

Opinion – Breaking Free From the Special Relationship

Written by Alexander Brotman

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ALEXANDER BROTMAN, MAR 11 2025

As Sir Keir Starmer visited Washington last week to meet with President Trump to discuss Ukraine, the fate of the special relationship between the US and the UK has begun to feel like a relic of another era. From Washington's perspective, Britain is a strategic partner on certain issues with incredible soft power yet lacking the hard power to carry its own weight in international affairs. The UK has not been a superpower, let alone a great power for some time, but as Washington is now a superpower in an increasingly multipolar world, the UK's power and influence will be continually tested.

For Starmer and members of both the Labour and Conservative parties in Britain, it is important to remain on friendly terms with the United States and to cooperate on critical issues. Any cooperation and cordiality should not be interpreted as special treatment, however, and the UK's place on the list of America's model allies is now far from the top. Furthermore, President Trump may enjoy the pomp and pageantry of a second state visit to London, but it risks becoming a piece of performance art in service of a bygone era, an invitation wrapped in forced superlatives rather than sincere substance.

Before making his way to Washington, Starmer announced an increase in defence spending to 2.5% of GDP by 2027, a welcome move, but still short of where other NATO alliance members like Poland and the Baltic states sit at between 4 and 5%. Over the past few years, Britain has proven to be an indispensable member of NATO in standing up for the alliance's values and supporting Ukraine with military kit that has made a marked difference on the battlefield. This has led to Boris Johnson being more popular in Kyiv than in London, where streets now bear the former prime minister's name.

The UK's principled cross-party stance on Ukraine is arguably more consistent than that of the US, and Starmer's hosting of a major summit to discuss the future of Ukraine carries even more weight now that Trump is back in power. The UK can claim greater moral leadership on Ukraine and European security than the United States, and it is Ukraine that now links Britain more closely to the continent it chose to sever its ties with in that fractious referendum close to a decade ago.

A 'coalition of the willing', of like-minded states from Britain to Poland and Estonia, likely absent US leadership or support, will be the key to victory for Ukraine and its Euro-Atlantic integration in the long-term. The core tenets of the special relationship lack their significance if the world is becoming more fractured and prone to ad-hoc alliances over specific issues rather than coordinated multilateral engagement. Just as the collapse of the special relationship is a natural effect of changing power dynamics, Britain's ability to leverage its distance with Washington to enhance its support for Ukraine is a result of these same forces. There is no immediate risk of the UK abandoning Ukraine, and that is a tremendous advantage for Starmer as he seeks to navigate his place in Europe during the Trump presidency.

The UK has historically played the role of Washington's 'bridge to Europe', advocating for a shared set of interests on the continent and deciphering the machinations of other states like France and Germany. Given Trump's preference for more transactional and bilateral relations over multilateral ones, coupled with Trump's disdain for the EU, Britain still has an important role to play in advocating for Europe without being tethered to its institutions that are widely seen as too cumbersome and bureaucratic.

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The UK is now purely independent and sovereign, something Trump admires, and which is both its strength and its vulnerability in a more fractured world. The same is true of Poland, increasingly becoming Washington's closest military ally in Europe, and a 'model ally' in the words of Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth when it comes to defence spending. Both states are strong supporters of Ukraine and fully sovereign when it comes to advocating for their interests in Europe while also sharing a deep Euroscepticism that has profoundly influenced domestic politics.

As Europe and the UK reconcile their place in the world under the second Trump administration, the healthiest ingredient for all parties is a heavy dose of realism. Europe can step up to the plate if it has the will to do so, and the UK can assist Europe in that process, not as a member of a supranational union but as a committed observer and partner to the affairs of the continent whose security is imperative for its own. In the same spirit of realism, it is important to acknowledge that Britain's place in the alliance and ladder of partners for Washington is diminished from where it was in previous decades. Even President Obama, who got along famously well with British Prime Minister David Cameron, warned that the special relationship was at risk so long as the UK didn't increase its defence spending.

To say the special relationship is not coming back and indeed does not have a place in this century is not to discount the significant role that it played in the last one. Rather, the fracturing of the relationship is now a vehicle by which Britain can pursue its interests in Europe and globally that will continue to diverge from those of Washington's. In Ukraine, London sees Zelenskyy as a modern-day Churchill standing up against a tyrannical aggressor. In Washington, the bust of Churchill symbolically presides over the collapse of America's moral authority and strategic leadership as Trump and Vice President Vance choose to berate Zelenskyy in the Oval Office.

For Britain to remain a middle power in the 21st century, it must re-establish its links with Europe on critical security and economic issues and begin to sever its strategic bridge with the United States. President Biden prematurely claimed that America was back when he spoke to European allies after his election, and those allies largely assumed a position of complacency once again under US security guarantees. The America that is now back is more revanchist and wedded to classical concepts of spheres of influence for great powers that fundamentally weaken calls by lesser powers for self-determination and autonomy.

In examining this current dynamic, Churchill's remark that 'Americans will always do the right thing after they have exhausted all other possibilities' remains prescient. Right now, those possibilities are unfortunately acts of self-harm under the guise of an America first agenda, and the UK and Europe would be wise to develop their own sphere of influence before they are subsumed by one not of their own making.

About the author:

Alexander Brotman is a political risk and intelligence analyst with a focus on EU politics and security developments. He has written for several political risk publications, including Global Risk Insights, Foreign Brief, and Geopolitical Monitor, and has provided direct research support to a leading scholar of Russia and Eurasia in Washington. Alexander received his MSc. in International Relations from The University of Edinburgh. He is currently based in Washington DC.

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