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October 31st, 2024

The end of the UK-US special relationship?

*The UK-US “special relationship” has survived for many decades, but Brexit and the hollowing out of the British defence forces means that the UK is no longer as strategically important as it once was to the United States. Even though another Trump presidency will present unique challenges to Labour’s Government, the “special relationship” is likely to continue to erode, whoever wins the 2024 US Presidential election, argues **Michael Cox**.*

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It’s difficult to recall a time when there has been so much international interest, almost bordering on the obsessive, in the upcoming American elections. The reasons are clear. For one thing, America continues to matter more than any other country in the world, so what happens there impacts on us all in ways that no other state does. And for another, the US today is more polarized than at any time in recent history, and quite understandably its allies and partners worry that a less than united America isn’t going to be a reliable partner in an increasingly dangerous world.

A special relationship?

So, when it comes to the UK, what difference will the election result make? Does it even make any difference to London who wins? History often teaches us nothing, but if it points to anything it is just how durable the relationship has been since the Second World War. Macmillan got on with Kennedy. Thatcher stood alongside Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. Meanwhile, Tony Blair simply couldn’t get enough of his new liberal ally Bill Clinton a decade later. But then the liberal Blair had no trouble standing alongside a neo-conservative like G.W. Bush when it came to Iraq. We also know that **Trump liked Boris Johnson** and Johnson Trump. But when Johnson was finally replaced by Rishi Sunak, Sunak’s foreign policy team at No. 10 got on perfectly well with the Biden people, so

much so that in June 2023 **Sunak visited Biden** in the White House, while a month later Biden was talking in the warmest of terms with Sunak in **Downing Street**.



A number of things have happened over the past ten years that have made the relationship a good deal less “special”.



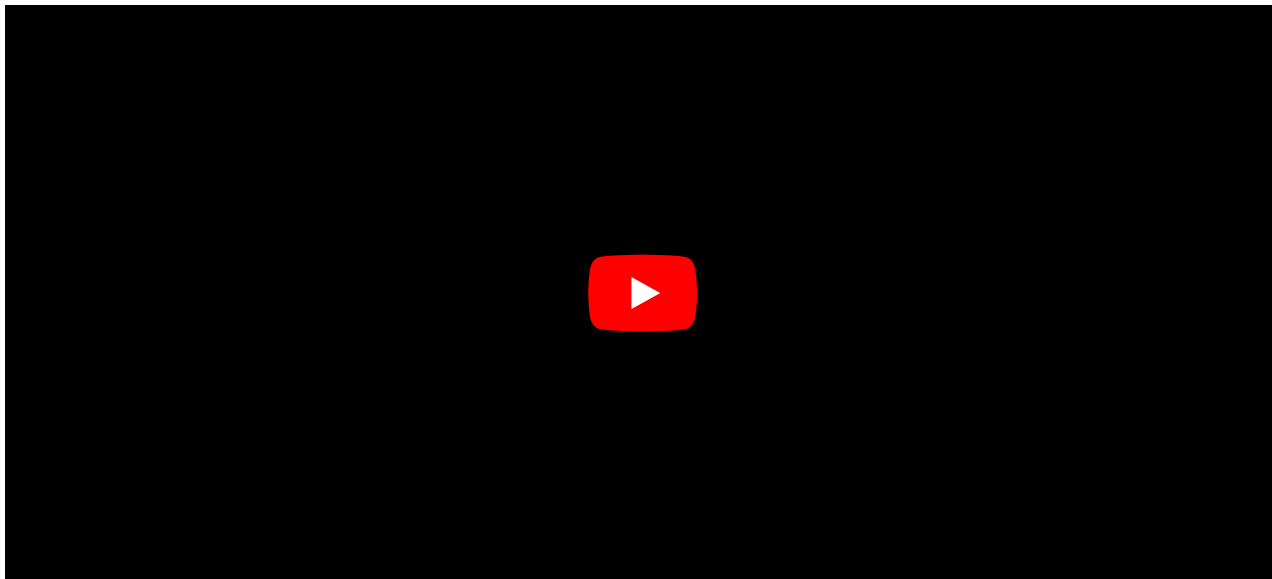
Cracks in the special relationship

Yet there is no hiding from the fact that the world has moved on since that golden era when Thatcher and Reagan stood side-by-side waging ideological war against socialism and Blair and Clinton forged a new “third way” which they hoped would redefine the world in the era of globalization.

One should not exaggerate. The “Brits” still remain America’s most reliable friend of choice; and there’s no doubting how much the UK depends on the United States for its security. But a number of things have happened over the past ten years that have made the relationship a good deal less “special” – one being Brexit which meant Washington no longer had a reliable pro-American partner working within the European Union, and the other the hollowing out of British defence forces thus making the UK less significant as an ally. As an unnamed US general **reportedly** told Defence Secretary Ben Wallace back in January 2023, inside the Pentagon there were many who no longer considered the British Army to be among the world’s top-tier fighting forces.

Nor did America’s decision to get out of Afghanistan in haste in the autumn of 2021 do much to reassure London that it still held much sway in Washington. As **Wallace** made clear, “a superpower” that was not “prepared to stick at something isn’t probably a superpower” any longer. “It is certainly not a global force, it’s just a big power,” he added for good measure.

Long before the 2024 election therefore the **special relationship** was facing more than a few problems. But if Trump rather than Biden’s successor were to be elected, this could make matters decidedly difficult for the new Labour government in the UK.



The distance between the two on most issues looks almost unbridgeable. Trump as we know favoured Brexit: the Labour Party in the majority voted Remain. When Trump was President and visited the UK, half of all Labour MPs opposed him speaking to Parliament: Trump was not amused. Labour is broadly speaking internationalist in outlook, whereas Trump believes in putting America first and the world second. Like the Democrats, Labour favours more government: Trump obviously favours less. Furthermore, while Labour has been consistent in its opposition to Putin's war in Ukraine, Trump has not only wavered when it comes to Ukraine, but with his running mate J.D. Vance has made it abundantly clear that he wants to bring the war to an end in double quick time on terms that would, by definition, **favour Russia**

Nor have more recent visits by Labour across the Atlantic done much to improve relations with Trump. Starmer might claim that his government "can have a good relationship" with a Republican President in the White House. But one suspects Trump is not going to forget the fact that Britain's current Foreign Secretary, **David Lammy**, once referred to him as a "racist" and a "dangerous clown". Then, as if to make matters more complicated still, only two to three weeks before the election, we had the decidedly bizarre spectacle of the Trump team calling out the Labour government for (in its own words) of "**illegal foreign interference**" into the US election. Yet this may not be Labour's biggest problem.



Whoever wins in November, the person sitting in the White House will have a lot more to worry about than the UK.



The loss of the UK's strategic importance to the US

The bigger issue may not just be Trump but rather how the UK is now viewed in the United States more generally. Sentiment can only carry a country so far, and the US right now has much more on its proverbial plate than worrying about its relationship with a country like the United Kingdom which no longer, in the famous words of Douglas Hurd uttered back in 1993, 'punches above its weight'. But no longer it would seem.

Indeed, whoever wins in November, the person sitting in the White House will have a lot more to worry about than the UK. With China rising, Russia continuing its war in Ukraine, and the Middle East on fire, the special relationship so-called now looks like very flat beer. As Lord Palmerston once observed, states don't have permanent allies or perpetual enemies, only interests. And at this particular moment in history when both the Democrats and Republicans are beginning to put America's own interests first, one suspects that what is said in London – or indeed anywhere else in Europe for that matter – will carry some weight, but much less than it did in earlier times.

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