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Where Next for US Foreign Policy?

How the 2020 US Presidential
Elections Will Shape Multilateralism,
Transatlantic Relations, and the
Future of the Special Relationship

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Introduction

The United States of America's Presidential Elections have historically been regarded as 'world events', and Westminster and Whitehall watch their outcomes keenly – aware of America's gravitational force on diplomacy, security and international cooperation, and the vested interest in the functioning of its democracy, long framed as the West's 'light on the hill'. In 2016, it was clear that America faced a stark choice about its identity and its role in the world; in 2020, somehow, the stakes feel even more profound.

The shifting tone of American foreign policy – which meaningfully began in the aftermath of the War in Iraq and the policy of military de-escalation promoted by President Obama – has undoubtedly sharpened and metastasised under the leadership of President Trump. President Trump's first term has been characterised by a 'maverick' form of diplomacy, dynamic inter-personal relations with authoritarian states, and a distinct degree of antipathy towards multilateral institutions – many of which the United States had historically played a critical role in defending.

There have been some historic successes: not least of all, the recent agreements brokered by the United States amongst several Arab states, to formally recognise the state of Israel and establish diplomatic relations. It is fair to argue that, under a different leader, these developments may have been lauded as a more substantial achievement. It is also reasonable to attest that, on the whole, the United States' foreign policy under President Trump has lacked a sense of strategic purpose and direction, and that many of his actions have destabilised important foundations of global peace, cooperation and security.

President Trump's term began with dramatic rapprochements towards leaders of authoritarian states, including Russia and North Korea. His relations with their autocratic Presidents have remained alarmingly ambiguous, with the President's personal admiration for the kind of 'strong-man' leaders antithetical to American democratic ideals plain to see. In particular, his evident ambivalence towards the critical threat posed by Russia to the sanctity of America's electoral system has been especially troubling, allowing national security to slip into a partisan political sphere.

In other areas, the President's diagnoses have not been without merit, and he has catalysed a number of important global conversations – not least of all, regarding China's cynical approach to its membership of the World Trade Organisation and the historical error of presuming that opening its markets to capitalism would inevitably precipitate the advancement of democracy. His rash decision-making and preference for 'shock and awe' tactics in forums of multilateralism, however, have troubled other Western leaders. Moreover, his own cavalier approach to national governance, which frequently skirts the boundaries of established ethics and conventions, complicates the legitimacy of America's moral voice on the world stage.

For many foreign policy veterans, the most disturbing aspect of President Trump's leadership has been the corrosion of the US State Department, the foundational underpinning of America's global reach. Since the President came to power, it is well documented that the Department has been made vulnerable by high levels of staff attrition and turnover, unacceptable levels of vacancies in key posts, the lack of coherent strategic mission, and the pervasive infection of a culture of fear. While exceptional work continues to be done by exceptional people, there are concerns about the long-term consequences of the sheer breadth and depth of the erosion of talent, shared purpose and priorities, and how these can be remedied.

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Despite the uncharted waters of the past four years, the United States remains a true global superpower, with an important role to play in the international community. While a Biden Presidency may well encourage a 'restorative' approach to steadying the ship and correcting against some of the deviations from the norm that have taken place under President Trump's leadership, it is clear that the United Kingdom, and all our Western allies, must accept that the United States' role on the world stage will continue to evolve.

As in many Western nations, foreign policy in the United States has become increasingly enmeshed in axes of domestic social polarisation, and tied into the expression of domestic political identities. Although the major political parties house diverse coalitions on foreign policy, there are clear forces of momentum within them exerting an outsized degree of influence. In both the Democratic and Republican parties in 2020, there are evolving foreign policy movements driven by activism and revolutionary zeal, and others shaped by the shifting tone of public opinion. One of the most striking characteristics of the fractious 2016 Presidential Election campaign was the degree to which both parties, through their candidates, presented themselves as sensitive to the electorate's anxieties regarding the trajectory of globalisation, and how an interconnected world of compromise and asymmetrical benefits was compatible with the notion of America's supreme power and sovereignty.

Although President Trump's leadership has at times accommodated the resurgence of a more hawkish and outmoded form of foreign policy, the fundamental tone of his administration has been one of inherent scepticism towards a globalised world – embedding a degree of protectionism and isolationism within the new status quo. This approach represents the extreme end of a process of evolution in the doctrine of American foreign policy and the political compact around foreign policy, since public opinion turned against the immense costs – in all senses – of the Iraq War.

President Obama shepherded the earlier phases of this transition, flipping the assumption about American military interventionism to favour caution over action. President Trump's interpretation of this mandate has extended beyond reticence towards military interventionism, to include other areas of international engagement, such as trade and multilateral organisations. Crucially, he has also removed the centrality of the United States' expansive moral leadership from its global mission, grounding all international relationships in the more transactional framework of a quid pro quo of mutual investment and mutual benefit. Regardless of the evolving analysis taken by the White House of the American people's wishes, the social landscape that precipitated the nation's foreign policy metamorphosis will remain complex, and a constraint on the flexibility of the choices and narratives underpinning America's role in the world.

It is also true that the United Kingdom has not experienced the past four years with its foreign policy apparatus at the peak of its powers – largely due to the consuming nature of its own unstable domestic political situation in the aftermath of the seismic Brexit referendum. Many of the key decisions about the tone and strategic priorities of British foreign policy were put on hold, to be defined in the wake of a new relationship with Europe. Meanwhile, the international landscape into which 'a truly Global Britain' was seeking to re-enter has been evolving dramatically, in real time, with the goodwill around the nation's role at the heart of the liberal world order becoming increasingly fragile in the absence of a clear statement of intent.

Moreover, that the sensitivity of Britain's political leaders to the evolving nature of British public opinion regarding the UK's global engagement has at times precipitated a strategic 'low profile' at international forums once considered to be central expressions of the liberal alliance – such as the Munich Security Conference. Britain's downgraded attendance at the Conference in February 2020 was received with alarm amongst many of its most steadfast allies, baffled by

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the political framing of the event as an irrelevant congregation of the 'global elite'. Indeed, there were concerns coagulating before the pandemic, both within and outside the UK, that the scale of the domestic revolution of the Levelling Up agenda would necessarily drain attention and resources from the generationally significant foreign policy project of the Global Britain agenda.

These developments remind us of the fragility of the foreign policy marketplace in this age of democratic transition, as advanced liberal democracies struggle with fundamental questions of governance – responding to the changing needs, priorities and demands of their increasingly diverse, increasingly empowered, populations.

With the Integrated Review coming into sharp focus, and the Global Britain project finally beginning to take shape ahead of its G7 Presidency and the hosting of the COP26 summit, the United Kingdom is revitalising its commitment to an active role of global leadership. The publication of the Review in the aftermath of the US Presidential Elections captures the degree to which they are necessarily co-dependent. No matter which candidate takes office after November 3rd, the United Kingdom must prepare itself for the realities of a more tempered American leadership role – yet, the consequences for Britain in the degree to which this modulation is realised are significant. In either case, the United Kingdom will need to build public consent for a more active form of British leadership on the world stage – the question is whether the vacuum America will create, stretches beyond the capabilities of the Government's domestic and international persuasion.

In this paper, we set out the anticipated direction of policy and tone in American foreign policy over the coming political term – considering how a Biden or a Trump Presidency may shape the United States' choices in terms of America's relationships with the United Kingdom and Europe, and its participation in, and leadership of, multilateral institutions.

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Multilateralism

Over the past 75 years, the United States has played an integral role in the creation, development, and defence of multilateral institutions. While there has been a considerable degree of fluctuation in the United States' support for multilateralism as a guiding principle, and its comfort with its leadership position within multilateral institutions, President Trump's first term in office has heralded in an unprecedented period of 'transactionalism' in the modern era. In short, President Trump has overwhelmingly favoured bilateral negotiations and agreements, in which it is easier to define and secure American objectives, over collaborative approaches with multiple stakeholders.

This instinct has led President Trump to leave, or actively seek to disrupt the functioning of, many of the world's major multilateral organisations. In his first term, this has included withdrawing funding from the World Health Organisation (WHO), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the United Nations Human Rights Council (OHCHR), in addition to pulling out of significant global agreements – such as the Paris Climate Accord and the Iran Nuclear Deal – and reducing America's military presence in allied nations, such as Germany.

The explanation for the United States' departure from these institutions and agreements has varied between allegations of political biases, strategic rivalry and irreparable institutional failure. For example, alleged prejudice against Israel, a close ally of the United States, was cited as a central reason for the United States' withdrawal from both UNESCO¹ and the OHCHR.² Meanwhile, in the midst of an escalating trade war and rising tensions over China's handling of the coronavirus pandemic, President Trump announced that the United States would withdraw from the WHO because "China has total control" over the organisation.³

Underlying these arguments is a clear sense that President Trump does not believe that these multilateral organisations sufficiently align with or promote American interests to warrant enduring support. President Trump has championed a policy of 'America First', and as such, regards multilateral organisations that he perceives to undermine his ability to prioritise the needs of the American people and the pre-eminence of the American state, as an obstacle to the United States' global interests.⁴ It should be noted that President Trump's foreign policy has not eschewed all manner of cooperation, helping to secure historic peace accords in the Middle East, for example. However, this form of direct 'brokerage' is fundamentally different to the regional and global reach of institutions that have sought to underpin the concept of an international community of nations.

In particular, President Trump's approach has favoured direct liaison with both allies and strategic rivals alike, utilising personal relationships to build cooperation and adherence to the global order. He has personally built a much stronger and closer US-Russia relationship than has been seen in decades, and although US-China tensions have increased significantly in recent months, for much of President Trump's tenure he has worked relatively closely with President Xi, who he described as a "very, very good friend" whilst agreeing to Phase One of a US-China trade deal.⁵

The President adopted a similar approach towards North Korea, becoming the first sitting American President to meet a leader of North Korea, leading to the signing of a joint statement committing to "establishing new U.S-DPRK relations" and working towards peace and the denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula.⁶ Since then, President Trump has spoken of how he and Supreme Leader Kim Jong-Un "fell in love"⁷ and he made the unprecedented step of visiting North Korea.⁸ Whilst the relationship has soured in recent months, with North Korea stating that there had been "nothing of factual improvement" in relations,⁹ North Korea did

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temporarily suspend nuclear missile tests during this period of warmer relations¹⁰ and the United States Government has emphasised that it remains committed to dialogue with North Korea.¹¹

In the Middle East, President Trump and his administration have successfully negotiated a rapprochement between Israel, UAE and Bahrain, in which the Arab states will formally recognise the state of Israel, and announced that he was joining with the UAE and Israel to launch a Strategic Agenda for the Middle East.¹² The strategic agenda will aim to expand diplomatic, trade and security cooperation in a historically unstable region. The steps towards normalising relations between Israel and some of its Middle Eastern neighbours is unprecedented and has led President Trump to be nominated for a Nobel peace prize by Norwegian politician, Christian Tybring-Gjedde.¹³

In a second term in office, there is every reason to suspect that President Trump will expand and deepen this trend of favouring direct engagement over multilateralism. In particular, he has already outlined his increasing dissatisfaction with the functioning of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), laying the groundwork for a deeper withdrawal. President Trump has repeatedly asserted his frustration with the scale of the United States' contributions to the alliance, relative to other members. Currently, nearly 70% of total spending by NATO governments comes from the United States, who spent 3.4% of GDP on defence in 2019, compared to an average of 1.55% across European NATO countries and Canada.¹⁴ The President has particularly singled out Germany for failing to contribute sufficiently to NATO and EU security more generally – a subject that remains shrouded in a degree of sensitivity, even some 70 years on from the Second World War.¹⁵

However, President Trump's dissatisfaction with NATO runs deeper than the financial burden, and in 2017, he sparked concerns about America's commitment to NATO after he failed to publicly confirm America's adherence to Article V of the NATO Charter.¹⁶ The Article pertains to the collective defence commitment, which states that if a NATO ally is attacked it will be viewed as an attack against all members, who will respond appropriately and collectively – making it central to the functioning and spirit of the alliance.

The decision to abstain from endorsing Article V has caused consternation amongst European Union members close to the border with Russia, and compelled frantic discussions around how best to address the potential sudden loss of resources. Speaking to the European Parliament in 2018, Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany, declared that “the days where we can unconditionally rely on others are gone” and joined calls by President Emmanuel Macron of France for a European army in the future.¹⁷ President Trump condemned the idea as being “very insulting”¹⁸ but the broad concept that Europe should have a more independent military capability has continued to gain traction amongst certain European Union member states.¹⁹

During the 2020 Presidential Election campaign, President Trump has made little reference to NATO, except to state that, in his second-term agenda, he will “get allies to pay their fair share”.²⁰ However, in the context of a global pandemic and economic crisis, and given NATO members committed to significant increases in spending in 2019,²¹ forcing the hand of other members is certain to become an even more challenging task. Although he has not made any public commitments to do so, former aides have alleged that privately President Trump has repeatedly stated his desire to withdraw from the alliance.²² The debates that the President's scrutiny of the financial framework for NATO funding have provoked have, however, been greeted with some enthusiasm within EU foreign policy circles, amongst those keen to leverage the heated pressure from the United States to precipitate a renewed focus on strengthening EU defence policy.²³

President Trump has also made clear his growing dissatisfaction with the World Trade Organisation, which his administration recently described as “completely inadequate”.²⁴ With its requirement that members treat all states equally, the President regards the WTO

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as an impediment to his 'America First' policies²⁵ and he has grown increasingly frustrated by the failure of the WTO to remedy China's continued failure to comply with WTO regulations.²⁶ The issue of the practical consequences of China's inclusion within the WTO has been evident for some time, and has been acknowledged by a bipartisan suite of voices within Washington, and by other Western leaders, over recent years.²⁷ However, the President's desire to promote a unilateral withdrawal, over a reform-based approach, has put him largely at odds with other foreign policy experts and political leaders.²⁸

In response to the failings that President Trump has identified within the WTO, he has sought to disrupt the functioning of the organisation, blocking it from appointing new members to the panel involved in trade dispute resolution, effectively crippling the dispute resolution mechanism.²⁹ In 2018, he also threatened to leave the Organisation if it did not "shape up", due to concerns that the body had repeatedly made 'unfair' rulings against the United States.³⁰ The most recent WTO ruling that found the United States breached global trading rules, by imposing levies on \$200bn of Chinese goods, has further strained relations between the United States and the WTO, with President Trump hinting at the possibility that he may seek to leave the WTO, or at least further disrupt it, in a second term of office.³¹

Frustrated with the World Health Organisation's response to the pandemic, President Trump formally notified the WHO of the United States' withdrawal from the organisation in July. The withdrawal will come into effect as of July 6, 2021. In the meantime, the United States has announced it will redirect its remaining dues for the year towards other UN organisations,³² although it will continue to make limited voluntary contributions to the WHO in areas where there is no alternative partner, such as in providing humanitarian health assistance to Libya and Syria.³³ President Trump argues that the World Health Organisation failed to adequately respond to the threat of Covid-19 because China has "total control" over the organisation, and that he gave them the opportunity to reform before withdrawing but that the WHO's failure to do so left him with no choice.³⁴

Despite being sympathetic to the need for reform of the World Health Organisation, America's allies have widely condemned the decision, arguing that the pandemic has shown the need for a stronger WHO and greater international cooperation. They have also warned that the move is of strategic benefit to China, as it creates a potential power vacuum within the organisation.³⁵ A US State Department spokesman emphasised that leaving the WHO does not diminish US leadership on global health matters and that the United States is still able to provide aid itself or through partners.³⁶

President Trump has also made clear his broader contempt for the United Nations, which he declared is "not a friend of democracy...not even a friend of the United States of America" during his first election campaign.³⁷ He outlined his vision for the United Nations in his first address to the United Nations General Assembly, in which he emphasised that the UN should enable cooperation between strong, independent nations rather than impose global governance from above.³⁸ This is a message he has reaffirmed in subsequent speeches at the UN arguing the importance of sovereignty and patriotism over globalism.³⁹

This dissatisfaction with the premise and objectives of the United Nations has led President Trump to withdraw from a number of key United Nations organisations, including UNESCO and the UNHRC. The American Government has long expressed concerns about the UNHRC, and President George W. Bush refused to join when the organisation was formed, arguing that it would be too accepting of countries with poor human rights records. Since joining the UNHRC in 2009 under President Obama, the United States has been consistent in condemning its ineffectiveness and the over-emphasis placed within its dialogue on Israel's alleged human rights abuses.⁴⁰ President Trump's decision to leave the UNHRC therefore follows an established trend among American Presidents; however, as ever, he has chosen to move beyond critique and reform and instead favour abandonment.

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It is highly probable that a second term for President Trump would see the continued erosion of the United States' leadership and participation in multilateral institutions, in favour of an approach combining his proven penchant for 'brokerage' deals and direct bilateral negotiations. This raises particular questions about the future of the Western alliance, which has been – to some extent – expressed and mediated through the institutions that have governed the liberal world order. The United States' historical allies will need to consider how to reorganise themselves, how to maintain momentum and the practical functioning of the institutions, and what it means for the legitimacy of their purview over the global community. In particular, the withdrawal of the United States will force difficult conversations around China's participation in international institutions, and potentially facilitate imbalanced power dynamics that will undermine Western interests.

By contrast, Democratic Presidential candidate, Joe Biden, has been steadfast in his commitment to multilateralism, and has made clear that he would put "the United States back at the Head of the table".⁴¹ The Democratic Party platform outlines plans to re-join the United Nations Human Rights Council and the United Nations Population Fund,⁴² and Joe Biden has publicly pledged to re-join the WHO on his first day in office, which could have significant repercussions for the global response to the coronavirus pandemic.⁴³ Candidate Biden's outlined foreign policy plans also afford a strong role to NATO, which he calls the "most significant military alliance in the history of the world".⁴⁴ Beyond military capabilities, it is likely that his administration would seek to enable the alliance to mobilise more rapidly against emerging threats, such as weaponised corruption and cyber threats.⁴⁵

As well as re-joining existing multilateral organisations, Biden has expressed that he is keen to build productive relationships with fellow democracies, and aims to hold a 'Global Summit for Democracy' during his first year in office. The summit would aim to gather commitments from democracies to fight corruption and authoritarianism and to protect human rights at home and abroad. Moreover, it would endeavour to issue a call to action to the private sector, particularly technology companies, to protect democracy and freedom of speech.⁴⁶ These intentions suggest that the Biden administration would emphasise symbolic and practical measures to differentiate itself from many of the totems of his predecessor's foreign policy, including the ambiguity he has injected into the United States' role in promoting global democracy, and its relations with authoritarian states – particularly those with intentions to undermine American democracy.

However, while Biden's campaign team have grand visions for restoring America's global standing, it is important to note the longer-term trajectory through which the United States has been re-evaluating its international role. There is very little appetite amongst the American public for an active, interventionist American foreign policy – a trend that has been building over decades. In 2016, more than half (57%) of Americans agreed that "the US should mind its own business internationally",⁴⁷ compared to just a fifth (20%) of Americans in 1964.⁴⁸ As such, President Obama, who was elected on a mandate that included ending the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan,⁴⁹ was often reticent to intervene in foreign affairs, leading to a delayed, hesitant or cautious response on many global issues – most infamously in the conflict in Syria.⁵⁰

It is reasonable to expect that a Biden presidency could go some way to ameliorating America's international soft power; after all, President Obama was able to decisively boost positive perceptions in the aftermath of the damage US soft power had experienced under the Bush administration and the Iraq War.⁵¹ However, it is worth taking stock of the current state of American soft power, which is historically significant in terms of its low standing amongst all major allies.

Global trust in the United States has plummeted 50% since 2016, according to the 2020 Best Countries report⁵² and only 34% of people across 13 countries surveyed by the Pew Research Centre have a favourable view of the United States, putting public support for the United

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States at or near an all-time low amongst its key allies.⁵³ There have been concerns expressed amongst several American allies in Europe that the dramatic nature of the shift in American foreign policy under President Trump – not only in its practical implementation but its tone – will leave lasting damage that cannot be reversed.⁵⁴

It is also true that the nature of contemporary American domestic politics will shape Biden's choices and priorities in terms of foreign policy, in a manner that may not always be conducive to multilateral institutions. For example, the Biden campaign's 'Made in America' pledge, which seeks to invest in American industries, onshore supply chains and increase the number of goods made in America,⁵⁵ could potentially contravene existing WTO regulations. In particular, the 'Buy American' campaign, which proposes a \$400 billion procurement investment to stimulate American industries, may contravene the Agreement on Government Procurement (GPA) which the United States is bound to through its membership of the WTO.⁵⁶ Biden has also suggested the use of carbon tariffs, which, while in line with UN objectives of tackling climate change, may run contrary to WTO regulations.⁵⁷

As for many of their Western allies, the domestic realities of governing the United States in 2020 bear significant consequences for the nation's scope of choices on the world stage. Although as President, Joe Biden would almost certainly seek to reinstate America's participation in many of the institutions that have proven so contemptuous for President Trump, there can be no illusions that the United States will be once again assuming the kind of interventionist foreign policy practised by previous administrations. Since the Iraq War, the American political and social landscape has not been permissive towards such a foreign policy mandate, and the fractious and polarised domestic environment will necessarily consume the majority of political oxygen over the next decade.

The United Kingdom and the United States have spent many decades as partners in the governance of multilateral institutions, and that compact is beginning to pull apart. As the United Kingdom has moved closer to the publication of the Integrated Review of its Defence, Security, Development and Foreign Policy, it has become increasingly firm in its stated commitment towards supporting multilateral organisations, while the United States under President Trump takes a different path.

In particular, as it pursues an independent trading policy ahead of its departure from the European Union, the United Kingdom has been forthright in its support for the World Trade Organisation. Speaking at the WTO general council meeting in March, Trade Secretary Liz Truss spoke of the UK's desire to work with other nations committed to multilateralism, "to lead the defence of free, fair, rules-based international trade". She acknowledged the need to "update the WTO rulebook"⁵⁸ to better address issues such as state-owned enterprises and forced technology transfer, which are criticisms that have been repeatedly levied at China.⁵⁹ However, the UK's – ultimately unsuccessful – endorsement of Former Secretary of State for International Trade Liam Fox for Director-General of the WTO, highlighted its commitment to supporting and reforming the WTO from within. Dr Fox described the WTO as "one of the world's great organisations" and stood on a platform of reforming the WTO and putting it back "at the heart of the rules-based trading system".⁶⁰

Following President Trump's announcement that the United States would withdraw funding from the World Health Organisation, a spokesperson for Boris Johnson reaffirmed the UK Government's continued support for the work of the Organisation, stating that it is "essential that countries work together" to tackle the coronavirus pandemic.⁶¹ In September, the UK reinforced this commitment by announcing a £340m increase in funding for the WHO over the next four years – a 30% increase – which would render the United Kingdom the single largest donor to the organisation should the United States move forward with its intention to withdraw.⁶²

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The UK Government has, however, expressed some degree of sympathy towards the issues that President Trump has raised regarding the need for reform within some international institutions. It has agreed that it is important to ensure that the World Health Organisation “is flexible and responsive in future emergencies”, and supports an in-depth review of the origins and spread of the coronavirus. Nonetheless, the UK Government has emphasised that the objective of such a review would not be to attribute blame, as President Trump appears keen to do, but rather to ensure the world can respond more effectively to any future pandemic threats.⁶³ It regards its financial investment in the Organisation as a means of facilitating the reform it hopes to achieve, whereas President Trump’s decision to precipitate an American withdrawal appears to stem from a scepticism towards the prospects for recalibrating the work of the WHO.

The United Kingdom also struck a decisively different tone to that of the United States at the United National General Assembly in September, stating its commitment to “work with [its] friends across the UN” to collectively address global issues.⁶⁴ However, as with the WHO, Great Britain has become increasingly vocal in echoing the need for institutional reform. In 2017, then-Prime Minister Theresa May drew attention to the gap between “the nobility of the (UN’s) purposes and the effectiveness of its delivery”.⁶⁵ More recently, Britain has supported reform in a number of UN sub-organisations, including the UNHCR⁶⁶ and in UN peacekeeping missions⁶⁷ – yet it is clear that, despite the revolutionary zeal the Government is directing towards its domestic civil service reform, the British approach to international institutions remains measured and restrained.

The United States will remain a pivotal global actor, and a sizeable member of the liberal democratic alliance, regardless of the outcome of the election. What is at stake is its commitment to the scope of that role, how and when it is expressed, and the priorities that are afforded to particular relationships and institutions. With specific regard to multilateral organisations, there is no doubt that a second term for President Trump will force the liberal alliance to move beyond a transitional period, to a new status quo – compelling a new era of cooperation outside of the United States, to ensure that the leadership of the institutions remains balanced in favour of democratic interests.

For the United Kingdom, the consequences would be especially profound, as it will be the first in line to absorb some of the responsibilities of its ‘special relationship’ partner. A Biden administration would soften this confrontation; yet, the fundamental question of the constitution of the liberal alliance with a less prominent United States, must still be answered. The Global Britain agenda must therefore be prepared to assume the mantle of – if not *the* central coordinator, *a* central coordinator – of the governance of multilateral institutions, to ensure they remain sustainably balanced. Achieving this will necessitate investment in financial and personnel resources, renewed focus on enhancing the British presence within the core functioning of global institutions, and the harnessing of Britain’s diplomatic soft power in a considerably more sophisticated and targeted manner.

The Special Relationship

The 'special relationship' between the United Kingdom and the United States has stood as a defining part of Britain's international identity since the Second World War. Although the two nations are connected in a security relationship through the Five Eyes alliance, the special proximity between them has significantly shaped the British foreign policy paradigm. At a time when the United Kingdom is reconfiguring its relationship with its regional European partners, and seeking to articulate a new formulation of its modern global role, this central bilateral compact would inevitably have been cast into a renewed light. However, the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, only months after the United Kingdom emerged from the seismic 2016 Brexit Referendum, has produced a new set of challenges and opportunities for the relationship.

One of the greatest strengths of the 'special relationship' has traditionally lain in the close military, defence and intelligence ties between the two nations. British and American intelligence officials collaborate frequently, and closely, with 60% of the UK's high-value intelligence sourced from the United States' National Security Agency. The partnership between the two nations on defence remains profound, with British firms heavily involved in the building of the United States' F-35 warplanes, and the United States maintain the UK's nuclear arsenal.⁶⁸ However, Britain has struggled to keep up with United States' stratospheric spending on defence, and there are debates within the UK defence community around the need for Great Britain to enhance its own independent military capabilities.⁶⁹

It is not expected that the 2020 US Presidential Elections will significantly alter the defence and security partnership at the heart of the 'special relationship', however the nature of the political and diplomatic partnership between the two nations appears to be more open to influence. During his time in office, President Trump has been a strong advocate for the US-UK 'special relationship', which he has described as "the greatest alliance the world has ever seen".⁷⁰ He has repeatedly declared his admiration for the United Kingdom,⁷¹ and officials from President Trump's administration have described his relationship with British Prime Minister Boris Johnson as his "closest relationship".⁷² The President's fondness for the United Kingdom appears to stem from his mother's Scottish heritage and his business interests there,⁷³ a personal appreciation for Her Majesty the Queen,⁷⁴ and a high regard for British culture and traditions – regarding the nation as the cornerstone of the Anglosphere.⁷⁵

President Trump's interest in the United Kingdom has extended into its contemporary politics. He has been a strong supporter of Brexit, which he described as a "great victory" and a successful rejection of the global elite.⁷⁶ At times, the President's interventions on Brexit have not always proven especially helpful for British leaders – particularly in his criticisms of the UK negotiation strategy with the European Union. President Trump made clear his frustrations towards then-Prime Minister Theresa May's approach, claiming that her proposed deal maintained links too closely with the European Union, at the expense of a possible US-UK free trade agreement.⁷⁷ He recommended that Prime Minister May should sue the European Union, and argued that former UKIP leader Nigel Farage should have been given a role in Brexit negotiations. President Trump then went on to publicly criticise the fact "she [the Prime Minister] didn't listen" when he told her "how to do" Brexit.⁷⁸

President Trump and his administration have been consistently vocal in their personal criticism of UK political leaders, most notably in their general disdain for former Prime Minister Theresa May. US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, compared Theresa May to Margaret Thatcher in an unfavourable manner, and the US ambassador to the UK, Woody Johnson, stated that Britain was lacking suitable leadership, straining the relationship between the two.⁷⁹ Furthermore, in the months ahead of the UK General Election in November 2019, President Trump derided

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then-leader of the opposition, Jeremy Corbyn, who he said “would be so bad” for the UK compared to Boris Johnson, whom he described as “the exact right guy for the times”. This led to accusations that he was attempting to interfere in the UK election.⁸⁰

In turn, since the Democratic Party took control of the House of Representatives in 2018, the United States Congress has made a number of interventions pertaining to Brexit and its potential impact on the Good Friday Agreement. While the United States is not a guarantor of the peace process in Ireland, it was an active participant in brokering the Agreement,⁸¹ and the large Irish-American population in the United States – and the sizeable and influential Irish-American caucus in the Congress⁸² – encourage a special political interest. Nancy Pelosi, the Democratic Speaker of the House of Representatives, warned that “there will be absolutely no chance of a US-UK trade agreement passing the Congress” if the UK overrides the Brexit withdrawal agreement and undermines the Good Friday Agreement.⁸³ This sentiment has been echoed in joint comments issued by four congressmen, including Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Elliot Engel, who argued that many in Congress see “the issues of the Good Friday Agreement and a potential US-UK Free Trade Agreement (as) inextricably linked”.⁸⁴

Although the current President’s particular interest in the ‘special relationship’ has not always pleased Britain’s political class – increasingly aware of the degree to which he has become personally repellent to many Britons⁸⁵ – it is also true that the attention he has afforded to Britain has accelerated the advancement of some key initiatives – most notably, President Trump’s commitment to securing a “phenomenal trade deal between the United States and the United Kingdom”.⁸⁶ Although the specifics of the proposed trade deal are still being negotiated, it is estimated that an agreement with the United States could increase the United Kingdom’s GDP by between 0.07% and 0.16% in the next 15 years, primarily through greater harmonisation of standards, and the resulting reduction in non-tariff barriers.⁸⁷

Despite the goodwill, free trade negotiations with the United States will not be without their challenges. One of the United States’ main priorities in such an agreement, is to gain access to the United Kingdom’s agricultural markets; however, this has been met with strong concern in parts of Westminster and amongst the British public, due to diverging standards on animal welfare, and food hygiene and safety, between the two. Although hormone-treated beef and chlorinated chicken have become areas of special focus, food labelling has become another issue of contention due to distinct perspectives on the role of government regulation.⁸⁸

The other area of particular public anxiety and political sensitivity pertains to the potential impact that a UK-US free trade agreement could have on the National Health Service (NHS) and drug pricing in Britain. Despite repeated assertions by Prime Minister Boris Johnson that the NHS is “not on the table”⁸⁹ in discussions over a US-UK free trade agreement – a clear red line for the British public⁹⁰ – concerns remain amongst activists and lobby groups that such negotiations could lead to American private medical providers having access to the NHS, potentially leading to privatisation and increases in drug prices.⁹¹ Less salient amongst the British people but still a considerable negotiation challenge, is the issue of digital services taxation. The United States is seeking for the United Kingdom to remove its new digital services tax, which is a 2% tax on the revenues of online technology companies that derive revenue for UK users. America, home to some of the largest social media and technology platforms in the world, argues that the tax is a “discriminatory attack on US tech companies”.⁹²

In opposition, Joe Biden has tended to emphasise the obstacles to achieving a US-UK Free Trade Agreement – with his caution largely focused on the consequences if the UK Government pursues an approach with its UK-EU Brexit negotiations that imperils the nature of the Good Friday Agreement, or promotes a hostile tone that could weaken the cohesion of relations within the Western alliance. However, these positions are compelled by the distinctions between Joe Biden and the President’s views on the fundamental importance of multilateralism,

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and his personal stake as an Irish-American in the upholding of the Irish peace process.⁹³ Indeed, there is nothing to suggest that as President, Biden's administration would de-prioritise or marginalise such a trading agreement – rather, that it would more likely pursue a clean break in language from the Trump era, diffusing the framing of close EU or US relations as somehow in competition.

However, it is important to recognise that the 'special relationship' has also been going through a period of evolution under President Trump, with a number of high-profile areas of tension spilling over into the public domain. Some of these are specific to the nature and temperament of the current President - for example, President Trump alleged that UK intelligence agencies helped then-President Obama to spy on him during the 2016 election campaign.⁹⁴ Others simply reflect the limitations inherent in the partnership itself – such as the tragic case of Harry Dun, killed on his motorcycle in a car accident with the wife of an American intelligence officer, whose blocked extradition has become a source of diplomatic agitation.⁹⁵

Relations became particularly strained when the UK Government announced in January that it would allow Chinese telecommunications firm Huawei a limited role in the UK's telecommunications infrastructure, arguing that its access would be contained outside the sensitive core. Along with fellow Five Eyes security partner Australia, the United States has become a fierce critic of states allowing Huawei to operate in their countries, warning that Huawei represents an embedded security threat with the potential to allow the Chinese government access to Western consumer data and influence over critical infrastructure. The United States responded to the UK's announcement by threatening to withhold intelligence from the UK and warning that it "could undermine the alliance, or at least our relationship".⁹⁶

In May, the United States extended wide-ranging sanctions on Huawei. This decision compelled the UK to reverse its earlier decision and announce the imposition of a total ban on the purchase of new 5G kit from Huawei, and a seven-year phasing-out of existing infrastructure. The UK Government declared that its decision was made "in response" to the sanctions, which would force Huawei to reconfigure its supply chain in ways that pose a greater security risk to the UK.⁹⁷ This episode shone light on the complex interaction between foreign policy and national security, and domestic political constraints: in reneging on its former decision regarding Huawei at the direct influence of the United States, the UK Government created political cover for its 'u-turn', but played into media narratives of an imbalanced power dynamic within the 'special relationship'.⁹⁸

The unpredictable nature of President Trump's approach to foreign policy has, in many ways, fostered some distance between the 'special relationship' and the Western alliance more generally. The UK Government expressed its "disappointment" over President Trump's decision to withdraw from the Paris Climate Accord⁹⁹ and the United Nations Human Rights Council.¹⁰⁰ On the Iran nuclear deal, the United Kingdom lobbied extensively to try and dissuade President Trump's administration from withdrawing from the agreement,¹⁰¹ and when unsuccessful, committed to "strive to preserve the gains" made by the international agreement.¹⁰² As the United Kingdom and the United States' values agendas on the world stage bifurcate, the 'special relationship' is therefore increasingly contained within a more self-interested security and economic paradigm, rather than a central axis on which a global liberal agenda is advanced through collective diplomacy, and expressed through multilateral institutions.

There are two prominent exceptions to this trend, although they capture something specific to the particular priorities and circumstances of the Trump administration. The first is responding to the deteriorating situation in Hong Kong, with China having become increasingly aggressive in its incursions towards the semi-autonomous territory.¹⁰³ Both the United Kingdom, with its primary historical and ongoing governing role in upholding democratic freedoms in Hong Kong, and the United States, as an enforcer of the Sino-British Joint Declaration through its own Hong Kong Policy Act of 1992, share a special interest in Hong Kong's independence and its success. However, China's escalation of its interference in Hong Kong's democratic freedoms also comes

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at a time when the United States' relationship with China is rapidly deteriorating.¹⁰⁴ Both Britain and the United States have responded forcefully and emphatically to the situation in Hong Kong,¹⁰⁵ and have also brought other liberal allies along with them in a show of strength.¹⁰⁶

The other area of prominent UK-American foreign policy cooperation under President Trump pertains to the deepening reach of the Magnitsky sanctions, and their rising importance in geopolitical terms. The United States signed the Magnitsky Act in 2012, imposing sanctions on Russian officials accused of serious human rights violations. The Act was extended in 2016 to allow the executive branch to impose visa bans and sanctions on individuals involved in human rights abuses from any country.¹⁰⁷ The UK passed a similar legislation in 2018, and imposed its first set of sanctions in 2020, in a move celebrated by US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo as "mark(ing) the beginning of a new era for UK sanctions policy and cooperation between our two democracies".¹⁰⁸ Meanwhile, the UK has stated that the implementation of such a sanctions regime will enable the UK to "work with international partners, including the US and Canada", "to demonstrate leadership and ambition on human rights values after we leave the EU".¹⁰⁹

The Magnitsky regulations have been welcomed by US and UK allies, with Canada already taking similar measures, and the EU making inroads towards its own version of the Act.¹¹⁰ Although the UK Government states that the legislation is not designed to target any particular countries,¹¹¹ it is clear that the Magnitsky Acts implemented by the United States, Britain and their allies will become a clear dividing line in the global order. Most recently, the UK has announced that the Magnitsky sanctions will be applied to the Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko and his core advisers, the first time that they have been directed specifically to a national leader.¹¹²

Despite their responsiveness to contemporary political dynamics, both of these areas of cooperation would be expected to continue under a Biden administration. This partly reflects the consistency of the bipartisan underpinnings to the United States' increasingly hostile tone towards China.¹¹³ Moreover, it is self-evident that there is a greater degree of congruence between Candidate Biden's global 'values' agenda – not least of all, on tackling climate change and challenging non-democratic states – and the stated priority areas of British leadership within the Global Britain project.¹¹⁴

Furthermore, Biden's proposal of a global summit of democracy, as previously discussed, aligns well with the UK's burgeoning interest in the prospect of a 'D10' alliance of democratic partners, to counter the rising influence of China and other authoritarian states.¹¹⁵ In this respect, it is reasonable to conclude that the greater preponderance to regard multilateral cooperation as a source of resilience amongst Candidate Biden and his advisers would transfer a significant proportion of America's relationship with China from a bilateral sphere, to a more traditional diplomatic space of mediation amongst allies and institutions.

It must be emphasised that, despite some political stressors, the 'special relationship' has remained remarkably strong over the past four years, as both nations have been undergoing a period of flux and dysfunction. The structural underpinnings of the relationship – institutional partnerships around security and shared geopolitical interests, and the goodwill between the State Department and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office – have proven themselves to be robust and grounded in a degree of collective ambition.

Nonetheless, it is also true that this maintenance of the status quo has been achieved in spite of an increasingly unsustainable state of operations within the US State Department. Staffing has been a constant issue since President Trump came to office: 60% of the highest-ranking career officers left during the first year of President Trump's tenure,¹¹⁶ and many key posts have remained unfilled for extensive periods. Where appointments have been made, many have favoured political loyalty over demonstrated expertise – diminishing the Department's institutional knowledge and the continuity of international relationship.¹¹⁷

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In July 2020, the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee's Democratic staff published a report commissioned by the top-ranking Democratic representative on the Committee, Bob Menendez, into the "decimation of the State Department" under the Trump administration. The report found that senior-level vacancies, nominee vetting failures, plummeting morale and attacks on career public servants "have decimated (America's) premier foreign policy agency dedicated to advancing American values". The report also highlighted how a weak State Department damages America's global leadership abilities and represents a national security risk to the United States.¹¹⁸

The strength of the 'special relationship' has also been destabilised by the degradation of British public opinion towards President Trump, and the United States under his leadership. Just 15% of Britons claim to have a positive view of President Trump,¹¹⁹ and his state visits to the UK have been met by large-scale protests.¹²⁰ The proportion of Britons who hold a favourable opinion of the United States, our closest historical ally, has fallen to just 41% - down from 83% in 2000.¹²¹ UK public opinion has taken a particularly sharp turn during the coronavirus pandemic, which just 16% of Britons believe the United States has handled well.¹²² According to the BFPG's own research, just 28% of Britons now say they trust the US to act responsibly in the world, down 13 percentage points since January 2020.¹²³ As such, despite President Trump's claims that he is "really loved" in Britain,¹²⁴ just 15% of Britons declare that they would like for President Trump to be re-elected, compared to 54% who claim that they would like Candidate Biden to win.¹²⁵

All in all, the outcome of the 2020 Presidential Election will be significant for the 'special relationship', yet even more consequential for the United Kingdom as an individual actor – as the instincts and priorities of the White House will ultimately determine the nature of the path Britain will need to take in terms of its own global leadership. If the United States continues to abscond from its central position in the Western alliance, and to actively undermine the functioning of multilateral institutions, the pressure on the United Kingdom to assume some of these responsibilities will become substantial.

Although institutional cooperation has proven itself to be substantive enough to withstand the functional operational challenges inflicted on the State Department over the past four years, the fundamental stakes for this election outcome pertain to the at least partial restoration of America's international influence, or the finalisation of a transition period towards a completely new era. Ultimately, the future of the 'special relationship' is therefore a question contingent on the future of America's role in the world.

US-EU Transatlantic Relations

President Trump's first term in office has been characterised by increasingly tense relations with the European Union, which, despite historically having stood as one of America's closest allies, has been defined by President Trump as a "foe".¹²⁶ The breakdown in engagement between the former partners is captured in the fact key EU diplomatic positions have remained unfilled for a large proportion of his time in office.¹²⁷ The President has also appointed several unconventional figures to key diplomatic roles, including the Ambassador to Germany, Richard Grenell, whose maverick diplomatic style was deeply unpopular in Germany. Criticised by German political representatives as a "biased propaganda machine", Ambassador Grenell made public his political views, including stating that he wanted to "empower other conservatives throughout Europe". He was also openly critical of Germany during his service for not sufficiently contributing to NATO, and for not blocking Huawei from its 5G networks.¹²⁸

The central axis of the discord between the United States and the European Union pertains to free trade, with President Trump boldly asserting that "the European Union was formed in order to take advantage of (the United States) on trade". Through this framing, it appears that he therefore sees Europe first and foremost a competitor to the United States.¹²⁹ In particular, the European Union and the United States have clashed over airline subsidies, automobile imports, the European Union's digital tax, agricultural trade barriers, and the United States' overall trade deficit with the EU. In 2018, President Trump imposed tariffs on steel and aluminium imports globally, which the EU was initially exempt from, but which were also extended to the EU from June 2018.¹³⁰ The EU responded by launching legal proceedings against the US at the WTO, and introducing "rebalancing measures", including immediately applying additional duties to €2.8bn of exports.¹³¹ Trade tensions were eased slightly in August 2020, when the two partners secured a 'mini trade deal', agreeing to eliminate tariffs on US lobsters in exchange for the halving of import taxes on \$160m worth of European goods.¹³²

The other area of specific hostility centres on the functioning and financing of NATO, with President Trump asserting his frustration at what he perceives as 'European free-riding' within the alliance. The President has drawn attention to the fact that America bears a disproportionate burden of the financial cost;¹³³ however, his singling out of Germany in particular, without regard for the broader historical context underpinning its position, has transgressed the boundaries of diplomacy.

The European Union has, in turn, expressed its frustrations with the Trump administration's decision to leave the Paris Climate Accord,¹³⁴ the Iran nuclear deal¹³⁵ and the World Health Organisation,¹³⁶ condemning these actions for having caused instability in the liberal world order. It has also been frustrated by the United States' decision to impose unilateral economic sanctions on a range of authoritarian states with whom the bloc continues to pursue cooperative, if limited, economic relations. For example, American sanctions on Iran have indirectly impacted European companies,¹³⁷ as have the imposition of sanctions on companies involved in the controversial Nord Stream 2 project, a 1230km long pipeline that would carry national gas from Russia to Germany.¹³⁸

The United States opposes the project on the grounds that it enables Russia to bypass Ukraine for gas transit to Europe, and would increase Europe's reliance on Russia for natural gas, creating energy security vulnerabilities in Europe.¹³⁹ The issue remains contested, especially within the German administration, due to the potential economic value of the project. However, the sanctions imposed by the United States have facilitated a pressure cooker environment that has rendered the project increasingly untenable on diplomatic grounds, raising pertinent questions about the challenges of taking a tougher line on economic cooperation with China, while pursuing the Nord Stream 2 project with another authoritarian state subject to active

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economic sanctions. Moreover, the moral complexity of advocating for sanctions against the Russian state in the poisoning of Alexei Navalny, while continuing to advance the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, due to its sizeable economic potential.¹⁴⁰

It is certainly the case that President Trump's unconventional approach to the Western alliance and multilateral institutions has heightened questions about the European Union's commitment to assuming a more cohesive, comprehensive role as a global actor. German Chancellor Angela Merkel has repeatedly asserted that Europe can no longer rely on the United States to govern the world order¹⁴¹ and therefore that the European Union "must take its destiny into its own hands".¹⁴² This was a message echoed in European Union President Ursula von der Leyen's State of the Union address, in which she positioned Europe in opposition to "others who choose to retreat", calling for a renewed commitment to European global leadership, including in the reconstitution of multilateral organisations. The EU President also argued for the implementation of a qualified majority approach to foreign policy voting decisions, to facilitate a more responsive EU voice, in line with the bloc's stated values.¹⁴³

President Trump's relationship with the European Union has been rendered more fraught by the coronavirus pandemic. The President's announcement of a travel ban on European visitors to America, without prior consultation with European leaders, was received with dismay in European capitals,¹⁴⁴ as was his decision not to join the European Union's drive to raise funds for vaccine research.¹⁴⁵ The President's approach to the pandemic has tended to eschew international cooperation more generally, and the United States has at times even sought to leverage its economic might to outbid its allies for access to crucial equipment.¹⁴⁶

While the European Union remains internally conflicted regarding its position on China, the escalating tensions between the United States and the authoritarian state are the cause of considerable concern. In its presidency of the European Union, Germany stated its objective to cut through the emerging dichotomy, declaring, "there are too many important topics that we need to discuss with China", to allow the debate to become framed in Cold War terms.¹⁴⁷ The institutions of the European Union regard China as both a "systemic rival" and a "negotiating partner", and while they have become increasingly publicly critical of China's human rights abuses, they appear keen to prioritise some forms of cooperation.¹⁴⁸

At times, the narrow scope between these two positions has compelled the European Union to draw lines under its advocacy efforts towards China – most infamously exemplified at the EU-China Summit held in September, which sought to simultaneously accelerate negotiations on increased trade and investment, and express the EU's condemnation of China's actions in the South China Sea, Hong Kong and towards its Uighur minority.¹⁴⁹ The relatively balanced position of the EU is becoming increasingly distinct from the approach being taken by the United States, which reflects its subscription to the framing of an era of 'great power competition'. As such, it is difficult to anticipate that a second term for President Trump would alleviate the tensions that have been building in the Transatlantic relationship.

Outside of the European Union's institutions, President Trump's relationship with individual European leaders has been highly volatile during his first term. Despite relations with French President Emmanuel Macron initially striking a friendly tone,¹⁵⁰ the fundamental differences in their approach to global governance have precipitated tensions. President Macron's statement before the 2019 NATO Summit that the alliance was becoming "brain dead" and ineffective, as the United States failed to coordinate with allies, were rebuffed by President Trump as "very, very nasty" and "very insulting".¹⁵¹ At the Summit itself, the pair proceeded to clash over NATO, Turkey's relationship with Russia, and President Trump's claim that many ISIS fighters came from France.¹⁵² The European digital services tax, which President Macron is a supporter of,¹⁵³ and President Trump's disruption of the World Health Organisation through his trade war with China, have also caused conflict.¹⁵⁴

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President Trump and German Chancellor Angela Merkel have also experienced friction in their relationship around foreign policy issues. President Trump claims that Germany is “captive” to Russia due to its reliance on Russia for energy¹⁵⁵ and has grown frustrated by the fact that Germany, despite being the world’s fourth largest economy, only spends 1.4% of its GDP on defence, which is well below the NATO target of 2%. President Trump has therefore removed thousands of troops from Germany, which have historically been based there since the Cold War, stating that “we don’t want to be suckers anymore” by funding protection for a country that could afford to protect itself.¹⁵⁶

Disputes have also arisen over the United States’ threats that it would limit the intelligence that it shares with Germany if it did not remove Huawei from its 5G networks,¹⁵⁷ and over disagreements between the two nations about how best to engage with Iran and its nuclear threat.¹⁵⁸ In May, Chancellor Merkel declined President Trump’s invitation to an in-person G7 summit stating that it was not possible given “the overall pandemic situation”. Officials also stated that Chancellor Merkel and other G7 leaders were reluctant to allow President Trump to use the meeting as an election year photo opportunity.¹⁵⁹ The German foreign minister has warned that relations between Germany and the United States may never be the same again, as President Trump’s behaviour has precipitated a structural shift in relations.¹⁶⁰

European envoys have highlighted their concerns around the potential further deterioration in US-EU relations, stating that they “fear we have not reached rock bottom yet” in the Transatlantic relationship if President Trump is re-elected.¹⁶¹ Aside from their diverging paths on China, there are particular concerns within Europe that President Trump could formally withdraw from NATO, which would leave Europe vulnerable to an increasingly unpredictable and brazen Russia.¹⁶² There are also concerns amongst some member states, that President Trump may extend existing sanctions and impose new sanctions on states such as Russia and Turkey. The close economic relationship that Europe has with these states means that such actions could have significant economic ramifications for Europe, as was seen with the imposition of sanctions on Iran.¹⁶³

In contrast, according to one of Candidate Biden’s foreign policy advisors, Tony Blinken, one of Biden’s primary objectives would be “engaging with the European Union” and working together on a number of shared goals and objectives, including challenging China’s trade practices.¹⁶⁴ This is in line with Biden’s track record on Europe, in which he has been a staunch supporter of a strong Transatlantic relationship and has forged close relationships with many European leaders.¹⁶⁵

Biden’s approach to Europe stems from his desire to see the United States taking a central leadership role within the liberal world order. He regards renewing and rebuilding existing alliances, including with Europe, as integral to that.¹⁶⁶ During the election campaign, Candidate Biden has highlighted key areas in which he aims to build American and European collaboration, which predominantly centre on tackling the perceived threat posed by China and Russia.¹⁶⁷ Biden has stated that he wants to work with Europe to improve technological innovation, allowing them to collectively strengthen their cyber infrastructure, close financial loopholes and coordinate intelligence efforts, in the fight against Russia and China.¹⁶⁸

Moreover, the Biden campaign has also identified NATO as a forum for a strengthened degree of defence and security cooperation with Europe, and has committed to deploying more troops to Eastern Europe and to reconsidering President Trump’s decision to withdraw 12,000 troops from Germany.¹⁶⁹ He has strongly defended NATO against President Trump’s criticisms¹⁷⁰ and has warned that “there will be no NATO” if Trump is re-elected.¹⁷¹ However, like President Trump, Candidate Biden has alluded to his desire to see Europe taking on more responsibility for NATO, calling on them to “recommit to their responsibilities as members of the democratic alliance”.¹⁷²

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Furthermore, Candidate Biden's ability to rebuild America's relationship with Europe will also undoubtedly face a number of obstacles that have revealed themselves during President Trump's first term in office. Economic sanctions against China and against those involved in Nord Stream 2, which – as mentioned above – have caused tensions due to their economic impact, were pushed for by the US Congress, and Biden himself has been critical of Nord Stream 2.¹⁷³ Although Biden has yet to make any commitments on either set of sanctions, his support for the issues underpinning the rationale for imposing sanctions particularly on Nord Stream 2, puts him at odds with key leaders in Europe.

Candidate Biden's ambitions for the EU-US relationship may also be limited by the structural challenges within the European Union itself. While the European Union's new President Ursula von der Leyen has made clear that she would like to see the EU becoming a foreign policy superpower,¹⁷⁴ as previously outlined, policy positions on some of the core issues facing the liberal world order – including attitudes towards Russia and China – remain heterogeneous across the bloc. For example, member states in Eastern Europe are increasingly concerned about Russian aggression in the region, and Baltic states such as Estonia have called for stronger action against Russia and greater NATO preparedness against a potential Russian threat.¹⁷⁵ Some Central European member states, such as Hungary, have urged for a de-escalation of tensions¹⁷⁶ – a view shared, albeit with distinct motivations, by large Western states such as Germany, which has urged for “dialogue” with Russia to prevent relations deteriorating further, and to ensure greater agreement on nuclear disarmament.¹⁷⁷

It would be simpler for the European Union's allies to have certainty in the bloc's positions on various issues, yet it seems unlikely that this will substantively eventuate over the course of the next Presidential term. It will also be essential for the European Union's own ambitions to become a global diplomatic superpower to address its discordant instincts on key issues, such as China and Russia. In the case of a second term for President Trump, the European Union will also need to accept the likelihood of continued competition, and consider its evolving relationship with the United States as a foreign policy question. Should a Biden administration prevail, the European Union will find warmer words of friendship, and a renewed degree of security support; yet the pressure to substantially invest in its defensive capabilities and develop a more cohesive and forthright voice in the global values agenda, is unlikely to recede.

For the United Kingdom, there should be no doubt that both outcomes in November's Presidential elections will compel a considerably more constructive and cohesive tone in UK-EU relations than has been laid bare over the past four years – in the case of a Biden administration, at the behest of the United States, and in the case of a second Trump victory, to balance against its retreat. In the respect that it would reflect a restoration of some degree of the 'status quo' of American foreign policy, a President Biden would almost certainly regard close and productive relations between the United Kingdom and the European Union as in the fundamental interests of the United States and the Western alliance more generally. Once again, however, it is the case with this election that either of the two pathways the United States could take will necessitate a more ambitious, courageous and collaborative role for Global Britain.

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