



By: *Harvey Morris*

# UK's special relationship with Washington may not be so special after all



The UK government is walking on eggshells as it assesses the prospects for its future relations with the US as a second Trump presidency looms.

The so-called “special relationship” with Washington has been a foreign policy cornerstone of UK governments since World War II. It may be tested as never before as Donald Trump reveals his intentions for his second term on issues ranging from free trade to the Ukraine war.

So how far might Britain go in accommodating Trump in order to preserve its much-vaunted “unbreakable” ties with Washington even in the face of White House policies that might conflict with its own interests?

Will Prime Minister Keir Starmer’s government opt to mend its economic ties with its erstwhile partners in the European Union or look for special favours from an America First administration on tariffs and trade?

Polling in recent years **suggests** most Britons are sceptical that there is anything particularly special about the relationship with its more dominant US ally. Rather more Americans maintain an attachment to the partnership, although that too is in decline.

That did not deter Starmer from citing what many on both sides of the Atlantic believe is an outdated concept in a fulsomely congratulatory call to Trump.

He told Trump he looked forward to working closely with him across all areas of the special relationship, from defence and security to growth and prosperity, according to the PM’s office.

## “We will work with whoever is elected”

Beyond the usual diplomatic niceties, Starmer is clearly intent on accentuating the positives of a US election outcome he would prefer not to have had to face.

The Labour leadership heavily hedged its bets ahead of voting on November 5, dispatching senior figures across the Atlantic to cosy up to the Trump camp even before the party’s own election victory in July.

“We will work with whoever is elected,” Starmer said in May. “We have a special relationship with the US that transcends whoever the president is.”

David Lammy, the future UK foreign minister, went from branding Trump as a “racist KKK and Nazi sympathiser” in 2017 to stepping up to his defence when he told a Republican think tank that their candidate’s commitment to the NATO alliance was often misunderstood. “I do not believe that he is arguing that the United States should abandon Europe,” Lammy **said**.

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Trump may stop short of abandoning the US’s Western alliance partners, as long as they pay what he sees as their adequate NATO dues. But he may ditch non-NATO Ukraine unless it goes along with his plans to impose a deal that would be seen as rewarding the Russian aggressor.

Starmer **joined** President Emmanuel Macron in Paris this week to mark Armistice Day and for talks in which the two leaders stressed their commitment to unfailingly support Ukraine for as long as it takes.

According to the French side, Macron stressed a more general need for Europe to assert its own interests and responsibilities in terms of security and defence.

There are already doubts, however, that European support for Ukraine can be sustained in the absence of a similar US commitment.

On the day that Starmer was in Paris, a former

British army chief, Lord Dannatt, said he believed a negotiated settlement was inevitable and that Trump's election had increased the pressure for one to be reached.

## Tariffs and trade

Ukraine aside, the UK's future relationship with the US and indeed with the EU will depend as much on what policies Trump adopts on tariffs and trade.

Will the UK be included in his campaign threat to impose minimum 10 per cent tariffs on its trading partners, or will the Brexit-supporting president reward the isolated British with a free-trade deal that has so far eluded them? And what would that, in turn, mean for the UK renewing economic ties with the EU?

All such questions are up in the air until Trump takes office. In the meantime, Britain's House of Lords' international affairs and defence committee decided, within two days of the US election, to launch an inquiry into UK-US relations.

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"At this stage, commentary of what precisely Donald Trump's victory means for Ukraine and European security, China, the Middle East, NATO and the role of other international organisations remains largely speculative," it soberly **conceded**.

Starmer's best option in the short term is to continue to woo Trump's inner circle, while not being afraid to distance the UK from isolationist measures that would undermine its interests and those of the wider Western alliance.

Maybe it is also time to acknowledge that the special relationship is not that special after all, particularly with a transactional leader such as Trump in the White House.

## Trans-Atlantic ties

The reason why it is so often derided by the British, and not only on the left, is that Britain can sometimes appear less as Washington's bulldog than as its poodle.

Despite the close ties, the UK has occasionally stood up to Washington in the past. In the 1960s, Starmer's Labour predecessor Harold Wilson doggedly resisted pressure from President Lyndon Johnson to commit British forces to his war in Vietnam.



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Even the political love fest between Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan was briefly thrown off course when the US president sent US troops to invade the Commonwealth state of Grenada in 1983 to topple its Marxist regime without consulting her first.

The Starmer-Trump relationship may be even more sorely tested in the months and years ahead. Realpolitik dictates that the UK must maintain its trans-Atlantic ties as best it can, specifically in the area of security and defence.

On other issues that affect Britain, from trade to climate change to adherence to international institutions and norms, Starmer may have to at least try to remind Trump that the closest relationships are those that can endure a measure of dissent.