

# Global Britain is about to collide with Brexit realities

*Does Joe Biden's election victory change the dynamic of Brexit? **John Ryan** claims that the 'Global Britain' vision is about to collide with Brexit realities.*

President-elect Joe Biden selected the UK among his first international contacts. The focus of the discussion was a reminder to prime minister Boris Johnson that the incoming US administration will closely follow the Brexit negotiations and the possible impact on the peace process in Northern Ireland. Even before the election result, many US officials had expressed their commitment to the Good Friday Agreement, and directly linking it to trade negotiations with the UK. With a Biden administration, the UK government may need to rethink its Brexit stance if it wants to pursue its 'Global Britain' vision.

Commitment to the Irish peace process in the US is bipartisan and in the context of Brexit well publicised. President Donald Trump's special envoy to Northern Ireland, [Mick Mulvaney](#), warned against creating a "hard border by accident" on the island of Ireland. In response to the Internal Market Bill introduced by Boris Johnson's government, Mulvaney went a step further, saying in an interview with the *Financial Times*: "The Trump administration, State Department and the US Congress would all be aligned in the desire to see the Good Friday Agreement (Belfast Agreement) preserved to see the lack of a border maintained".

[Nancy Pelosi](#), speaker of the House of Representatives, has stated "The Good Friday Agreement is the bedrock of peace in Northern Ireland. If the UK violates its international agreements and Brexit undermines the Good Friday accord, there will be absolutely no chance of a US-UK trade agreement passing the Congress".

[A memo published by Joe Biden's campaign](#) in late October outlined the Democratic candidate's view on Ireland and Irish-America. It said if elected, Biden would 'support active US engagement to advance the Northern Ireland peace process' and ensure there was 'no US-UK trade deal if the implementation of Brexit imperils the Good Friday Agreement'.

Many UK experts on UK-US relations have been busy saying how important the UK is to the US which reflects on the insular view the Johnson government has on the so-called special relationship between the UK and the US. Special that relationship may be, but it is not the only one and one that has slipped in the pecking order. Those same experts have been deficient in their understanding of the EU and Irish negotiation objectives in the process of trying to make a post-Brexit trade deal happen.

Now Biden has won the US presidential race Johnson's relationship with President Donald Trump will hinder his efforts to form close contact with the incoming administration. Forget about the ill-informed commentary in the British media about a US-UK trade agreement. Boris Johnson's relationship with Trump, who backed Brexit and calls his British counterpart "Britain Trump", is much closer. Downing Street was hoping the goodwill between the two populist leaders would help smooth the path of a trade deal, London's top priority when it comes to its relations with Washington.

In 2016 Johnson was accused of dog-whistle racism for suggesting President Barack Obama's attitude to Britain might be based on his "part-Kenyan" heritage and "ancestral dislike of the British empire". In a widely criticised [column for The Sun in 2016](#), the then-mayor of London recounted a story about a bust of former prime minister Winston Churchill purportedly being removed from the White House Oval Office. Tommy Vietor, a former communication advisor in Obama's team, [replied to Johnson's congratulatory tweet](#): "We will never forget your racist comments about Obama and slavish devotion to Trump." Under Johnson, the so-called special relationship which is more special for the UK than for the US will probably drift to lack of relevance or irrelevance. Not to say that the UK does not have utility for the US, for example, its membership of the UN security council, military and intelligence capabilities are important assets.

[President-elect Biden associates Boris Johnson with Donald Trump](#). After last year's general election, he described the UK prime minister as "a physical and emotional clone" of Trump. Biden also knows about foreign policy, not just because he was Vice President for eight years but because he chaired the US senate foreign policy committee for years. The so-called Special Relationship has lost its relevance to the US. No doubt the UK is an important partner, but the relationship was somewhat more relevant under the era of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher and George W Bush and Tony Blair.



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A Biden presidency is likely to follow the lead of Barack Obama in making Berlin his primary relationship in Europe. German chancellor Angela Merkel and Merkel's successor and France's President Emmanuel Macron will be the main interest in a Biden White House. And then there is Ireland. If the UK leaves the EU without a deal, or with a deal that US politicians believe undermines the Good Friday Agreement, the peace deal that settled three decades of sectarian violence in Ireland, the relationship will come under further strain. Biden, who is proud of his Irish roots, has warned publicly he would make a trade deal contingent on respecting the Northern Irish peace plan. The US Congress has already made clear that they will veto any trade agreement they believe threatens the peace deal.

If the UK government during the final weeks of 2020 negotiate a deal with the EU, which preserves an open border on the island of Ireland, they will have the support of the new US administration. If Boris Johnson fails to conclude an agreement on the future relationship between the UK and the EU, and in those circumstances seeks to row back on the commitments already made in the Withdrawal Agreement, they will face hostility from Washington after 20 January 2021. It would then subsequently not be possible for them to secure a free-trade deal of any kind with the US unless they are willing to make concessions on the question of the Irish border.

So far Downing Street insists that it has no intention of backing down from its Internal Market Bill and the clauses that are not only in breach of international law but that threaten the fragile peace on the island of Ireland. Behind the scenes though, there are signs that some Conservative politicians are getting worried and may look for a government rethink. The 'Global Britain' vision is about to collide with Brexit realities. Boris Johnson has so far chosen to ignore the implications of Brexit on Northern Ireland. With the election of Joe Biden to the US presidency, it is becoming ever more apparent that the repercussions of Johnson's Brexit stance will go much further than Brussels, Dublin and Belfast.

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