He is also the first to win despite having been repeatedly shown to be a liar, tax-avoider, race-baiter, sexual predator, bankrupt, anti-intellectual, and who won the backing of the Ku Klux Klan and authoritarian governments such as Russia and North Korea. He is far from an average US president-elect. Since his election some have taken to hoping that his presidency will not be so bad, that he can be controlled both internationally and domestically, that economic and security arrangements and the norms that have developed over decades will hold. Yet Trump's election is as a reminder that we should be prepared for the unexpected.

What then might Trump mean for UK-US relations? We can look at the possible implications in five areas:

- First, we need to know the man, his politics and what his outlook on foreign affairs might entail.
- Second, do the similarities in support for Trump with the political trends in Britain and Europe such as those that drove Brexit form the basis for cooperation?
- Third, what could Trump mean for the core - largely defence related - of the UK-US relationship that is usually protected from the vagaries of presidential and prime ministerial politics?
- Fourth, where might that leave UK foreign policy, which since 1945 has balanced Britain between the USA and Europe?
- Finally, given the attention often given to prime minister-president relations, what might a President Trump mean for Prime Minister May?

## THE TRUMP DOCTRINE

Contrary to popular belief, Trump does have a coherent worldview. But it is not a worldview that many of his counterparts across Europe will particularly like. Trump's rhetoric during the campaign, as well as before, illustrates a foreign policy ideology based on 19th century, sovereigntist principles. Trump is not a contemporary version of the isolationist Charles Lindbergh or Senator Robert Taft who favoured strict mercantilist and isolationist policies. Instead, Trump feels that the US has been used to prop up a liberal world order that is not necessary for US prosperity. As we detail below, his approach could lead to a policy of 'offshore balancing'.

He found electoral support amongst those who have been disenfranchised economically via free tree and others who feel that US allies have drained US resources for their defence, all the while spending their own budgets on domestic investments. As Trump put it in an interview in 1990 "Our 'allies' are making billions screwing us".

He later questioned the US-Japan Treaty of 1960 asking why if someone attacks Japan, the US has to go to Tokyo's aid, but that if the US is attacked Japan is not compelled to assist the US. "Somehow, that doesn't sound so fair", Trump said. In 2013 he asked when South Korea would start paying for the protection the US provides against North Korea: "We have 28,000 soldiers on the line in South Korea between the madman and them. We get practically nothing compared to the cost of this." And of course Trump's campaign rhetoric against Germany and other NATO allies without sufficient defence spending is hard to ignore. As Trump put it "pulling back from Europe would save this country millions of dollars annually".

It is easy for European counterparts to despair at the situation. But we should recall a German saying 'Nichts wird so heiss gegessen, wie es gekocht wird' (Nothing is eaten as hot as it is cooked). Trump used inflammatory rhetoric during the campaign to fire up voters angry that America is being 'used' by its allies. But, once the new president takes office, it is likely that his aides will point out the dangers of undermining the entire US alliance structure by stating that the US will only defend allies that pay their fair share. That said, it is of course impossible to predict what Trump will do—he is unpredictable, but from what we have seen thus far his cabinet and close advisers seem to be a mix of anti-establishment and establishment types.

Trump's choice of Reince Priebus for example is an indication of policies that will stick more towards establishment lines. Trump was considering some mainline candidates for Secretary of State, such as Mitt Romney and Bob Corker. But instead he chose Rex Tillerson, the CEO of Exxon-Mobil who was against sanctioning Russian following the annexation of Crimea. This move sends a worrying message about NATO and underlines Trump's view of diplomacy as 'transactional'.

Trump's choice of retired Gen Jim Mattis for Secretary of Defence, while controversial, is again of an individual who has long been involved in traditional, establishment policies and will in large areas tow a line more of continuity than change in US foreign policy. Some of these names also appear on the short-lists for CIA Director and Director of National Intelligence. His appointment of retired Marine Corps General Michael T. Flynn as National Security Advisor is also a pick closer to the establishment than not. Flynn's thinking veers between neoconservatism, as evident in his labelling a fear of all Muslims as 'rational', and realism, demonstrated in his calls for the US to work with Russia and Assad over Syria. As much as one might disagree with Flynn's views, they are not a drastic departure for traditional thinking on US foreign policy. Finally, there is the long-noted tendency for presidents to revert to a certain US foreign policy norm. Whatever the campaign rhetoric, when they reach Washington DC they face a strangling combination of existing commitments, lags in defence spending, ingrained institutional habits and ideas, and a small, static community of officials and decision makers.

It would, however, be wrong to assume that continuity in US foreign policy under Trump means continuity with President Obama's policies. Rather, there will be continuity within the administration along the lines of a more nationalist-hawkish foreign policy. And there will most likely be a recognition that the US public, or at least Trump's voters, are fed up with extensive commitments abroad. This doesn't mean they want to see US decline or isolationism. Rather, it is likely that the administration's instincts will tend to offshore balancing. The US will remain globally engaged, but will intervene only in cases affecting a narrowly-defined national interest and such interventions (and policy responses) will be the result of strict cost-benefit analysis. This will annoy neocons on the right and liberal interventionists on the left, but may not be an entirely bad development. Much

consternation between powers like the US, China, and Russia have been over the 'rules' of the international system. Russia and China prefer a more sovereignty based system akin to the 19th century, whereas the last three US administrations have sought to rewrite the rules of the system. A Trump White House will see the US move to policies that coincide better with the Sino-Russian world view. For those that believe in the rights of individuals this would be a big blow, but a win for realists.

## BREXIT, TRUMP, AND THE FUTURE OF THE WEST

Few would have thought in 1945 that Germany would one day be seen as the beacon of liberal democracy, but that is where we find ourselves today. If the US pursues a policy of 'offshore balancing', then the liberal world order will continue to fray under pressure from illiberal regimes. This is because offshore balancing is a strategy whereby a great power uses regional allies to check the power of rising rivals. This was the US approach during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s and in the 1930s when the US through the Lend-Lease Program tried to stave off Nazi aggression via Great Britain. In the 1930s of course the strategy failed and there is a great danger that this time around such a strategy could fail again. For the last sixty years successive US Administrations have created a defence dependency amongst allies, particularly in Europe. As such the USA's liberal allies are fundamentally weak and not up to the challenge. This world order is not just under assault in the US, it is also facing criticism and rebuke in Europe as the Brexit vote indicated.

The anger and tensions that animated Trump and Brexit are to be found elsewhere in Europe. These tensions surround an often overlooked working class and an under pressure middle class who have growing frustrations over the political and economic status quo. Frustrations are directed at globalisation, elite politics, austerity, fears about threats to identities, and immigration. Britain's vote for Brexit was itself seen as a pointer to the growing power of these frustrations. The election of Trump has taken it global. Trump's election says to the world that illiberal politics in liberal democracies is ok. This is a dangerous message and one that liberals in Britain, Europe, and America must refute at every opportunity.

The danger is as much from inside US society as it is from illiberal policies. The policies of the Bush Administration, from surveillance to interrogation, not to mention military intervention and rendition, strained US-British and US-European relationships. Given Trump's rhetoric there is reason to suspect that there may be a return to such illiberal polices. This is also not an administration that is going to get to grips with the structural changes needed to improve US government and foreign policy. 'Drain the swamp' might have been a cry of Trump supporters, but Trump couldn't even bring himself to disclose his tax returns. A US government tinged with kleptocracy and kakistocracy (government by the worst persons) is not going to bring about the reforms that fundamentally change US politics or foreign policy.

Here it is worth considering that Trump has considered nominating someone such as Rudy Giuliani or Chris Christie to the post of Attorney-General and ended on a choice of Jeff Sessions. These men have

shown an inclination towards methods that are incompatible with liberal democracy, especially as understood in Europe. If the US were to turn in such a direction the strain on Euro-Atlantic relations may fracture the Euro-Atlantic consensus, fatally wounding the Atlantic alliance and more generally the idea of an Atlantic Community. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, for example, laid out very clearly in her 'congratulatory' remarks to the President-Elect that the cooperation and relationship between Germany and the US is on the basis of shared liberal values and that cooperation would depend on adherence to those values.

Are we, however, overlooking the similarities in what drove Brexit, Trump and rising populism and nationalism across Europe? On both sides of the Atlantic we see palpable fears about immigration, growing inequality, perceptions of corruption and failing political systems, declining trust in institutions and elites, mounting financial and economic crises, and populists willing to seek power from this toxic mix or binary referendum votes that bring these issues to the boil. In addressing these common problems, will a Trump presidency seek common purpose with Britain and other European allies? Trump's campaign rhetoric pointed instead to a presidency that believes in the US turning inwards and at most balancing against rather than engaging with.

This will be a reversal, or at least an unprecedented test, of the approach shared by both the US and Europe since the end of the Cold War of seeing globalisation as a force for good that benefited and unified the West. Support for an agenda of freer movement of capital, goods, services and people has declined, both at the national and party political level. Instead of finding common purpose decision makers on both sides of the Atlantic and within Europe may pursue policies that drive themselves further apart. Western leadership could fragment, leaving the global institutions it has committed itself to preserving since 1945 to stagnate.

## 'THE' SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP

British politicians and media have speculated that Britain can expect an exemption from Trump's protectionism in the form of a special UK-US trade deal. Does this point to the enduring strength of the UK-US 'special relationship'? As always when discussing the 'special relationship' we need to remember that for both sides it is 'a' special relationship rather than 'the' special relationship. Both have other special relationships, such as US-Israel and UK-Ireland. For the foreseeable future the most special relationships for both are the ones they face the most difficult but important long-term questions over: US-China and UK-EU.

Nevertheless, the UK-US relationship is special due to links in three core areas: intelligence, Special Forces, and nuclear weapons. Demographics, religion, culture, law, politics, economics, and much more also make it 'special'. But it is these three areas that are protected from tensions and arguments elsewhere, for example the vagaries of presidential and prime ministerial relations. They form the basis on which the UK and

US trust each other in ways they don't with others. This has helped make the relationship something of the Lazarus of international relations; often declared dead due to personal fallings out or disasters such as the Iraq War, only to soon come back to life.

This core could be tested to the limit by dealing with President Trump because of the degree of distrust and unease in British Government and UK politics at cooperating with an erratic president who appears willing to do and say anything when it comes to torture, bombing, and relations with authoritarian states. Granted, both Britain and the USA's record in these areas have been marked by a degree of hypocrisy. But the extremes to which Trump has been prepared to push these areas, at least in public, means uncomfortable times could lie ahead.

**Intelligence**

In intelligence cooperation, relations are already strained by allegations of UK complicity in torture, such as through water boarding by the USA, and the sharing of information acquired from it. US use of British facilities, for example Diego Garcia, has long caused disquiet in UK politics. If Trump's administration decides the best way to combat global terrorism is a combination of domestic anti-Muslim discrimination, torture and escalated military strikes in the Middle East then Britain will find itself drawn down a path that will raise political tensions in UK politics. Transatlantic tensions over data sharing could grow if Trump seeks to develop a database of any sorts of Muslim US citizens or Muslim visitors. Trump's talk of deporting 2–3 million illegal immigrants looks an impossible number to achieve unless legal alien residents are targeted. Cooperation with a government engaged in mass-deportation will inevitably raise questions in the House of Commons. Just as worrying will be Trump's attitude to Russia. During the presidential campaign Trump turned a blind eye to clear evidence of large-scale Russian cyber attacks on government institutions and private organisation in the US and other Western countries, including Britain. Can Britain now count on US intelligence pushing back if the President himself seems indifferent? Perhaps Trump will change his approach once he is president. However, that the reliability of the US has been called into question in such a core area of the relationship should give pause for thought.

**Special Forces**

Cooperation between UK and US special forces has become an important part of the relationship as Britain's conventional forces have reduced and as the need for clandestine operations has increased. As with intelligence cooperation, UK-US cooperation in this area has benefited both sides but also come with dangers of complicity in each other's mistakes or misdemeanours. The use of drone strikes to target terrorists under President Obama has on several occasions put UK-US relations at odds due to differing views, both legal and political, over the use of the technology. Trump's stated intention to target the families of terrorists did not go down well in UK politics, raising concerns that Britain could find itself caught up in activities or benefiting from actions that Britain deems illegal and immoral. Britain's own relations with states in the Middle East or Pakistan,

the latter a country with whom Britain has a large demographic and security relationship, could be tested by alignment with a Trump presidency that goes beyond what the Obama Administration has done.

**Nuclear Weapons**

Trump's attitude to nuclear weapons poses several problems both domestically and internationally for Britain. Domestically, any close alignment with the Trump administration risks inflaming anti-Americanism that could fuel Scottish nationalism. Britain's nuclear weapons, which rely on the US Trident missile system, are based in Faslane (the base of Britain's nuclear submarines) and Coulport (the storage facility for warheads), 25 miles west of Glasgow. The Scottish Nationalist Party is committed to an independent Scotland that is free of nuclear weapons (albeit one that will remain in NATO). It has been critical of UK involvement in wars in Kosovo, Iraq, and Libya, as well as opposing Britain's intervention in the Syrian conflict. This opposition has sometimes won it support in Scottish public opinion. Should Britain find itself drawn into a conflict with a Trump led USA then this could benefit moves for Scottish independence and the expulsion of Britain's nuclear weapons from Scotland. This would almost certainly end Britain's nuclear status because there is no viable alternative location in Britain to base, at short notice, both warheads and submarines in close proximity.

Internationally, Trump's attitude towards nuclear proliferation, as with so much of his policies, has been contradictory. He has sent mixed messages about states such as Japan, Saudi Arabia or South Korea acquiring nuclear weapons. Britain has long opposed nuclear proliferation. As part of efforts to reduce the global stock of nuclear warheads Britain's capacity has been reduced towards the minimum necessary to maintain the Trident system. Nuclear proliferation may make the case for retaining Trident more compelling, although the key here will be whether the Scottish people feel this is the case in any second independence referendum.

**UK-US defence relations**

Given that security is the core of the relationship, it is worth considering what Trump's policies may mean for wider UK-US defence relations. The most important challenge for Whitehall will be to respond to Trump's promise to substantially increase US defence spending. That might sound a welcome development. However, US military forces are growing ever more technologically advanced, while lacklustre European defence and research and development spending mean that at some point in the future European NATO forces - including those of Britain - may struggle to work alongside US military forces as efficiently as they might have previously. Boosts to US defence spending may only increase this disparity. Furthermore, it remains unclear whether Trump has any substantial ideas for reform of the military beyond increased spending. Trump has claimed the US is being bankrupted by defence commitments around the world, yet he seeks large increases in US defence spending. Such an increase could deflect attention from much needed reforms, weakening US defence in the longer-run.

## WAYS FORWARD FOR THE UK

These challenges to the core of the relationship leave the British government with two ways forward. First, Britain could remain close to the USA in the hope it can be a candid friend, make the relationship work and help smooth what could be a highly unpredictable four (possibly eight) years. It is worth recalling that George W. Bush's election in 2000 brought with it concerns in Tony Blair's government of US isolationism. In response Blair followed Bill Clinton's advice to "hug them close". Blair's Chief of Staff, Jonathan Powell, put it more bluntly when he advised Sir Christopher Meyer, the British ambassador to, "get up the arse of the White House and stay there". By getting so close - and intimate - with Trump's White House, Britain would be trying to protect the core of the relationship in the hope relations ease with the next president.

This approach would reflect a long-standing desire by British decision makers to shape US power as a means to the end of enhancing British power. They would also be doing so in the hope that Britain - of all the US' allies - can shape a President Trump in the interests of the wider West. Given Trump's isolationist and protectionist outlook it must be asked whether he would care that much about Britain's efforts. Instead Britain could find itself dragged into conflicts from which it has little means to escape, not least in the Middle East if Trump tries to drop the Iran Deal and things escalate to the point of conflict.

The British government should also be weary of how such an approach may play with future presidents or US domestic opinion. Nearly 53% of US citizens who voted backed another candidate. Polling shows that an even larger proportion hold unfavourable views of Trump. In getting close to Trump, the British Government could help to establish and boost the credibility of a president who lacks the faith of the vast majority of US citizens.

Second, if close relations are not an option then the British government could limit relations in the military and intelligence communities. But by backing away from the USA, Britain would strike at the core of the relationship in ways never seen before. This also risks depriving Britain of access to information and capabilities it and other European countries depend on for their security. Given the perilous state of European defence capabilities, the British government and others across Europe would be weary of any moves that increase the likelihood of US disengagement.

## BETWEEN A TRUMP ROCK AND A BREXIT HARD PLACE

President Trump poses a dilemma for Britain's overall strategic outlook. Britain's vote to leave the EU has highlighted a desire by some in Britain to play an enhanced global role that would in part depend on cooperating with the USA. Yet in President Trump Britain finds itself stuck between a Trump rock and a Brexit hard place.

Since 1945 Britain has based its foreign policy and place in the world on balancing relations between the US and Europe. With UK-European relations now in flux following the Brexit referendum, Trump now throws relations with the US into question. The process of Brexit is already proving an administrative and constitutional headache before formal UK-EU negotiations have begun, with Britain's strategy and freedom of choice increasingly revealed to be limited. Trump's election could mean Britain finds that the rest of the EU now seeks close relations with it to help counter the potential disruption of a Trump presidency. As such the EU also finds itself between a weakened EU rock that will soon be bereft of Britain and a Trump hard place. Europe is confronted with the dilemma of having contracted out its defence to the US to such an extent it has left it reliant on a political system and president over which it has little control. The degree of control Britain has over relations with the USA are also in doubt. It is now dependent on whether President Trump's more extreme positions of offshore balancing are moderated by the US political system and, not least, the Republican party itself.

Does this mean Britain needs to find a third way? Some may point to relations with other English-speaking nations such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand. On their own, however, they are inadequate substitutes for the scale of existing relations that root Britain firmly into a North America-Europe transatlantic community.

This all poses multiple quandaries for a post-Brexit Britain and those who campaigned for Brexit so Britain could instead forge new global trading links. Trump might have hinted at being open to a trade deal with a UK outside the EU. That's a position that contrasts with his overall protectionist stance. While he might leave an opening for Britain (albeit one Britain is not necessarily guaranteed a good deal over, given there are no special relationships in trade negotiations), an approach of offshore balancing mixed with protectionism risks much larger damage to the wider open global trading system that Britain remains a committed member of. Britain's hopes of securing global trade deals depends on the rest of the world being open to such approaches.

Granted, difficulties reaching global trade agreements ushered in attempts such as TTIP and TPP, smaller but still large-scale (and therefore incredibly complex and sensitive) regional deals intended to shift the wider trading system. With Trump now threatening them, Britain faces the possibility of a global trading system that is fragmenting, closed and delivering stunted if any growth.

## THERESA MAY AND A KNOWN UNKNOWN PRESIDENT

Close relations between presidents and prime ministers have often personified UK-US relations: Roosevelt-Churchill, Kennedy-Macmillan, Reagan-Thatcher, Blair-Clinton, and Blair-Bush. There have also been difficult relations, albeit ones that warmed up later: Major-Clinton, and more recently Obama's initially distant attitude to Brown and Cameron. What then can Theresa May expect to find when dealing with President Trump? As with any president, there are risks and opportunities involved. With Trump there are so many unknowns that Donald Rumsfeld's famous albeit verbose quote about risk seems apt.

*'There are known knowns; there are things we know we know.'* For May this would have been a Clinton presidency. Relations would have faced some difficult moments. Clinton would have been more hawkish than some in Britain and Europe expected. She would have been chased by long-standing allegations of corruption. But she would have operated within the existing parameters of transatlantic relations and US foreign policy. With Trump, we have some ideas of his worldview as being defined by a strict view of sovereignty. We know what he has said on the campaign trail and previously about various international issues. But we also know he has repeatedly contradicted himself, perhaps often without even realising that he was doing so. His administration and its prominent figures will offer more 'known knowns'. They will still, however, live in the shadow of Trump.

*'We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know.'* With Trump there are many things that remain hidden: his tax affairs, connections to Russia, allegations of sexual misbehaviour, plans for running his family's companies while he is in the Oval Office, his likely working relationship with the US military. While we know some of the broad outlines of his worldview, some of the unknowns of it were once the 'known knowns' of any incoming US president. We cannot now assume the US will remain the leader of the free world. We cannot be sure that trade deals such as NAFTA, TTIP or TPP will survive or be replaced with arrangements that address their inadequacies and which maintain an open global trading system. We don't know if the US will try to sink the Paris agreement on climate change. We don't know if Trump will try to dump the deal with Iran. We cannot even be certain of the US commitment to NATO. Much like Brexit remains an unknown we don't know what Trump presidency will now emerge, or whether it will change daily according to the President's mood.

*'There are also unknown unknowns - the ones we don't know we don't know.'* As the most erratic candidate ever elected to the presidency in the modern era, the biggest unknown for May and other world leaders is what Trump might say or do next. Trump's shock victory has led to hope that he will be a changed man, that the 'office maketh the man'. The international community should be weary of such hopes.

His erratic behaviour and incoherent ideas have led many to worry he poses a danger to the US republic itself. He boasted

about his attempts to stay on script in the final few days of the campaign, as if this is something we should welcome rather than expect from a man who will soon command the most powerful military force humanity has ever known. As discussed, what he will and will not be able to get away with will be shaped by the checks and balances of the US system of government. The Republican party's leadership will also influence him, although the world will now watch as the Republican party's internal tensions play out with global consequences. We must also remember that his support base is built on anger at being cheated, but with no clear unifying sense of what they have been cheated from. As Trump struggles to deliver, the more he could turn to stoking and manipulating fear that overwhelms reason, tolerance and sanity. It's therefore easy to foresee press conferences and meetings with President Trump where the British prime minister and officials are left aghast and struggling to explain to themselves, let alone Britain's parliament, media, public and allies, why relations with a Trump led US are worth maintaining. ■

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Donald Trump's election poses uncomfortable questions for Britain about the future of the UK-US 'Special Relationship'. This Strategic Update looks at the core elements of the 'Special Relationship' that could be under strain and how Britain could be left between a Trump Rock and a Brexit Hard Place.

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