



Blog

# CHOOSING SIDES? THE UK BETWEEN TRUMP'S AMERICA AND A UNITED EUROPE

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## Introduction: Between Two Worlds

Almost a decade has passed since the Brexit referendum, but the UK is still grappling with the consequences of its departure from the EU. Touted by the likes of Nigel Farage as a glorious ‘independence day’, Brexit was supposed to unleash a ‘Global Britain’ – a great trading nation free to pursue a revitalised ‘special relationship’ with the US, amongst other goals. However, the confluence of factors that pushed 52% of voters to choose Leave<sup>1</sup> in June 2016 belongs to a geopolitical reality that no longer exists.

Now with a war on European soil, a devastating conflict in Gaza, a second Trump presidency in full swing, and Starmer’s Labour government attempting to “reset” relations with Europe, the UK finds itself at a geopolitical crossroads. In the face of these new global flashpoints, British political leaders can no longer sidestep a serious debate on Europe, and what that might mean for Britain’s relationship with Washington. As a result, the Starmer administration is walking a foreign policy tightrope between a renewed partnership with the EU and its longstanding ties with the US - but can the UK really be friends with both? With the harsh economic realities of Brexit setting in, British public opinion gravitating towards the EU, and the grave situation in Ukraine demanding a united front in Europe, the UK’s balancing strategy is becoming unsustainable.

## Life After Brexit: Europe, Who?

Five years on from the formal departure under the Withdrawal Agreement (1 February 2020)<sup>2</sup>, the UK still primarily lives under the framework of a ‘hard Brexit’ shaped by successive Conservative governments, despite a multitude of internal and external changes. A big reason for this inertia is the remarkable veil of silence that fell over Britain’s relationship with EU the moment Brexit became a done deal. Traumatized by years of

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<sup>1</sup> The Electoral Commission. [“Results and Turnout at the EU Referendum.”](#) The Electoral Commission, 24 June 2016. Accessed 4 July 2025.

<sup>2</sup> European Commission. [“The EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement.”](#) European Commission. Accessed 4 July 2025.

painful negotiations, the British political establishment opted to collectively ignore the question of Europe. The silence was so stark that even during the 2024 British General Election campaigns, centred on the issue of economic growth, the impact of Brexit was totally absent from the political agenda.

To fill this strategic vacuum, the UK had been chasing its vision of Global Britain, with a strong transatlantic relationship at its core - an Atlanticist attitude that has shaped British foreign policy for decades. In 1944, Winston Churchill told Charles de Gaulle, "You must know that when we have to choose between Europe and the open seas, we will always be with the open seas."<sup>3</sup> While Churchill himself was a staunch supporter of European integration, it was this spirit of Atlanticism and buccaneering free trade that was instrumentalised by Brexiteers in 2016. The Referendum rode on a wave of populism, which also helped to elect Trump, and many Britons will remember the nauseating sight of former Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May clutching the new President's hand in an effort to secure a post-Brexit trade deal. These efforts dismally failed, and no such deal materialised that could justify the deep impact of shunning the UK's nearest neighbours and biggest trading partner.<sup>4</sup> In the years since the hard exit from the Customs Union and Single Market, the 'Brexit Effect' has taken a sledge hammer to the British economy, shaving off 4% of GDP (£100bn per year) compared with pre-Brexit conditions.<sup>5</sup> Even as the economic fallout became painfully clear, compounded by the obvious hit to Britain's global influence and soft power, the British Conservative Party maintained their dogmatic rejection of closer relations with EU and kept their sights on the open seas.

## The Invasion of Ukraine: A Catalyst for Reconnection

Nonetheless, the conspiracy of silence could not continue. The invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 profoundly shifted the meaning of European integration and shattered the conditions in which Brexit took place. For the UK, the Russian invasion helped to break

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<sup>3</sup> In: Sundar, A. "[Transatlantic Drift: UK-EU Defence Cooperation in the Second Trump Era.](#)" European Council on Foreign Relations, 4 December 2024.

<sup>4</sup> House of Commons Library. "[Geographical Pattern of UK Trade.](#)" House of Commons Library Research Briefing, 13 December 2024. Accessed 6 July 2025.

<sup>5</sup> Office for Budget Responsibility. "[Brexit Analysis.](#)" Office for Budget Responsibility. Accessed 4 July 2025.

the political taboo on closer ties with Brussels. As one of Europe's major military powers, staying on the sidelines was no longer an option. The unifying effect of external aggression, combined with the decisive demise of the Conservative Party in July 2024 in favour of the Remainer Starmer and his strong Labour majority, forced an end to the national silence on Brexit and prompted a reframing of where transatlantic relations should sit in the UK's foreign policy priorities.

Starmer's government seized the moment. The May 2025 EU-UK Summit – the first of its kind since Brexit – delivered breakthroughs in defence cooperation, joint procurement and regulatory alignment. Celebrated by Ursula Von der Leyen as the beginning of a “new chapter”<sup>6</sup>, this was the closest thing to a ‘reset’ achieved so far. A Defence and Security Partnership took centre stage, formalising EU-UK cooperation on hybrid warfare, cybersecurity, critical infrastructure, and paving the way to include the UK in common procurement actions under SAFE (an EU funding instrument to mobilise € 150bn for defence investment).<sup>7</sup> Such substantive outcomes clearly articulated *mutual* ambitions in European security in the midst of an adverse geopolitical environment.

Yet crucially, this show of unity was not just about responding to the threat from Russia. Ahead of the Summit, the UK proposed a broad statement of shared values with the EU. This was framed as a ‘geopolitical preamble’ in which both sides laid out a shared position in stark contrast to US policies.<sup>8</sup> Namely, the statement articulated the EU and UK's continued support for Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, in contrast to Washington's April proposal to recognise Moscow's control of Crimea, and to allow de-facto recognition of Russian control of other Ukrainian territories. The joint statement also reiterated a shared commitment to multilateralism and “free and open trade”<sup>9</sup>, pointedly framed as a bulwark against Trump turmoil.<sup>10</sup> At a crucial moment, the

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<sup>6</sup> European Commission Press Corner. [“New Chapter in EU-UK Relations Announced at Leaders’ Summit in London.”](#) European Commission Press Corner, 19 May 2025. Accessed 19 May 2025.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Bayer, L. [“UK Proposes Statement of Shared Values with EU. Document Shows.”](#) Reuters, 28 April 2025. Accessed 4 July 2025.

<sup>9</sup> European Council. [“EU-UK Summit 2025: Outcome Documents.”](#) European Council Press, 19 May 2025. Accessed 4 July 2025.

<sup>10</sup> Pugnet, A., and Morgan, O. [“UK, EU to Frame Partnership as Bulwark Against Trump Turmoil.”](#) Euractiv, 28 April 2025. Accessed 6 July 2025.

UK sent a clear signal of ideological alignment with the EU vis-à-vis Ukraine, thereby presenting a united European front.

## THE TRUMP EFFECT: Walking the Tightrope

But how united is it, really? The much-anticipated 'reset' has not made British foreign policy immune to the gravitational pull of a Trump White House. Despite the new atmosphere of cooperation, the UK still seeks to carve out a third path as a neutral partner to both the EU and the US - even more so than with the first Trump Presidency. In line with this geopolitical balancing act, the EU-UK Summit arrived as part of a 'hat trick' of deals, including a free trade agreement with India, and a vaguely named 'Economic Prosperity Deal' with the US.<sup>11</sup> Throughout the negotiations leading up to the deal, Starmer struck a distinctly deferential tone toward Trump, occasionally verging on obsequious. Upon Trump's re-election, British Foreign Secretary David Lammy was among the first to warmly congratulate the President elect, who was then invited for an unprecedented second state visit hosted by King Charles, due to take place in September this year.<sup>12</sup> The PM's balancing act is clear: appease Trump, preserve European ties, and keep Britain relevant on the world stage. But how sustainable is this in the long run?

No one can deny the wisdom of attempting to maintain diplomatic ties with a world economic and military superpower, and the UK is in a unique position to exploit its post-Brexit status as a country with strong historical and cultural ties to the US, free from the shackles of a multilateral organisation which was, according to Trump, designed to "rip off" the US.<sup>13</sup> This approach has produced results. The UK was the first to secure any kind of trade deal with the returned Trump, and with the onset of his global trade war in April Britain enjoyed relative leniency: only 10% tariffs compared with the initial blanket 20% imposed on the EU.<sup>14</sup> More recently, during Trump's informal visit to Scotland,

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<sup>11</sup> Government of the United Kingdom. ["UK-US Economic Prosperity Deal \(EPD\)."](#) Policy Paper, 8 May 2025. Accessed 6 July 2025.

<sup>12</sup> Relph, D. ["Trump will be hosted by King at Windsor during second state visit."](#) BBC, 14 July 2025. Accessed 11 August 2025.

<sup>13</sup> The Irish Times. ["European Union Was Formed Solely to 'Rip Off the United States,' Claims Trump."](#) The Irish Times, 7 April 2025. Accessed 7 July 2025.

<sup>14</sup> Crerar, P. ["Trump Hits UK with 10% Tariffs as He Ignites Global Trade War."](#) The Guardian, 2 April 2025. Accessed 7 July 2025.



Washington and Brussels struck a trade deal where most EU goods will now face an import tariff of 15% (half the threatened rate), while the already small tariffs on US goods entering the EU will be eliminated altogether.<sup>15</sup> This clear concession to Trump has attracted strong criticism from within the EU, leaving Starmer's US trade deal for post-Brexit Britain looking more favourable. Indeed, despite what was agreed in Scotland the extreme 50% global tariffs on steel and aluminium will remain in place for now<sup>16</sup>, with the UK still (subject to conditions) benefitting from a preferential 25% rate.<sup>1718</sup> This has been described as a 'Brexit dividend' and evidence of successful geopolitical balancing. In June, the first face-to-face meeting between German Chancellor Merz and Trump demonstrated the drawbacks of operating from within the EU. Trump disparagingly highlighted Merz's inability to unilaterally negotiate trade deals, and the lack of substantial outcomes from this meeting does highlight the relative success of Starmer's of personal diplomacy, and post-Brexit freedom to manoeuvre.

Nonetheless, in simple economic terms, selective leniency from Trump and a handful of global trade deals have not come close to replicating the economic relationship the UK had with the EU. Even with the preferential tariffs and a new deal, the UK's total net loss in trade volumes (imports and exports) is still at 15%, relative to if it had stayed in the EU.<sup>19</sup> The 'Brexit dividend' for the British economy has not materialised, the Labour government must now contend with the dire economic circumstances it inherited from its Conservative predecessors, and the country now operates in a much harsher geopolitical environment without the comfort of a large regulatory trade block. Indeed, in the face of Trump's erratic trade policy, succinctly described by British journalist Emily Maitlis as "economic diarrhoea,"<sup>20</sup> it will become increasingly difficult for the UK to maintain its neutrality and simultaneously honour its joint commitment to multilateralism and free

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<sup>15</sup> Elliott, L. ["This Is Europe's Suez Moment – Its Weakness Is Now Laid Bare."](#) The Guardian, 31 July 2025. Accessed 7 August 2025.

<sup>16</sup> Gray, A., and Shalal, A. ["US and EU Avert Trade War with 15% Tariff Deal."](#) Reuters, 28 July 2025. Accessed 9 August 2025.

<sup>17</sup> Government of the United Kingdom. ["UK-US Trade Deal Kicks into Gear."](#) Press Release, 30 June 2025. Accessed 7 July 2025.

<sup>18</sup> House of Commons Library. ["US Trade Tariffs."](#) House of Commons Library Research Briefing, 30 July 2025. Accessed 8 August 2025.

<sup>19</sup> Office for Budget Responsibility. ["How Are Our Brexit Trade Forecast Assumptions Performing?"](#) Office for Budget Responsibility. Accessed 7 July 2025.

<sup>20</sup> The News Agents. ["Has Brexit Really Saved Us from Trump's Trade War?"](#) The News Agents Podcast, 3 April 2025. Accessed 3 April 2025.

trade. Concretely, a closer trading relationship with the US will come with severe pressure on the UK to deregulate – particularly in regard to food standards – a move that would preclude the close regulatory alignment needed for a renewed trading partnership with the EU, something which is ultimately much more valuable to the British economy.

With the economic rationale to choose the EU over the US established, the clear ideological divergence comes to the forefront. From the moment Trump re-entered office, his transactional style of diplomacy, warm attitude toward Putin, and evident indifference to the territorial sovereignty of Ukraine reinforced an already clear vision of a world order in which national borders can be redrawn by force, and multilateralism has been abandoned. This does not constitute a 'safe partner' for the UK. The volatility of Trump alone makes any long-term alignment with US impossible, and detrimental to the shared values that underpin renewed EU-UK cooperation. The British public are clear: in 2025, only 16% of the British population are positive about Trump,<sup>21</sup> and 66% think that the UK should have closer relations with the EU.<sup>22</sup>

Despite this strength of feeling, Starmer's government asserts that the UK does not have to choose between partners - it can 'have the best of both worlds' - but there comes a point when ideological divergences are too strong to credibly pursue a balanced foreign policy. In these instances, the UK will be forced to decide which partnership it values the most. The joint statement that was released ahead of the Summit in May, unequivocally rejecting Trump's so-called 'peace plan' for Ukraine, represented one such crunch point. As the situation in the Middle East escalates even further, Trump's response to Israel's plan to occupy Gaza City - a move which has already led Germany, one of Israel's staunchest international allies, to suspend arms exports<sup>23</sup> - could soon be another.

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<sup>21</sup> Statista. ["Percentage of People in Great Britain Who Like Donald Trump from 3rd Quarter 2020 to 2nd Quarter 2025."](#) Statista, 23 June 2025. Accessed 4 July 2025.

<sup>22</sup> Smith, M. ["Britons Back Closer Relationship with Europe as UK and EU Reset Relations."](#) YouGov, 20 May 2025. Accessed 18 June 2025.

<sup>23</sup> Deutsche Welle. ["Germany suspends arms exports to Israel for use in Gaza."](#) DW, 8 August 2025. Accessed 12 August 2025.

## Conclusion

While few would deny that Britain must continue to ‘play along’ with Trump and pursue a geopolitical balancing act that has delivered some short-term rewards, the long-term case for prioritising the EU is clear. Starmer has managed to make some progress, but ‘Brexit fatigue’ and domestic political pressures have hindered a more ambitious reset. In this sense, what has been missing so far in the EU-UK relationship is genuine political will. A second, and even more radical, Trump presidency can provide precisely that, not as a source of division, but as a catalyst for clarity on the UK’s position. With Ukraine’s future hanging in the balance, the UK will have to make a definitive assessment about its alignment. There is no guarantee that the White House will change hands in four years, and the security imperatives that bind the UK to the European continent are not going away. The logic of geography, economic integration, and shared values points towards Europe. This choice is not just a diplomatic preference, but a strategic necessity, even if it risks displeasing Trump.



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