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Geostrategy

A Strained Special Relationship
Georgina Wright

A Strained Special Relationship

By Georgina Wright | April 22, 2024

British foreign policy goals will remain the same after upcoming UK and US elections but achieving them may become much harder.

Voters in the United Kingdom and the United States are expected to go the polls within weeks of each other later this year. Such a coincidence last happened in 1992. But unlike then, the US election will be the one to have more bearing on British foreign policy, especially if Donald Trump wins.

That policy is unlikely to change drastically even if, as polls predict, the Labour Party returns to power after 14 years in opposition. All major parties are committed to an open and stable international order, to defending European security, and to building strong international partnerships. The real concern is one of means: The UK economy is sluggish and has the lowest levels of investment of any G7 state. Without growth, London will find it difficult to spend more on defense and security without cutting elsewhere. Given huge problems facing the National Health Service and other public-sector agencies, domestically unpopular decisions lie ahead.

The United States' position as Britain's principal ally and partner will also remain unchanged, regardless of November's winner. The countries enjoy deep bilateral ties in political, diplomatic, military, and intelligence circles. A second Trump administration may loosen those ties, but they will not dissolve. The next British government will do all it can to preserve the UK-US "special relationship".

Finally, the US election outcome, whatever it may be, is likely to continue pushing the United Kingdom and its European partners closer. Washington has for years made clear its desire to reduce its presence in Europe and focus its attention elsewhere. Reduced American presence and support, however, poses a significant risk for European security, including for a United Kingdom that lacks the capabilities and leadership to replace the United States. For Conservatives and Labour alike, this means strengthening NATO's European pillar. For Labour, it also means a renewed foreign and security partnership with the EU. The speed and structure of this London-Brussels rapprochement, however, remain uncertain.

The contours of British foreign policy, therefore, will remain much as they are. But new challenges are likely to arise.

Keeping the United States in Europe

Britain's top foreign policy priority will be ensuring that Washington continues to invest in European security and Ukraine. Should President Joe Biden be reelected, the United Kingdom will assume that Congress, rather than the Oval Office, is the greater risk to continued US support and concentrate its lobbying efforts on Capitol Hill. The next US mid-term elections will soon be on the horizon, and London will want to have good working relations with both parties.

The UK's approach would be only slightly different under a new Trump administration. The former president has campaigned on foreign policy positions that are continually at odds with Britain's. He has said that he would end military support to Ukraine and pull the United States out of NATO, the cornerstone of UK foreign policy. He has also said that he would encourage Ukraine to accept a negotiated settlement with Russia, even if this meant surrendering territory. A future UK government is likely to devote considerable effort to convince Trump and Congress that these are bad ideas. In fact, this

has already begun. Foreign Secretary Lord Cameron's recent dinner with the presidential nominee at Mar-a-Lago is part of this strategy.

London still knows that it cannot bank on Trump's clemency and would prioritize discussions on strengthening NATO's European pillar. A Trump return might also force new thinking on British collaboration with individual European countries, especially France and Germany. A Labour government would aim for new defense treaties.

Trump-proofing Indo-Pacific Alliances

A future UK government will also seek continued close collaboration with the United States in the Asia-Pacific through the AUKUS pact and Five Eyes intelligence group.

But here, too, a Trump return could prove problematic. He appears not to value alliances or partnerships and is likely to scrap any deal for which US tangible costs exceed benefits. Five Eyes is likely to continue regardless of who occupies the Oval Office, so London will work to keep the AUKUS deal viable. One challenge in this regard is Trump's threat to impose a 10% tariff on all imports, including on defense materials. This could substantially increase the cost of nuclear submarines for AUKUS signatories, especially if components are sourced from outside of the United States. The United Kingdom and Australia will be keen to avert this.

Concerning the People's Republic of China, Trump is likely to pursue US interests unilaterally. He will not hesitate to force allies to adopt measures similar to his, either by threatening the withdrawal of US defense support or by imposing new sanctions on allied countries' companies. A second Biden term is also likely to seek more alignment with Washington's policy toward Beijing. Biden may prioritize diplomacy over open conflict, but he, too, could use US unilateral sanctions to cajole allies.

Trade Headaches

Despite all the potential for turbulence, the US trade agenda is likely to be London's biggest foreign policy challenge in bilateral relations. The United States is Britain's largest single-country trading partner (US-UK trade was \$392.7 billion in 2023), yet both countries have failed to overcome long-standing trade issues. Biden has shelved negotiations, and Trump is likely to make imports of notorious chlorinated chicken, among other products, a condition of any comprehensive pact. This will be difficult for any future British government to swallow. London is instead likely to pursue more targeted deals, like the one it is currently negotiating on critical raw materials. Agreements on quantum or artificial intelligence, for example, could follow.

US industrial policy and its potential to continue fragmenting the international economic order will also remain a particular concern. Washington's Inflation Reduction Act, and its CHIPS and Science Act, poured unprecedented amounts of money into strategic innovation and production while making it harder for non-American firms to compete with and export to the US. A Trump administration is unlikely to stop this.

The Work Ahead

Back in 2016, UK foreign policy relied on two pillars: economic integration with Europe and close alignment with United States. Brexit rocked the first, and the approaching presidential vote could strain the second. London has already begun planning for different US election outcomes, and discrete discussions have taken place with governments across Europe and beyond.

Whatever the election outcome, it will force Britain to reappraise the "special relationship" and, probably, accelerate rapprochement with Europe, especially if Labour assumes power. The latter process will require the United Kingdom to clearly determine the circumstances under which it wants to distance itself from Washington. That process has yet to begin.

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