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The UK-US Relationship: In the Shadow of Trump and Brexit

Daniel Kenealy*

Introduction

The UK-US relationship stands at a crossroads. The decision by UK citizens to leave the European Union (EU) raises questions about one of the fundamental roles that UK policymakers have sought to cast their nation in, namely that of a 'bridge' between the US and Europe. The shadow cast by the presidency of Donald Trump also raises questions about the relationship. The purpose of this paper is to place the relationship in to historical context in order to assess current realities and sketch out potential future developments.

Since 1945 the relationship has been characterised by an asymmetry of power and has been underpinned by three principal factors. First, the desire by the US to have the UK function as a capable *European* partner. Second, the two nations have shared a broad interest in creating and supporting a rules-based international order. Third is the usefulness of the UK to US foreign and defence policy, grounded in intelligence, nuclear weapons, and conventional military capabilities. The first argument of the paper is thus that notions of a romanticised 'Special Relationship' between the US and the UK are historically inaccurate. Rather, it is a relationship grounded in tangible factors, namely political interests and national capabilities. It has displayed resilience in the aftermath of crises and disputes but is, as with most foreign policy relationships, marked by ebbs and flows.

The second argument is that each of those three underpinning fundamentals is currently in flux as a result of policy decisions in both nations and a shifting global balance of power. In the UK, the decision to leave the EU raises obvious questions about the UK's future 'European' role. Alongside this, the approach of successive UK governments to military spending has raised questions about the UK's future capacity and willingness to act internationally.¹ In the US, a shift in foreign policy focus away from Europe and towards Asia-Pacific – something that precedes the Trump administration – raises questions about the future of the transatlantic alliance. On top of that deeper shift are the idiosyncrasies of the Trump administration and its questionable commitment to the existing rules-based international order.

The third argument is that the UK now has an opportunity to rethink and reshape its foreign policy and, by implication, its relationship with the US. Such a debate would be a far cry from the wooliness of 'Global Britain', the closest thing that Theresa May's government has come to setting out a foreign policy strategy.² In the coming years, European states will have to assume greater responsibilities for the security of their neighbourhood and, despite Brexit, the UK ought to remain a key player in that effort. It is this geography that most interests US policymakers when they appraise the ongoing



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usefulness of the UK as a strategic partner. It may be one of the deepest ironies of Brexit that it coincides with a recommitment by the UK to the collective security of Europe.

A relationship grounded in interests and capabilities

Although the UK-US relationship long predates it, this paper takes 1945 as its opening juncture: the moment that crystallised the transition from UK to US hegemony in international politics.³ In the preceding decades the two nations were strategic competitors, with their interests colliding in various parts of the world, particularly in the Far East.⁴ By the 1930s the UK had grown increasingly overstretched and the US was unwilling to accept international responsibilities commensurate with its rising power. That unwillingness dissolved in the 1940s, during and immediately following the war. The Roosevelt administration made several policy moves that pressed the US advantage, often against the UK's interests and further entrenching the passage of power. Most US support to the UK during and immediately following the war came with conditions designed to weaken the UK's international trading, financial and commercial arrangements: the lynchpins of UK power before the war.

After 1945 the UK gradually withdrew from a number of its international security commitments, beginning in the Eastern Mediterranean in 1947 and culminating in the withdrawal from East of Suez in the late 1960s, involving the withdrawal of UK troops from key military bases in the Far East.⁵ In some cases, especially in the Middle East, action by US officials catalysed this process.⁶ In between those two dates stands the embarrassment of the 1956 Suez crisis, an event that for many heralded the end of the UK's role as a Great Power.⁷ It also signalled that the US was prepared to directly challenge the highest level of UK policy decisions if they clashed with US interests. The UK abdication of power was symptomatic of shifts in the global balance of power, which persuaded US policymakers during the Truman administration to jettison a reluctant, even isolationist, foreign policy tradition and embrace a Great Power role.⁸ The construction of what we recognise as today's rules-based international order proceeded throughout the 1940s and 1950s, underpinned by US leadership. The UK was broadly supportive – with Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin working to convince the Truman administration⁹ – but the decisions were taken in Washington.

The institutions created differed in scale. Some, such as the United Nations, were global. Others, such as the Bretton Woods institutions, initially covered the US and its principal allies in the Cold War divide.¹⁰ NATO had a transatlantic geography whilst being principally directed at providing a security guarantee for Western Europe. Successive US administrations desired a Western Europe that was economically strong, secure from the prospect of both German might and Soviet aggression, and increasingly unified. The distribution of Marshall Plan aid was the first post-war effort by European states to coordinate their economic activities. The UK's active role in promoting Marshall Aid cooperation gave way to scepticism about schemes for deeper and more institutionalised forms of European cooperation, resulting in a refusal to join both the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951 and the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1958.

UK politicians, both Labour and Conservative, struggled to conceptualise their nation as solely a 'European' power. There was a belief that the UK had a unique position in international politics: as part of Europe, as part of the English-speaking world, and as a leader of the Commonwealth of nations, which was growing through the addition of newly independent



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British colonies. This imagined geography was what Churchill referred to as 'Three Circles'.¹¹ It is an imagining that continues to resonate with sections of the public and the political class to this day, serving rhetorically to distinguish the UK as not 'European', or at least not exclusively so.¹² The passage of time revealed notions of the UK as a 'Third Force' alongside the US and the Soviet Union as bordering on delusion. Such visions were far removed from the role the US wanted the UK to adopt, namely as a 'European' partner.

Not until 1973 – driven by economic decline and the removal of the obstacle of Charles De Gaulle – did the UK join the EEC. It is no coincidence that this came shortly after the UK's strategic withdrawal from East of Suez. US officials welcomed the membership of a UK that often shared its outlook on the liberalisation of trade and increasingly through the 1980s shared its broader neoliberal economic approach. In the sphere of security and defence, the UK was a strong voice in favour of NATO remaining the bedrock institution in the face of efforts to create a foreign and defence policy within the EU. Even when leading new initiatives – such as the December 1998 St. Malo Declaration that advanced the creation of the European Security and Defence Policy – UK governments have strongly endorsed the principle that EU security and defence efforts much respect the principles of no duplication of, no de-linking from, and no discriminating against NATO.¹³ An idea that took root in UK foreign policy circles was that the UK could play the role of 'transatlantic bridge' between the US and the EEC (later EU), whilst continuing to use its hard power resources – discussed further below – to influence US decision making, a form of 'power by proxy'.¹⁴

UK officials recognised that to be successful a 'power by proxy' strategy would require a sustained effort to maintain their capabilities so that they could contribute towards shared international endeavours. It is debatable whether the result has been any significant enhancement of UK power and it has been remarked that the determination of UK officials and politicians to stick close to the US has undermined the ability to develop a more independent strategy.¹⁵ The core components of the relationship are material: intelligence and military power. In both areas there are deep and institutionalised policy networks operating between the two. The intelligence relationship is underpinned by close exchanges of information but is far from a shared system.

In the military realm, UK-US cooperation regarding nuclear weapons has been a cornerstone of the relationship since the 1958 Atomic Energy Defence Agreement.¹⁶ A reduced cost nuclear deterrent was acquired and the UK adopted a supporting role in the overall US nuclear defence posture. It has been argued that both nuclear and intelligence cooperation have been used by the US to manipulate UK policy.¹⁷ And insofar as intelligence sharing was heightened during the Global War on Terror – when the close personal bond between President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair dominated the UK-US relationship – it resulted in the UK becoming complicit in unethical practices such as rendition and torture. In the conventional military realm, successive UK governments have maintained a commitment to inter-operability with US military forces, enabling UK forces to play a combat role alongside US forces in situations from Korea in 1950 to Syria in 2015.¹⁸ There have been times when the UK has failed to support US interventions, such as in Vietnam. More recently the relationship has been dominated by joint military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, which have had a profound impact on UK foreign policy.¹⁹ Fundamental questions have been raised about when the UK should act militarily.



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In sum, post-1945 history suggests a UK-US relationship that is not 'Special' in a way that connotes uniqueness, but it is deep and resilient. It is hard, if not impossible, to understand UK foreign policy since 1945 without understanding US foreign policy. The relationship has been characterised by an asymmetry of power and the notion that the UK 'tail' has in any systematic way 'wagged the US dog' is difficult to defend. The impression is one of UK politicians and officials struggling to imagine a global role without orienting it somehow to the US.

The present and the recent past: Where do things stand?

Although the relationship currently sits in the two long shadows cast by Brexit and the Trump presidency, several current problems predate the events of 2016. Brexit and Trump are the short-term causes for concern, raising questions about the UK's future European role and the commitment of the US to the rules-based international order. However, the UK's standing as a useful partner to the US has been questioned for several years as a result both of cuts to the defence budget and the intervention fatigue that followed the Blair years. Similarly, the shift in attention on the part of US foreign policymakers from Europe to the Asia-Pacific, and their desire for Europe – including the UK – to shoulder more of the burden of continental security and defence predates Trump.

It has been suggested that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq may represent the last major joint UK-US military effort.²⁰ As UK Prime Minister between 2010 and 2016 David Cameron oversaw severe cuts in defence spending, so much so that the Obama administration applied pressure to ensure that the NATO spending commitment of 2 per cent of GDP was maintained. Despite the cuts, Cameron maintained a similar attitude to Blair regarding the use of military intervention for humanitarian purposes. The 2011 intervention in Libya demonstrated willingness to intervene militarily with coalitions of European partners, raising the prospect of NATO being recast as a 'post-American' alliance, with the UK and France leading.²¹ The failure of Europeans to conduct the operations without the US revealed how far-fetched that idea was. In 2013, Cameron's failure to secure the approval of the UK Parliament for military strikes in Syria raised new questions about the political will of the UK to act internationally.

Since the embarrassment of that vote, there has been a partial reversal of the cuts to military expenditure and the UK government has managed to secure parliamentary support for military strikes against Islamic State in both Iraq and Syria. Nevertheless, the UK has been largely absent from central international conflicts, including the war in Syria and the crisis in Ukraine. Public attitudes towards an interventionist foreign and defence policy remain cool and recent Modernising Defence Programme has been greeted as something of a damp squib. Questions continue to be asked in Washington, D.C. – by Democrats and Republicans alike – about the reliability and willingness of the UK to support the US internationally.²²

Two areas that are demonstrating a greater degree of continuity are intelligence and nuclear weapons. However, the renewal and upgrading of the nuclear deterrent consumes around a quarter of the UK military's equipment plans over the next decade. The opportunity cost is in more conventional forces, which is especially relevant at a time when the UK army is arguably too oriented to the sort of counter-insurgency and stabilisation operations that have characterised Afghanistan and Iraq. Although defence budget increases since 2015 are welcome, significant questions remain about the composition of the UK's military footprint, at home and in Washington. In the realm of conventional military forces, the commitment to



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inter-operability remains: there are a number of projects on which the two nations are cooperating and US defence policymakers continue to value UK capabilities in key areas. The biggest obstacle to UK military deployments in support of US operations during the Trump presidency may well be the domestic political controversy faced by any UK Prime Minister who offered support to such an unpopular President.

One thing Trump *has* vocally demonstrated a preference for is for NATO's European members to spend more on defence and shoulder a greater share of responsibility for the security of the continent and near abroad. Although the most extreme parts of Trump's rhetoric – such as questioning the US commitment to NATO's Article 5 collective defence guarantee – seem to have been reversed, concern remains that the US cannot be relied upon as it was in the past to underwrite the security of Europe. The election of a new President in 2020 may see a return to normalcy but there are also deeper, structural forces steering the attention of US policymakers away from Europe and towards Asia-Pacific. Albeit striking a very different tone, the Obama administration was keen to see Europeans – in particular the UK and France – shoulder more of the burden, creating bandwidth for US policymakers to executive the so-called 'pivot to Asia'.²³

The preference of US officials is for the UK to focus more of its security attention on Europe whilst providing a supporting role in the Middle East. The US welcomed the 2018 opening of *HMS Jufair*, a permanent UK naval base in Bahrain. In the European theatre, the situation remains more fluid and confused. In the context of a revanchist Russia, and an increasing security threat in Europe's southern neighbourhood, questions are once again being asked about the role of NATO and its relationship with the EU. In normal times the UK would be expected to be at the forefront of this policy debate. But after Brexit the UK will not wield anything like the same level of influence over EU foreign, security, and defence developments. There remains a possibility that UK policymakers will seek to compensate for leaving the EU by boosting their presence and participation in NATO. Recent UK commitments – such as leadership of the NATO battalion in Estonia – have sent positive signals to US policymakers.²⁴

Outside of NATO and EU structures the UK-French strategic relationship continues to develop, with potential ramifications for the UK-US relationship. As Europe's two leading military powers they have been creating ad-hoc partnerships and initiatives in recent years. Most recently, President Macron's European Intervention Initiative (EII) aims to enhance cooperation amongst the 10 participant states' militaries and to forge more of a shared strategic culture. Macron developed the initiative outside of EU frameworks specifically to keep open the possibility of participation by the UK. Precisely how the UK and her European partners work out relations in this space will be an important part of the future UK-US relationship.

Outside of security and defence policy, the UK-US relationship is also facing a new economic challenge, namely the UK's desire to secure a free trade agreement with the US after Brexit. There remains the possibility that, in the future, the UK could end up being pulled between the regulatory models of the EU and the US. Rumours and reports are already circulating about the sort of hard bargains the US will try to drive, hard bargains that could problematize the UK-EU trade relationship.²⁵

Whether in the realm of security and defence, or of economics, it is a fine line between recognising the impact of Trump as an individual, and overstating that impact. He represents a fundamental break with the mainstream of US foreign policy.



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Trump's approach is a form of tough, muscular nationalism that differs from both the various shades of liberal internationalism that have characterised the Democrat and Republican foreign policy establishment. Trump's approach gives short shrift to the notion that the US ought to work through international organisations and provide so-called public goods in the form of underwriting a rules-based international order. At the extreme, such an outlook threatens the very fabric of the existing international order, maintenance of which has been the deepest shared interest of the UK and the US since 1945.

At this deeper and more fundamental level, in spite of Brexit, the UK will find greater common cause with European partners than with a Trump-led US. On some of the key issues where Trump has refused to uphold multilateral commitments – for example the Iran nuclear agreement and the Paris Climate accords – the UK has tended to side with European partners, creating high profile splits in the foreign policy relationship with the US. Whether this trend continues will depend on whether Trump secures a second term or not. His re-election could herald a more contested transatlantic relationship and a significant shift in UK foreign policy.

Looking to the future: a critical juncture for the UK?

It is an interesting but difficult time to appraise UK foreign policy and the UK-US relationship. It seems unlikely that Theresa May will be in office by the end of the year. A possibility not discussed in this paper is that the Labour party leader Jeremy Corbyn becomes Prime Minister. That development would mark a radical departure in the foreign and defence policy of the UK and would create significant tensions in the UK-US relationship. Given Corbyn's historical opposition to almost every aspect of US foreign policy, and his long record in favour of the UK giving up its nuclear deterrent, the best outcome might be that US policymakers simply see a Corbyn-led UK as an irrelevancy in foreign and defence policy terms.

Leaving aside the prospect of a Corbyn-led government, UK policymakers ought to take Brexit as an opportunity to ask fundamental questions about the UK's role in the world. Instead of security and defence reviews that are tactical and operational in character, and instead of concepts such as Global Britain, a set of core questions should be posed. Those questions must cover the geographical scope of the UK's global role and the instruments of foreign policy, posing the fundamental question: what role should the UK play in the world? Whilst a Great Power role is unrealistic and an isolated role is not in keeping with the UK's history and traditions, there exists a range of other roles that the UK could play if it has political leaders who are willing to make the case for them.²⁶

The possibility exists of recasting the UK as a European regional partner. Whilst Brexit will, by definition, compromise the conventional US-EU 'bridge' role, the UK's military strength makes it a still potentially attractive partner both to a US looking to handover responsibilities for European security and to European states seeking to develop new forms of cooperation. Beyond Europe the UK's diplomatic expertise leaves open the possibility of the UK playing a role as 'thought leader'; a state that seeks to champion and uphold the rule of law, working principally through diplomatic networks and deploying softer forms of power.

It remains unlikely that the UK-US relationship will become negative. But the UK is becoming a less important partner to the US, in large part because of shifts in the global structure of power politics and the growing significance of the US-China



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relationship. Ironically, just as the UK has opted to leave the EU, its foreign and defence policy relationships in Europe may become more important than ever.

Dr. Daniel Kenealy

* Lecturer at the University of Edinburgh's School of Social and Political Science



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- ¹ Interviews conducted by author in Washington, D.C., July 2018; see also House of Commons Defence Committee, *Indispensable Allies: US, NATO and UK Defence Relations* (London: HMSO, 2018).
- ² The UK government's vision for 'Global Britain' is set out at <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/global-britain-delivering-on-our-international-ambition>. For a critique see House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, *Global Britain* (London: HMSO, 2018).
- ³ See Kori Schake, *Safe Passage: The Transition from British to American Hegemony* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).
- ⁴ Explored extensively by Kathleen Burk in *The Lion and the Eagle: The Interaction of the British and American Empires, 1783-1972* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), chapters 3 and 4.
- ⁵ For a discussion of the withdrawal from East of Suez, see Edward Longinotti, 'Britain's Withdrawal from East of Suez: From Economic Determinism to Political Choice', *Contemporary British History*, 29/3 (2015), pp. 318-40.
- ⁶ See James Barr, *Lords of the Desert: Britain's Struggle with America to Dominate the Middle East* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2018).
- ⁷ See G.C. Peden, 'Suez and Britain's Decline as a World Power', *The Historical Journal*, 55/4 (2012), pp. 1073-96.
- ⁸ The best account of these developments remains Melvyn Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration and the Cold War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).
- ⁹ A good discussion of Bevin's strategic approach is Sean Greenwood, 'Ernest Bevin: Reluctant Cold Warrior', in T.G. Otte (ed.), *The Makers of British Foreign Policy: From Pitt to Thatcher* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).
- ¹⁰ The Bretton Woods institutions were created to govern international money and finance, comprising the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and what is now the World Bank.
- ¹¹ See Nimmi Kurian, 'Concentric Circles in British Foreign Policy', *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs*, 57/1 (2001), pp. 135-46. For the speech see Winston Churchill, *Europe Unite: Speeches, 1947-1948* (London: Cassell, 1950), pp. 416-18.
- ¹² See Michael Kenny and Nick Pearce, *Shadows of Empire: The Anglosphere in British Politics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018) and Philip Murphy, *The Empire's New Clothes: The Myth of the Commonwealth* (London: Hurst, 2018).
- ¹³ See Robert E. Hunter, *The European Security and Defense Policy: NATO's Companion – or Competitor?* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2002), chapter 6.
- ¹⁴ David Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled: British Policy and World Power in the 20th Century* (Harlow: Longman, 1991), p. 178.
- ¹⁵ Patrick Porter, 'Why Britain Doesn't Do Grand Strategy', *RUSI Journal*, 155/4 (2010), pp. 6-12.
- ¹⁶ Which reversed the 1946 McMahon Act, prohibiting the sharing of atomic secrets.
- ¹⁷ Kissinger used them as carrots during the 1970s when US officials feared the impact of UK defence cuts and base closures See R. Gerald Hughes and Thomas Robb, 'Kissinger and the Diplomacy of Coercive Linkage in the "Special Relationship" between the United States and Great Britain, 1969-1977', *Diplomatic History*, 37/4 (2013), pp. 861-905.
- ¹⁸ In this context, inter-operability is a commitment to shared practices and understandings regarding military strategy, not merely the technical inter-operability of military kit.
- ¹⁹ See Patrick Porter, *Blunder: Britain's War in Iraq* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018) and findings of the Chilcot inquiry into the Iraq War.
- ²⁰ Patrick Porter, 'Last charge of the knights? Iraq, Afghanistan and the special relationship', *International Affairs*, 86, 2 (2010), pp. 355-75.
- ²¹ See Ellen Hallams and Benjamin Schreer, 'Towards a "post-American" alliance? NATO Burden-sharing after Libya', *International Affairs*, 88/2 (2012), pp. 313-27.



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²² Interviews conducted by author in Washington, D.C., July 2018.

²³ Jeffrey Goldberg, 'The Obama Doctrine', The Atlantic, April 2016, at <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.

²⁴ Interviews conducted by author in Washington, D.C., July 2018.

²⁵ Lisa O'Carroll, 'Concern over food safety as US seeks greater access to UK markets', The Guardian, 1 March 2019.

²⁶ These roles were discussed at greater length, and indeed before Brexit, by Jamie Gaskarth, 'Strategizing Britain's Role in the World', International Affairs, 90/3 (2014), pp. 559-81.