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# The impact of changing global rules on UK foreign policy: a choice between ambition or stagnation

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## **Abstract**

This analysis focuses on the extent to which the newly emerging world order, evidenced by the initial steps taken by the Trump administration, is likely to affect both the United Kingdom's foreign policy and also its direct relationship with the United States. By first taking note of the underlying changes the international system is experiencing, the analysis will propose that US-UK relations have deviated from its traditional pattern. It will consider the implications that a more independent UK foreign policy, one that relies less on its ties with the US, might have on European and also international security. To pin down specific areas of converging US and UK interests, the analysis will consider how the Trump era might influence the UK's approach to Ukraine, the Israel-Palestine conflict, defence cooperation with the EU and also broader security impacts on regions like the South Caucasus.

## **Introduction - The electorate and recent decisions**

The return of Donald Trump to the American presidency almost immediately led to the previously expected rise in geopolitical uncertainty, diplomatic confrontation and the improvisational reconfiguration of interests by various powers across the international system. The president's inherent scepticism of international institutions, and therefore, the traditional practice of international cooperation, clashes directly with the ideals that have underpinned the Western liberal order for decades. This is a serious and deep-rooted issue, powerful enough to shake even the most loyal of alliances. Exacerbated by multiple armed conflicts currently taking place, the situation the international system finds itself in runs the risk of turning what was previously an international order into an international ['disorder'](#).

Both the United Kingdom and the United States recently experienced a change in government, with Donald Trump's inauguration culminating an intense period of elections in the Western world. Elections in Europe and the US are characterized by an intense polarization, with it becoming increasingly challenging to predict the behaviour and preferences of the electorate. Recently, this polarization has surpassed the traditional pre-electoral period and has begun to affect every-day governance like arguably never before. Whether it's Elon Musk's, now an official government official, [remarks](#) about the UK Prime Minister or the American Vice

President's fiery [exchanges](#) on social media platforms with members of the British political class, the traditionally warm diplomacy that differentiated US-UK relations from others appears to be in the past.

In this case, the initiator of the tension is clearly the American side. This represents a much deeper trend on the geopolitical level, with the US diverting away from acting as the 'standard' setter for the Western world. With Donald Trump's election, this process is likely to gain significant traction, with the US pursuing an unprecedentedly transactional foreign policy where it does not rush to justify its actions that others may deem as inappropriate. One such example is Trump's rhetoric regarding Greenland, where he has gone as far as refusing to rule out military action should American conditions not be complied with. Such statements add even more ambiguity to the current state of the international order, where rules that govern interstate relations are increasingly blurred and their application is increasingly selective. Therefore, given the UK's traditional role as the US's closest ally, it will be interesting to observe the extent to which this new 'style' of governance might harm a bilateral relationship that arguably forms the essence of the Transatlantic relationship.

### **Musk's interference into UK politics**

The current situation, however, extends beyond conventional diplomatic frigidity that might occur pre- or post-election. Elon Musk, the director of the Trump Administration's inaugural Department of Government Efficiency, has vehemently criticized the current Labour leadership and has even accused the newly elected government of covering up national scandals. He has used his personal social media platform to question the legitimacy of the government, citing Keir Starmer's low approval ratings among the British public. Whether such aggressive rhetoric is Musk's own approach, which is understandable given his general unorthodoxy, is to be determined. However, an American government official interfering in the British domestic political arena by expressing outright support for far-right parties (tweets supporting [Reform UK](#) and even extremist [Tommy Robinson](#)) is unprecedented. Moreover, Musk's complete takeover of social media platform X (formerly Twitter), runs the risk of magnifying what is already a hostile political environment. Crucially, someone with Musk's boldness and unpredictability is unlikely to simply alter his strategy. The fact that he continues to express his thoughts so openly implies that to at least some extent, this aligns with the Administration's broader position. If Musk was to succeed in turning popular opinion in the UK against Labour, the potential

emergence of a far-right alliance in the next British general election becomes more likely. This will generate concerns about the UK's foreign policy, specifically its approach to Europe and position on vital issues like trade and immigration.

### **The impact of changing global rules on UK foreign policy**

Ever since the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union (EU), its foreign policy agenda has undergone a considerable period of uncertainty. Initially preoccupied with establishing new ways of working with the EU and formalizing a new 'status' for the already highly complex relationship, the UK attempted to implement a ["Global Britain"](#) agenda which emphasized the development of trade relations with new, non-traditional partners. The root of this policy is closely connected with the belief among the British political community that the UK has lost its previously high-profile international status and has taken a back seat in key areas such as humanitarianism and conflict management. This cast doubt over the 'special relationship' and whether the UK, amidst the then potential and now confirmed arrival of Donald Trump, could continue trading and cooperating with the US in the same way it has become used to.

UK Foreign Secretary David Lammy's newly outlined ["progressive realism"](#) doctrine does indicate some degree of an adaptation to new realities. It hints at the fact that the UK has, in certain instances, fought 'too hard' and unrealistically in the pursuit of certain 'ideals'. Lammy describes the diplomacy pursued by the previous Conservative government as ['gaffe-prone'](#), suggesting that the UK's image in the international arena took significant damage. Instead, Lammy argues that all decisions and policies must reflect a balanced and pragmatic attitude that prioritizes the serving of global goals *without* setting unrealistic expectations. Lammy elaborates by proposing that such goals must be met with 'realist' means but not in the traditional sense of maximizing power and transactionalism. It remains to be seen, however, whether this will clash with a Trump administration that has demonstrated an extremely hostile rhetoric towards even some of its traditionally closest allies. Trump's continuous threatening of Canada and Mexico with coercive economic action and even refusing to categorically [rule out](#) the use of military force suggests that the new Administration does not appear to be bound by a commitment to the now rapidly eroding rules-based order. Instead, the US has entered a new era which can be defined as the ["post-American world order"](#) in which the US no longer feels the moral responsibility of first presenting and then adhering to specific guidelines.

## The Special Relationship

The relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom has historically drawn significant academic attention on both sides of the Atlantic. The depth of the alliance is undeniable, with the countries sharing a [high-level intelligence partnership](#), historically conducting joint military partnerships and forming a part of alliance such as AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom, United States) that are regarded as counter-balancing efforts against Chinese influence. Nevertheless, there are some in academia that are sceptical about whether the word 'special' accurately represents day-to-day reality. These doubts tend to originate more on the British side. With America being Britain's significantly larger and more powerful ally, the maintenance of the relationship in good health is arguably more aligned with British rather than American interests. This said, the role of the individual in foreign affairs is not to be understated, with different American administrations demonstrating different levels of enthusiasm for working with the UK. This feels particularly relevant today, with Donald Trump doubling down on his 'America First' approach that includes taking a step back from international alliances that do not necessarily bring immediate benefits to the American economy. Among these is the Transatlantic alliance between the US, Europe and the United Kingdom, which Trump feels is heavily unbalanced and unfair towards the American side.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that the UK has always differed from other European allies of the US. In particular, Donald Trump tends to single out EU member states for their inadequate defence policies and over-reliance on the American security umbrella. This also concerned the UK until Brexit, which did itself have a complicated history of Euro-scepticism that pushed for a more independent foreign policy that did not mirror those policies pursued in Brussels. Trump's recent statements shed more light on what one can expect from the new Administration's approach to the UK, suggesting that relations with the UK will in fact be conducted on a separate wavelength to relations with the EU. When pointing out that America's European allies have been "way out of line" and need to face consequences for their passive attitudes towards collective defence, he adopted a [softer tone](#) on the UK, noting that despite evident issues, 'something' could be figured out. Moreover, it was later revealed that following a conversation with the Mexican President, Trump agreed to delay the imposition of tariffs for a month in return for Mexico deploying [10,000 soldiers](#) to the Mexican American border, assisting with the implementation of Trump's various immigration policies. This reiterates the transactionalism mentioned initially, with the Trump administration

deliberately flexing its economic and military might to swiftly obtain results without incurring any needless economic costs.

The exact approach that President Trump ultimately adopts will have profound implications on the European continent. Decades long debates about the nature of the EU's foreign policy have failed to materialize into something that resembles a genuine actor in security and defence. In this sphere, the EU's institutionalized mechanisms remain largely theoretical and documented, with their practical implementation happening only gradually. In addition, the UK and EU have not yet been able to upgrade their post-Brexit [Trade and Cooperation Agreement](#) into something that resembles a genuine political cooperation alliance. For example, the EU already has such official alliances with the likes of Japan and Canada. Hence, it remains to be seen if a US that distances itself from its traditional, but 'too costly' alliances will encourage UK and EU leadership into revising their approach to what is currently only a half-spirited alliance.

## **Ukraine**

A fundamental area where American and British foreign policies overlap is in Ukraine. Donald Trump's plan for finding a solution to the war remains unclear, even though his statements to date appear to rule out what many feared was going to be a 'Putin appeasing' approach. The Labour government is significantly more decisive in its [statements](#), arguing that Ukraine's territorial integrity must be restored. This raises questions about what might occur if Donald Trump decides to suspend or limit aid to Ukraine in the hope that Kiev will be forced into negotiating with Russia. In theory, the UK, according to the guidelines outlined by 'progressive realism', would continue using all the tools at its disposal to arm the Ukrainian Armed Forces with high-level weaponry. The UK did demonstrate an almost unparalleled commitment to supporting Ukraine since the first day of the war. However, should the US decide to suspend support for Ukraine, the extent to which the country's territorial integrity will be undermined will be pivotal. If the sides were to exit the 'negotiations' with a ceasefire being reached but Ukrainian territories remaining under Russian control, questions will arise regarding NATO's authority and its ability to safeguard nations that aspire and fight for its membership. The reputational damage to the 'Western' rules-based order, which was preached as the ultimate version of just and moral international affairs, would be significant and America's role as its protector significantly undermined.

The United Kingdom has first-hand experience supporting Kyiv through the war, with the Ukrainian side making a point in repeatedly acknowledging London's tenacious persistence in both the provision of material aid and also comprehensive moral and symbolic support. Elsewhere, President Zelensky's consistent calls for a more proactive European approach suggest that even though the United Kingdom's diplomatic hold on crucial areas might be regressing, its otherwise polar-opposite recent governments are unequivocal in their support for Ukrainian sovereignty. As Labour strives to restore the reputation many believe the UK has lost in international affairs, Ukraine appears to be a perfect litmus test for this approach. Given the uncertainty that surrounds the American position, the UK has an opportunity to take the lead in implementing the approach that supporters of the 'rules-based' international order believe is essential for long-term European security. This would serve to reinforce, at least partially, the 'confidence' behind the UK's foreign policy, something widely considered to be at a historical low. It would also confirm that the UK is independent enough in its foreign policy to take the risky but brave step of distancing itself from Trump's approach, knowing of the challenges 'upsetting' Trump may bring. A deeper UK-EU security pact, to be discussed below, could therefore consist of a more coordinated 'European' (including both UK and EU members) support system for those countries struggling with the protection of their territorial integrity.

## **Israel-Palestine**

The other important area where the interests of both the US and UK overlap is the conflict between Israel and Palestine. Whereas condemning Russia's actions in Ukraine and the subsequent need to arm the country provoked an almost unanimous approval from Western powers, their position on the Israel-Palestine conflict was considerably more vague. Alternating between supporting Israel's right to 'defend itself' and calling for compliance with international humanitarian law in all ground operations, both sides have accused the West of not doing enough to uphold their part of the narrative. Keir Starmer, for example, continues to regularly face fierce [criticism](#) for the way he expresses his position on the matter. Each side regularly accuses Western leaders of pursuing inconsistent policies, with the Palestinian community particularly pointing out the vagueness with which the casualties in Gaza are often talked about.

Nevertheless, the Labour government has always been clear vis-à-vis its acceptance of the two-state solution. The UK does not formally recognize Palestine, but various Labour Party politicians have expressed their support for what some believe to be a

step that would actually guarantee Israeli security as much as it would guarantee the security of the Palestinian people. There has, however, been a very clear restraint from setting specific time limits on this hypothetical recognition. Considering both the unpredictability of the Middle East's security architecture and doubts about the kind of policy to be implemented by the White House, the UK is once again presented with an opportunity to pursue a strategy that underlines its motivation to re-establish itself as a powerful force in issues as essential as conflict management, conflict resolution and even post-conflict reconstruction.

Donald Trump's recently announced [Gaza plan](#), however, threatens to further divide European allies. The US president abruptly stated that the US would 'take over' Gaza with the aim of reconstructing it and opening it up for foreign investment. Approximately [1.8 million Gazans](#) would have to relocate to neighbouring territories, with this, according to Trump, being the only way of stopping their suffering and enabling the beginning of a post-conflict era on the territory. Reactions to the plan have been overwhelmingly negative, with [Keir Starmer](#) among the principal supporters of the right of Gazans to return home. It would be careless to overstate the significance of Starmer's statement as the feasibility of Trump's plan remains under question. Nevertheless, the Prime Minister for arguably the first time publicly distanced the UK from the US on a foreign policy matter.

In doing so and by reaffirming the country's commitment to the basic rights of Palestinians to remain on their territory, the UK's leadership demonstrated an initial attempt to distance itself from the intense bending of the international legal system that has been underway since President Trump took office. This is not only an attempt to uphold what surely are the remaining straws of the legitimacy of the international legal system but also a clear stressing of the fact that basic international humanitarian norms must be safeguarded. Moreover, the consequences of supporting the rights of Palestinians or not have the power to significantly alter the landscape of the British political system. British Muslim voters view the Palestinian question as an imperative one, with it certainly being powerful enough to influence their future electoral decisions. The Palestinian side has regularly accused Western actors of doing too little to uphold the international norms that were supposed to turn international relations into a conflict-free arena. Even though many around the world rejoiced at the prospect of a second Trump presidency due to his promises of ending all foreign wars, this case is one more example of the US further distancing itself from working in tandem with its traditional allies.



Given the almost unanimous disapproval of Trump's 'go at it alone' approach, one should expect the spotlight to turn even more intensely on European allies. This includes the UK and perhaps even more so than the likes of Germany and France. London has a unique status as it is no longer constrained by its relationship with the EU but on the other hand is equally motivated to re-establish its foreign policy as an influential, leading and uniting one.

## **Security and defence**

Donald Trump's approach to the Transatlantic alliance is more often than not associated with his profound disapproval of European defence and particularly the passivity of the European Union's input into collective 'Western' security. Trump has reiterated his desire to 'punish' the EU and its member states for 'using' the US and its economy whilst inadequately financing the development of a European defence system. Trump has [threatened](#) to leave NATO if the current situation continues, and European states do not increase their defence spending to at least 5% of their GDP's. Even though such radical steps might turn out to be out of reach and are a part of a strategic discourse to warn Europe, it is certain that Trump has no interest in deepening the Transatlantic alliance. In fact, Elon Musk's appointment as government efficiency minister is expected to lead to [audits](#) in multiple government departments, including the military and intelligence. Therefore, one has every reason to expect a US that is extremely targeted and selective in its military initiatives.

This opens up considerable opportunities for UK foreign policy, especially in its security relations with the EU. One of the immediate foreign policy priorities of the Labour government has always been the deepening of security cooperation with the EU as an attempt to re-define a complex relationship that was never truly consolidated after the UK concluded its withdrawal from the Union. To date, all attempts to deepen cooperation have not exceeded bilateral statements that speak of 'the need' to work more closely together. The arrival of Trump, however, and the increasing scepticism of the American establishment (especially the Republican camp) towards prioritising European allies over interests in the Indo-Pacific region might just be the spark that ignites a long-awaited process. Securing a clearer and more transparent relationship with the EU would be a major win for the Labour government as it would emphasize its commitment to revitalizing Britain's armed forces and crucially, its role in upholding its own security and that of its neighbours. In addition to its leading role in supporting Ukraine, the UK government can finally

act on the continuous signals from Washington that the security of *Europe* should be the sole responsibility of *European* countries.

The EU's 2022 [Strategic Compass](#) speaks of 'ambition' with regards to its defence relationship with the UK. The European Commission recently [appointed](#) a first-ever European defence and space commissioner, signalling its desire to continue the institutionalization of defence cooperation. Similarly, the changes in the Transatlantic relationship brought about by Donald Trump's first months in office provide the UK with an opportunity to demonstrate its own ambition. As many in the country continue to re-visit the decision to leave the EU and accept the UK's descendancy from a 'super' to a 'middle' power, replacing, at least partially, America's influence in Europe might be the ideal opportunity to kick-start a much deeper revitalization.

If Donald Trump succeeds in deepening the implementation of his 'America first' policy, the UK-EU relationship has the potential to become the leading shaping force of European security. In the abovementioned case, the US will likely redirect away from the Transatlantic relationship and place even greater emphasis on cooperation that is transactional and prioritises short-term interests of the US (and of the Administration) ahead of any potential idealistic or moralistic attachment. This reinforces the significance of Secretary of State Marco Rubio's list of [first official foreign calls](#) not including any European ally. Hence, if the signals to date follow their suggested pattern, the European continent might arrive at a crucial turning point the outcome of which will depend exclusively on the level of ambition demonstrated by the continent's most influential actors.

## **Conclusion**

The future of the UK's foreign policy faces two very clear but deeply different paths. The country could pursue an active and ambitious future that sees the renewal of its most important strategic partnerships. Alternatively, it could face a future where it accepts the 'status-quo' and fails to materialize on the on-going geostrategic changes by boosting its international status and crucially, contributing to the maintenance of some kind of order in international relations. With regards to material capabilities, the UK is too far behind the likes of China and the US to aspire for a 'promotion' to great power status. Nevertheless, its historical influence and status as a traditional ally of the US and Europe presents it with an opportunity to re-establish the foreign policy reputation it once possessed. Whether it's increasing its role in humanitarian efforts, being a more reliable 'norm upholder' in international institutions or simply

working to push Europe towards a genuine collective security system, the UK must make a very clear and definitive choice between ambition and stagnation.

As for global rules, Trump's continued modification of what one can consider as 'normal diplomatic conduct' will not mean that all others will follow suit. The utility of our estimations and predictions can only go so far with an individual that tends to adopt a case-by-case approach that isn't always reflective of specific strategic patterns. However, if one was to hold on to something positive from the new Administration's statements it would certainly be the pledge and promise to end as many wars as possible. With the security frameworks of regions like the South Caucasus facing decisive periods, this approach can only be welcomed.

However, what makes the sphere of geopolitics so unpredictable is that despite the spread of institutions and the consolidation of the practice of international cooperation, its stability remains considerably dependent on the level of the 'individual'. Therefore, whilst Trump figures out his next steps, the likes of the UK have a unique opportunity to design a new approach that puts its country and rich diplomatic track record back on the radar of international relations analysts.

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