

# The British should be pleased with Biden's victory, even the Brexiteers

*Brexit has not led to a genuine renaissance of the 'special relationship' with the United States. Brexit might have untied the UK's hands when it comes to foreign policy but it has not changed the world's geography – the UK's interests remain inextricably linked with those of Europe, writes **Dalibor Rohac** (AEI). He argues that the main promise of the Biden presidency, also internationally, is simply to take down the temperature. The UK's political establishment should be pleased with such turn of events, even the Brexiteers.*

The news of Vice President Joe Biden's victory in the US presidential election will probably leave most Britons relieved since only 13 per cent of them [wished](#) for President Donald Trump to win re-election. For Brexiteers, however, the outcome brings both some bad news alongside good ones.

For one, President Trump's defeat deflates the illusion of an impending boom of the 'special relationship' eagerly anticipated by those who believed that the combination of the British decision to leave the European Union and of a Republican administration in Washington was a "time to let the British Lion 'roar' again on the world stage" as "a formidable force for freedom alongside the American Eagle," as the Heritage Foundation's Nile Gardiner [put it](#) in his testimony to the House of Representatives' Foreign Affairs Committee.

It is highly unlikely that as president, Biden will choose to seize "the tremendous opportunity to negotiate and sign a historic free trade agreement with the United Kingdom." Not only has it been a [long-standing position](#) of both Biden and congressional Democrats that any prospective US-UK trade agreement was conditional on a satisfactory arrangement guiding the UK's future relationship with the EU, particularly as the issue of Northern Ireland was concerned, but Biden's campaign also promised not to "enter into any new trade agreements until we have invested in Americans and equipped them to succeed in the global economy."

To the extent to which there will be an appetite for trade negotiations at all, a Biden administration is bound to prioritise large multilateral agreements, such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). The challenge of China provides compelling grounds for the United States to rejoin TPP. Similarly, there may be strong geopolitical reasons for trying to get the now-shelved Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership across the finish line – though that its full revival seems unlikely. Yet, the point made by the former US president Barack Obama in the weeks leading to the 2016 referendum, namely that a bilateral trade agreement with the UK would not take precedence over TTIP, [will almost certainly stand](#) under the Biden administration.

A putative US-UK trade deal would also face difficulties at home. For better or worse, the UK's domestic regulatory environment has been shaped by decades of EU membership. Deep integration with the United States, involving mutual recognition or harmonisation of rules, would require an overhaul that would prove highly controversial with the British public. After all, one only needs to remember [the hysteric reaction](#) to the mere possibility of reforming public procurement rules within the National Health Service as part of TTIP negotiations earlier.



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After 2016, the United Kingdom has frequently put its newly acquired flexibility, especially in the area of foreign policy, to good uses, such as by [weighing in on Hong Kong's national security law](#) together with Canada, Australia, and the United States; [banning Huawei](#) from its 5G network, and [sanctioning](#) Lukashenko's regime in Belarus – all issues on which the EU's officialdom has been characteristically behind the curve.

Yet, Brexit has not led to a renaissance of the 'special relationship' on the global stage, notwithstanding the superficial ideological alignment between British Conservatives and US Republicans. Brexit might have untied the UK's hands but it has not changed the world's geography – the UK's interests remain inextricably linked with those of Europe, making close collaboration with European powers such as France and Germany unavoidable. That is why, Brexit or no Brexit, defence cooperation with France following the Lancaster House Treaties has [continued](#) unabated. Moreover, setting aside the mercurial character of Donald Trump, the UK's long-term outlook on issues ranging from climate change through technology and personal data to the Iran Deal has been closer to that of the EU than of the United States.

In one important sense, the result of the US election is unambiguously good news both to Brexiteers and to the UK at large. It was precisely Trump's election in November 2016 and the uncertainty it engendered that made Brexit a particularly reckless idea – particularly when compared to the relatively benign international environment before the referendum. The relationship between President Trump and the former Prime Minister Theresa May soured quickly and although the personal ties seem to have improved under Boris Johnson's watch, the wholesale assault on multilateralism conducted by the US administration has often left the UK in a tight spot. For example, many in the UK have invoked the "WTO option" – essentially foregoing an explicit trade agreement with the EU and relying on the rules set by the World Trade Organisation in guiding future trade relations. Yet, the Trump administration has effectively paralyzed the WTO by blocking appointments to its appellate body. Had such trends continued for another four years, the UK's newly regained "control" would very quickly prove illusory.

The main promise of the Biden presidency, both domestically and internationally, is simply to take down the temperature. Brexiteers should wish the US president-elect luck in that endeavour. If he delivers, the worst downside risks of the complicated economic and geopolitical exercise that the UK embarked upon with the 2016 referendum would be mitigated. And as for the upside opportunities of Brexit, touted by the likes of Mr Gardiner, let us just say that those were never terribly realistic, to begin with.

*This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of LSE Brexit, nor of the London School of Economics. Image by Joe Bide, [Some rights reserved](#).*