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## America and the World—The Effects of the Trump Presidency

### *U.S.-UK Relations in the Time of Trump*

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In November 2016, I wrote an essay for H-Diplo on the possible impact of the Trump administration on U.S.-UK relations.<sup>1</sup> My first paragraph included the following sentences: “If Trump himself knows what he truly plans to do – as opposed to what he would truly like to do – he has hidden it from the rest of United States. Although the British government has a long tradition of adjustment to whichever government is in power in any given country of interest, adjustment needs an object or action or policy to which to adjust. Thus far, President-elect Trump has not felt the need to provide any of them,” other than the slogans promising to put America First and Make America Great Again.

I assumed that there were bound to be continuities in the 2016-2020 relationship: the specific military links, i.e., the nuclear and the intelligence. The nuclear relationship is grounded by the 1958 U.S.-UK Mutual Defence Agreement and subsequent agreements. The intelligence relationship dates from the last years of the First World War, followed by a gap, and then the very close relationship during the Second World War. By the end of the war, resources tumbled, and the U.S. pulled ahead. However, it needed the facilities and the expertise of the UK and this was formalised by the UKUSA Agreement in 1946. All of these relationships did continue as normal.

What was very different, and very public, was the nature of the relationships between the President and the two Prime Ministers. I have myself thought that this was an element of lesser importance in the U.S.-UK relationship than is sometimes claimed. Granted that a strong alliance requires a supportive public opinion, and that this can vary in the UK depending on the public’s view of the president, nevertheless I believed that the continuities – not just military, but also the bureaucracies and the general amity between Congress and Parliament – were more important. President Trump has shaken but not entirely destroyed this belief.

With President Trump, the personal is the political. As John Bolton, Trump’s third National Security Adviser, remarked on the British Channel 4 News on the 25<sup>th</sup> of June 2020, “Trump can’t distinguish between his personal relationships with a counterpart leader and the actual state of the national relationships between two countries.”<sup>2</sup> If he likes a leader, he likes a country. He approves of authoritarian strong men and particularly the lack of constraints on their actions; he has made it clear that he envies such freedom. He expresses great liking for those leaders who say admiring things about him. He is a 6’3” bully, who reportedly refused to allow Janet Yellen to remain chairman of the Federal Reserve System because, at 5’ tall, she was too short for the position;<sup>3</sup> a more likely reason, of course, was that she was a Democrat appointed by former president Barack Obama. In summary, Trump admires strength and those who hold opinions that are aligned with his, and has a disinclination to worry overmuch about the interests or feelings of others. Nevertheless, he retains the support of a substantial proportion of the U.S. population.

Given this context, how was the Anglo-American relationship likely to develop? It began with a whimper with Prime Minister Theresa May and ended with a whimper, with something of a wave pattern in between. The nadir was certainly reached on the 20<sup>th</sup> of June 2017,

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Burk, “The Impact of the Trump Administration on U.S.-UK Relations,” January 20, 2017; <https://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/Policy-Roundtable-1-5G.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Watched and transcribed by Professor Martin Farr of the University of Newcastle, UK.

<sup>3</sup> Matt O’Brien, *Washington Post*, 3 December 2018. O’Brien says that she is 5’ 3”.

when Trump essentially sacked the British Ambassador, Sir Kim Darroch. He did not actually demand his recall; he just made it clear that Sir Kim would never darken his door again. This was the first occasion anything of this sort had happened between the two countries since President Franklin Pierce dismissed the British Minister to the U.S., Sir John Crampton, in 1856.

In July 2016 Theresa May became Prime Minister and in January 2017 Donald J. Trump became President. As a result, an insecure president faced an increasingly weak prime minister. He had defeated one woman, and he was continually to undermine another woman. This was not difficult, given that Theresa May's hold on power was somewhat tenuous. She came to power as the choice of the Conservative Party's Members of Parliament after the previous Prime Minister, David Cameron, had resigned the day after the referendum on continued British membership of the European Union had resulted in the decision to withdraw ('Brexit'). She had not been elected leader of the Conservative Party by the full Party membership and thus could not claim her own mandate. Indeed, when she called a General Election for the 8<sup>th</sup> of June 2017, the Conservatives lost their majority in the House of Commons. At the same time, the country was to continue to be in turmoil for the next several years over first, the Brexit decision, secondly, its implementation, and thirdly, in 2020, the coronavirus pandemic, during some months of which the UK suffered the highest rate of infections in Europe.

Trump immediately faced a prime minister burdened with at least three alarming weaknesses. The first was personal. Theresa May is self-contained and prefers agendas, order, and predictability to wild surmise. She finds small talk difficult and has a total lack of charisma. Indeed, she probably has the least charisma of any leader since Edward Heath, who was Prime Minister from 1970-74, a high bar to leap. Home Secretary for six years, she held an ideal post for someone with her devotion to detail and desire to control. However, she apparently showed a lack of personal warmth beyond those in her close circle which, combined with the fact that she had not cultivated a coterie of allies in the House of Commons, increased her vulnerability at time of crisis. She faced a man who prided himself on his own charisma and his power to arouse a crowd and had a drive to dominate and bully. Second, the only major office that she had held before becoming Prime Minister was the Home Office, and she was, in fact, the first Home Secretary to become Prime Minister since Lord Palmerston in 1855. The Office has a pretty thankless group of responsibilities, including crime, the police, and immigration. It often has to develop and carry out policies that provoke significant opposition. When May was Home Secretary, she announced that she intended to provide a 'hostile environment' for immigrants, in order to deter them from attempting to come to the UK. This was detrimental to her own reputation. And third – and crucially – she was Prime Minister of a disoriented and weakened country, one which was deeply unsure of its future.

Trump repeatedly made it clear that he had little time for her and she felt the same way about him. In fact, they did not speak to each other at all during her final month in office. With the advent of Boris Johnson as Prime Minister on the 29<sup>th</sup> of July 2019 (he had earlier been a notably inadequate Foreign Secretary, before resigning over Brexit), the atmosphere changed. The two leaders were co-terminus in their positions as leaders for only eighteen months, but Trump had begun to praise Johnson publicly since 2016. The pro-Brexit behind-the-scenes men in Britain had strong links with the pro-Trump behind-the-scenes men in the U.S.; indeed, shortly after Trump won, Johnson flew over to the U.S., where he met Trump's Chief Strategist Steve Bannon. Bannon and others talked-up Johnson to Trump, and the rest is a short history.

Certain beliefs and characteristics link the two of them. Both are right-wing populists and strong nationalists. They are both overweight with blond hair, but Johnson's is usually messy whilst Trump's is controlled like a helmet. The physical resemblance was a boon to cartoonists. Neither is known for his work ethic, and both are serial liars. They both bluster, although Johnson is more boisterous than Trump. Both show a disinclination to be questioned by the press in an uncontrolled manner. In one important element they are very different: Johnson is loyal to those who are loyal to him; Trump, famously, is not. It is difficult to know to what extent each recognises similar traits in the other, but Trump apparently feels a strong affinity for Johnson, referring to him more than once as 'Britain's Trump.'

Indeed, the relationship warmed up considerably with the advent of Boris Johnson as Prime Minister, and settled down to one that was unexpectedly unbalanced in the opposite direction from what it is normally: Trump kept praising Johnson, whilst Johnson seems to have kept himself as far away as possible. Johnson was one of the few leaders of whom the President seems to have remained fond, possibly because of Johnson's attempts to complete Brexit. Yet, over 2020 Johnson increasingly evaded appearing close to Trump or to say his name in public, even refusing an invitation to visit the United States. Little kudos would be gained in Britain by his being seen as 'Britain's Trump. In the end, at a press conference on the 7<sup>th</sup> of January 2021, he publicly condemned Trump for encouraging people to "storm the Capitol."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> "Boris Johnson Condemns Donald Trump and Says He's 'Pleased Democracy Prevailed'," 7 January 2021, *Telegraph*: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2021/01/07/news-boris-johnson-latest-covid-lockdown-schools-brexit-vaccine/>.

What had brought the two leaders together, in fact, was Brexit. Trump strongly supported and called for it, whilst Johnson's recent ascent in British politics was largely based on his strong support for Brexit combined with his public persona, both of which galvanised a large proportion of the Conservative Party. The bulk of the Party in the country supported him in the General Election on the 13<sup>th</sup> of December 2019 because they believed that he would achieve Brexit. He did, and largely because of his promise of an immediate Brexit, the Conservatives won many of the seats in the North of England that were traditionally dominated by the Labour Party. One of his and his supporters' major arguments was that, once the UK was free of the shackles of Europe, they could negotiate a Free Trade agreement with the U.S., which would benefit the UK beyond measure. The difficulty, of course, is that no leader of a country will easily surrender what he or she sees as the country's national interests, and Trump appears to see them in terms of trade. In these negotiations he also apparently believes in winner-take-all. He would have done the UK no favours, and the weapons of the UK in this sort of conflict are relatively few (slots for U.S. airlines at Heathrow are one of these few). Nevertheless, many of Johnson's Brexit supporters continue to hold on to this hope.

Was and is it important for the U.S. that the two countries remain close? The relative military decline of the UK was increasingly obvious. Although the UK is one of only five members of NATO to contribute the full 2% of GDP towards defence capabilities and one of only three nuclear powers in the alliance, nevertheless it was progressively running down its military forces. In international terms, its withdrawal from the EU at one blow snapped the tie that made it the primary link between the U.S. and Europe. Part of its power was that European countries believed that they could convey ideas to the U.S. much more successfully through Britain than by themselves. This will hardly continue. With the decline of its military forces and the throwing-away of one of its major diplomatic uses to the Americans as the bridge between the U.S. and Europe, its overall use in terms of contributory power is rapidly lessening. Its primary link, and one that is probably long-lasting, is intelligence. In short, a domestically weak prime minister succeeded by an internationally weak prime minister of a weakening country met a president who had possibly not expected to be elected, whose experience of government in any form was zero, and whose close aides throughout his tenure, few of whom were foreign policy experts, appear to have been chosen for their loyalty rather than for their competence.

The U.S.-UK relationship was not helped by the fact that the UK disagreed with virtually every major foreign policy decision that the administration took. Trump cultivated Putin. He disliked alliances, which by their very nature constrain individual members from taking decisions that they might prefer to take. Consequently, he threatened NATO, and he withdrew the U.S. from membership of the World Health Organization, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action agreement with Iran, and the Paris Climate Agreement. He also either insisted on re-negotiating, or withdrew from, international trade agreements on the basis that they were unfair to and thus harmed the United States. Therefore, the North American Free Trade Agreement was re-negotiated and the U.S. withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership. The U.S. boycott has prevented the proper workings of the World Trade Organization. With none of these policies did the UK agree, and in every case it had little or no influence. The UK did not matter.

The new Biden administration will be strategically oriented rather than transactional, as well as reverting to working with traditionally close allies. The U.S. and the UK will probably return to a closer alignment on international questions; they will undoubtedly continue their close relationship on military activities through NATO and on joint intelligence activities. Trump's one term in office was not enough to obviate the institutionally pro-British or at least neutral inclinations of various Washington bureaucracies. Therefore, the expectation must be that the UK will recover something of its former position as one of the United States' closest allies. Yet, the U.S.-UK relationship is unlikely ever again to be as close as it was in days gone by.

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