



Still Special?

Why UK eyes are focused on Washington ahead of November's Presidential Election

Originally coined by former Prime Minister Winston Churchill in 1946, the United Kingdom has shared a symbolic bond, a so-called 'Special Relationship', with the United States for decades. Throughout modern history, our nations have been strong allies and cooperated in international diplomacy, military activity and intelligence sharing. Our shared beliefs in democracy and free speech embody the cornerstones of Western ideals – or so that's what we like to think. As the US Presidential election approaches, it is worth examining what the outcome might mean for the UK and the relationship with its closest ally.

Strong partnerships between Prime Ministers and Presidents have been important components of the 'Special Relationship', such as the shared ideological outlook of Thatcher and Reagan, or the less predictable but no less amicable bond between Blair and Bush Jr. Such ties have been important in cementing the geopolitical importance of the partnership. President Trump has presented a new, challenging style of leadership for UK Prime Ministers to navigate; one characterised by an abrasive personality, an apparently inward-looking 'America First' strategy and an abrupt change to the status quo.

Election Time

As the world awaits the outcome of the election next week, the UK Government is already preparing for a new US administration. In September, the Foreign Secretary visited Washington, D.C. to meet key Democratic politicians and gauge their support. Meanwhile, British ministers have been advised by Number 10 to keep a degree of distance from the Trump administration and are busy forging links with Joe Biden's team. Abiding by historical precedent, Johnson has not publicly endorsed either candidate – such a move would be detrimental to UK interests.

Aside from the polls currently suggesting a Biden win, it is worth examining what both outcomes would mean for the future of the Special Relationship.

Would a second term for Trump threaten UK intentions to spearhead global climate leadership at COP26 next year? How might a Biden administration stall UK-US trade deal efforts, or present challenges for the future of post-Brexit Britain navigating its new position in Europe? Neither outcome comes without risk for the UK but either could offer Britain opportunities to advance its interests on the global stage.

The Not-So-Special Relationship

Before analysing the international policy implications of either result, it is important to recognise that the UK will not be an immediate priority for the victor. Domestic issues will inevitably take precedent over trade talks and other international considerations. If elected, Biden will seek to heal a nation wounded by the impact of Covid-19 and deep tensions over racial inequality, inheriting a troubled economy and facing a disconcerting international landscape. On the other hand, Trump's presidency has not had a particular focus on UK relations. While UK-US trade talks began during his administration, there have been differences on issues such as Huawei, the Iran nuclear deal and the Paris Accord, where the UK's position has more closely aligned with that of Brussels than Washington, D.C.

Post-Brexit Britain: America's door to Europe?

As Britain seeks to assert itself as a nation independent of the European Union, the UK Government will be looking for support from its trusted ally. But how could a change in leadership affect this? Trump was a vocal supporter of Brexit and the leaders spearheading the Leave campaign, even naming Boris Johnson 'Britain Trump'. Similarities can even be drawn between the Brexit vote and Trump's election, in their rejection of international bureaucracy and appeal to nationalism.

Alternatively, Biden presents a contrasting worldview which might, ostensibly, be more problematic for a post-Brexit Britain. Despite accepting the result, Biden has made it clear that Brexit was not his preference, given his support for multilateralism, established international institutions and the security of a united Europe. This has invited suggestions that Biden may take a leaf from President Obama's book, who remarked that the UK would go to the "back of the queue" in trade talks should it vote for Brexit.

This issue highlights a wider question about how the UK's new position in Europe may hinder the traditional dynamics of the Special Relationship, regardless of who takes the White House in November. A plausible economic critique contends that Britain provided the US with a strategic point of access to the EU, America's top export market. Regardless of your view on Brexit, the UK's exit has now closed this door, prompting questions about which EU nation a potential Biden administration looking to repair bonds would turn to. Obama hinted at this shift

when he declared German Chancellor Merkel his "closest partner". Biden's team is said to have already made overtures to French President Macron regarding cooperation on economic and military issues. Navigating this relationship with the UK and EU as separate entities presents a new challenge for the President. Although Britain will not sit at the top of America's priority list, it is unlikely that either candidate would be hostile to the UK, given their continuing alignment of interests.

A more "European" foreign policy?

While Trump has largely avoided flexing US policy muscles in respect of political challenges in Europe, Biden has been active on issues relating to European security and defence policy for in excess of forty years. His campaign has already published detailed policy proposals regarding how his administration would address challenges in the Western Balkans, Caucasus and Baltics. In this respect, a Biden White House seems likely to closely mirror the UK's own strategic priorities in respect of NATO enlargement to include Georgia, a reinforced military and naval presence to head off Russian threats in the North and Baltic seas, and the long-term stabilisation of emerging democracies in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo.

Across the Irish Sea

A point of potential discord in the event of a Biden administration is the issue of Ireland. Following the introduction of the Internal Market Bill, which creates the potential to undermine the Withdrawal Agreement, Biden [stated](#) that any UK trade deal would depend on respect for the Good Friday Agreement. Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, echoed this sentiment from a Congressional standpoint. Given that Biden champions his Irish-Catholic identity and around 10% of the American population – a significant voter demographic – claim Irish heritage, this rang alarm bells for those in the UK seeking a transatlantic deal. Trump has been less vocal on the issue, although his Northern Ireland envoy did warn of a potential hard "border by accident".

The onus here is ultimately on the UK to achieve a deal with the EU. Given any deal is dependent on an equitable settlement of Irish border operations, the issue would likely subside once an agreement is made. A no-deal Brexit, however, would create serious problems. The Government would likely face pressure or isolation from a

Biden administration, particularly if the situation provokes unrest in Ireland.

“We can’t allow the Good Friday Agreement that brought peace to Northern Ireland to become a casualty of Brexit. Any trade deal between the U.S. and U.K. must be contingent upon respect for the Agreement and preventing the return of a hard border. Period.”

– Joe Biden, September 2020

A Greener Future?

Action on climate change holds opportunities for potential bilateral cooperation. However, it marks a distinct point of divergence between the two presidential candidates. Having labelled the problem a hoax, Trump’s policies have had a climate-sceptic bent. For instance, over [70 environmental rules and regulations](#) have been reversed, revoked or rolled back during his presidency. The greatest UK concern was the US withdrawal from the Paris Accord, which Trump justified on the basis that it creates an “unfair economic burden” on Americans. This stance was further evident in December, when the White House prohibited any mention of climate change during UK-US trade talks. This approach would likely continue under a second term.

Biden, on the other hand, has made climate change a cornerstone of his campaign. The Democratic ticket commits the US to achieving net zero emissions by 2050 — a policy already written into UK law — and is proposing a federal investment package of \$1.7 trillion for green tech research. Biden’s plans to decarbonise buildings are in line with the UK Government’s [Plan for Jobs](#), which commits £2 billion to increase the energy-efficiency of UK homes.

Crucially, Biden has firmly asserted his intention to re-enter the Paris Accord. This will be welcomed by the UK and wider international community, given that the US is the largest global emitter of CO₂ after China. The UK’s global emissions contribution is less than 1%, while the US accounts for 15%. Simply put, US inaction on climate change renders the efforts of other nations less effective.

However, while parallels can be drawn between Biden’s green pragmatism and the stance of some in the Conservative Party, it would be wrong to paint him as a

climate warrior. For instance, Biden has side-lined more ambitious climate proposals from the left of his Party, namely the Green New Deal championed by Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. But his commitment to the Paris Accord and potential inclusion of climate arrangements in a UK-US trade deal would be welcomed by the UK.

COP26

While climate change is certainly not an issue exclusive to the UK-US relationship, it presents an opportunity for a synergy of policy. This is all the more important as the UK hosts the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) next year, which will be a critical opportunity for the UK to position post-Brexit Britain at the forefront of global leadership on the issue. A key theme of the event is advocating for “collective action” on greenhouse gas emissions — something the UK may find difficult to achieve if the focus of the event is distracted by headlines of a climate-sceptic US President.

The Caveat of Congress

While the attention of the international community will be set on the presidential election, Number 10 will be watching the Congressional elections with keen interest too. While the President would be a key stakeholder in trade negotiations, Congress ultimately holds the power of the purse and ability to ratify treaties. Unlike the UK’s constitutional monarchy, the separation of powers in the American Constitution requires the legislative body to bargain with the executive. This adds a further obstacle for the UK to consider when scoping a deal.

As Congressional inactivity on Covid-19 stimulus funding has recently demonstrated, a partisan Congress does not typically lead to quick legislative action – and certainly not to the extent of a large Commons majority. The shape of the new Congressional landscape is therefore important, regardless of who is in the White House. The quickest route to a trade deal is a President whose party controls both Houses.

With a week to go until polling day, the Democrats appear likely to increase their majority in the House of Representatives and have a strong chance of gaining control of the US Senate; something which, if it comes to pass, would leave the party in full control of the US Government for at least the first two years of a Biden presidency.

The Anglo-American Future

To varying degrees, Trump and Biden both present risks to the traditional dynamic of UK-US ties. Trump's isolationist worldview creates a challenge for a post-Brexit Britain striving to strengthen its bonds overseas, particularly as COP26 approaches. But Trump practices personality politics and, whatever their ideological differences, in Johnson he sees a man with whom he can do business. On the contrary, while Biden may restore America's foreign policy leadership which would be of comfort to the UK, his Brexit views embody a potential hurdle for a UK-US deal and a more nuanced fragility to transatlantic relations. Although the UK can mitigate much of this tension through an EU deal and enhanced diplomatic efforts, Brexit has reconfigured the UK's standing in Europe which may, in turn, reshape its relations with the United States.

Respect for the historical significance of the 'Special Relationship' will continue, regardless of the political leaning of the individual who occupies the White House next year. However, all is to play for as the road towards election day reaches its final bend this week. Much like British politics, American elections – as Trump's win in 2016 demonstrated – are unpredictable and subject to political developments over the coming days. One thing is certain; Number 10 will be watching developments closely, in anticipation of how the victor and Congress that they work alongside will shape the nature of transatlantic relations.

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