



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The US, BREXIT and Anglo-American relations

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At the time of writing, US President Donald Trump is embattled in the White House, Theresa May gambled and lost her government's working majority at the June 2017 General Election, BREXIT is mired in confusion, Trump has pronounced trade wars a 'good thing' and transatlantic relations are unsettled. Now is, therefore, a fascinating – if uncertain – time to consider the state of Anglo-American relations. This article argues that concern for the special relationship arising from Britain's forthcoming loss of influence within the European Union is overstated and obscures a more important consideration – namely the economic capacity of post-BREXIT Britain to continue 'paying the price' of special access to and cooperation with Washington. It also argues that whatever Washington does or does not do during BREXIT negotiations will be an important factor in how Britain emerges from the Union. The terms of British departure are the province of Westminster and Brussels but proactive American shaping of the environment in which BREXIT is negotiated and effected could strengthen British prospects significantly. Conversely were the Trump White House to neglect or mishandle the BREXIT process it would risk greater instability in transatlantic relations and the further erosion of America's most capable and reliable ally.

**Keywords:** Anglo-American; BREXIT; special relationship; Trump; May

### Introduction

2016 witnessed an upheaval in the Anglo-American political landscape. In an outcome less surprising than Prime Minister Cameron's Party-driven decision to allow an in-out referendum on British membership of the European Union (EU), the British people voted for BREXIT. Then, disenfranchised middle America led a rebellion against the US political establishment and placed Donald Trump in the White House. The unorthodox and unpredictable Trump Presidency has since courted controversy at home and spread uncertainty abroad. Meantime Cameron's successor, Theresa May, gambled – and dramatically lost – that an early General Election in June 2017 would consolidate her political mandate over Britain and BREXIT. President and Prime Minister are thus both unusually weakened early in their terms and preoccupied with difficult domestic agendas and foreign policy challenges. At the same time, as Britain and Brussels engage in tortuous negotiations about the post-BREXIT UK–EU relationship, British and US leaderships must reassess bilateral Anglo-American relations and where these now sit within their evolving foreign policy postures and interests.

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This article argues that recent debate about the relationship between BREXIT and the health or otherwise of ‘special’ Anglo-American relations is somewhat misplaced. Though important, it is not the pending loss of British influence in the EU that most threatens them. There is an underlying resilience within the special relationship and sufficient meaningful cooperation in core areas of activity removed from the EU to enable the relationship to continue. Rather, the key issue is whether the terms and consequences of BREXIT will allow Britain the economic capacity especially to underwrite the continuing global role advocated by the May government and by the Trump administration. How Washington behaves during BREXIT negotiations will be important in this respect, not least in terms of how Trump’s ‘America first’ approach potentially runs up against British need to deepen international trade links with the likes of China. Put bluntly, Britain’s post-EU future and utility to the US will best be protected if the Trump administration shapes positively the environments of expectation and practice in which BREXIT is negotiated and effected.

### **Resilience in adversity**

One characteristic of Anglo-American relations since WW2 that has set them aside from most other international relationships is their capacity to withstand change and sometimes severe bilateral tension. Two examples of different types of acute challenge suffice to demonstrate this ‘Lazarus-like quality’.<sup>1</sup> First, there have been specific crises within Anglo-American relations that might justifiably have broken or seriously damaged other relationships. One thinks, for instance, of British bitterness at the terms of the 1946 Anglo-American loan<sup>2</sup> and the nuclear betrayal symbolised by the McMahon Act, of American disappointment at British refusal to commit militarily to the Vietnam war, of divisions over the Yom Kippur war that caused temporary interruptions of UK-US intelligence cooperation<sup>3</sup> and of the shock US invasion of Commonwealth member state Grenada in 1983.<sup>4</sup> And then, of course, there is the most frequently cited example of severe Anglo-American discord – the Suez crisis.<sup>5</sup> The Eisenhower administration’s humiliating compulsion of British and French troop withdrawals from the Canal Zone is seen by some historians as marking the moment when Britain ceased being one of the world’s great powers.<sup>6</sup> France drew from this experience the conclusion, which still holds fast within sections of French society today, that the US could not be trusted and that France must develop political and strategic options that avoided dependence upon the whims of Washington. In contrast the Macmillan government developed the concept of Anglo-American interdependence and the ‘hug them close’ mantra that characterises British policy towards the US through to the present.<sup>7</sup> By December 1962, a remarkable recovery in Anglo-American relations had been effected to the point that nuclear technology sharing had been restored under the 1958 MDA and President Kennedy had agreed with Macmillan at the Nassau conference to sell Polaris missiles to Britain.<sup>8</sup>

The second type of potentially acute challenge withstood by Anglo-American relations is systemic change. Towards and upon the end of the Cold War, there gushed forth a torrent of academic literature and media comment pronouncing the end of the special relationship. Crudely put, the argument ran that without the Cold War and a common enemy in Europe, British and American interests would diverge, interaction opportunity lessen and the functionalist *raison d’être* of the special relationship dissolve such that the Anglo-American relationship would

become 'special no more'.<sup>9</sup> Britain would become stranded between a receding American shoreline and a federalising Europe, and left clinging in the special relationship to an empty and largely non-reciprocated political construct that provided an illusion of continuity for a nation experiencing 'a profound sense of powerlessness'.<sup>10</sup> In the post-Cold War years, these critiques of the special relationship centred increasingly on the profound asymmetry between a middle-ranking Britain and the lone US superpower. The realist calculation that had prompted British policymakers after WW2 to cultivate assiduously the special relationship was that Britain would be able to 'help steer this great unwieldy barge, the United States of America, into the right harbour'.<sup>11</sup> This required access to US policymaking, which in turn had to be earned. As British Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon expressed bluntly in June 2003, 'the country must be prepared to pay a price, including blood, to prove that it is the most dependable U.S. ally'.<sup>12</sup> However American conduct, especially during and after the 2003 Iraq war, encouraged an impression that the US had reneged upon this *quid pro quo* and treated Britain instead as 'largely a client state'.<sup>13</sup>

British officials spent much time arguing, as Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office John Battle did in January 2001, that 'We are not a tail being wagged by the dog'.<sup>14</sup> Yet the lack of perceived American reciprocity made this line an increasingly difficult 'sell'. President Bush's 'yo Blair' greeting at the G8 summit in 2006 and Obama's 'kitchen meeting' with Brown in September 2009<sup>15</sup> were widely interpreted as demonstrating Britain's 'poodle' status. In 2010, the British House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee controversially pronounced the special relationship to be over.<sup>16</sup> And even British public opinion reflected a sense of annoyance and grief at Britain's apparent impotence in Washington. A YouGov poll in May 2010 revealed that 85% of respondents thought the UK had little or no influence on American policies, that 62% believed America failed to consider British interests and that 74% considered Britain's relationship with the US to have stayed the same or deteriorated since Obama's entry to the White House. Two years later, another YouGov poll revealed that 84% of respondents still felt that the UK had little or no influence on US policies and that 66% felt the US paid no attention to British interests and that more people felt the relationship had deteriorated than improved since Prime Minister Cameron had arrived in office.<sup>17</sup>

There are plenty of examples since the Cold War that can be cited in support of 'end of the affair' interpretations of the special relationship. Prime Minister Thatcher bemoaned the loss of her special relationship with Reagan and the George H. Bush administration's initial 'conscious choice' to prioritise links with Germany,<sup>18</sup> on 31 May 1989, President Bush spoke publicly in Mainz of a 'partnership in leadership' between the US and Germany.<sup>19</sup> Prime Minister Major rated Anglo-American policy disagreements over Bosnia as being the most serious since the Suez Crisis<sup>20</sup> and his personal relations with President Clinton were reportedly conducted on a 'grin-and-bear-it basis'.<sup>21</sup> Conversely, when during preparations for his first meeting with Major, an aide reminded Clinton to mention the special relationship, the President burst out laughing and said 'Oh yes. How could I forget?'.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, the post-Afghanistan and Iraq campaign inquests drew forth bruising exchanges about British tactics and capabilities, some embarrassingly publicised by Wikileaks, and these fuelled doubts about Britain's ability to contribute effectively to US-led interventions.<sup>23</sup>

Nevertheless the special relationship again survived. Functionally, special areas of bilateral Anglo-American cooperation actually intensified, especially post-9/11. Britain proved itself repeatedly to be America's most capable and reliable military, security and intelligence partner.<sup>24</sup> And British leaders earned at least access to US decision-making by standing shoulder to shoulder with US Presidents in times of their personal and national need. In their respective memoirs, President Clinton recalls his gratitude to Tony and Cherie Blair for visiting the White House in the midst of the Monica Lewinsky political storm and George W. Bush wrote how his phone conversation immediately after 9/11 with Blair 'helped cement the closest friendship I would form with any foreign leader'.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the imagery of Anglo-American solidarity remained a valuable source of legitimacy for US foreign policy, an important demonstration to the American people that they were not alone in underwriting international security and a particular asset to the Bush administration in countering charges of its going into 'unilateralist overdrive'.<sup>26</sup> One commentator noted of the Bush-Blair meeting in March 2003 that 'The choreography of the Camp David war council, so reminiscent of the FDR-Churchill meetings on that very spot, seemed to echo the greatest moments of the Anglo-American Alliance'.<sup>4</sup>

The question that naturally follows in this context of resilience is whether BREXIT constitutes a shock of such magnitude that it overwhelms the capacity of Anglo-American relations to heal and regenerate? If past practice is any indicator of future probability, then the answer is no. BREXIT will diminish British value to the US but at the same time has none of the potential for corrosive bilateral Anglo-American recrimination that, for instance, the Suez crisis offered. More importantly, British withdrawal from the EU and consequent loss of influence is of a magnitude less than Britain's retreat from empire and the managed transition to US global leadership.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, EU membership has been an important but not determinate factor in the US maintaining a series of privileged relationships with the UK. BREXIT does not therefore strike directly at the core functionalist, organisational or cultural underpinnings of the special relationship that have imbued it with such resilience.

### **The US and non-EU Britain: BREXIT in perspective**

It is important lest we forget that this is not the first time that the US has had to consider an integrated Europe without British membership. Despite the best efforts of US policymakers, the Attlee government refused to join the European Coal and Steel Community. The Churchill government poured scorn upon British membership of the ultimately stillborn European Defence Community. And the Macmillan government not only declined to join the European Economic Community but also led efforts to undermine it via the creation of the European Free Trade Association. While all of these instances of British attachment to national sovereignty and refusal to be regarded as 'just another European country'<sup>28</sup> generated friction in Anglo-American relations, none prevented the intimate cooperation in intelligence, defence and nuclear matters commonly seen to underpin the special relationship.

The historical event most closely analogous to the present situation came in 1975 when Prime Minister Harold Wilson's Labour government put to a referendum renegotiated terms of Britain's EEC membership, which had itself been achieved just two years earlier following French President De Gaulle's vetoes of British applications

in 1963 and 1967.<sup>29</sup> It is interesting that archival records at this point show similar US considerations at hand then as now. British membership of the EEC had recently caused complications for Anglo-American relations, not just in trade but also over the Yom Kippur War and the ‘Year of Europe’, with Europeans irritated deeply by unilateral American announcement of this initiative and by Kissinger’s public description of Europe as having regional concerns next to America’s global responsibilities.<sup>30</sup> Yet, the general American conclusion was nevertheless that the ‘mutual interests of the United States and the United Kingdom are best served by a stable, prosperous and outward-looking European Community of which Britain is a committed member’. Conversely, the prospect of British withdrawal was described in sometimes nigh-apocalyptic terms:

A healthy and realistic relationship is only possible if Britain remains in Europe. If the British people do not see their future in that direction, but opt for a Little England solution ... it is hard to see how this country can avoid slipping into international irrelevance. In such circumstances, the United States would have to reflect very carefully whether we would wish to carry on any kind of close (let alone “special” relationship which would become increasingly lop-sided and probably an unacceptable burden.<sup>31</sup>

Fast forward to 2016 and much the same arguments could be heard, albeit this time far more publicly. In April 2016, eight former US Treasury Secretaries penned an open letter in *The Times* in which, while saying the referendum was a choice for the British people, they pronounced a ‘critical’ US interest in the outcome and advocated Britain remaining in the EU. Lawrence Summers, President Clinton’s Treasury Secretary, followed this up on BBC Radio 4 by advising listeners that in the event of BREXIT ‘I think the special relationship would translate much less into prosperity for both our countries and I think the special in relationship would have much less influence on the broad world’.<sup>32</sup> And then, of course, Obama lent the weight of the Oval Office to the Remain campaign. He suggested that a leave vote would put Britain at the back of the queue for a trade deal with the US and spoke unequivocally about the importance to America of Britain being in the EU:

I will say, with the candour of a friend, that the outcome of your decision is a matter of deep interest to the United States ... The European Union doesn’t moderate British influence – it magnifies it. A strong Europe is not a threat to Britain’s global leadership; it enhances Britain’s global leadership. The US sees how your powerful voice in Europe ensures that Europe takes a strong stance in the world, and keeps the EU open, outward-looking, and closely linked to its allies on the other side of the Atlantic. So the US and the world need your outsized influence to continue – including within Europe.<sup>33</sup>

It can never be known how the US would have reacted in 1975 to a BREXIT vote but some insight to the likely approach can be gained by consideration of US reaction to contemporaneous British defence cuts. The Cold War defence cooperation was more central to the special relationship than was British EEC membership. American officials unsurprisingly looked askance upon the UK–US relationship when the Supplementary Statement on defence of July 1967 announced major defence cuts and accelerated British withdrawal from the Persian Gulf and Southeast Asia. US Ambassador to Britain David Bruce warned that a unilateral determination and announcement of British cuts East of Suez risked incurring from the US President ‘a rebuke

of titanic proportions' and was more likely than any other issue in the past few years to cause 'bitter' Anglo-American controversy.<sup>34</sup> On 11 January 1968, Johnson duly expressed 'profound dismay', warned of grave consequences were the US left to 'man the ramparts all alone' and urged urgent reconsideration upon Prime Minister Wilson.<sup>35</sup> Secretary of State Rusk likewise berated Foreign Secretary George Brown upon a 'Little England' posture, declared that the defence cuts represented by practical and psychological effect a 'catastrophic loss to human society', and urged that Britain 'be Britain'.<sup>36</sup> As British defence cuts proceeded regardless of US pressure, Dean Rusk speculated that 'The concept of Atlantic cooperation could replace the special relationship'.<sup>37</sup>

By the early 1970s, from an American perspective, the environment for further significant British defence cuts was still worse. Transatlantic relations were under significant pressure. Economic uncertainty was high in the wake of the Nixon shock of a new economic policy that transferred burdens to America's allies, the collapse of the Bretton Woods system, and the Middle East oil crisis. The US establishment was struggling to cope with American over-extension, the aftermath of the Vietnam War, civil rights and Watergate. And Congress was reasserting itself vis-à-vis the executive and demanding redress of alliance burdensharing. For example, the 1973 Jackson-Nunn amendment to the American Defence Appropriation Authorisation act demanded that the government reduce forces in NATO Europe to the extent that their foreign exchange costs were not met by the European allies.<sup>38</sup>

Prime Minister Wilson inherited from the Conservative Heath government grave economic circumstances flowing from the latter's expansionary monetary policy and consequent sharply rising public expenditure and fiscal deficits.<sup>39</sup> Spending cuts were imperative and defence expenditure could not be exempt. Just as they did in the 1960s, the British kept the US informed of their ongoing defence review discussions and the Americans pressed hard throughout to minimise them. President Ford, for example, impressed upon Wilson and Foreign Secretary Callaghan that cuts should not compromise the Polaris upgrade, Diego Garcia commitments or sovereign bases on Cyprus, which were important for US signals and imagery intelligence gathering in the Mediterranean. As the debate raged, US officials again pronounced apocalyptic consequences for the special relationship. In October 1974, Henry Kissinger advised President Ford that 'You have to operate on the assumption that Britain is through'.<sup>40</sup> Two months later, the US Embassy in London begged the State Department to undertake damage limitation following reported remarks by Defence Secretary Schlesinger that 'we can no longer expect British to pull any weight'. Similar protests were drawn in July 1975 following reports that Schlesinger had threatened to cut off intelligence and Polaris cooperation in the event of further British defence cuts; the *Wall Street Journal* simply opined 'Goodbye, Great Britain: it was nice knowing you'.<sup>41</sup>

So, did the special relationship cease? History tells us not, and the principal reason for this is there being marked differences between what individuals say in moments of crisis/frustration, what they might say as they seek to persuade a third party to adopt a particular course of action and what they do in the aftermath of an event. In the 1970s, Britain's relative decline was offset partially by continued qualitatively special cooperation in traditional functional dimensions of the Anglo-American alliance and by an increase in the utility of British soft power.<sup>42</sup> Much the same applies to BREXIT which, ultimately, is less central to core elements of the special relationship



than was the crisis of British defence retrenchment in the late 1960s–1970s. Once the dust settles, policymakers reassess the balance of advantage offered by cooperation and, if favourable, it continues, especially when undergirded by a long record of collaboration and particularly strong historical and cultural connections. As former US National Security Advisor and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger noted in the aftermath of the BREXIT vote ‘The duty for statesman ... “is not anguish or recrimination; it should be to transform setback into opportunity”’.<sup>43</sup>

### **Steering a steady course: global Britain**

Beneath the furore and handwringing at the EU referendum result runs a strong current of continuity in the disposition of the British people and in elite attachment to a global Britain. Opinion polls are notoriously unreliable but considered over the long term they show consistent trends in British popular opinion towards the US and the EU. The latter, a frequent and sometimes unfair target of the British press, has never captured the imagination of the British people. British turnout for European Parliament elections has been notoriously low. Eurobarometer surveys also reveal British confidence in European institutions and sense of European identity to be regularly at or near the bottom of EU member state publics.<sup>44</sup> In contrast, belief in the importance of good Anglo-American relations and identification with their American ‘cousins’ have been consistently strong features of British public opinion. In 2016, a Pew Centre poll revealed that 61% of British people surveyed had a favourable view of the US and 67% thought the US to be as important as it was 10 years previously.<sup>45</sup> Where support for and confidence in the US has dipped, these instances have usually been short-lived and associated with a particular crisis or President. Interestingly, a poll for *The Independent* in November 2016 indicated that 66% of British respondents agreed that ‘Donald Trump as president makes the world a more dangerous place’.<sup>46</sup> In February 2017, an Opinium poll reported that 64% of respondents considered Trump to be a threat to international stability and 56% to rate him as untrustworthy. Poignantly for this article, though, the same poll revealed that more people felt Anglo-American relations would improve under Trump than deteriorate, that 58% agreed that it is in Britain’s interests for the US to continue as a powerful nation and that the public overwhelmingly sees the US as Britain’s most important ally. Out of a list of 13 options, 50% selected the US; the second most popular answer was Germany with just 9%.<sup>47</sup> Popular doubts about a particular President do not, it seems, dissuade general British affinity for the US and the special relationship.

Neither is there much evidence to suggest that the BREXIT vote marked an elite or a popular retreat to a ‘little Britain’. Attacked for compromising British international leverage by advocating BREXIT, the Leave campaign reaffirmed an outward-looking UK but one better able to control its own decisions and resources.<sup>48</sup> Post-mortems conducted on the referendum result subsequently foregrounded voter concerns not for an internationally over-committed Britain but for sovereignty, security and control over immigration from fellow EU countries. Following the vote Chancellor George Osborne was quick to advise in the *Wall Street Journal* that the task ahead was to ‘set out to build a more outward-looking, global-facing Britain, with stronger links with its friends and allies around the world’.<sup>49</sup> Though Theresa May soon sacked Osborne upon becoming Prime Minister, she maintained his line on Britain’s international posture. Heading off to a G20 meeting in China in September 2016 May

affirmed ‘The message for the G20 is that Britain is open for business, as a bold, confident, outward-looking country we will be playing a key role on the world stage’.<sup>50</sup>

With little evident support for, or even consideration of, a ‘little Britain’ future, the BREXIT vote inevitably fired renewed debate about how Britain would redefine its role in the world. The May government itself answered this very much in the vein of ‘back to the future’. In her January 2017 BREXIT speech, May juxtaposed a new ‘Global Britain’ with an EU that would remain a key partner but which was essentially more parochial than the UK. The speech opened with the statement that ‘A little over six months ago, the British people voted for change. They voted to shape a brighter future for our country. They voted to leave the European Union and embrace the world’.<sup>51</sup> This impression of British re-emergence from an introspective EU was underscored repeatedly. For instance, May noted that

Since joining the EU, trade as a percentage of GDP has broadly stagnated in the UK. That is why it is time for Britain to get out into the world and rediscover its role as a great, global, trading nation

She also recalled that ‘Many in Britain have always felt that the United Kingdom’s place in the European Union came at the expense of our global ties, and of a bolder embrace of free trade with the wider world’. The vote thus spoke to Britain’s distinct political traditions, a history and culture that are ‘profoundly internationalist’ and a resolve to ‘restore, as we see it, our parliamentary democracy, national self-determination, and to become even more global and internationalist in action and in spirit’. In a clear echo of Churchill’s dictum that Britain was with but not of Europe, May declared that while Britain was a European country ‘we are also a country that has always looked beyond Europe to the wider world’. The British people had therefore elected to return the country to its natural role as ‘Global Britain’ – a term used no less than 11 times during the speech.<sup>52</sup>

Just over a year later, May delivered another set-piece speech on BREXIT. Again she hailed ‘Global Britain’ and emphasised that ‘we will forge a bold new positive role for ourselves in the world’.<sup>53</sup> As a former global power that is dependent on overseas trade to a greater extent than most industrialised countries, the assumption that Britain has global interests and responsibilities has held fast for over a century. Successive post-World War 2 British governments have consequently preoccupied themselves with reconciling those interests with dwindling relative power and with articulating variants of global Britain that match its settlement as a middle-ranking power. Churchill set the framework with his ‘three circles’: Britain’s relationships with the US, the Commonwealth and Europe. While over time the relative importance to Britain of each of these circles ebbed and flowed, as did Britain’s ability to leverage them for influence, the foreign policy contours and underlying mindset persisted throughout the Cold War and beyond. Consider, for example, how Prime Minister Blair’s vision of Britain in the world accepted the country’s fall into middle power status but still echoed Churchill’s ideas of global British interests, responsibilities and influence. In 1999 he constructed Britain as a ‘pivotal power’ whereby

We have a new role [...] It is to use the strengths of our history to build our future not as a superpower but as a pivotal power, as a power that is at the crux of the alliances and international politics which shape the world and its future.<sup>54</sup>



These circles serve as mental maps and general characterisations of a British foreign policy that developed in the aftermath of World War 2 and are still discernible in May's BREXIT speech. Dealing with Europe, she positioned Britain as a reliable European partner, vibrant market and staunch supporter of an EU less Britain: 'The decision to leave the EU represents no desire to become more distant to you, our friends and neighbours ... It remains overwhelmingly and compellingly in Britain's national interest that the EU should succeed'. At the same time, May referenced Britain's ties with the Commonwealth and English-speaking world, noting that 'Even now as we prepare to leave the EU, we are planning for the next biennial Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in 2018 – a reminder of our unique and proud global relationships'.<sup>55</sup> She even managed, in a speech about Britain and Europe, to scorn President Obama's warning for Anglo-American relations against BREXIT: 'President Elect Trump has said Britain is not "at the back of the queue" for a trade deal with the United States, the world's biggest economy, but front of the line'.<sup>56</sup>

There is therefore little new in the May mantra of 'Global Britain' – and that is the point as far as Anglo-American relations are concerned. Though it is leaving an international organisation of significant economic weight especially, Britain will remain the most outward-looking partner for the US in Europe and its reflexive Atlanticism will now likely be complemented by even more assiduous cultivation of the special relationship.<sup>57</sup> From the British perspective, the US will be vital in navigating BREXIT and developing 'Global Britain'. The May government will want a strong Anglo-American relationship to help compensate for the loss of EU membership and to work with America in protecting NATO and in influencing from the 'outside' remaining Atlanticist EU states. Also, how America receives BREXIT will be crucial to business and market confidence in Britain, to the speed and interest of other states in concluding trade deals with Britain and to global perception of post-BREXIT Britain.

### **The US and BREXIT: a retreat to 'Little Britain'?**

Functionalist interpretations of specialness in Anglo-American relations especially foreground calculations of mutual utility. The critical question therein is where in the imbalanced relationship now characterising UK-US relations is the tipping point at which the UK no longer warrants special treatment? This calculation was laid bare by the US Embassy London in July 1975:

Our close and unique programs of cooperation will be increasingly vulnerable to criticism if Britain's role as a military partner continues to shrink. This is not stated as a threat but a recognition of inherent relationship between continued cooperation in sensitive fields and politico-military payoff which can be expected as justification for these programs.<sup>58</sup>

Does BREXIT today, as debated in US analyses in 1975, constitute an inevitable British retreat to international irrelevance? The British government unsurprisingly argues not and, with popular support for an internationalist stance, is resolved upon developing 'Global Britain'. From the US perspective, too, there are core facets of the special relationship hitherto calculated as worth preserving which are not directly impacted by BREXIT. The overarching consideration remains that the

US still has no more capable and reliable ally than Britain. In 2017, the British economy ranked fifth in the world by GDP.<sup>59</sup> In 2016, the British defence budget ranked third behind only China and the US. In 2015, OECD figures reveal the UK contributed the second greatest amount of Overseas Development aid behind the US. Britain also retains significant structural power, especially its seat on the UN Security Council, and the residual links of empire and Commonwealth remain useful. Indeed, as the parameters of ‘Global Britain’ are debated, BREXIT has been a fillip for proponents of the Anglo-sphere and / or CANZUK.<sup>60</sup> Just as importantly the UK generally looks actively to use its more limited resources to complement American power, reflecting three calculations unaffected by BREXIT: its operational assumption of staying close to Washington and the calculation that niche assets may best yield influence; a vision of the international order sustained by American power that is arguably uniquely close to that of Washington; and an experiential and culturally informed interpretative lens of world affairs sufficiently similar that Washington and London enjoy a coincidence of policy selection unrivalled by any other set of allies.

What functions can a post-BREXIT Britain perform of relevance to the US superpower? With the caveat of no longer being able to serve as a US stalking horse within the EU, what has necessarily changed pre- and post-BREXIT is limited. Britain can still in principle offer America three important categories of assets: physical and material capability; diplomatic and legitimacy. In terms of legitimacy, Britain can be important in terms of refuting charges of US unilateralism and in maintaining domestic support for US overseas commitments. The long history of Anglo-American cooperation in conflict and the high relative regard the US people have for the British people and their military sacrifice make Britain’s standing alongside the US particularly valuable for American administrations. Consider, for instance, President Johnson’s desperation to have even token British forces in Vietnam<sup>61</sup> and that President George H. Bush considered British participation in the first Gulf War to be ‘terribly important’ as Americans knew that they were not alone.<sup>62</sup>

Diplomatically, Britain’s UN Security Council seat, official nuclear power status and membership of numerous international organisations continue to offer opportunities for Anglo-American cooperation on a range of issues of mutual concern, including non-proliferation, terrorism, ‘states of concern’, money laundering and cyber security. It can also use its diplomatic assets to garner support for the US; a former senior official in the Clinton administration acknowledged that ‘when it doesn’t suit us to push an initiative directly, the British will put it forward instead’.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, Britain’s residual influence in its former empire and in the Commonwealth has proven useful to the US since the Cold War and has potential to remain so. As American focus moves to the Asia-Pacific Britain can potentially assist in safeguarding US interests in Europe whilst also helping the US, through the Commonwealth, to connect the strong points of its global security network. The UK-Australia Defence Treaty announced in January 2013 is noteworthy in this respect, following as it did in the US-UK and the US-Australia Defense Trade Cooperation Treaties.

As for material contributions, the US is a global military hegemon but, especially given blowback from the 2003 Iraq War and simultaneously rising strategic challenges in the Middle East, Asia and Eastern Europe, it does need allies able to make niche contributions, capable of interoperating with US forces and willing to undertake responsibilities the US prefers not to. Britain stands in this context foremost in a

very short queue. Long traditions of cooperation, integrated command structures and access to the same real-time intelligence enable easier and more effective Anglo-American armed coordination than with any other country. A threat landscape that prioritises detection and prevention adds value to Britain's sophisticated contribution to intelligence gathering and analysis. Furthermore, the Trump administration has made very clear the importance it attributes to greater burdensharing; Britain will likely push even harder for NATO military modernisation and strategic re-orientation once removed from the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).

Mining down further into the special relationship, it is again possible to see BREXIT as likely having limited rather than catastrophic impact on core aspects of 'specialness'. The bilateral economic relationship is substantial. In 2015, the US was the UK's largest export partner (19.7%) and second-largest import partner (11.1%). In terms of foreign direct investment (FDI) stocks, the US was the largest single inward investor into the UK (24.5%) and the largest single outward investor for the UK (23.6%) in 2014. From 2005 to 2015, the UK continually ran a trade surplus with the US (with an average value of £28.1 billion) and from 2005 to 2014, the value of FDI stock held in the UK by US investors grew 68.9% to £253.0 billion.<sup>64</sup> Wherever BREXIT leaves Britain relative to the Single European Market will certainly impact some US investment decisions. But these figures reflect much more than Britain's status as an EU member. They reflect also similar economic philosophies and consequent reciprocal confidence in the institutions, policies and economies of the two countries. Indeed the 2008 financial crisis resulted in close Anglo-American consultation<sup>65</sup> and measures, such as the Bank of England regaining oversight of banks in Britain, which further converged financial practices and tightened the step lock between the two economies.

In terms of defence, this is an area where EU involvement is something the US has long been ambivalent about, wanting additional EU burdensharing but fearing a challenge to NATO. Britain within the EU was a strong ally in promoting the former – consider, for instance, the 1998 St Malo agreement – and preventing the latter, including blocking development of a permanent EU military Headquarters. However, BREXIT does not necessarily make more likely an EU defence force that challenges NATO or mean the complete evaporation of British influence vis-à-vis CSDP. First, the loss of Britain so deprives CSDP of already inadequate military capabilities that the threat to NATO primacy has in the short-term at least diminished. Some analysts suggest that Britain accounts for up to 25% of EU defence capability.<sup>66</sup> Any significant EU-led military action will thus likely depend on coalitions of the willing within and without of the EU, including consultation with London. Second, assuming BREXIT negotiations avoid serious damage to diplomatic relations, Britain and the EU are likely to want the former associated in some way with EU defence development.<sup>67</sup>

Meantime, despite criticism of aspects of British military performance in Iraq and Afghanistan, US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter's plea in 2015 that Britain not cut military expenditure smacked heavily of President Johnson's fear in 1968 of being 'left to man the ramparts alone':

Britain has always had an independent ability to express itself and basically punch above its weight ... I'd hate to see that go away because I think it's a great loss to the world when a country of that much history and standing ... takes actions which seem to indicate disengagement ... We need an engaged United Kingdom.<sup>68</sup>

Britain will almost certainly heed this call, not least because cooperation with the US assumes even greater importance as its options to leverage CSDP in British interests diminish. In fact, self-exiled from the EU and in pursuit of ‘Global Britain’, the UK is likely to maintain its military to the maximum of its means, with its two new aircraft carriers providing impressive – if costly – expressions of intent to project power across the world. In addition, projects such as the F35 Joint Strike Fighter contribute both to boosting British power projection capabilities and to tightening the military link with the US in terms not just of procurement but also tactics and strategy. It is noteworthy, for instance, that Britain’s new 65,000-tonne aircraft carrier, HMS *Queen Elizabeth*, will during her maiden voyage tour the South China Sea in late 2020 and play host to a contingent of US Marine Corps F-35Bs.<sup>69</sup> It is interesting, too, that the F-35B marine variant for use on British and American aircraft carriers will soon also be deployable on Japanese Izumo class helicopter carriers, which is expected to provide greater interoperability with the US and Royal navies.<sup>70</sup>

As for the Anglo-American intelligence and nuclear relationships, these have long been irritants to rather than dependent upon the EU. The Echelon global security and intelligence sharing system speaks to levels of trust between key English-speaking countries not mirrored with any EU country. Indeed, while the European Parliament instigated an investigation into Echelon and industrial espionage, Anglo-American cooperation intensified from 9/11 to a point that the UK–US intelligence community was described as being an increasingly fused entity with exceptional ‘networked’ as well as quasi-epistemic qualities’.<sup>71</sup> Within the nuclear domain, a leading analyst argued recently that US–UK nuclear weapon and delivery system collaboration could ‘be argued to have become deeper and wider following the end of the Cold War ... and to be operating on a more equitable (though by no means equal) basis’.<sup>72</sup> Mutual benefits include cooperation on the disarmament and non-proliferation agenda, forensics of nuclear terrorism, design and detection of improvised nuclear explosive devices, and scientific collaboration - including joint work on a new Reliable Replacement Warhead to modernise existing W76-style designs.

### **Managing uncertainty**

Logic suggests that BREXIT will attenuate the Anglo-American special relationship but not to the extent that defence cuts into the 1970s did. BREXIT reflects and strengthens rather than weakens British Atlanticism. It has none of the potential for recrimination of much more serious bilateral disagreements; indeed, President Trump welcomed it. It does not strike vitally at core functional domains of Anglo-American cooperation. And the key sources of resilience in Anglo-American relations – the so-called coral reef or layer cake of transatlantic linkages – remain largely intact.<sup>73</sup>

Yet none of this means the special relationship will not wither as a consequence of BREXIT. Though of significant import, the key determinate herein is not Britain’s reduced influence vis-à-vis EU countries as a result of leaving the Union. True, the US made clear its strong preference for the UK to remain part of the EU and will regret the loss of British insider advocacy of a Union able and willing to better burden-share with the US, of particular policy positions favoured by Washington such as sanctions on Iran and firming European responses to Russia over Ukraine, and of muscular international free trade – irrespective of the Trump administration’s selective

protectionism. At the same time, though, there will likely be some ambiguity in US attitudes towards BREXIT, as indeed there is towards the EU itself. For a start, Britain never developed meaningful trilateralism in the EU as hoped for by Prime Minister Blair<sup>74</sup> and its traditional self-appointed role as a transatlantic bridge had become tenuous at best. Blair equated it to a 'high-wire act' during the Iraq crisis; some suggested that the bridge had collapsed and could not be rebuilt.<sup>75</sup> Washington is actually accustomed to working different key bilateral relations with EU countries dependent upon the issues at hand. The US will likely also continue to work with London to court remaining EU Atlanticists and use fears of Russia in Eastern Europe to strengthen NATO. Some, such as former US Ambassador to the UN John Bolton, have even suggested that Britain liberated of the EU will be a stronger partner to the US in renewing NATO.<sup>76</sup>

Those in Washington critical of resource duplication and possible EU rivalry with NATO through CSDP could also see BREXIT as an opportunity to deal a reassuring blow to a meaningful autonomous EU defence capability that decouples the Atlantic Alliance. Admittedly, France and Germany have reacted to BREXIT with renewed interest in boosting CSDP, the EU has agreed to deploy the Community budget for the first time for military purposes, and 25 member states have committed to permanent structured cooperation (PESCO) in defence matters.<sup>77</sup> Nevertheless, Britain was arguably the EU's most outward-looking and militarily capable power. Subsequent EU access to these assets on an at best ad hoc case-by-case basis constitutes a major blow to its ability to meet the full range of Petersberg tasks. Furthermore, with France's President Macron indicating that French defence spending may not hit the NATO target of 2% GDP until 2025,<sup>78</sup> France is unlikely to lead solely EU states into much beyond low end Petersberg tasks. More challenging scenarios will generally still be negotiated through national capitols, especially London and Washington. And even if PESCO does deliver better than have other initiatives thus far, such as the European Defence Agency, procurement lead times for modern weapons systems especially are so extended that it will likely be years before meaningful EU-generated capability uplift could be in place.

Assuming BREXIT does not shake the UK apart constitutionally,<sup>79</sup> the likelihood of which has receded somewhat since Scottish Nationalist Party losses in the 2017 General Election, the key to the future of the special relationship will be Britain's ability to re-orientate its external relations such that it has the economic capacity to 'pay the price' of influence in Washington. Already, for instance, the relative decline in the value of sterling is putting pressure on British defence equipment spending. In turn, this will depend on the eventual terms of BREXIT and of extra-EU reaction to them. Naturally, there is much speculation about the outcome of negotiations but the simple fact is that at the time of writing nobody knows how BREXIT will play out and what consequences it will have for Britain, the EU, wider international relations and the global economy. What is certain, though, in terms of Anglo-American relations is that the US has a key role to play in the BREXIT negotiations. Assuming that the US wants Britain to remain as strong as possible then the White House needs to shape actively a constructive environment surrounding Britain and the BREXIT talks. Herein Trump made a promising start, at least symbolically so. He returned the bust of Winston Churchill so controversially removed by his predecessor to the Oval Office. He made Prime Minister May the first foreign leader to be invited to the White House and not only readily indulged the special relationship rhetoric but

in stark contrast to Obama, drew attention to his familial roots in the UK. He also broke with the standard American posture by welcoming BREXIT, declaring a ‘free and independent Britain is a blessing to the world’,<sup>80</sup> and by dismissing Obama’s suggestion that post-BREXIT Britain would be at the back of the queue for a trade deal with the US. Going beyond these atmospherics, signs of active Anglo-American development of a Free Trade Agreement in readiness for BREXIT would help maintain business and market confidence in Britain. Sustained American engagement could also help consolidate NATO primacy at a time of new uncertainty and diminished capabilities within CSDP. Furthermore, quiet behind-the-scenes American diplomacy might facilitate a BREXIT deal that the 27 EU countries plus Britain could all live with.

Yet the timing for close Anglo-American coordination in managing BREXIT is unpropitious. May’s ‘Global Britain’ is premised on developing British prosperity and influence through a liberal, rules-based international order where the UK can leverage its membership of international institutions, especially the UN, its network of alliances, and partnerships – old and new. It also depends on Britain being able to re-orientate its foreign economic relations, which in turn means a strong interest in global free trade. Hence, for example, the government has invested in developing a ‘golden relationship’ with China. The Trump administration’s aggressive ‘America first’ programme, epitomised by strong rhetoric against China and abandonment of the Trans-Pacific Partnership free trade deal, rubs up against not only British interests but also the essential basis of the post-WW2 Anglo-American order. It also risks provoking new global relationships that challenge Anglo-American leadership of the international order. For instance, US withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement has encouraged the emergence of an EU–China partnership in environmental leadership. Similarly, and even more problematically for Britain, Trump has sent damaging mixed messages on NATO, calling it ‘obsolete’ – and then ‘no longer obsolete’, and declining to reaffirm explicitly his commitment to Article 5 in a set piece speech at NATO’s headquarters in May 2017.<sup>81</sup> Following that NATO meeting and a difficult G7 conference, Germany’s Chancellor Merkel felt compelled to declare ‘The times in which we could completely depend on others are, to a certain extent, over ... We Europeans truly have to take our fate into our own hands’.<sup>82</sup> It would be strongly contrary to post-BREXIT British interests were the EU to devote time and resources to building security capabilities as a hedge against US desertion rather than in partnership with NATO.

Washington’s general attitude towards the BREXIT process also potentially carries risks. The Trump administration might continue the ‘benign neglect’ of Anglo-American relations that characterised much of the Obama period, an approach driven not by intent but by preoccupation with domestic challenges and with threats in the Middle East and Asia especially.<sup>83</sup> This is increasingly possible given the speed at which Trump’s approval ratings have fallen, his domestic agenda become stymied and his administration mired in controversy and instability. Alternatively – or in addition – Washington might operate on the assumption that BREXIT so increases British dependence on the US that Britain’s support can be ever more taken for granted. Both scenarios are problematic. The former would likely mean Washington failing to leverage its influence over BREXIT positively. The latter would be dangerous in terms of elite and popular British sentiment towards America, especially at a time when Trump himself is so lowly regarded beyond his support base in the US.<sup>84</sup>



British sensitivity is high to American rhetoric and to accusations of the British bulldog being neutered to the point of being Uncle Sam's poodle. This was evidenced in the uproar that greeted Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson's statement in April 2017 that, despite a 2013 House of Commons vote that blocked at that time British military action against Syria for its use of sarin gas, 'I think it would be very difficult for the United Kingdom to say no' were the US to ask for British participation in a new round of strikes on Syria in reprisal for its use of chemical weapons.<sup>85</sup>

Finally these dangers are, at the time of writing, compounded by significant obstacles to May and Trump developing a strong personal relationship from what was a promising start. May's poor performance in the 2017 General Election diminished her international stature, weakened Britain's BREXIT negotiating position vis-à-vis the EU-27 and plunged the UK into political uncertainty. Coupled with a calamitous closing speech at the Conservative Party Conference during which May was presented with a fictitious P45 document and inability to hold discipline within the Conservative Party over BREXIT, all of this suggests that May's attention will for the foreseeable future be dominated by the fight for political survival in a hung parliament and against potential leadership challenges.<sup>86</sup> Meantime Trump's controversial policies and twitter diplomacy have attained a toxicity that raises the political price for any British Prime Minister in maintaining a close relationship with the White House and jeopardises popular British support for American policies. Former British Ambassador to the US, Sir Christopher Meyer, declared undiplomatically in June 2017 that 'Trump makes me puke'. And in a swipe at Theresa May's January 2017 visit to Trump, Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn promised British voters in June 2017 'no more hand-holding with Donald Trump' and that a Labour government would 'conduct a robust and independent foreign policy made in London'.<sup>87</sup> The charge made political capital, though the irony seems to have been lost that Cameron made a similar criticism of Gordon Brown during the 2010 General Election, promising to be 'solid not slavish' in managing Britain's relations with the US.<sup>88</sup>

Past precedents indicate that Anglo-American relations are very capable of enduring periods of poor President–Prime Minister relations and of then thriving following changes in government or circumstance. There is no reason to suspect that this capacity has been lost and a good likelihood that in the not too distant future US politics will return to a more internationalist posture and American diplomacy revert to more conventional modes. The key issue with regard to BREXIT, though, is that for the duration of the negotiations, barring unforeseen circumstances, Britain and America will have uncertain political leaderships that are preoccupied with matters other than Anglo-American relations. May and Trump are also unlikely to develop a close President–Prime Minister relationship capable of holding US attention to the BREXIT process and of ensuring that American influence is exercised constructively. Even traditional demonstrations of Anglo-American amity at the highest diplomatic levels appear difficult; Trump's planned visit to the UK has already been thrice postponed amid fears of popular protest.<sup>89</sup>

## **Conclusion**

History suggests that Anglo-American relations have a demonstrable resilience to bilateral shocks, a capacity to adjust to circumstance and an enduring quality that

sets them aside from most other international relationships. This does not mean that the balance of advantage in a highly asymmetric relationship will not at some point tip Anglo-American relations such that Britain regards the price of staying close to America as too high or America regards Britain as so enfeebled as to not warrant special treatment. BREXIT, though, is unlikely to be that moment. The loss of British influence in the EU is significant for Britain and the US but it is also an essentially collateral shock for Anglo-American relations in the sense that it impinges in limited ways directly on their core aspects of functional bi-lateral cooperation and on Britain's status as America's most capable ally. In August 2017, researchers at European Geostategy actually ranked the UK as the only global power – one step down from superpower (the US) and defined as 'A country lacking the heft or comprehensive attributes of a superpower, but still with a wide international footprint and [military] means to reach most geopolitical theatres, particularly the Middle East, South-East Asia, East Asia, Africa and South America'.<sup>90</sup>

Britain and the EU will, to Washington's frustration, likely become more introverted over the next couple of years. Hammering out the terms of BREXIT and managing a probable transition period will dominate EU–UK relations. The May government will have to wrestle with a hung parliament and likely ongoing questions about its leadership. And the EU will have to devote considerable energy to managing immigration, securing the euro and to combating ascendant forces of populism, nationalism and separatism, as illustrated in Catalonia's highly charged push for independence from Spain. There will be economic uncertainty, too, as exchange rates and markets fluctuate in response to announcements and speculation about the terms and modes of British withdrawal from the EU.

Nevertheless, Anglo-American defence, intelligence and military cooperation all generally take place outside of the EU. And post-BREXIT, the UK is likely to become ever closer tied to American economic cycles and to look even more to international markets in and influenced by the US. Indeed, just as when opposing British defence cuts in the 1960s/1970s, the American apocalyptic discourse of opposition to BREXIT has already given way to pragmatic adjustment. Similarly in 'Global Britain', the May government is seeking to dismiss the predictions made in 1974/1975 and in 2015/2016 that British retreat from the EC/EU would bequeath a 'little Britain'. In this task, of course, she is helped by growing US ambivalence about the EU, the very limited list of capable and reliable allies at US disposal, and by American desires of Britain being now of a quantitatively different (lesser) order than was the case during the Cold War. Britain remains committed to trident, a key partner within Echelon and capable of making niche contributions of military and legitimacy value to the US. Furthermore, assuming the Trump administration does nothing to provoke a solidarity in CSDP hitherto unseen amongst the EU-27, BREXIT can at least in the short-term reduce US worries about a credible independent EU defence force, *de facto* bolster NATO primacy and potentially reinforce the Atlanticism of some remaining EU member states – especially if Russia maintains its current pressure in Eastern Europe.

The lasting significance of BREXIT for the special relationship, therefore, lies in what the eventual terms agreed between the UK and EU, and international reaction to them, mean for British economic strength and the consequent credibility of 'Global Britain'. These BREXIT negotiations are obviously a UK–EU bilateral affair but the US will have a significant bearing on how Britain – and the special

relationship – fare as a consequence of them. The Trump administration made encouraging noises about post-BREXIT Britain and freely indulged the trappings of the special relationship during Prime Minister May's visit to the White House in January 2017.<sup>91</sup> Washington could both further shield Britain during BREXIT against the vicissitudes of uncertainty and speculation and capitalise upon EU uncertainty to boost Atlanticism. Indeed, constructive American diplomacy, public demonstrations of Anglo-American amity and continued functional cooperation ought in principle to help BREXIT impact the special relationship less than some other shocks that it has survived – including the British defence cuts of the 1960s/1970s.

The worrisome issue herein, though, is that the BREXIT timetable is progressing at a particularly unpropitious moment. Trump's 'America first' programme is less consonant with 'Global Britain' than was President Obama's worldview of multilateralism when possible, international institutions and free trade. The initial promise of a strong President–Prime Minister relationship to navigate differences and coordinate positive atmospherics of the special relationship has run up against Trump's unpredictable and controversial leadership and May's post-General Election status as what former British Chancellor George Osborne has called 'dead woman walking'.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, this uncertainty 'at the top' of the Anglo-American 'coral reef' of bureaucratic intermingling magnifies the dangers flowing from the relative importance of BREXIT within American global foreign policy concerns. Those expecting the logic of Anglo-American cooperation to deliver sustained and constructive US engagement in the BREXIT process and its aftermath should at least draw pause from a warning offered by Patrick Dean, British Ambassador to Washington, in July 1968: the Americans 'with so much else to think about ... have little time or inclination at present to remember their friends or to consider their worth to themselves'.<sup>93</sup> It is a caution that holds as good, if not more so, today as it did at the time.

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### **Notes on contributor**

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