

# The Telegraph

The special relationship is our only indispensable alliance.  
Theresa May and Donald Trump must renew it



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President Trump awaits Theresa May this week CREDIT: JONATHAN ERNST/REUTERS

In foreign affairs, symbolism matters. [Theresa May's arrival at the White House on Friday](#) as the first foreign leader to visit President Trump sends a clear message to the world about the intimacy of the ties between London and Washington DC. It also shows that our sometimes derided diplomats have done their job well, and puts to bed the idea that Nigel Farage or anyone else was needed as a go-between.

When the Prime Minister arrives, she will be fresh from addressing congressional Republicans – another privilege that would be accorded to few other foreigners – and I predict she will get on well with Trump, even though their personal traits are as different as is possible among members of the same species.

Try to imagine [our PM sending out angry tweets](#) at three in the morning, or savaging our own intelligence agencies. Picture Donald Trump reading files quietly for hours, then asking for more information and refusing to give any commentary on his thoughts. Both defy the imagination. It is the greatest contrast in styles between the holders of these

offices, at least since Ulysses S Grant overlapped with Gladstone – and they didn't have to meet.

Yet Trump evidently is predisposed to [find his "Maggie"](#) and he will probably warm to her clarity and firmness. For her part, Theresa May is highly skilled at creating a warm relationship with colleagues when she really wants to, and never in her life will she have been more determined to do so than on Friday.



A return to the Reagan-Thatcher relationship may be on the cards

She knows, as does anyone who has seen government in Britain from the inside at the top, that leaving the EU is a risk, but estrangement from the United States would be a certain disaster. Our nuclear deterrent [may be the subject of controversy this week](#), but we only have missiles that work at all because America is happy to sell them to us – something it does for no one else. Our ability to detect potential terrorist attacks is as strong as it is because British security and intelligence-gathering is tightly integrated with the US.

Every day, all over the world, whatever our ambassadors and soldiers are doing, they are usually doing it in concert with our transatlantic cousins. And our business with America is greater than that with any other single country, even before attempting a special trade deal. The alliance with the USA is the one relationship the UK has that is truly indispensable.

[Since 1941](#), British prime ministers have generally maintained their influence over the policies of US presidents by differing only behind the scenes and giving support whenever it mattered. Churchill bowed to Roosevelt in accepting much that he disliked in the post-war division of Europe; Blair enthused about removing Saddam Hussein to be the most influential ally of George W Bush. All have sought to avoid the fate of Anthony Eden over Suez, exposed and humiliated after being abandoned by Eisenhower.



They have been helped by the fact that, ever since Pearl Harbour, the strategic thinking of Britain and America has usually been in natural alignment. But in the Trump administration, Theresa May faces something no recent predecessor has encountered in the White House: a different world view, a contrasting approach to a wide range of issues, and a potentially serious divide on matters of fundamental importance.

Her first priority has to be to persuade and influence the President on those subjects on which he and his embryonic cabinet have not expressed a settled view. It is not at all clear, from their comments in recent weeks, [what price they are prepared to pay for improved relations with Russia](#), or if they will ditch the nuclear deal with Iran. As they get to grips with these issues, forceful arguments from the British Prime Minister can make a difference, before major mistakes are made. For if Trump gives Putin the cover to divide and intimidate Europe, or provokes a nuclear arms race in the Middle East, the security of all Western nations will be seriously damaged.

The trickiest task of all, however, is to exercise that influence – and push for a US-UK bilateral trade agreement – while creating the space for public differences on other issues. This requires a recasting of the normal rules of how London and Washington work together. For instance, Mrs May has rightly dedicated herself and this country to championing global free trade. That is something Trump is determined to destroy. A new understanding is needed that we will differ on this issue, without recrimination or accusation of betrayal.

If trade were the only such problem, a vast and crucial matter though it is, it would be manageable. But on a wide range of other matters, the “America First” philosophy reiterated in Trump’s inauguration speech threatens to open a split with longstanding allies.

In particular, all the signs are that Trump and his advisers are set on a path of [confronting the growth of Chinese power](#). Theresa May is not exactly a starry-eyed fan of China, whether for its political system or its territorial claims against other Pacific nations. But she and most global leaders will doubt the wisdom of tearing up the main areas of co-operation between the US and China, such as on climate change and trade, abandoning the foundations of the West’s relationship with Beijing reached by Nixon in 1972, and intensifying rivalry across the board.

Over the coming months, such differences may become very stark indeed. The necessary recasting of the special relationship will have to permit a wider divergence between British and American leaders on some major issues than most of us have known in our lifetimes. That, like all problems between friends, is best explained early on to avoid resentment later.

The PM and President both need to show they can work together. If she influences him on some of these vital issues both will get credit – her for persuading and him for listening. And in addition, as they contemplate the vastness of our common interests and heritage, they should quietly promise to avoid attacks on each other and their respective countries when they inevitably disagree. For they are now the custodians of a friendship between nations that is beyond price. In this volatile century, it will most certainly be needed again.

