

# In 2017 and beyond, the UK-US Special Relationship will be caught between a Trump Rock and a Brexit Hard Place

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*Donald Trump's forthcoming presidency poses uncomfortable questions for Britain about the future of the UK-US 'Special Relationship'. As [Tim Oliver](#) and [Mike Williams](#) argue in a new [LSE IDEAS Strategic Update](#), that even the core elements of the relationship look set to be strained mean Britain is likely to find itself caught between a Trump Rock and a Brexit Hard Place.*



Donald Trump's victory has raised uncomfortable questions for Britain about the future of the UK-US 'Special Relationship'. As we argue in a new LSE IDEAS Strategic Update '[Making the "Special Relationship" Great Again?](#)', despite similarities in Brexit and the politics of Trump's rise, and the Lazarus quality of the relationship to return to life after being pronounced dead, Trump presents a worldview and so many unknowns that even the core of the relationship could be strained as never before. This hardly poses an ideal scenario in which a Britain exiting the EU can hope to move forward in the world.



Coming to terms with President Trump will not be easy for UK politics or for many of the USA's allies, to say nothing of the 54 percent of US voters who supported other presidential candidates. 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. This leads us to examine five questions.

## Trump's World

First, what will Trump's politics and outlook on foreign affairs entail? Contrary to popular belief, Trump does have a worldview. His campaign rhetoric, as well as before, illustrates a foreign policy ideology based on 19th century, sovereigntist principles. We should recall a German saying '*Nichts wird so heiss gegessen, wie es gekocht wird*' (Nothing is eaten as hot as it is cooked). Some in the Trump administration are not wedded to his worldview and will check him, as will many of the constraints – domestic and foreign – every president faces when it comes to foreign policy. However, it is likely that his 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. That may sound no bad thing. But in doing so Trump may lack the subtlety necessary to deliver a stable change, and could end up aligning the US less with a liberal world order and more with more sovereignty based system akin to the 19th century and one that coincides more closely with a Sino-Russian world view.

## Transatlantic Common Purpose?

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? Trump's following drew on a mix of frustrations amongst a range of groups – but most notably the white working class – directed at globalisation, elite politics, austerity, fears about threats to identities, and immigration. Similarities can be seen in Brexit and across Europe. Will the US and

European governments now find a common purpose? Trump's rhetoric points instead to a US determined to turn inwards. Instead of finding common purpose, the two sides of the Atlantic may find they drive themselves further apart. That would pose a quandary for a post-Brexit Britain and its leaders who campaigned for Britain to leave the EU so it could instead forge new global trading links. The US may seek a trade deal with a UK outside the EU; a position that contrasts with Trump's more protectionist stance. While he might leave an opening for the UK (albeit one where the US drives a hard bargain – for example over any UK-China trade relationship – because there are no special relationships in trade negotiations), his overall position could inflict much larger damage on the wider open global trading system that Britain remains a committed member of. Britain's hopes of securing global trade deals depend on the rest of the world being open to such approaches. A Trump presidency would help push us all towards a world that isn't like that.



### **Striking at the Core**

Third, what could Trump mean for the core – intelligence, special forces and nuclear weapons – of the UK-US relationship that is usually protected from the vagaries of presidential and prime ministerial politics? It is this core that has formed the basis on which the UK and US have trusted 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 of disasters such as the Iraq War, only to soon come back to life. Yet this core could be tested to the limit by dealing with a President who is often erratic and appears willing to do and say anything when it comes to torture, bombing, nuclear proliferation, Muslims, mass deportation, and relations with authoritarian states such as Russia where he has appeared more willing to trust Vladimir Putin than the US intelligence agencies with which the UK cooperates more closely than any other state.

### **Rocks and Hard Places**

Fourth, where might that leave UK foreign policy, which since 1945 has balanced Britain between the USA and Europe? Does Britain remain close to the USA in the hope it can be a candid friend and by doing so help smooth – for the benefit of Britain and other allies of the US and UK – what could be a highly unpredictable four (possibly eight) years of a Trump presidency? Can Britain be such a counsel? The history of UK-US relations shows Britain does have influence, but that should not be exaggerated. Given Trump's isolationist and protectionist outlook it also seems unlikely he would care that much about Britain's efforts. Britain could limit relations, but in doing so would

strike at the core of the relationship in ways we have never seen before. It would also deprive Britain of access to information and capabilities it and other European countries depend on. Given the perilous state of European defence capabilities, the British government and others across the continent would be weary of making moves that increase the likelihood of US disengagement from NATO and Europe's security.

The bigger problem for Britain's government is that Trump poses an added dilemma for Britain's strategic outlook. The British people's vote for Brexit highlighted a desire by some in the UK to play an enhanced global role, a role that would in part depend on cooperating with the USA. Yet in Trump the UK would find itself stuck between a Trump rock and a Brexit hard place. Does this mean Britain would have to find a third way between the US and Europe? Some may seek this and point to relations with other English-speaking nations such as Canada or Australia as ways forward. On their own, however, they are inadequate substitutes for the scale of existing political, economic, social and security relations which root Britain firmly into a transatlantic community. If that community cannot function then British foreign policy faces a bleak future.

## Knowing the Unknown President

Finally, given the attention often given to prime minister-president relations, what might a President Trump mean for Prime Minister May? For May, like many other world leaders, it will be a question of getting to know the unknowable President. There are some things we know – the 'known knowns' – but compared to any previous president much of Trump's worldview remains a mystery. There are a multitude of 'known unknowns' such as his business interests, tax affairs or links with states such as Russia. As the most erratic – and thin-skinned and easily provoked – candidate ever elected to the White House, the biggest challenge for May and other world leaders will be dealing with what he might say or do next. The 'unknown unknowns' of President Trump will make for an unpredictable and extremely difficult presidency.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of USAPP– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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