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Anglo-American relations 2.0: pressing the reset button?

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The results of the 2020 US presidential election sent the British media into a frenzy of anticipation over the state of the special relationship. The news that Boris Johnson was among the first world leaders to have received a phone call from the President-elect was received with a sigh of relief, even if it didn't entirely assuage all fears. The level of anxiety had been running especially high as the British Prime Minister was deemed to have enjoyed an exceptionally close personal relationship with Donald Trump. Memories of Boris Johnson's hobnobbing with the President at international conferences, of Donald Trump's public support for Johnson's bid for the leadership of the Conservative party in the summer of 2019 and for a tougher stance in the Brexit negotiations, as well as of all the swagger and bluster on either side of the Atlantic, were seen as millstones round the Prime Minister's neck which would drag him - and the United Kingdom - down to the bottom of the queue. The similarities between the leaders' personal and political lives, two insiders running as outsiders, mavericks who had risen to the top of their own parties through pandering to the tastes of the rank and file and of an unusual electoral base, the echoing political slogans "America First" and "Take Back Control", the readiness to resort to 'alternative facts', all could conspire to wrongfoot the British Prime Minister. If the tide had turned with Joe Biden's victory it was feared that Boris Johnson would be left on the wrong side of history, in the company of those 'strong leaders' Donald Trump had taken a liking to.

When trying to fathom out how the new Anglo-American relationship might play out in the future, the odds seem to be piling up against the British Prime Minister. If Joe Biden's reaction to the news of Johnson's 2019 election victory is anything to go by, namely the somewhat damning indictment that the newly elected Prime Minister was a replica of Donald Trump ("a kind of physical and emotional clone of the President"), relations between London and Washington are likely to hit turbulence. Johnson's handling of the Brexit negotiations has attracted criticism from the President-elect, his campaign team and Democratic grandees: in his post-victory telephone conversation with Johnson, out of loyalty to former Democratic President Bill Clinton whose administration had brokered the deal and as a tribute to his own family roots, Joe Biden is reported to have warned the British Prime Minister that he would be keeping close watch as the hardline stance favoured by the British government in the ongoing Brexit negotiations was likely to jeopardize the Good Friday Agreement. On the same issue, senior Congress Democrats sent an official letter to Boris Johnson on 15 September 2020 when it appeared that the Government's Internal Market Bill, besides defaulting on the October 2019 Withdrawal Agreement, would in all likelihood put a strain on the peace process in Ireland. Finally, as Joe Biden appoints his foreign policy team and the list grows of well-seasoned experts groomed to senior government positions in Barack Obama's administration, the jarring notes of Brexit nationalism may come back to haunt the British Government. Both Joe Biden, and his Francophile Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, have repeatedly voiced their disapproval of Brexit and explained how a UK outside of the EU would be of little use to American interests. As the President-elect draws up the list of his administration's priorities as of January 2021, the prospect of a "great free trade deal with the USA" is receding, thus depriving the UK negotiators of a major asset and vindication of British brinkmanship in the Brexit wrestling game.

As recent assessments of the impact of Joe Biden's election on the Anglo-American partnership have been tainted by attitudes to Brexit, the doomsday scenario of Johnson's post-Brexit Britain, having left the Union and not yet found a role, drifting aimlessly in the mid-Atlantic, is more likely to convince the Remain side of the divide, Leavers tending to be more optimistic about Britain's future prospects. There is nevertheless a case to be made for not reading too much into Boris Johnson's so-called friendship with Donald Trump and jump to the conclusion that it has durably compromised

Britain's chance to cooperate with the new administration. In that respect it is probably useful to reread the history of [the](#) last four years from a different perspective and take a more circumspect view of the excessive personalization of Anglo-American relations since 2016 as a fall-out from Trump's idiosyncratic diplomacy and conduct of foreign policy. If it is indisputable that Johnson played along with some gusto and kept the ball rolling in front of television cameras, other leaders too tried to ingratiate themselves with the US president before realizing that great shows of friendship failed to materialize into tangible benefits. Donald Trump's enthusiastic promotion of a magnificent fast-track US-UK free trade deal amounted to little more than mere soundbites, largely because it required Congressional approval and could not be ratified before the end of the transition period. In addition, there was never any real traction in the claim that the future US-UK trade deal would be 'special' in any way or significantly different from other US trade deals, and eventually even the Brexiters could not fail to realize that it would come with a heavy price, in terms of lower agricultural standards, or for cash-strapped British public services such as the NHS, whose vulnerability to the US healthcare industry threatened to expose the "Take Back Control" slogan as a sham, even in the eyes of its staunchest supporters. The Johnson-Trump rather protracted honeymoon eventually came to an end when Donald Trump's shallow interpretation of the special relationship was progressively exposed not even as a zero-sum game but as one which involved political risk. In view of the American president's low popularity in the United Kingdom, did not guarantee protection from foreign threats to national security, as in the case of the 2018 Salisbury poisoning (although the British government was willing to turn a blind eye on threats to the British democratic process at the time of the Brexit referendum), and failed to uphold the tacit agreement whereby the ultimate convergence of views and interests on either side of the Atlantic did allow for some occasional degree of divergence in the pursuit of national interest. The Huawei episode revealed that Donald Trump was keeping the British Prime Minister on a tighter leash than was expected.

As a Biden presidency promises to press the reset button of US-UK relations, some analysts have argued that although personal relations between the two leaders might arguably be more strained, at least initially, the new administration's outlook on foreign policy would prove more congenial to British interests. The UK, like other European nations, is likely to welcome Joe Biden's renewed commitment to the transatlantic alliance and a reinvigorated Euro-Atlantic community. Similarly, the repeated declarations in favour of a return to multilateralism hold the promise of an international environment both more familiar and more congruent with Britain's interests, which the UK can navigate on the basis of well-tried recipes. Most evidently, Biden's "America is Back" sounds more heartening to US allies, including the United Kingdom, than "America First".

Boris Johnson was admittedly relatively slow to congratulate Joe Biden on his election victory; as Donald Trump refused to concede and seemed bent on contesting the results, the British Prime Minister chose to tread carefully. Once it was clear that the results would not be overturned by the courts, Johnson was quick to sketch the contours of the future Anglo-American partnership. His list of priorities, from the fight against climate change to trade and security issues chimed in nicely with Biden's major campaign themes. As well as laying the basis of post-Brexit US-UK cooperation Johnson's pronouncements could be seen to confirm the new orientations of British foreign policy. Early signs of a so-called policy shift were perceptible from 2019 when Johnson first vented the idea that an outdated G7 should give way to the D10, a coalition of democracies committed to the promotion of multilateralism. In what can be seen as a clean break with the policies of the 'golden era' of Sino-British relations, which David Cameron and George Osborne ushered in when Britain's economy was still reeling from the effects of the global financial crisis, the British government backed out of a prospective 5G Huawei deal and decided to ban Huawei from its 5G rollout. The United Kingdom's response to the mounting tension in Hong-Kong over the introduction of a new security law came with

the offer of a new immigration route and a fast-track to British citizenship for British Nationals (Overseas) citizens. Alongside the much-publicized commitment to a sharp increase in Britain's defence budget on 20th November 2020 (£7bn higher in 2024-25 than it would have been under previous plans according to a recent assessment by the Institute for Fiscal Studies), the British government's refusal to include foreign policy and defence issues in current discussions over the future of its relations with the European Union is a sign of the United Kingdom's determination to increase its standing in the world. While the UK might sometimes shadow its former European partners as exemplified by the recent decision to enhance its presence in the Indo-Pacific region, following similar moves by Germany and France earlier this year, attempts to flesh out the 'Global Britain' slogan, whose emptiness was turning into an embarrassment, are predicated on a revived special relationship with the US.

Close cooperation with the US can buttress the UK's claim to global status, it offers a way out of the European conundrum and enticing prospects of signing new economic deals, such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), in the wake of the US, and joining the fast(er) growing economies of the ASEAN, the world's largest trading bloc as of October 2020. Perhaps even more importantly, if couched in the language of free trade as well as the defence and promotion of a rules-based international environment, Britain's post-Brexit bid for global status can countenance the myth of Britain's independence from foreign interference. American superiority in this highly unequal partnership can be dismissed almost as an irrelevance as long as the US are described as senior partners in a joint endeavour, committed to the perpetuation of a British initiative crucial to the preservation of British interests. The recent developments in British foreign policy have been welcomed by some, including in the US, as promising 'greenshoots'. It is our contention that some of those budding leaves look somewhat withered already, with their shades of the 1960s 'independence through interdependence' slogan and their echoes of the 'piggy backing', 'punching above their weight' rhetoric; the recent wheeling out of the Indian Ocean base of Diego Garcia seems to warrant this interpretation. How will this resonate with the new US government? Will it be impervious to some of the more hackneyed connotations of the kind of transatlantic partnership which the British government seems to have in mind? Will a Biden administration turn a blind eye to the 'postcolonial melancholia' which animates both Global Britain and Brexit, for the sake of containing Chinese expansionism?

One last characteristic of the recent 'policy shift' is its brazen disregard for the outcome of the current negotiations on the issue of the UK's future trading relations with the EU. The Johnson government has been setting its gaze firmly on a post-Brexit, post-transition period horizon. This is not entirely unreasonable considering that the Conservative leader's election pledge was to break the parliamentary deadlock which had plagued the better part of Theresa May's term in office, swiftly deliver Brexit and place Britain "on the launching pad" (see Johnson's Greenwich speech, 3 February 2020). The resounding election victory in December 2019 could be interpreted as an endorsement of Johnson's vision of a bright future outside of the EU, however fraught with uncertainty and wishful thinking. In addition to capturing the imagination of a majority of voters it brought satisfaction to the Eurosceptic faction within the Conservative party who had offered decisive support to his bid for leadership in the summer of 2019. This provides further evidence of the fact that Conservative party in-fighting has recently been the main driver of Britain's foreign policy.

If looked at from a different perspective, the suggestion that Brexit is a thing of the past and that negotiating future relations with the United Kingdom's major trading partner and 'near abroad' is an unwelcome distraction from the imperatives of Global Britain is both short-sighted and misleading as

it fails to acknowledge how much Britain's future standing in the world is predicated on the outcome of the negotiations as well as on the UK's negotiating style and strategy.

A whole range of options have been contemplated and discussed at length in the past 3 or 4 years. From Norway+ (the EU's favourite) through Canada-style (the UK's favoured option) to Australia-style as a last resort, all offered different trade-offs between sovereignty and prosperity, reflecting the successive governments evolving priorities. Under Johnson's premiership, the UK has adopted a much tougher stance in the negotiations, as the Prime Minister, the chief negotiator Lord Frost and the Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab, all stated their determination to pursue their brinkmanship strategy to the end in countless public declarations, even if this meant having to contemplate the collapse of talks. Although the tougher stance and brazen rhetoric are indisputably meant for domestic consumption, they also suggest that Boris Johnson might be gambling on wrenching an 11th-hour bare-bones deal which would allow negotiations to resume on a sectoral basis in 2021. There is a lot of traction in the claim that the UK government is currently clutching at straws, hoping that the EU would eventually yield to the pressure exercised by the German chancellor and compromise on the so-called sticking points in the negotiations, from fishing rights to the level-playing field clauses involving competition rules and state aid for businesses, or that extolling the virtues of Global Britain while blaming the global pandemic for economic hardships would help Britain weather the storm of its first few months out of the EU.

When one tries to factor in the impact of Brexit on Britain's global ambitions, the picture looks more sobering. If Global Britain was intended as a response to the claim that the UK was no longer a military power, no longer an economic power and no longer a regulatory power, the economic downturn which is predicted to follow hard on the heels of Brexit, deal or no deal, sits uncomfortably with the UK's high profile military ambitions. Even allowing for the precaution to defer the bulk of extra spending to 2023-24, the plan is likely to be blown off course as a combination of Brexit and Covid-related knock-on effects takes its toll on the British economy. Similarly, as the UK's Secretary of State for International Trade is currently engaged in processing as many continuity agreements as possible with EU's trading partners before the end of the transition period and is putting out feelers to try and build new trading relationships world-wide, the Government's Internal Market Bill which includes a provision to override elements of the Withdrawal Agreement, is likely to act as a powerful deterrent as it damages the UK's international reputation as a reliable ally.

As the UK prepares to leave the single market and the customs union on December 31st, the British government's capacity to respond to new challenges appears to be on shakier grounds than ever and as a new administration prepares to move into the White House, the need to whitewash the history of the past four years becomes more pressing. Boris Johnson will have to reinvent himself as the leader of a problem-solving and burden-sharing nation. Fortunately for the British Prime Minister, opportunities will arise in 2021 to play up the United Kingdom's long-standing strengths such as Britain's membership of NATO (the UK is the second highest contributor after the US), of the Five Eyes alliance and of the UN Security Council, as well as more recent ones like the claim to a leading role in the fight against climate change following the timely publication of the 10-point net-zero plan on 18 November 2020. Next February when the UK takes the presidency of the G7 or next November when it hosts the UN Climate Change Conference (COP 26) in Glasgow, Boris Johnson will be in a position to stress the importance of the Anglo-American partnership and the common determination to 'press the reset button' and 'build back better' in an attempt to bury any suggestion of an ideological rift with the US government.

In a post-Brexit context, Britain's global influence depends largely on the US administration's willingness to contemplate cooperation with the United Kingdom. The new dynamic of convergence which the British Prime Minister is gambling on rests on a number of assumptions. Washington's willingness to let bygones be bygones and come to terms with the reality of Brexit is as much a function of Joe Biden's legendary pragmatism as of the need to attend to more pressing issues. It also depends on the British government's willingness to adopt a more conciliatory stance in the last leg of the negotiations with the EU. The recent backdown on the Internal Market Bill which saw the government agree to the removal of its most controversial sections might indicate a move in that direction. In that case, we would be witnessing the last of Boris Johnson's intractability, his swan song and insurance policy with his own party.

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