

Trump will present an enormous challenge for the UK-US 'Special Relationship'

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*Donald Trump's victory will pose uncomfortable questions for Britain about the future of the UK-US relationship. **Tim Oliver** writes that 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 so many unknowns that the core of the relationship could be strained as never before.*



Donald Trump's run for the US presidency, he has left an indelible mark on US politics and on views of the US in Britain and around the world. Those views are now very likely to turn into actual policy towards a president many in Britain will feel deeply uneasy about.

British views of Trump can be a mix of selective praise and widespread horror. He has been criticised and attacked by British political leaders from the foreign secretary, Boris Johnson through to the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan. A petition of over half a million signatures led Parliament to debate (and reject) banning Trump from entering the UK. Yet he has also drawn the support of politicians such as UKIP leader Nigel Farage and polling showed support in Britain for his plan to ban Muslims from entering the US. What then will Trump actually mean for UK-US relations?

We can look at the possible implications for the relationship in three areas. First, how similar is support for Trump to the political trends in Britain and Europe such as those that drove Brexit, and would they form the basis for cooperation? Second, what will Trump mean for the core – largely defence related – of the UK-US relationship that is usually protected from the vagaries of presidential politics? In turn, where will that leave a UK that since 1945 has built its global position on trying to balance itself between the USA and Europe? Finally, given the importance often attached to prime minister-president relations, what will a President Trump mean for Prime Minister Theresa May?



Europe, Brexit and Trump

The US presidential election has shown American politics grappling with the same tensions and frustrations found in Britain and across the rest of Europe. These tensions surround an often overlooked working class and an under pressure middle class who have growing frustrations over the political and economic status quo. Their frustrations are directed at globalisation, elite politics, austerity, fears about threats to identities, and immigration. Britain's vote for Brexit was itself seen as a pointer to the growing power of these frustrations.

Will a Trump Presidency seek common purpose with Britain and other European allies to find solutions? 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. Trump has hinted at being open to a trade deal with a UK outside the EU. That's a position that contrasts with his overall protectionist stance. While he might leave an opening for the UK, his overall position would 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 depends on the rest of the world being open to such approaches. A Trump presidency will help push us all towards a world that isn't like that.

'The' Special Relationship

If Britain can expect an exemption from Trump's protectionism then does that not point to the success and strength of the UK-US 'special relationship'? As always when discussing the 'special relationship' we need to remember that for both sides it is 'a' special relationship rather than 'the' special relationship. Both London and Washington D.C. have other special relationships, such as with Israel for the USA or with Ireland for the UK. Arguably, the most important relationships – and therefore special in their own ways – for either side are the ones they face the most difficult but important questions over: US-China and UK-EU.

Nevertheless, the UK-US relationship is special due to links in three core areas: nuclear weapons, intelligence and Special Forces. Culture, politics, economic considerations and so forth also make it 'special' but it is these three areas that are protected from the vagaries of presidential and prime ministerial politics. They form the basis on which the UK and US trust each other in ways they don't with others. And it is trust that matters in any relationship.

This core could be tested to the limit or be left sour by a Trump presidency because of the degree of distrust and unease in Her Majesty's Government and the wider UK political arena at cooperating with a country headed by an erratic president who appears willing to do and say anything when it comes to torture, bombing, and relations with authoritarian states. Granted, the UK's record on torture, bombing and relations with authoritarian states is nothing to be proud of. But the extremes to which Trump appears prepared to push these areas, at least in public, makes for uncomfortable politics for any UK government already struggling with allegations of complicity in torture with the USA, where the public is sceptical of involvement in overseas conflicts, and where relations with authoritarian states such as Russia remain – despite hopes of easing relations – tense.

That leaves the British government facing three difficult questions. First, does it remain close to the USA in the hope it can be a candid friend and by doing so help smooth what could be a highly unpredictable four (possibly eight) years of a Trump presidency? In doing so it would try to protect the core of the relationship in the hope of an easing of relations with the next president. If chosen, this approach would reflect a long-standing desire by British decision makers to shape US power as a means to the end of enhancing British power. They would also be doing so in the hope that Britain – of all the US' allies – can shape a President Trump in the interests of the wider Western world. Given Trump's isolationist and protectionist outlook it seems highly unlikely he would care that much about Britain's efforts.

Second, if close relations are not an option then the UK government could limit relations with the USA in the military and intelligence communities. By doing so they 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 Europe's security.

Finally, Trump will pose a dilemma for Britain's overall strategic outlook. Britain's vote to leave the EU has 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 economic and security relations which root Britain firmly into a transatlantic community.

Theresa May and a Known Unknown President

Close relations between presidents and prime ministers have often personified UK-US relations. Reagan-Thatcher and Blair-Clinton/Bush are the most recent examples. What can Theresa May or any other future British prime minister expect to find when dealing with a President Trump? As with any president, there are risks and opportunities involved. With Trump, however, there are so many unknowns that Donald Rumsfeld's famous albeit verbose quote about risk seems apt.

'There are known knowns; there are things we know we know.' For Theresa May this would have been a Clinton presidency. UK-US relations would, as always, face some difficult moments. Clinton would have been more hawkish than some in Britain and Europe expect. She would have been chased by long-standing allegations of corruption. But compared to Trump she would have operated within the existing parameters of transatlantic relations and broader US foreign policy.

'We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know.' That will be a Trump presidency, a man about which the world – and in all likelihood even the UK Government – still know so little about. With Trump there are things we know remain hidden from us. Examples include his tax affairs, connections to Russia, allegations of sexual misbehaviour, plans for running his companies while he is in the Oval Office, the next recording to appear of him bragging about things, his likely working relationship with the US military. We also know little about who would actually staff his administration or how the wider Republican Party elite would cope with him being in the White House.

'There are also unknown unknowns — the ones we don't know we don't know.' As the most erratic presidential candidate ever nominated in the modern era by the two main parties, the biggest unknown for Theresa May and other world leaders is what Trump might say or do next. His erratic behaviour and incoherent ideas have led many to worry he poses a real danger to the US republic itself. He has boasted about his attempts to stay on script in the final few days of the campaign, as if this is something we should welcome rather than expect from a man who could soon command the most powerful military force humanity has ever known. Granted, what he will and will not be able to get away with – such as in trade protectionism – will be shaped by the checks and balances of the US system of government. But it's easy to foresee many press conferences and meetings with a President Trump where the British prime minister and officials are left disgusted, aghast and struggling to explain to themselves, let alone Britain's parliament, public and allies, why relations with the USA are worth maintaining.

An earlier version of this article first appeared on [gives the views of the author, and not the position of LSE Brexit, nor of the London School of Economics. Image credit: CC0 Public Domain.](#)

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