



## Danish Institute for International Studies

### The Special Relationships of the US in Europe

The impact of the Trump presidency on UK and Denmark

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*Publication date:*  
2017

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Olesen, M. R., & Hinds, M. F. (2017). *The Special Relationships of the US in Europe: The impact of the Trump presidency on UK and Denmark*. Danish Institute for International Studies. DIIS Policy Brief Vol. 2017 No. January

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The impact of the Trump presidency on UK and Denmark

## THE SPECIAL RELATIONSHIPS OF THE US IN EUROPE

**Special relations between Washington and its closest European allies is at a crossroad after the election of Donald Trump as US president. Trump's "America First"-approach to diplomacy may expose such bonds to disruption.**

Special relationships are an essential part of how the United States has been able to maintain its hegemony throughout the world. With the Donald Trump administration about to begin, one of the main questions will be where this leaves the "special relationships" that Washington holds with its European allies and NATO partners, such as the United Kingdom with long historic traditions for closeness, but also on a lesser scale, small countries like Denmark, whose present close-

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Trump's America First stance may make special relations less stable and contingency plans should be developed for the day when special relations may scuttle.
- European countries – big and small like Britain and Denmark – with close dealings with the US should expect relations to become more opportunistic with a greater focus on short-term usefulness.
- On the flip side, Trump's transactional approach may make getting American help for specific issues easier for "good" allies.

# Because of Donald Trump's victory and the onset of Brexit, the United States and Britain are teamed up once again

For smaller countries like Denmark, maintaining a special relationship with the US is likely possible as long as such relationship is deemed useful by the Trump presidency

ness to the US is of a more recent vintage. The end result will largely turn on the interplay between the constancy of bureaucratic bilateral cooperation and now more than ever, the "wild card" that Trump represents.

## **GREAT BRITAIN: THE BIGGEST JUNIOR PARTNER**

Forged by a unique set of historical and cultural ties, shared liberal ideological values, while grounded by a multitude of overlapping strategic interests, US-UK relations is usually considered the "Special Relationship" and a lynchpin upholding the global liberal order since 1945. The rationale behind *the* "Special Relationship" is the simple idea of reciprocity. London relies on the connection to preserve its international stature, just as Washington considers the UK a useful junior partner in shouldering *Pax Americana* and the burdens of global hegemony. In this common goal, joint diplomatic efforts have been a calling card of the State Department and Foreign Commonwealth Office (FCO). Unparalleled bilateral cooperation also continues in the fields of defence and intelligence. The partnership between the US Navy and Royal Navy in both war and peace remains the backbone while the two "cousins", the CIA and MI-6 are arguably the two closest intelligence agencies in the world. Nuclear relations have been equally close, demonstrated by the UK's nuclear deterrent, the American made Trident. While each country's foreign policy and security led apparatuses lock the "Special Relationship" in place, it is the goodwill shared between American president and the British prime minister that sets the tone.

But ever since the botched US-UK intervention in Iraq, personal diplomacy only counts for so much. When entering the White House, President Obama de-emphasized the "Special Relationship" mainly because it lost its reciprocal qualities. By serving as

the US's closest ally throughout *Operation Iraqi Freedom*, Britain's international credibility ironically suffered and ultimately proved less vital to Washington. Militarily, UK forces became a liability as witnessed by their occupation of Basra or the Chinook Helicopter Scandal in Afghanistan. Since then, Britain has continued to scale back its military commitments culminating in the Strategic Defence and Security Review of 2010 which, from the American perspective at least, makes the "Special Relationship" that much less special. Regardless, it's easy to surmise that to Obama the very notion of special relationships is fundamentally suspect. Diplomatic arrangements that are predicated on the idea of "exclusivity" between nations, is far removed from the more inclusive vision of international relations that Obama championed.

## **DENMARK: THE SMALL FRIEND**

US-Danish relations, though consistently cordial, lack the long history of closeness that the US and the UK have. Furthermore, Denmark lacks the political clout that a country the size of the UK can muster. Since the end of the Cold War, however, Denmark has aligned itself much closer to the US. Like the UK, Denmark has bought fully into *Pax Americana*, primarily by supporting US military operations around the globe. Such expeditionary operations were highly prioritized by the Danish government and included difficult assignments, such as the Danish deployment to Helmand, Afghanistan, in 2006. This substantiated Denmark's reputation in Washington as a serious ally. As a result ties between Denmark and the US have grown steadily closer, peaking during the George W. Bush presidency, but remaining strong under the Obama presidency, not least due to the bureaucratic connections then in place.

The general US goodwill towards Denmark, as well as personal relationships built up over time at all levels of

government, has ensured a sympathetic ear for Danish ideas on substance in joint efforts. Furthermore, there have been practical advantages in the bond to the US: Denmark has benefitted from a high level of information sharing within the fields of intelligence, diplomacy and military matters. Warm relations have also resulted in increased "access" for Danish diplomats, military officers and politicians to their American counterparts. That can be important in times of crisis and it has indeed been used both in general crisis situations, such as the Muhammad Cartoon crisis 2005 or to sort out bilateral controver-

sies, such as the various Danish-Greenlandic-US controversies over the US military base in Thule in recent years. While such access does not in itself guarantee successful resolution of the problems brought up, it is a powerful avenue for capturing the attention of the superpower at the highest levels.

### THE FUTURE OF SPECIAL RELATIONSHIPS UNDER TRUMP

The incoming president's "America First" stance as a staunch unilateralist remains problematic, not to mention his unprecedented public attacks on the



A World War I poster showing Britannia arm-in-arm with Uncle Sam symbolizing the alliance between the US and the UK.

American foreign policymaking apparatus, the institutional mainstays that have anchored the special relationships. Still, the bureaucratic machinery in place is so multilayered that it is an almost impossible task for a president to completely depose of it. This means that we should not expect the special relationships to disappear overnight. Furthermore, it should also be remembered that in every sense of the word Trump is an opportunist; he will likely be susceptible to anything he deems a good deal.

For the UK specifically, Trump might suppose that Prime Minister Theresa May is ready to “play ball” as he admires her “strength”. In response, what if she accepts Nigel Farage as a backchannel between the White House and Downing Street, softens her stance towards Russia, gives a lower profile to human rights and the liberal maxims that once bound US-UK relations together and strikes against the EU by seeking out a new comprehensive trade agreement with the United States as a bargaining chip? Indeed, Trump announced on Sunday that the US and UK would get a deal “done quickly and done properly”, which no doubt comes as relief to Downing Street. At any rate, for the majority of Conservatives who backed Brexit, Euroscepticism is a part of Thatcherism, which is also part of an evangelical devotion to the “Special Relationship”. We are in the midst of one of the most bewildering moments in the history of Anglo-American relations. Because of Donald Trump’s victory and the onset of Brexit, the United States and Britain are teamed up once again. Not as allies defending the status quo, but rather finding themselves in the strange position of “revisionists”, unchaining the liberal world order that they – more than any two countries – helped to create.

For smaller countries like Denmark, maintaining a special relationship with the US is likely possible as long as such relationship is deemed useful by the Trump presidency. Indeed, Trump’s transactional

approach may prompt him to reward good alliance behaviour. The question is of course, how often such usefulness needs to be demonstrated and across which policy areas? To mention one example, Denmark’s commitment to Pax Americana and its willingness to put humans in harm’s way have so far largely deflected American criticism over Danish defence spending, which falls far short of NATO’s prescribed 2% of GDP. That may now change. Not only because of Trump’s threats to revisit the US security guarantee for countries falling short of this goal – defence spending was becoming a problem, albeit on a lesser scale, even before Trump – but also because Trump’s proposed way of war, deemphasizing humanitarian concerns, may make it more difficult for Danish politicians to go to war alongside the US in the future. Danish security interests in alliance with the US remains vital, but Danish enthusiasm for Pax Americana may well wane if Trump radically were to change what Pax Americana really means.

For better or worse, expect special relationships to look profoundly different in deed and character, but remain “special” by the simple virtue of its renewed importance.

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