

America and the World - 2017 and Beyond

“The Impact of the Trump Administration on U.S.-UK Relations”

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This essay is being written at the end of 2016, with the topic stimulating a series of reactions: bewilderment, then bemusement, then apprehension, then uncertainty, and, finally, curiosity. If President-elect Donald 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 us. 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, Trump has not felt the need to provide any of them. And so, we prognosticate in the dark. One only hopes that it is the dark before the dawn.

Importantly, there will be some continuity, because although NATO has been criticised, the specific military links between the U.S. and the UK, the nuclear and intelligence relationships, are unlikely to be disturbed. The nuclear relationship is governed by the 1958 U.S.-UK Mutual Defence Agreement and subsequent related agreements. The intelligence relationship is of considerably longer standing, having begun in 1917 when the U.S. joined the Allies in the First World War. The UK was much more experienced than the United States – it had fought more wars and held more colonies – and its political leaders were more accepting of the need for surveillance of the activities of other countries. Thus, during the interwar period, the U.S. continued to lag behind Great Britain in the ability to gain and analyse information. This might be symbolised by Bletchley Park and the cracking of the Enigma code during the Second World War, although it should be remembered that the Americans were primarily responsible for breaking the Japanese codes. By the end of the war, however, resources told, and the United States began to pull ahead. (The foundation of the CIA should have been a boon for the gaining of information, but from the beginning it concentrated more on covert action than on the gathering of intelligence.) A major stimulus was the growth of signals intelligence, which required financial resources that the UK could not provide. What it could provide, however, was several generations of expertise in collecting and decrypting information, centred by 1952 in the UK Government Communications Headquarters, or GCHQ, in Cheltenham, and residing now in a building

called, in the best British tradition, 'the doughnut'. Great Britain also provides indispensable listening posts able to catch signals from the European continent and further afield. The arrangement is that the UK shares all of the intelligence it gathers; it is doubtful, however, if the reverse is true, especially after a British court required the British Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) to provide copies of some of its exchanges with American intelligence. Nevertheless, this relationship is vital to the United States, and, if anything is certain, it is that it will not be disturbed.

We now move into an area of uncertainty. The largest concern is, what will happen to NATO? Trump has made public threats against it: it is obsolete, he claims, and, in any case, no country should be aided if it has not paid its dues (meaning that it should devote at least 2% of its gross domestic product to defence spending). At present, only five of the twenty-eight members do so: Greece, Poland, Estonia, the UK, and the U.S. itself. If any enemy does not believe that support would be virtually automatic, NATO's worth as an alliance is severely damaged. Even though Britain itself would probably feel sure of U.S. aid if attacked – see the previous paragraph on intelligence – any unchallenged attack on other members in Europe would be seriously alarming for the UK.

The current relationship between the UK and Russia is close to frigid. The British government cannot but be alarmed at Trump's cosy up to Russian President Vladimir Putin. Whilst there is a clear argument for Trump's moving to eliminate some of the points of conflict with Russia – after all, did not Secretary of State Hillary Clinton attempt to do the same herself, in the famous attempt to 're-set' the relationship? – nevertheless, Trump's strong admiration for Putin is a source of worry. It can also be argued, in this context, that he is worryingly susceptible to flattery.

There is another factor that could have a strong impact, that of economic and business aggression. Trump's proposed Secretary of Commerce, Wilbur Ross, has been quoted as calling for Cypriot financiers, and presumably those of other countries, to exploit the 'God-given opportunity' of the confusion arising from Brexit to steal business from the UK. It would be astonishing if he did not include American bankers in this call to take advantage of the uncertain position of the City of London. A further consideration is that Ross will be responsible, according to Trump, for negotiating international trading agreements. He will be strongly encouraged by Trump himself to forego any notion of give-and-take if the interests of American business and finance are part of the equation. Any members of the British political and economic classes who believe that the United States will be kind to Great Britain whilst negotiating any trade agreements because of a putative 'special relationship' will be sorely disappointed.

Public opinion must also be a concern. In a democracy, any open alliance requires at least the acquiescence of the public, and because of the likely culture clash between a Trump administration and any conceivable UK government, antipathy could readily arise. The saving consideration here is that unless there is a crisis, public opinion tends to pay little attention to foreign affairs. Nevertheless, there was an episode that demonstrates the power of an adverse public opinion. President Lyndon Johnson was desperate to bring Britain into the Vietnam War: he wanted British soldiers to fight next to their American comrades. Prime Minister Harold Wilson knew that if he did, he and the Labour government would suffer a terminal political crisis ending in the fall of the government: protestors against the war had already attempted to storm the American embassy on Grosvenor Square in what the police called the worst riot in memory, and had had to be controlled by police on horseback. Furthermore, over a hundred Labour Members of Parliament had made it clear that they would vote against Britain's joining the war. Johnson was livid and bitter: "A platoon of bagpipes would be

sufficient; it was the British flag that was wanted.”¹ Secretary of State Dean Rusk followed this up at a cocktail party, telling a British journalist that “All we needed was one regiment. The Black Watch would have done. Just one regiment, but you wouldn’t. Well, don’t expect us to save you again. They [the Russians, presumably] can invade Sussex, and we wouldn’t do a damned thing about it.”²

What this also demonstrates is that long-standing and fundamentally strong relationships can have their ups and downs. On the one hand, the activities over four years of an American Administration can have at least a medium-term effect of greater or lesser profundity. On the other hand, there are habit and inertia. Presidents and other leaders come and go, but it is hugely difficult to change bureaucracies, whether civilian or military, permanently during a relatively short period. And then there is the Congress, with its kaleidoscope of interests and convictions. A consoling possibility is that the changing and unpredictable pronouncements of Trump are encouraging feelings of uncertainty and insecurity in enemies as well as friends. Even Putin may suffer in due course a cessation of Trump’s lavish admiration for him. As for the United Kingdom, a member of the Executive Committee of Trump’s transition team, Anthony Scaramucci, told the British public via BBC radio on New Year’s Eve that we were entering a Golden Age of Anglo-American relations. Perhaps he might succumb to the flattery of a State Visit to Great Britain and dinner with the Queen in Buckingham Palace?

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¹ Harold Wilson, *The Labour Government 1964-70* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1974, 1st pub. 1971), 341.

² Louis Herren, *No Hail, No Farewell* (London: Harper & Row, 1970), 230. Herren was a British journalist stationed in the U.S.