



# A Faustian Special Relationship

**Srdjan Vucetic**

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**Donald Trump has recently been criticising his democratic allies, but he has been eager to revive the special relationship with the UK. Likewise, Theresa May has pledged to “renew the special relationship for this new age”. What are the drivers behind this development?**

Donald Trump has a thing for rebuking America’s democratic allies and their leaders—his latest target being Australia’s Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull. The UK appears to be an exception to this trend. In his first interview with the British press as president-elect, Trump explained that the UK has a “special place” in his half-Scottish heart and pledged to support a post-Brexit UK-US trade deal. Reportedly a big fan of Winston Churchill—and of Boris Johnson’s *Churchill Factor*—he also asked the UK government to loan him a Churchill bust that his Republican predecessor George W. Bush kept in the Oval Office.

This got some people in the UK excited—and not just Trump’s old friends like Nigel Farage. Indeed, shortly after Trump’s inauguration, Downing Street announced that Prime Minister Theresa May would be the first world leader to visit America’s new president. On January 23, four days ahead of May’s visit, Sean Spicer, the White House press secretary, confirmed that two leaders would talk trade (of course he called May “the British head of state”) and that the US has “always had that special relationship with Britain.” He then added, with a peculiar giggle: “We can always be closer.”

Looking at the visual images the media coverage left behind in isolation, you might think that May’s visit was a roaring success—the beginning of a beautiful Conservative-Republican friendship *à la* Margaret Thatcher and Ronald

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Reagan. Image one depicts the two leaders shaking hands against the background of Trump's main Oval Office redecorations—the Churchill bust and the portrait of Andrew Jackson. Image two shows Trump and May holding hands while walking from the Oval Office to the press conference. Image three: a well-attended, convivial press conference.

These images now depict a day that will live in infamy in the history of British foreign policy. A day after May left Washington—that is, on the Holocaust Remembrance Day—Trump's "Muslim ban" came into force, causing worldwide shock and pain. Now even her supporters had to wonder: How did we ever think we could do business with this misogynistic, racist man? And why was the prime minister prevaricating instead of outright condemning Trump's policy?

The standard answer is cold realpolitik. Scheduled to formally take the country outside the EU's single market in 2019, the UK government is desperately searching for new trade deals. The U.S. market is the primary target—this was implicit in May's Lancaster House speech ("We will continue to be reliable partners, willing allies and close friends") and explicit in her speech at the Republican Party conference in Philadelphia ("I am delighted that the new Administration has made a trade agreement between our countries one of its earliest priorities"). Viewed from this perspective, hugging Trump close, while doing so in an extremely unedifying manner, is in Britain's best interest—it is certainly in the best of interest of some Britons, as George Monbiot pointed out in his latest weekend column for *The Guardian*.

Most Conservatives and probably at least a third of the British voters are in quiet support of staying the course. On the same day Trump's press secretary giggled about the need for an ever closer special relationship. William Hague,

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former British foreign secretary and no supporter of Brexit, [penned](#) in *The Daily Telegraph* that the special relationship was Britain's only "indispensable alliance." Subsequent events did little to make him change his mind. To Hague, rather than retaliating against Trump's policies—which is a minority demand anyway—the UK government should host the American president this summer as planned. As for the image of the queen being "[within grabbing distance of America's helmsman](#)," Britons would do well to recall that she has dealt with thugs before, [wrote](#) Hague on January 31.

### **Bannon's rules**

The special relationship has always been asymmetric, with the Americans acting as rule-makers and the British as rule-takers. That said, the rules have never before been made by Stephen Bannon, the American president's "chief strategist." Having likened himself to revolutionaries such as [Lenin](#) and [Thomas Cromwell](#) (and also [figures](#) like Darth Vader and Satan) Bannon appears to be bent on remaking international order by moving the US away from "multilateralism", "liberalism" and "democracy" and towards America First-styled "sovereignty" and "traditional values." In practice, this means that the US is now openly hostile to the UN, WTO, NATO, the Five Eyes, to say nothing of the fragile global governance regimes on climate, human rights and arms control—while simultaneously being "open-minded" about Putin's Russia and Europe's [far right](#).

Related, Bannon, former executive chairman of Breitbart News, an information hub for conspiracy theorists, ultra-conservatives, authoritarians, fascists, white supremacist and other "alt-right" aficionados, seems to think of international relations are fundamentally inter-racial relations. American politics and American foreign policy textbooks cannot shed light on this particular America.

A combination of Samuel Huntington, Carl Schmidt and Jared Taylor's *White Identity* might.

In every generation for the past seventy years there were those who saw the special relationship as a Faustian bargain for Britain. Their arguments usually *never made it* into the mainstream, however. As of last week, this has changed—compare the aforementioned Monbiot or Paul Mason in *The Guardian* to Gideon Rachman in *The Financial Times*, for example.

As thousands of Londoners surrounded the US embassy this past Saturday under the banner “Make America *Think Again*,” it is worth asking where May's Trump policy might take Britain. Among several memorable statements the prime minister made in her Philadelphia speech, one that received no media scrutiny was the claim that the UK and the US together “defined the modern world.” Not a diplomatic thing to say, but not necessarily wrong either. The British Empire, in its many forms and iterations, transformed the globe by making Britain and “Neo-Britains” rich, and those on the outside poor. Britain also *never challenged* the rise of the U.S. the way it challenged other imperial rivals—before the *democratic peace* came the *Anglo-Saxon* peace. And once the US moved to establish the so-called *liberal international order* after World War II, a *special* role was reserved for Britain. “Whenever we want to subvert any place, we find the British own an island within an easy reach,” said one American spook in 1952. The statement has aged well—it helps explain British foreign policy after Suez, after East-of-Suez, after the end of the Cold War and after 9/11. It may well be valid in the Trump era as well, albeit this time the island in question is likely to be Britain itself—Oceania's “Airstrip One,” as depicted by Orwell in *1984*.

Image credit: The White House/Wikimedia.

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