

America's New Best Friend: The UK vs Japan

Written by Peter Matanle

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2017/02/26/americas-new-best-friend-the-uk-vs-japan/>

PETER MATANLE, FEB 26 2017

Prime Minister Abe of Japan returned to Tokyo on Sunday 12 February having sealed his country's position as a principal ally of the United States of America, in the process potentially even ousting the United Kingdom from its long-treasured 'Special Relationship'. Leaving aside, first of all, the question of whether the UK or Japan should wish to deepen relations with the USA, given the nature of the new administration, both Theresa May and Shinzo Abe – in their rush to be the first leaders to cross the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans to meet with and congratulate President Trump for his 'stunning election victory' – have been keen to cement a special role for themselves and their country in the foreign policy of the world's only superpower.

Despite that awkward 19 second handshake in the White House's Oval Office on Friday, President Donald Trump has thus far emphasised Japan's special status, by taking PM Shinzo Abe and wife Akie on Air Force One to Trump's beachside resort at Mar-a-Lago in Florida, and extending an invitation to play golf at Trump's Jupiter golf course. This has enabled them to engage in extended discussions on matters of mutual concern, as well as to get to know one another personally. And it bears repeating that Abe was the first foreign leader to meet face to face with Trump after the presidential election, when he briefly visited the President-Elect at Trump Tower on 18 November 2016, making Abe the only foreign leader thus far to have met Trump twice since 8 November.

The warmth and time reserved for the Abe visit contrasts with that given Prime Minister Theresa May of the UK on her visit in mid-January. Other than being led – again awkwardly – by the hand along the White House Colonnade, May had a working visit to the White House without the social events extended to Abe. Perhaps that was at the UK's behest. On the diplomatic side, Trump's only gift to the UK was nothing of the kind, since it was a reiteration of the longstanding US commitment to NATO, which Trump had questioned during the election campaign, intending to fire up his base and wring concessions from European allies.

Instead, it was May who offered special personal favours to the incoming President Trump, by inviting him on a State Visit to the UK later this year, which will include a banquet at Buckingham Palace and a parade along the streets of central London seated alongside Queen Elizabeth in a horse-drawn carriage.

Coming so soon into a controversial President's first term, this looked like an act of desperation on May's part, forced upon her by the international consequences of the UK's impending exit from the European Union. Criticisms that May's invitation was premature and ill-advised gained traction when, upon returning to the UK, she had to endure the embarrassment of being seen to cosy up to a regime that would implement an illegal blanket ban on travellers with citizenship of seven majority Muslim Middle Eastern countries.

It is expected that countries will compete for attention in the early days of a new American Presidency, and normal for the leaders of the UK, Japan, Canada and Mexico to be among the first visitors to Washington. Underlying this round of diplomatic jostling, however, lies a troubling message for the UK over the longer term, which Japan is deftly exploiting to reposition itself.

Playing a clever game of one-upmanship, and offering a more substantive partnership with the US, Prime Minister Abe is proposing to help Trump retain support at home with promises to generate approximately 700,000 high quality American jobs in high technology industries, in addition to the usual soothing message of cooperation with the US in

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security and diplomacy in East Asia. Alongside developing Japanese Shinkansen (Bullet train) technology to build state-of-the-art high-speed lines in the US, Abe and Trump together announced plans for Japanese investments in the American energy and communications sectors, and for US-Japan partnerships to sell technologies on to third countries.

Following the election of Donald Trump, many EU leaders – notably German Chancellor Angela Merkel – are adopting an arms-length approach in their relations with the US, which makes Theresa May's offer of a State Visit all the more noticeable for its gushing eagerness. Europeans are consequently questioning the usefulness of the UK as their trustworthy intermediary, given its rejection of close relations with its EU partners. President Dalia Grybauskaitė of Lithuania went so far as to mock both the UK and US by saying, 'I don't think there is a necessity for a bridge ... we communicate with the Americans on Twitter'.

Until 2016 Britain had been adept at compensating for its waning economic and military power with a series of diplomatic alliances based on its unique cultural geography as the 'mother country' for the Anglophone sphere, former imperial and mercantilist power, and being part of Europe but physically detached from it. This enabled the UK to 'punch above its weight' in international affairs by constructing a role for itself as diplomatic pivot between its EU neighbours, the USA, the former Imperial colonies turned Commonwealth partners, and Japan.

However, no longer trusted by its EU partners to act in accordance with the foundational principles of European solidarity, the UK has suddenly lost its role as a trans-Atlantic bridge. Given that the UK no longer has an automatic place reserved for its leaders at EU meetings, Americans understand that British views carry little weight in European decision making, and the US is less motivated to cultivate a 'special relationship' – though happy to maintain vestiges of its appearance. Even as the UK seeks to re-invigorate relations with former colonies, a return to the 1950s is not on the cards, since most have long ago cut themselves free and established relationships of their own.

At its own behest Britain's diplomatic world has been suddenly overturned, and in 2017 it has fewer levers to pull to its advantage. With Brexit, other countries sense that the UK's traditional international role no longer fits the country as it is becoming domestically. The UK is beginning to look surprisingly uncomfortable in world affairs these days – even isolated and weakened.

Enter Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan, a conservative nationalist eager for his country to escape its own post-war constraints. Lest we forget, Japan was also the first non-EU country to express international dismay at the British decision to leave the world's largest trading bloc. Britain's Brexit weakness and the disorder prompted by the election of President Donald Trump simultaneously have given Abe the opportunity he wants to re-invigorate Japan's role as an active participant, even leader, in international affairs by replacing Britain as America's Best Friend.

The first round has been won by Prime Minister Abe. With no economic advantages comparable to those which Japan can utilise to court US interest – particularly as the UK's position as an offshore island for exporting to the rest of the EU is about to end – the decision to Brexit finds Britain at an international crossroads. Despite some worthy public optimism shown by the government, Britain's post-referendum diplomacy reveals the UK losing standing and influence in the world – not just with our EU neighbours, but with our principal and strongest ally, the United States.

The challenge in the months and years ahead will be to ensure that Britain's deepening international isolation and weakness can be reversed with the discovery of a new purpose and place at the centre of world affairs.

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