

## ISSUE BRIEF

# The US-UK “Special Relationship” at a Critical Crossroads

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Since World War II, the United States and Britain have enjoyed a truly special relationship grounded in a shared commitment to a world order based on democracy, the rule of law, and free trade. In this endeavor, Britain is and has been the United States’ most loyal, trustworthy, dependable, and effective ally, and both countries have benefited substantially from the relationship.

In sustaining its global role, the United States has in the United Kingdom (UK) a partner with a world-class intelligence service, a small but highly capable military with renowned special forces, an ally with nuclear weapons that help preserve extended deterrence, a key collaborator in the war against the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and al Qaeda, and its biggest foreign investor. Through the UK, Washington has also enjoyed a proxy seat in the European Union’s (EU) decision-making. In return, the UK has had unique access to US intelligence, advanced weaponry, and nuclear weapons technology, as well as a special voice in US foreign and security policy-making. This relationship has not only earned the UK a privileged position in Washington, but also grudging respect in Brussels, due to the weight of US influence on the world stage. The UK also benefits from a massive flow of US foreign direct investment (FDI). Washington and London share a unique partnership based on mutual interests and mutual values.

However, within the past year, the twin realities of the UK’s decision to leave the EU—Brexit—and the election of US President Donald J. Trump have brought the special relationship to a crossroads.

First, it is now clear that Trump and UK Prime Minister Theresa May do not share a compatible strategic outlook or a commitment to international law and multilateral institutions such as the United Nations and NATO. As Jonathan Powell, former chief of staff to former UK prime minister Tony Blair, wrote recently, “what Britain has feared for over a century—the advent of a nativist, protectionist, and isolationist US president—has finally come to pass.”<sup>1</sup>

The Brent Scowcroft Center’s **Transatlantic Security Initiative** brings together top policymakers, government and military officials, business leaders, and experts from Europe and North America to share insights, strengthen cooperation, and develop common approaches to key transatlantic security challenges. This issue brief continues the Transatlantic Security Initiative’s focus on US-UK defense cooperation and the “Special Relationship” more broadly.

1 Jonathan Powell, “Britain’s Biggest Fear Realised – An Isolationist US President,” *The Guardian*, November 10, 2016, [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/nov/10/donald-trump-britain-greatest-fear-isolationist-president](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/nov/10/donald-trump-britain-greatest-fear-isolationist-president).

Second, both Trump and May face serious challenges to their leadership of their respective governments. The Trump White House remains mired in several congressional and US Department of Justice investigations regarding possible collusion between the Trump presidential campaign and Russian intelligence, as well as possible obstruction of justice by the president himself. This unfolding crisis has increased speculation about the possibility of impeachment or the political disintegration of the administration. As a result of this shadow of doubt looming over the White House, Trump and a Republican-majority Congress find it difficult to accomplish anything substantial. Meanwhile, the results of Britain’s recent general election on June 8, 2017, a snap election held in an attempt to bolster May’s political mandate in Brexit negotiations, have seriously damaged her political authority, leaving her at the head of a fragile minority government that may be short-lived. The result of this political volatility in both the US and British governments is weak leadership that effectively reduces the influence of both governments while other institutions and governments fill the vacuum.

Third, both the US and UK governments seem determined to pursue foreign policies that are damaging to their own interests, to their influence in Europe, and to their special relationship. Trump’s repeated equivocation of the United States’ commitment to the collective defense of NATO allies and his decision to withdraw the United States from the Paris agreement on climate change led German Chancellor Angela Merkel to conclude that European countries “must fight for our future on our own, for our destiny as Europeans.”<sup>2</sup> For the UK, the May government’s determination to proceed with Brexit has already led to a substantial reduction of British influence on the continent. This, in turn, further reduces US influence in Europe and negates somewhat the value of the special relationship. The UK had hoped to compensate somewhat for its absence in the EU by strengthening its commitment to NATO. Yet, the more Europe looks to the EU for collective security as a hedge to US retrenchment, the more isolated Britain may find itself as well. As Thomas Haines, research fellow at Chatham House recently concluded: “This is London’s geopolitical reality now: caught between a

retrograde American administration with which it no longer shares a worldview and a frustrated Europe it is trying to divorce.”<sup>3</sup>

Despite populist rebellions on both sides of the Atlantic, the special relationship is in many ways more valuable today than ever before. In their rhetoric, both President Trump and Prime Minister May have reaffirmed its importance, but neither is in a position to invest the kind of political capital necessary to eschew narrow nativist agendas and give that relationship real substance in today’s increasingly multivalent and volatile international environment. More likely, the task of sustaining the special relationship will fall to those in and out of government on both sides of the Atlantic—in intelligence, in the military, in the diplomatic corps, and in international finance and business.

This issue brief reviews the substantive elements of this relationship and suggests ways for the Trump and May administrations to revitalize the special relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom in the interest of greater international stability, thereby serving the mutual benefit of both countries.

### What is the “Special Relationship”?

Defining the special relationship is not easy. It is not a sentence that can be parsed or a treaty that can be analyzed. This unique relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom has deep roots and has served both countries well. John Hay, the US ambassador to Britain in the early 1890s, said that Britain and the United States are “bound by a tie we did not forge and which we cannot break; we are joint ministers of the same sacred mission of liberty.”<sup>4</sup> However, if the two nations share a common “sacred mission,” they have also been able to disagree on how to execute it. Ambassador Mitchell Reiss, former US President George W. Bush’s special envoy to the Northern Ireland peace process, wrote: “It is our ability to disagree, to argue passionately, candidly, and forcefully with each other—and then to pick up the pieces, place our anger behind us, and go forward

2 Alison Smale and Steven Erlanger, “Merkel, After Discordant G-7 Meeting, Is Looking Past Trump,” *The New York Times*, May 28, 2017, [www.nytimes.com/2017/05/28/world/europe/angela-merkel-trump-alliances-g7-leaders.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/28/world/europe/angela-merkel-trump-alliances-g7-leaders.html?_r=0).

3 Thomas Raines, “Britain is Caught Between Trump and a Hard Place,” Chatham House, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, November 16, 2016, [www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/britain-caught-between-trump-and-hard-place](http://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/britain-caught-between-trump-and-hard-place).

4 John Hay’s address at the Lord Mayor’s Easter Banquet, the Mansion House, London April 21, 1898, quoted in Charles S. Campbell, Jr., *Anglo-American Understanding 1898-1903* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1957), p. 125.



US President Donald Trump greets British Prime Minister Theresa May upon her arrival on Friday, January 27, 2017 to the West Wing entrance of the White House in Washington, DC. *Photo credit: White House.*

together—that makes the relationship special and explain why it has thrived.”<sup>5</sup>

Some years ago, former US President George H. W. Bush described the special relationship as “the rock upon which all dictators this century have perished,”<sup>6</sup> referring to the joint role the allies played in combatting Nazism and Communism in the twentieth century. The unique level of collaboration between London and Washington to counter threats that imperil their shared worldview has endured well beyond the Cold War. The two nations worked closely together to expand both NATO and the EU. Since the terror attacks in New York and Washington, DC on September 11, 2001, Britain has also been a key ally in the “war on terror.” British forces joined US troops in overthrowing

the Taliban in Afghanistan, Saddam Hussein in Iraq, and Muammar Qaddafi in Libya. In addition, UK Special Forces and intelligence services have made important contributions to counterterrorism efforts in Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan, Yemen, and East Africa. Britain and the US have also been partners in controlling nuclear weapons since the 1940s and throughout the Cold War, and— together with other permanent members of the United Nations (UN) Security Council and Germany—they successfully negotiated a nuclear weapons deal with Iran. This is a remarkable record of cooperation.

While international collaboration has not been limited to the United States and the United Kingdom, the special quality of this particular alliance has been grounded in a shared vision of an open, democratic, rules-based world order—a foundation threatened by the populist impulses that propelled both Donald Trump and Theresa May into power. Each government has been forced to adapt to the political realities of its respective system of government and the demands of a divided electorate, so there is little clarity on how not only their policies but also their relationship will evolve.

5 Mitchell B. Reiss, “Introduction,” in Douglas T. Stuart and Jeffrey McCausland, eds. *US-UK Relations at the Start of the Twenty First Century* (Carlisle, PA: US Army Strategic Studies Institute), 2006.

6 Quoted on the rear cover of Sir Robin Renwick’s *Fighting with Allies: America and Britain in Peace and War* (New York: Random House, 1996).

In the UK, May’s snap election did not produce the intended result of securing her leadership. Whatever the long-term impact on British foreign policy, May’s loss of her parliamentary majority in the House of Commons will not strengthen Britain’s hand in its attempt to redefine its relationship with Europe. In the United States, Trump has discovered the power of a system of checks and balances, creating not only unpredictability about his policies but also confusion even within his administration about how contradictory rhetoric will translate into concrete policy.

At this juncture, Trump’s policy “record” is more rhetoric than substance, and battles within his administration manifest many contrary impulses, depending on which senior official is speaking. It is already clear that some of the president’s policies are at odds with the candidate’s rhetoric. Though Trump has characterized NATO as “obsolete,” he also publicly embraced NATO as an important institution, especially in the fight against terrorism.<sup>7</sup> Consequently US Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of Defense James Mattis have had to play “clean up” to reaffirm the United States’ commitment to NATO’s Article 5, which stipulates that an attack on one ally is an attack on all allies.

Trump’s wavering stance on international affairs extends beyond NATO. Once chastised as a “currency manipulator” in Trump’s uniformly confrontational rhetoric, China became an indispensable asset in attempting to deal with North Korea. The administration has (reluctantly) concluded that Iran is in compliance with the Iran nuclear agreement after all, though there remain those in the administration who want to do away with the deal.<sup>8</sup> The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) will apparently be “renegotiated” in some of its elements, but the United States will not (for now) withdraw from the treaty.<sup>9</sup> In addition, for a variety of reasons—not least the pressure of domestic politics over Russia’s clear attempts to interfere in the US election—Trump’s earlier rhetoric about

accommodating Russian President Vladimir Putin’s ambitions have been cast aside in favor of a tougher stance against Russia.

Nonetheless, it remains to be seen whether the Trump administration’s policy shifts reflect anything more than deference to a political reality that is more “complicated” than his rhetoric admits. Trump’s speeches and tweets consistently betray a disdain for the rules-based, US-led liberal world order that the United States and Britain helped build. Despite the disconnect between rhetoric and policy outcomes, there is little, if any, evidence that President Trump’s fundamental worldview has changed from that of Candidate Trump’s. In that regard, there remain worrying differences between the two governments’ outlooks. In both rhetoric and policy, for example, Trump remains a protectionist. Britain, on the other hand, has long believed in free trade and open markets. Instead of abandoning that belief, the Brexit decision reflects an attempt by Britain to redefine the terms of free trade relationships.

While the British government no doubt welcomes many of the Trump administration’s policy reversals, its more traditional worldview includes a determination to stand up to Putin, a desire to build a workable partnership with China, and a commitment to ensuring the success of the Iran nuclear agreement. For Britain, NATO is not just a useful instrument in fighting terrorism but the cornerstone of its security policy—all the more important now that Britain is exiting the EU. While Trump (and many in his administration) may see the United Nations and its Security Council as a nuisance, to be used on occasion but otherwise ignored or defunded, for Britain it is a critical mechanism through which it can still punch above its weight in world affairs.

In short, the differences between the United States’ and United Kingdom’s views of the world are significant and unnerving; likewise, apparent similarities in policy remain unreliable as an enduring foundation for this relationship. The unprecedented (albeit unsuccessful) attempt by many in Britain to block a state visit to London by a US president is but one indication of how palpable this sense of “disconnect” between Britain and the United States has become. Finding common ground and a bridge across rhetorical divides will prove difficult for the two allies, requiring careful and informed diplomacy in each of the following elements of this special relationship.

7 See Shayna Freisleben, “A Guide to Trump’s Past Comments about NATO,” *CBS News*, April 12, 2017, [www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-nato-past-comments/](http://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-nato-past-comments/).

8 Gardiner Harris and David E. Sanger, “Iran Nuclear Deal Will Remain for Now, White House Signals,” *The New York Times*, May 17, 2017, [www.nytimes.com/2017/05/17/us/politics/trump-iran-nuclear-deal.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/17/us/politics/trump-iran-nuclear-deal.html).

9 Julie Hirschfeld Davis, “Trump Sends NAFTA Renegotiation Notice to Congress,” *The New York Times*, May 18, 2017, [www.nytimes.com/2017/05/18/us/politics/nafta-renegotiation-trump.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/18/us/politics/nafta-renegotiation-trump.html).

## Six Crucial Elements of the Special Relationship

### 1. A common vision of a liberal world order based on the rule of law

Traditionally, the political elites in both the United States and Britain have shared a common vision of a liberal world order that they built together after 1945. That foundational worldview is under threat from populist nationalism in both countries.

Britain and the United States share a constitutional DNA: the shared body of political thought and jurisprudence that underpin the two countries’ legal and political systems and help shape their foreign policies. Both countries embrace the concept of a law-based state buttressed by an independent judiciary, shaped by centuries of common political philosophy, jurisprudence, and practice dating back to the Magna Carta. As a result, both countries take a pragmatic common law approach to resolving international problems and share a deep commitment to individual liberty and human rights. From 1944 to 1949, the United States and Britain took their shared concept of a law-based state and built an international postwar order around it. It is this liberal world order that has preserved the peace between the great powers since 1945 and enabled unprecedented prosperity around the world.

As Ian Buruma wrote recently, “the Anglo-American allies were the last hope of freedom, democracy, and internationalism.”<sup>10</sup> Former US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) and former UK Prime Minister Winston Churchill (as well as their respective immediate successors, Harry Truman and Clement Attlee) understood that this role as champions of freedom brought with it the duty to build a new world order based on the principles of the Atlantic Charter: individual liberty, democratic government, and the rule of law, coupled with international peace guaranteed by new international organizations that would eventually become the United Nations and NATO.

What is often forgotten is that, at the insistence of Attlee, Churchill’s deputy and leader of the Labour Party, the Atlantic Charter also included the principle of economic justice. It suggested that the post-war

world should be based on free trade, tempered by “improved labour standards, economic advancement and social security for all.”<sup>11</sup> Britain and the United States wanted a Keynesian New Deal writ large. To that end, leaders from both sides of the Atlantic created the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, the Marshall Plan, and the General Agreement on Trade and Tariff. They also supported the principle of European unification. These institutions and policies created unprecedented prosperity for tens of millions of people in the postwar world and avoided the disastrous economic and financial blunders of the 1920s and 1930s.

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The populist nationalism that drove Britain to Brexit and propelled Trump into the White House suggests a retreat from this longstanding post-World War II vision. Although both Trump and May appear keen to reassure others that “America First” does not mean “America Alone,” or that “Global Britain” does not exclude Europe, the nativist popular forces that demanded these policies are not sympathetic to preserving the pillars of *Pax Americana* or the foundations of European integration. Earlier this year, Steve Bannon, Trump’s chief strategist in the White House, hammered the theme of “economic nationalism” to a cheering crowd at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), casting it as the antithesis of “globalism.”<sup>12</sup> Trump and Brexit architect Nigel Farage dined together after Farage’s appearance at the same CPAC gathering. Who will be the real interlocutors in this special relationship? Trump and May? Senior cabinet secretaries? Senior diplomats? Senior defense chiefs?

10 Ian Buruma, “The End of the Anglo-American Order,” *The New York Times Magazine*, November 29, 2016, [www.nytimes.com/2016/11/29/magazine/the-end-of-the-anglo-american-order.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/29/magazine/the-end-of-the-anglo-american-order.html).

11 Quoted in Martin Gilbert, *Winston Churchill - Vol. VI, Finest Hour, 1939-1941* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983), p. 1163.

12 Max Fisher, “Stephen K. Bannon’s CPAC Comments, Annotated and Explained,” *The New York Times*, February 24, 2017, [www.nytimes.com/2017/02/24/us/politics/stephen-bannon-cpac-speech.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/24/us/politics/stephen-bannon-cpac-speech.html).



US Army and British paratroopers perform a static line jump at Holland Drop Zone in preparation for Combined Joint Operational Access Exercise 15-01 at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, April 2015. *Photo credit: US Air Force/Flickr.*

Steve Bannon or Jared Kushner, Trump’s senior adviser and son-in-law, and Farage? Observers on both sides of the Atlantic have grounds to be skeptical about the durability of any shared vision between US and UK leaders, keenly aware that domestic political forces could intervene to change course at the speed of Twitter. Given the political volatility in both Washington and London, there has been remarkably little senior-level policy coordination on matters of mutual US-UK interest.

## 2. A unique collaboration in intelligence

The unique US-UK intelligence relationship has served both nations and their allies well, but Trump’s expressed mistrust of the US intelligence community as well as the consequences of Brexit could diminish its value.

During World War II, Roosevelt and Churchill created an unprecedented partnership in gathering and sharing intelligence, sustained by a network of institutions and consultative relationships. The US-UK Enigma code-

breaking project during the war is but one famous example of this partnership, which has continued in secret ever since in addressing a range of global security issues, not least counterterrorism. At the core of those arrangements remain the US-UK intelligence agreements of 1947, which included Canada, Australia, and New Zealand in the so-called “5 eyes club.” Just as Britain’s Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) provided a model for the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), so Britain’s code breakers (GCHQ) inspired the creation of the US National Security Agency (NSA). Likewise, the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and Britain’s Security Service (MI5) have enjoyed an exceptionally close and cooperative relationship in counterintelligence. Operating within a strong legal framework and the wider “5 eyes” network, the NSA/GCHQ, CIA/MI6, and FBI/MI5 intelligence gathering and sharing relationships remain indispensable to Western security.

President Donald Trump’s demonstrated disdain for the US intelligence community threatens the value of the

unique US-UK and “5 eyes” intelligence relationships. Winston Churchill once wrote that Britain’s Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) “achieves more important results than that of any other country, friend or foe.”<sup>13</sup> His tribute remains valid today. Britain’s SIS and GCHQ have repeatedly helped the CIA and the NSA fill blind spots in US presidents’ understanding of the world by providing accurate, timely, and actionable intelligence on key security threats. In doing so, they have also helped foster debate within the US intelligence community by offering fresh insight from a different perspective. However, Trump has denigrated the intelligence community and only reluctantly heeded its advice.<sup>14</sup> Trump’s Press Secretary, Sean Spicer, made unfounded accusations that British intelligence had bugged Trump Tower.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, Trump disclosed to the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, highly classified intelligence provided to the US by Israel regarding an ISIS plot.<sup>16</sup> This breach of trust between allies has had a potentially chilling effect on all of the United States’ intelligence partners.<sup>17</sup> In this environment, there is much less opportunity for British intelligence or the “5 eyes framework” to demonstrate value and more opportunity for potential reticence in cooperating with US intelligence agencies. If US intelligence partners become circumspect in collaborating with a chaotic policy apparatus in Washington, this will have enormously damaging effects on Western security.

Although Brexit should not affect the NSA/GCHQ and CIA/MI6 relationships, it does have the potential to weaken MI5’s relationships with its European counterintelligence partners. Despite recent criticism of its failure to thwart the Manchester and London terrorist plots, MI5 is a superb domestic intelligence agency, arguably the best of its kind in the world. While

MI5 is a crucial partner in its own right, an important part of its value to the United States lies in the intelligence it gleans about possible terrorist plots from key EU partners. Cut off from the fullest possible access to shared European intelligence, MI5 would be of less value to not only US but also European counterterrorism efforts at a time when recent ISIS terrorist attacks in Paris, Nice, Brussels, Istanbul, Manchester, and London demonstrate the need for much closer and more effective intra-EU intelligence sharing. Hence, Britain’s Brexit negotiations with the EU must give the highest priority to preserving, and where possible enhancing, MI5’s intelligence sharing protocols with EU members. A strong UK-EU intelligence relationship would benefit not only EU members, but also the United Kingdom and, by extension, the United States, preserving a cornerstone of the US-UK relationship.

### 3. A strong military partnership

The military partnership between the United States and United Kingdom remains strong, but it is threatened by major British defense cuts over the past thirty years that have eroded Britain’s capabilities, while the United States has, over that same thirty-year period, maintained substantial investments in defense.

The long-standing US-UK military relationship dates back to World War II and has depended on Britain’s proven capabilities—and British prime ministers’ political will to use it—alongside the United States in defense of the liberal world order. At first sight, the military-to-military relationship appears to be in good standing, closer than at any time since World War II. Since the 1991 war against Iraq to liberate Kuwait, US and British armed forces have fought alongside each other against common adversaries almost non-stop to great effect. However, year upon year of defense cuts have eroded Britain’s military capabilities since the 1990s, a trend accelerated by the fiscal austerity of former UK Prime Minister David Cameron’s government and not yet reversed by Theresa May’s government.

The second part of the special military relationship involves the willingness of British prime ministers to join the United States in using military force. With the exception of former UK Prime Minister Harold Wilson’s unwillingness to send British troops to support their US allies in Vietnam, British prime ministers from Attlee to Cameron have been willing to join their US presidential counterparts in a US-led coalition of the willing against enemies as diverse as communist North

13 Quoted by Alex Younger, Chief of Britain’s Secret Intelligence Service, in his address, “Inside the Modern Day MI6,” given at MI6 Headquarters, London, December 8, 2016.

14 Eugene Kelly, Trump and the Intelligence Community, *The Wire*, January 23, 2017, [www.factcheck.org/2017/01/trump-and-intelligence-community/](http://www.factcheck.org/2017/01/trump-and-intelligence-community/).

15 Alistair Bunkall, “GCHQ: ‘Claim We Bugged Trump Tower ‘Utterly Ridiculous,’” *Sky News*, March 17, 2017, <http://news.sky.com/story/gchq-claim-we-bugged-donald-trump-utterly-ridiculous-10804341>.

16 Katie Bo Williams, “Trump Relationship with Intelligence Community Sinks Further,” *The Hill*, May 17, 2017, <http://thehill.com/policy/national-security/333731-trump-relationship-with-intelligence-community-sinks-further>.

17 See, for example, Priscilla Alvarez, “The Risks of Sharing Intelligence,” *The Atlantic*, May 16, 2017, [www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/05/trump-russia-intelligence-sharing/526857/](http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/05/trump-russia-intelligence-sharing/526857/).

Korea, Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, or terrorist groups like al Qaeda and ISIS.

Donald Trump has promised to intensify military action against ISIS in Syria and Iraq, and will likely expect Britain to join in.<sup>18</sup> Theresa May might be inclined to agree, but she will have to face the reality of Britain’s depleted military capabilities and the continued political fallout from Britain’s involvement in the 2003 Iraq War. Today, the British Army has only ten infantry regiments and two tank regiments left. The Royal Navy, which in the 1990s had a destroyer-frigate force of thirty-six warships, now has only eighteen. Further, for the first time in modern British history, the Royal Navy finds itself with no aircraft carrier, pending the arrival in the next couple of years of two newly commissioned Queen Elizabeth class carriers. The Royal Air Force has shrunk to ten strike squadrons. If Brexit damages Britain’s economy as much as the IMF, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and other respected authorities believe, the UK may not have the resources to rebuild its defenses as Theresa May says she wants to do. As Lord Renwick, one of the greatest of Britain’s ambassadors to the United States, has written, if Britain wants to influence US national security policy, “the price of consultation is participation.”<sup>19</sup> If the UK does not reverse its defense cuts, it will not have enough military capability to contribute to US-led operations at a level that will earn it the right to be fully consulted.

The United States, for its part, has the responsibility to exercise due restraint in launching military operations if it expects to persuade the UK to weather any political storm occasioned by its participation in those operations. In this regard, the shadow of the 2003 Iraq War is a long one, demonstrated by the domestic political fallout last year from Britain’s Chilcot inquiry into British policy in the Iraq War, 2003-2009,<sup>20</sup> as well as continued US reluctance to engage in further military adventures in the Middle East. Both Britain and the

United States are currently engaging in air operations against ISIS in both Syria and Iraq, but there are doubts in both countries about the wisdom of escalating those operations to include substantial engagement on the ground.

The political dimension of the US-UK military-to-military relationship cannot be overstated. In 2013, when Syrian President Bashar al Assad employed chemical weapons against his own citizens, thus crossing former US President Barack Obama’s stated “red line,” the British parliament at the time declined to endorse British military action, a factor that contributed to Obama’s own decision not to use force. In April 2017, when Trump reversed his own warning to President Obama not to attack Syria after its 2013 chemical weapons attack<sup>21</sup> and decided to launch cruise missiles into Syria after Assad again used chemical weapons, May focused her comments on Assad’s illegitimacy and not the merits of the cruise missile attack, about which British public opinion was, according to several polls,<sup>22</sup> deeply divided. Depending on how future decisions on the use of force are made in the Trump administration, and how they are perceived by the UK, it is an open question whether one could expect UK collaboration in heightened US military operations in the Middle East.

#### 4. A close diplomatic link

The traditionally close US-UK diplomatic relationship remains intact for now, but Brexit has potentially serious implications for the special relationship.

Diplomacy is the art of practicing international relations, an art at which both the United States and Britain have excelled, in part because of a large pool of well-trained diplomats from which to draw. Many of them share a worldview, a common culture, and bonds of friendship and trust, especially given that many British diplomats have studied in the United States, and dozens of leading US diplomats and policy practitioners were educated at Oxford, Cambridge, and other top British universities through Rhodes, Marshall, and other scholarship opportunities. The current turmoil surrounding staffing the senior positions of the US Departments of State

18 Ed Krayewski, “Trump Steadily Ramps Up Military Action Against ISIS and al Qaeda,” *Newsweek*, March 23, 2017, [www.newsweek.com/trump-steadily-ramps-military-action-against-isis-and-al-qaeda-571670](http://www.newsweek.com/trump-steadily-ramps-military-action-against-isis-and-al-qaeda-571670).

19 Sir Robin Renwick, *Fighting with Allies: America and Britain in Peace and War*, p. 394.

20 For the text of the 145-page Executive Summary, see *The Report of the Iraq Inquiry: Executive Summary*, July 6, 2016, [www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/247921/the-report-of-the-iraq-inquiry\\_executive-summary.pdf](http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/247921/the-report-of-the-iraq-inquiry_executive-summary.pdf). See also “Chilcot Report: Findings At-a-Glance,” *BBC News*, July 6, 2016, [www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-36721645](http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-36721645).

21 Nicholas Fandos, “Trump’s View of Syria: How it Evolved, in 19 Tweets,” *The New York Times*, April 7, 2017, [www.nytimes.com/2017/04/07/us/politics/donald-trump-syria-twitter.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/07/us/politics/donald-trump-syria-twitter.html).

22 Ashley Cowburn, “British Public Split Over Support for Donald Trump’s Missile Strike in Syria, says Poll,” *The Independent*, April 15, 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/british-public-split-over-support-for-donald-trump-s-missile-strike-in-syria-says-poll-a7684826.html>.



and Defense, as well as the National Security Council—not to mention serious inconsistencies in the rhetoric of policy—will make it difficult for the United States to conduct credible and meaningful diplomatic initiatives, much less engage its British partners in that effort.

“Brexit will deprive future US administrations of British, and, by extension, US influence in Brussels.”

For its part, Brexit—even before it is consummated—has significantly reduced Britain’s influence within the European Union. Historically, for the most part, British priorities in the EU have reflected Washington’s priorities. British influence has helped keep the EU less insular, less regulated, more open to free trade, and more likely to support the United States in imposing economic sanctions against Vladimir Putin’s Russia than would otherwise have been the case. Brexit will deprive future US administrations of British, and, by extension, US influence in Brussels.

For example, Germany and France have, over time, offered various proposals for a European defense force separate from NATO—something the United States and Britain have always opposed as an unnecessary and wasteful duplication of scarce European military resources. Such proposals will be all the more compelling to Europeans who increasingly find it prudent to hedge against the possibility of an evaporating US commitment to NATO. Post-Brexit, Washington will need to look more towards Berlin to influence deliberations in the EU. While US-German relations have a strong foundation, there is not the same entrenched level of trust as the United States shares with Britain, and the relationship between Trump and Merkel is, at best, a difficult one.

### 5. Mutually beneficial investment

The US-UK investment relationship remains vigorous, but Brexit—if that means complete separation from an EU single market and customs union—could damage US investment in Britain.

Despite the Trump administration’s complaints about the “bad deals” that are its current trade relationships, the mutual investment link between Washington

and London is a critical component of the special relationship that benefits both countries. In 2014, for example, the UK was the largest foreign investor in the United States—\$449 billion—well ahead of its closest competitors, Japan and the Netherlands. Likewise, the UK remains the number one destination in the EU for US foreign direct investment: \$588 billion, or 25 percent of the over \$2 trillion in US foreign direct investment into the EU.<sup>23</sup>

Although Brexit is unlikely to affect British foreign direct investment in the United States, there are already signs it could undercut US investment in the UK. Last year, Theresa May’s government backed away from its predecessors’ hands-off approach to foreign takeover of UK companies. Going forward, May wants to impose limitations on whether foreign companies could buy British companies, but whether this will continue in May’s minority government remains to be seen. Access to the EU’s single market via the UK has always been one of the most compelling reasons for US firms to invest in the UK. Outside the single market, Britain will find it much harder to compete against other major EU economies for US foreign direct investment. It is unlikely that simply lightening the regulatory burden on US firms operating in Britain would offset the disadvantage occasioned by the lack of full, free access to the European single market. Though it currently attracts the most FDI in the EU, the UK is in intense competition with Germany, France, Denmark, and the Netherlands for drawing in foreign direct investment. As long as there are well-run economies in the heart of Europe in which to invest, Britain will have difficulty claiming its current share of that investment pie.

### 6. A shared legacy with nuclear weapons

Britain and the United States’ shared legacy in creating and managing the nuclear age remains stable. However, uncertainties surrounding Brexit and the potential for a second Scottish referendum have potentially serious implications for the special relationship.

One of the most striking examples of the US-UK relationship in the realm of nuclear weapons is the

23 Euijin Jung and Zhiyao Lu, “US-UK Trade and Foreign Investment,” *PIIE Charts*, June 27, 2016, Peterson Institute for International Economics, <https://piie.com/research/piie-charts/us-uk-trade-and-foreign-investment>. Historical book value of US investment stock in the EU of \$2 trillion is from US Department of State, Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs, 2013 Investment Climate Statement, February 2013, [www.state.gov/e/eb/rls/othr/ics/2013/204640.htm](http://www.state.gov/e/eb/rls/othr/ics/2013/204640.htm).

Manhattan Project, which pooled the resources of both the United States and the United Kingdom in developing the atomic bomb. As defense analyst Leo Michel has written: “There exists no other program where the United States has worked so intimately with another country for such an extended period of time on the gravest matters of national security.”<sup>24</sup> This aspect of the US-UK special relationship remains very much alive. One could posit that this relationship grows even more important as the size of both countries’ respective nuclear arsenals has shrunk over the past decade.

Today, the United States and UK deploy identical Ohio-class submarines armed with Trident missiles. US Navy and Royal Navy submarines are serviced in Kings Bay, Georgia, and share a common pool of missiles. Britain’s nuclear warheads are designed and built at the UK’s Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston, but with US technical expertise. British liaison officers are stationed at US Strategic Command. This is a nuclear relationship of unprecedented intimacy. Together, the United States and UK provide the essential nuclear component of NATO’s deterrent strategy, since France neither commits its nuclear forces to NATO defense nor participates in NATO nuclear consultations.

Not long after taking office, Theresa May’s government decided to affirm Britain’s independent nuclear deterrence through continued cooperation with the United States, rather than to switch to a collaborative relationship on nuclear weapons with France. Nothing Trump has said about nuclear weapons is likely to weaken the special US-UK nuclear collaboration, but the Brexit vote could cost the Royal Navy its only Trident base, at Faslane in Scotland. Scotland has been strongly opposed to Brexit, and has threatened to organize a second referendum on Scottish independence, given that the 2014 referendum was such a close vote.<sup>25</sup> While initial polls in Scotland indicated that such a referendum might succeed, the Scottish Nationalist Party’s losses in the recent UK general election have reduced that likelihood.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, the risk of a

second Scottish referendum remains, and if Scotland were ever to become independent, a Scottish Nationalist Party government would most likely close Faslane, forcing Britain to spend enormous funds to develop a replacement base.

## Recommendations for the Future

The special relationship can never realize its full potential unless there is a close working relationship between the president and the prime minister. President Trump appears to have positive feelings towards Britain that are most welcome. In a telephone call with Theresa May early in the transition, Trump held up the close relationship between former US President Ronald Reagan and former UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher as the model they should work toward. However, it is unlikely that Trump and May will ever rise to the level of Reagan and Thatcher. Reagan and Thatcher had established a genuine friendship years before either of them was elected president or prime minister. Moreover, they were ideological soul mates: both were fierce anti-communists and robust champions of free markets and free trade. Trump and May share no pre-existing friendship or ideological kinship. Nor has there been any pre-existing relationship between their advisers or common pool of ideas as there was between Reagan and Thatcher. Finally, whereas Reagan and Thatcher were in a strong political position in their respective countries, neither Trump nor May enjoy anywhere near the latitude on which Reagan and Thatcher could depend.

These cautions notwithstanding, there are some useful lessons that Trump and May can draw from the Reagan-Thatcher relationship and apply to the future. This special relationship is, most of all, one of partnership and trust for mutual gain and shared interests. Each country must deliver for the other.

**The first imperative** is that Trump must deliver for May as Reagan did for Thatcher.

Trump needs to grasp that loyalty demands rewards. May needs tangible rewards to take from Washington back to London to show skeptics in her government, in

24 Leo Michel, “Observations on the Special Relationship in Security and Defense Matters,” in Stuart and McCausland, *US-UK Relations at the Start of the Twenty-First Century*, Chapter 11.

25 The 2014 referendum on Scottish independence was defeated 55.7% to 44.7%; in the 2016 Brexit referendum, Scotland voted to remain in the EU by a margin of 62.2% to 38.85. See Claire Zillman, “Scotland is Already Hinting at Another Referendum to Leave the U.K. After Brexit Vote,” *Fortune*, June 23, 2016, <http://fortune.com/2016/06/24/scotland-independence-brexit-vote/>.

26 The Scottish Nationalist Party lost 21 of its 56 seats in the June

8, 2017, UK General Election. For polling between the Brexit referendum through June 7, 2017, see “How would you vote in a Scottish independence referendum if held now?” in *What Scotland Thinks*, <http://whatscotlandthinks.org/questions/how-would-you-vote-in-the-in-a-scottish-independence-referendum-if-held-now-ask#line>.



US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and UK Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson sign a condolence book for victims of the Manchester terrorist attack, May 2017. *Photo credit: US Department of State.*

parliament, and in the EU that getting close to Trump can pay off.

European mistrust of Trump and concerns about Russian assertiveness echo the situation in the early 1980s. It is easy to forget how the United States' European allies saw Ronald Reagan in 1980. At best, he was seen as an intellectual lightweight and potentially dangerous at a pivotal point in the Cold War. However, Thatcher won his confidence and, on her first official visit, persuaded Reagan to accept NATO's 1979 "dual track" decision to deploy intermediate range nuclear weapons in Europe if the Soviet Union rejected an arms control solution. This political achievement, a product of Reagan and Thatcher's close personal and professional relationship, provides an example of the demonstrable benefits of mutual trust between leaders.

In order to achieve such results in today's political climate, May needs to win Trump's full confidence and trust. She made a start during her first visit to the United States in late January 2017, but she has a long way to go.

To date, the benefits of a close relationship with Trump have not been forthcoming. An unequivocal and sustained endorsement of NATO and its transcendent value to both US and European interests would serve as a welcome beginning to reinforce this most important bedrock of the relationship. President Trump deliberately equivocated on that point during his first meeting with fellow NATO leaders in Brussels in May 2017. His endorsement of the importance of "Europe"—which May insists Britain is not leaving—would be helpful in reassuring the rest of both the United States' and the UK's European allies, but that is probably too much to expect.

However, Washington needs to understand that Theresa May's attempt to build a closer relationship with Donald Trump will come with a high political price. If Trump genuinely wants May (or her successor) as a close ally, as he should given the significance of the special relationship, there are two specific assurances that he can give that will shore up the prime minister's political standing and influence: first, a firm, unequivocal

commitment that he will negotiate a bilateral trade agreement as soon as the UK leaves the European Union and that it will begin informal preparatory talks as soon as possible; second, a guarantee that US “buy American” provisions will not apply to UK companies applying for US defense and other contracts.

The second imperative is that May needs to demonstrate to Trump and his team that the special relationship with Britain is not a one-way street of US patronage. For Britain to continue to be the United States’ military partner of choice and the leader of the European members of NATO, she needs to increase defense spending beyond the NATO-agreed 2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP). The inconvenient truth is that the severe budget cuts imposed by her predecessor’s government have left serious weaknesses in all branches of the British military. In addition to providing material improvements in NATO’s capabilities, British defense investment must be restored before the UK is able to lead European members of NATO by example rather than exhortation.

If the prime minister wishes to demonstrate Britain’s value as a partner in dealing with Iran and ISIS, she needs to strengthen Britain’s naval presence in the Persian Gulf. In addition, May could deploy more strike aircraft to Royal Air Force (RAF) Akrotiri in Cyprus so that the Royal Air Force can join the United States and other allies in flying more sorties against ISIS targets in Iraq and Syria.

Finally, in case Scotland ever becomes independent, May or her successor needs to commit to maintaining Britain’s nuclear deterrent force and making the necessary investment to secure a base for Britain’s Trident submarine force, which can also serve to complement the US sea-based deterrent.

The third imperative is that the British government needs to build friendships and establish alliances within the US administration and coordinate their approaches to Trump and his White House inner circle with their contacts, a strategy that Thatcher employed effectively.

British Ambassador to the United States Sir Kim Darroch and his team will need to be as exceptionally well-informed about the Trump administration’s internal deliberations as were Sir Nicholas Henderson and Sir Oliver Wright and their teams during the Reagan

administration. Never has so much depended on the insights and the relationships of so few. On election night 2016, Ambassador Darroch wrote that he was optimistic that Trump was “open to outside influence if pitched right,” and at the time he believed that Britain was well placed to do that.<sup>27</sup> Hopefully Sir Kim is right, although there is significant public evidence suggesting that Trump does not listen to advice, much less act on it, unless the advice confirms his gut instincts and unless the person offering the advice is either a fellow billionaire, a friendly celebrity, or a war hero. Theresa May does not fall into any of these three categories. It will be vital, therefore, that Britain’s national security leadership build trusted relationships with US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Secretary of Defense James Mattis, and National Security Advisor General H.R. McMaster. The same goes for both sides’ intelligence organizations and within the private sector domains of business and finance.

Ultimately, both countries’ leaders need to take political, social, military, and economic steps to reinvigorate the special relationship. In past transitions between presidents and prime ministers, the enduring relationship between the United States and United Kingdom seemed all but implied. Neither country’s current leaders, however, came to power through normal political trajectories, and each faces a series of pressures that could easily distract them from strengthening their collaboration.

These are not the days of FDR and Churchill, or Reagan and Thatcher—times in which the combination of strong, like-minded leaders enabled the US-UK special relationship to have a transformational impact on the international order. Now one must look to the institutional foundations of that special relationship and the professionals that work within them to shape good policies, limit the damage of unwise political decisions, and preserve the value of US-UK cooperation.

There is no shortage of areas in each of the six elements of the special relationship discussed earlier in which the two governments can find common ground to build. Given the growing importance of cybersecurity, they can start by building on the 2015 joint US-UK agreement to strengthen cooperation

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27 Sir Kim Darroch, “Exclusive: The Ambassador’s Dispatch,” *The Times* (London), November 13, 2016, [www.thetimes.co.uk/article/exclusive-the-ambassadors-dispatch-ktxnnggh22](http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/exclusive-the-ambassadors-dispatch-ktxnnggh22).

on cybersecurity.<sup>28</sup> Washington and London could also create a joint Department of Defense/Ministry of Defence task force to improve interoperability of US and UK military forces for combined operations.

Most of all, however, it is important that the two leaders appoint a senior US and a senior UK official from their respective National Security Councils to focus on reinvigorating the special relationship and coordinating an annual strategic dialogue involving the president, the prime minister, and senior cabinet ministers, perhaps modeled on the existing US-China strategic dialogue. The relationship is too important, the political environment too fragile, and the stakes too high to assume this critical relationship will endure without proper sustenance.

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28 The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “Fact Sheet: U.S.-United Kingdom Cybersecurity Cooperation,” January 26, 2015, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/16/fact-sheet-us-united-kingdom-cybersecurity-cooperation>.

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