



Intro to US-UK Relations

History:

The term “special relationship” is used as a catch-all term for the political, diplomatic, military and economic relations between the US and the UK. Although the unofficial term became popularized in a speech by the then-Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Winston Churchill, in 1946, it is also widely acknowledged that the two states have enjoyed close political and military relations for much of the 20th Century. During this time the two countries were military allies in a number of wars and have often shared prioritized access and close cooperation on a range of issues.

The relationship is not a consistent one, with the personality traits and policies of both countries' leaders reportedly playing a significant role in determining its closeness during specific periods of time. The two countries were considered particularly close during the Clinton/Blair period, when the two leaders, as friends more than representatives, would frequently talk about the issues of the day and provide support and guidance to each other. This relationship is often thought to have been a significant factor in the decision by the UK Government to enter the Iraq War alongside the United States.

Present:

President Biden's first phone call to a European leader was to the current British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, and the call included a joint commitment to strengthening the relationship. However, this came not long after Biden had publicly voiced major concern about the direction of UK policy regarding Brexit. His particular focus was on the UK Government's decision to break the Good Friday Agreement in order to deliver a Brexit deal that would leave the UK out of the European Union's Free Trade Agreement.

It is this disagreement—amongst other differences—that has led to less focus being given to the relationship in recent years. An example of the tension during Trump's presidency is clear in the following passage in a briefing available to MPs and advisers in 2018:

“Against the backdrop of increasing American isolationism, the so-called ‘special relationship’ between the United States and the United Kingdom has arguably been subject to even more intense scrutiny, particularly as the UK seeks to define its global role in light of its withdrawal from the European Union. In particular, opportunities for cooperation such as a mooted bilateral trade deal, and areas of disagreement such as the US's stance on the Iranian nuclear agreement, have prompted a number of questions about the potential nature of future relations between the two countries, and the wider ramifications.” (HOL Library, 2018)

Future:

It is clear that the future of the relationship will depend largely on the personality and politics of the future leaders of both countries. The UK Government is eager to see the relationship culminating in a US-UK trade deal. However, given Biden's recent announcement that a trade deal may not occur till 2024, it is clearly not a US priority. Nevertheless, both countries seem to remain committed to keeping at least a facade of proximity, given their shared values and their status as two of the world's key powers, economically, militarily and diplomatically.