



Michael Cox

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Has Keir Starmer faced the truth about Trump?

The US-UK “special relationship” was already hanging by a thread before Donald Trump even took office. Despite the enormous gulf between the UK and the US when it comes to support for Ukraine, Keir Starmer is still trying to keep the US President on side. Michael Cox asks whether this approach is simply in denial of the new international order Trump is creating.

It is difficult to recall a time when the future of the world looked as uncertain as it does right now. But for the United Kingdom there was always one thing that it could rely upon even in the most tumultuous of times: its special relationship with the United States of America. Churchill may have hyped it up somewhat back in 1946 when he talked of the “**fraternal relationship of English-speaking peoples**”. But his many successors through Harold Macmillan, Margaret Thatcher and latterly Tony Blair all showed that the relationship was not just fine words. Macmillan recall had close contact with Kennedy throughout the Cuba Missile crisis of 1963, Thatcher and Reagan together helped change the world, and Blair made it abundantly clear in that **famous letter to G.W. Bush** just a short time before the invasion of Iraq that the UK would stick by the United States come what may.



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totally at odds not only with all the major parties in Britain but with British public opinion as well.



Those halcyon days have now long gone. Of course, something important remains in the shape of economic ties, intelligence sharing, and military cooperation through the NATO alliance. But over the last twenty years – and long before Trump came on the scene – the relationship began to change in significant ways with the chocks underneath it being weakened one by one, first when Blair tied Britain's reputation (not to mention his own) to the American adventure Iraq, then by Brexit, followed in turn by the hollowing out of Britain's military capability, and finally in August 2021, when Biden took the final decision to **get out of Afghanistan against British advice**.

Now we have Trump 2.0, indifferent to the idea of alliances in general, philosophically an ocean apart from Starmer's Labour government, and on one particular issue – Ukraine and Russia – totally at odds not only with all the major parties in Britain but with British public opinion as well. As an Ipsos poll showed, even after three years of war, the **vast majority of Britons still stood by Ukraine** and supported sanctions against Russia. The same however cannot be said of all **Americans** (only 52 per cent of whom say they personally support Ukraine) and even if the new team in the White House claims it is not hostile to Ukraine and its president, it has certainly behaved as if it is.

Preserving the “special relationship”

Starmer of course is well aware of this and the potential threat it poses to the transatlantic relationship more generally and to the UK-US relationship more specifically.



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Indeed, his efforts to preserve the “special” in the relationship began even before Trump became President when Britain's well connected Ambassador to the US, Karen Pierce (an LSE alumna), helped arrange a lunch meeting **between Starmer and Trump** last September where the

two sides “discussed the longstanding friendship between the UK and the US and the importance of continuing to develop the strong and enduring partnership between our two countries”. It then continued in earnest when he visited Trump in February of this year, even carrying with him a letter of invitation from the King for a state visit. And it went into overdrive in early March when Starmer hosted a mini-European summit in London which came up with a set of four proposals all designed to reassure Zelensky and Ukraine that while they too were working for peace just like the United States, Ukraine could rest assured that it would not be abandoned to the predations of Russia. Rest assured, declared Starmer, Ukraine can depend on our “unwavering support” at this “**once-in-a-generation moment for the security of Europe**”.

If nothing else, Starmer’s activism has won him a great deal of plaudits at home and in Europe. *The More in Common* polling indeed showed a five-point rise in British people approving of Sir Keir, while 56 per cent thought his handling of the Ukraine negotiations reflected well on his government. Significantly, two newspapers not known for their support for either Starmer or Labour could hardly contain their enthusiasm. *The Sunday Telegraph* for instance talked in flowing terms if not so much of Starmer, but at least of his standing up for the “**underdog**” Zelensky. Even *The Daily Express* lavished praise on the prime minister, saying he had “**made the nation proud**”. France too praised Starmer. Indeed, according to one **report** Starmer had achieved the near impossible of putting the UK right back on the “world stage”.

An unbridgeable gulf between Europe and the US?

Yet it is difficult to see how the British and European positions on Ukraine and that of the Trump administration can easily be squared, with Washington keen or so it would seem of making a peace deal at any price, and the Europeans and the UK insisting on upholding Ukrainian independence and assuming (or at least hoping) that there would be strong US security backing for a deal despite the fact that no such guarantees have thus far been forthcoming from Washington. As Trump made clear in his first cabinet meeting, there would be **no significant US security guarantee for Ukraine**.



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But much more is stake here than stake here than just Ukraine or even the special relationship between one country accounting from nearly a quarter of the world's GDP led by an out and out "American firster" who doesn't feel the US should be bound by rules, and a middle ranking power led by an old-fashioned multilateralist who believes that the only thing standing between the world and anarchy are those rules. Rather, it is the very future of the international order itself which until now has assumed an active American role at the heart of it.

Optimists tell us that we should not panic: that carefully constructed diplomacy coming from this side of the pond will in the end pull us out of the impasse in which we now find ourselves; that Trump may in fact have performed a useful role in getting the Europeans at last to take their own security seriously. Some have also argued with some conviction that Trump's fiery words are not always matched by the equivalent action. Possibly so. But with America trying to impose a peace with or without the Ukrainians, and Russia seeing only opportunity ahead in the new environment created by the election of Donald Trump last November, it is difficult to be particularly sanguine about the future in general or the special relationship in particular. As **David Frum**, a former speech writer for G.W. Bush recently noted, though the "truth" might be "ugly", it's still necessary to "face it". Whether Starmer or the UK have yet done so, remains unclear.

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