

FROM AFFINITY TO ASYMMETRY: RETHINKING THE UK-US SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP IN THE POST-BREXIT ERA

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Abstract: The United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union was accompanied by expectations that Brexit would enable Britain to pursue a more autonomous global foreign policy while strengthening its longstanding relationship with the United States. Central to the vision of "Global Britain" was the assumption that separation from the European Union would allow the United Kingdom to strengthen its transatlantic orientation, expand its international partnerships and enhance its global influence. This article examines how Brexit has reshaped the character and structure of the UK-US special relationship. It argues that Brexit has neither destroyed the relationship nor produced the more equal partnership anticipated by some proponents of Global Britain. Instead, the post-Brexit period has made an underlying asymmetry within the relationship increasingly visible. Drawing on a qualitative comparative analysis of three cases— AUKUS, post-Brexit economic relations surrounding Northern Ireland, and the UK-Mauritius agreement concerning the Chagos Archipelago and Diego Garcia—the article examines security, economic and diplomatic dimensions of this asymmetry. It further considers British public opinion and the UK's strengthening security relationship with Europe. The article argues that the UK-US relationship is increasingly characterised by asymmetric interdependence: Britain continues to derive substantial strategic benefits from cooperation with the United States, particularly in defence, intelligence and advanced military capabilities, while possessing comparatively less capacity to shape American preferences. At the same time, Britain's renewed engagement with European security structures represents not a rejection of Washington but an attempt to manage strategic dependence through diversification. The article concludes that the post-Brexit special relationship is best understood as a process of reconfiguration in which historical affinity remains important, but strategic interests, capabilities and bargaining power increasingly shape the terms of cooperation.

Index Terms— Brexit; UK-US relations; special relationship; Global Britain; asymmetric interdependence; AUKUS; British foreign policy; transatlantic relations; UK-EU relations; strategic diversification

1. INTRODUCTION

The United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union following the 2016 referendum represented one of the most consequential transformations in British foreign policy in the post-war period. Brexit was presented by its supporters not simply as a withdrawal from a regional organisation but as an opportunity to redefine Britain's international role. The idea of "Global Britain" subsequently became central to this project. The British government's post-Brexit foreign-policy strategy sought to position the United Kingdom as an internationally active state capable of strengthening relationships beyond Europe while maintaining its major security partnerships. The 2021 Integrated Review formally articulated this ambition, presenting Global Britain as a strategy for strengthening Britain's international influence, security and resilience (HM Government, 2021).

The United States occupied a particularly important position within this vision. For decades, British policymakers have described the UK-US relationship as a "special relationship", drawing upon shared historical experiences, political values and extensive cooperation in defence, intelligence, nuclear policy and diplomacy. Academic scholarship has similarly identified the depth of institutional and strategic connections between the two countries (Dumbrell, 2006) (Wallace, 2009). Yet the relationship has never been one between equal powers. The United States possesses substantially greater economic, military and demographic capabilities, while Britain's influence has frequently depended upon its ability to operate as a particularly capable and reliable American ally. This tension between affinity and asymmetry provides the starting point for this article.

The Brexit debate generated competing expectations about Britain's future relationship with Washington. Some supporters of Brexit argued that Britain would become a more autonomous global actor and a more valuable American partner after leaving the European Union. Others warned that Brexit could weaken Britain's position by removing one of the institutional platforms through which London exercised influence in both Europe and Washington. (Olive, 2016)

argued that Brexit would not necessarily destroy transatlantic relations but could leave Britain in a more difficult position within a relationship involving both Washington and Brussels. Their analysis highlighted the possibility that Britain could become an "awkward inbetween" in a changing transatlantic system (Olive, 2016).

Subsequent scholarship similarly identified Brexit as a foreign-policy dilemma. British policymakers had historically relied upon both European integration and the relationship with the United States as important sources of international influence (Gaskarth, 2021). (Oppermann, 2020) likewise demonstrate that post-Brexit Britain attempted to reconcile several partially competing foreign-policy roles, including those of global power, trading state, European partner and faithful US ally. The post-Brexit period therefore raises an important question: **How has Brexit reshaped the balance between normative affinity and asymmetric interdependence within the UK-US special relationship?**

This article argues that Brexit has not destroyed the special relationship, nor has it produced the more equal Anglo-American partnership anticipated by the strongest versions of the Global Britain narrative. Instead, Brexit has exposed and intensified structural asymmetries that were already embedded within the relationship. The central concept employed here is asymmetric interdependence. Interdependence does not imply equality. States can be mutually dependent while possessing very different capacities to absorb the costs of disruption or influence the preferences of the other. Keohane and Nye (Keohane, 2012 (4th ed.)) demonstrate that interdependence creates both opportunities for cooperation and sources of political vulnerability, while (Baldwin, 1980) emphasizes that power within interdependence depends upon the distribution of dependence and the costs associated with changing a relationship.

The article applies this perspective through three dimensions. First, strategic dependence refers to Britain's reliance on American military capabilities, intelligence cooperation, technology and strategic coordination. Second, bargaining asymmetry refers to the unequal ability of Britain and the United States to influence one another's preferences. Third, normative affinity refers to the historical, institutional and political connections that have traditionally allowed unequal capabilities to be interpreted as complementary rather than hierarchical.

The argument is examined through three cases.

The first, AUKUS, represents the security dimension. It demonstrates the continuing depth of British-American defence cooperation while also illustrating Britain's dependence upon American technological and strategic capabilities. The second, Northern Ireland and post-Brexit economic relations, represents the economic dimension. It demonstrates the constraints created by Britain's simultaneous need to maintain economic relationships with both the United States and European Union. The third, the Chagos Archipelago and Diego Garcia, represents the diplomatic and geopolitical dimension. It illustrates the interaction between British sovereignty, Mauritian claims, international legal considerations and the strategic importance of the Diego Garcia military facility.

The article also considers British public opinion and Britain's renewed engagement with European security structures. These developments are important because the future of the UK-US relationship is not determined exclusively by government-to-government relations. Public attitudes, economic geography and Britain's wider security environment influence the strategic options available to British governments.

The article makes three contributions. First, it moves beyond the binary question of whether the special relationship is "alive" or "dead" and instead examines how its structure has changed. Second, it connects security, economic and diplomatic dimensions through the concept of asymmetric interdependence. Third, it interprets Britain's renewed European engagement as a strategy of diversification and risk management rather than as a straightforward rejection of Washington.

The central claim is therefore that the post-Brexit UK-US relationship is undergoing reconfiguration rather than collapse. Historical affinity remains significant, but the terms of cooperation are increasingly shaped by interests, capabilities and bargaining power.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 THE SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP AND BRITISH FOREIGN POLICY

The concept of the "special relationship" has occupied a prominent position in scholarship on British foreign policy. Its foundations are generally associated with the extensive cooperation that developed between Britain and the United States during the Second World War and early Cold War. Shared language and historical connections were reinforced by institutional cooperation in defence, intelligence, nuclear policy and diplomacy (Dumbrell, 2006).

However, the term "special relationship" has always been contested. (Wallace, 2009) argue that the relationship should not be understood simply through rhetoric about exceptional friendship. Instead, its durability is better explained through concrete institutional connections and shared strategic interests.

This distinction is important because institutional depth does not imply equality of power. The post-war international system witnessed the emergence of the United States as the dominant Western power while Britain's relative economic and imperial position declined. Consequently, Britain frequently sought to preserve access to Washington and maximise its influence despite an increasingly unequal distribution of capabilities.

The literature therefore contains two overlapping interpretations. The first emphasises the durability of shared interests, institutional links and strategic cooperation. The second highlights Britain's relative dependence upon American power and the recurring difficulty of converting close access into equivalent influence. This tension provides the foundation for examining the post-Brexit relationship.

2.2 Brexit and the British Foreign-Policy Dilemma

Brexit created a structural dilemma for British foreign policy because Britain sought to achieve several objectives simultaneously.

It wanted to:

1. maintain a close relationship with the United States;
2. preserve workable relations with the European Union;
3. develop a more autonomous global role; and
4. maintain its status as a significant military and diplomatic power.

The problem is that these objectives can sometimes pull British policy in different directions. (Gaskarth, 2021) argue that Brexit disrupted a longstanding British foreign-policy tradition in which European engagement and the special relationship with the United States functioned as complementary pillars of British influence. Their analysis suggests that Brexit forces British policymakers to make choices that were previously easier to avoid.

(Oppermann, 2020) similarly demonstrate that Britain after Brexit attempted to construct multiple foreign-policy roles simultaneously, including those of global power, trading state, European partner and US ally. The authors argue that these roles were not always compatible. This literature provides an important starting point for the present analysis. However, it does not fully explain how the UK's dependence on the United States has changed across different policy domains.

2.3 Research Gap

Existing scholarship has made significant contributions to understanding Brexit, British foreign policy and the UK-US relationship. However, much of the debate continues to ask whether the special relationship is becoming stronger or weaker.

This binary framing is insufficient. A relationship can remain institutionally strong while becoming more asymmetric. Likewise, cooperation can deepen even while bargaining power becomes increasingly unequal. This article therefore shifts the question from: Is the special relationship still special? to: How is power distributed within the relationship, and how is Britain managing that distribution after Brexit?

The article consequently conceptualises the relationship as one of asymmetric interdependence. This approach is particularly relevant to recent British parliamentary analysis. The House of Lords International Relations and Defence Committee's 2026 report argues that the relationship contains an important element of dependence and that Britain should reassess how it manages its reliance on the United States (House of Lords international Relations and Defence Committee, 2026). The present article builds on this insight by examining security, economic and diplomatic cases together.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: FROM AFFINITY TO ASYMMETRIC INTERDEPENDENCE

3.1 INTERDEPENDENCE AND POWER

The theoretical framework of this article draws primarily upon the literature on interdependence and power. (Keohane, 2012 (4th ed.)) conceptualise interdependence as a situation in which states are affected by one another through multiple channels. Such relationships create both benefits and vulnerabilities. Importantly, interdependence does not imply symmetrical dependence. (Baldwin, 1980) further demonstrates that power and dependence must be analysed in relation to the costs of changing a relationship. A state that can more easily reduce or replace a relationship may possess greater bargaining power than a state for which disruption would be more costly.

This distinction is highly relevant to the UK-US relationship. Britain benefits from American defence capabilities, intelligence cooperation, advanced technology and strategic coordination. The United States also benefits from Britain through intelligence, military capabilities, diplomatic networks and the UK's role as a highly capable ally. The relationship is therefore mutually dependent but not equally dependent.

3.2 STRATEGIC DEPENDENCE

Strategic dependence refers to the extent to which British security objectives rely upon American capabilities. Britain possesses significant military and intelligence capabilities of its own. It is a nuclear-armed state, a permanent member of the UN Security Council and a major NATO power. Nevertheless, some British capabilities are embedded within wider American-led systems. The UK-US intelligence relationship, nuclear cooperation, defence technology and

advanced military programmes illustrate this pattern. Strategic dependence therefore does not mean incapacity. It means that certain British strategic objectives are substantially easier to achieve through cooperation with Washington than independently.

3.3 Bargaining Asymmetry

Bargaining asymmetry concerns the ability of one state to influence the preferences of another. The United States possesses significantly greater economic, military and technological resources. Britain nevertheless retains sources of influence. These include intelligence capabilities, diplomatic reach, military interoperability, financial power and institutional expertise. Consequently, the relationship is not one of unilateral American domination. Instead, it is characterised by unequal bargaining power within mutual dependence.

3.4 Normative Affinity

Normative affinity refers to the historical and political foundations of the special relationship. Shared democratic traditions, political values, institutional trust and historical experiences have helped create a perception of partnership. Normative affinity can therefore soften the political visibility of material inequality. When governments perceive one another as trusted partners, differences in capability can be interpreted as complementary. When political interests diverge, however, those same differences become more visible. The central proposition of this article is therefore: Normative affinity can partially conceal material asymmetry, while strategic divergence makes asymmetry more visible. This proposition provides the analytical bridge between the historical special relationship and its post-Brexit transformation.

4. METHODOLOGY

This article adopts a qualitative research design based on comparative case analysis. The analysis focuses primarily on the post-Brexit period, with particular attention to developments from 2020 to 2026. Three cases were selected because they illuminate different dimensions of the relationship.

Case Dimension Analytical focus

- AUKUS Security Strategic and technological dependence
- Northern Ireland Economic Economic interdependence and bargaining constraints
- Chagos/Diego Garcia Diplomacy Sovereignty, strategic interests and constrained autonomy

The article uses academic literature, government documents, parliamentary reports and public-opinion research. The cases are not intended to demonstrate that every aspect of the UK-US relationship is asymmetric. Instead, they provide analytical windows through which recurring patterns of dependence and bargaining power can be examined.

5. AUKUS: STRATEGIC COOPERATION AND SECURITY DEPENDENCE

AUKUS, announced in September 2021, represents one of the most important recent developments in UK-US strategic cooperation. The partnership involves Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States and focuses on advanced defence cooperation. Its first pillar concerns Australia's acquisition of conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarines, while its second pillar focuses on advanced capabilities including artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, cyber capabilities and undersea technologies (UK Government, 2021).

For Britain, AUKUS appeared to confirm that Brexit had not marginalised the country from major strategic initiatives. Instead, the UK remained deeply integrated into an important US-led security partnership. The May 2026 AUKUS Defence Ministerial Joint Statement confirmed that the three governments continued to reaffirm their commitment to the partnership. It also recorded progress on SSN-AUKUS, advanced capabilities and the first AUKUS Pillar II signature project focused on uncrewed undersea vehicles (UK Ministry of Defence, 2026).

AUKUS therefore demonstrates continuing strategic congruence. Britain contributes military capabilities, technological expertise and diplomatic value. Washington gains a highly capable ally with global military and intelligence reach. However, the same partnership demonstrates asymmetry. The United States possesses considerably greater economic, military and technological resources than Britain. The development of advanced defence systems therefore takes place within a relationship in which American capabilities remain particularly significant. This produces a paradox.

AUKUS increases Britain's strategic relevance while simultaneously embedding Britain within American technological and strategic structures. The partnership should therefore not be interpreted simply as evidence that the special relationship has become more equal. It is better understood as: deep strategic cooperation within an unequal distribution of capabilities.

The significance of AUKUS for the present argument lies precisely in this combination. The relationship is valuable to both parties. But value does not mean equality. Britain can increase its strategic relevance through participation while remaining dependent upon capabilities and systems in which the United States possesses greater material weight. AUKUS consequently illustrates the first dimension of asymmetric interdependence: strategic dependence.

6. NORTHERN IRELAND AND ECONOMIC ASYMMETRY

The economic dimension presents a different form of asymmetry. Brexit fundamentally altered Britain's relationship with the European Union while creating particularly complex arrangements for Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland occupies a distinctive position because British policy must reconcile the UK's constitutional arrangements with the commitments associated with the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and the need to avoid a hard border on the island of Ireland.

The Windsor Framework, agreed in 2023, replaced the original Northern Ireland Protocol arrangements and introduced new mechanisms governing the movement of goods while attempting to protect Northern Ireland's position within the United Kingdom and preserve the practical functioning of the peace settlement (UK Government, 2023).

The importance of Northern Ireland for this article extends beyond the technical operation of the Windsor Framework. It demonstrates the structural constraints created by Britain's simultaneous relationships with Europe and the United States. Britain sought greater regulatory autonomy through Brexit. Yet it remained economically and geographically connected to Europe. At the same time, Britain continued to seek a strong economic relationship with the United States. This creates a strategic dilemma. The UK cannot simply disregard Brussels. Nor can it disregard Washington. The issue is therefore not simply whether Britain is dependent upon one external actor. It is whether Britain can manage multiple forms of interdependence simultaneously.

The Windsor Framework illustrates this problem particularly clearly because changes to Britain's regulatory relationship with the EU can generate political and economic consequences extending into its wider transatlantic relationships. Northern Ireland therefore demonstrates that Brexit did not eliminate Britain's external constraints. Instead, it changed their structure. The United Kingdom gained greater formal autonomy from EU institutions while retaining substantial practical interdependence with European markets and institutions. This can be understood as strategic compression: policies designed to increase autonomy in one relationship can create constraints in another. From the perspective of asymmetric interdependence, this is important because bargaining power does not operate in isolation. A state's bargaining position with Washington can be affected by its relationship with Brussels. Likewise, decisions concerning European economic arrangements can influence Britain's wider international strategy. Northern Ireland consequently represents the economic dimension of the article's argument.

7. CHAGOS AND THE LIMITS OF DIPLOMATIC AUTONOMY

The Chagos Archipelago provides a particularly important case for examining the relationship between sovereignty and strategic dependence. The dispute has a long history involving Mauritius, Chagossian communities, British colonial policy and international legal questions. The strategic importance of Diego Garcia adds another layer to the issue because the island hosts a major UK-US military facility.

In January 2025, Britain and Mauritius reiterated their commitment to a treaty under which Mauritius would become sovereign over the Chagos Archipelago while arrangements would ensure the long-term operation of the base on Diego Garcia (UK Government, 2025; UK Government, 2025). The agreement was signed on 22 May 2025. The treaty provides for Mauritius to exercise sovereignty over the Chagos Archipelago while establishing arrangements concerning Diego Garcia and the continued operation of the strategically important military facility (UK Government, 2025). The British government explicitly described the agreement as securing the future of the joint UK-US military base and protecting British national security interests (Ministry of Defence, & Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, 2025).

The Chagos case is important because it demonstrates how sovereignty and strategic dependence can intersect. However, it would be analytically too simplistic to argue that Britain was merely compelled by Washington. The dispute has a much longer history and involves Mauritius, Chagossian interests, international law and Britain's own policy choices. The more defensible interpretation is that Britain exercised agency within a structure of strategic constraints. The strategic importance of Diego Garcia created strong incentives to preserve the operational viability of the base. The UK government itself framed the agreement in terms of national security and the UK-US Defence relationship (Ministry of Defence, & Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, 2025). The case therefore demonstrates the difference between agency and autonomy. Britain possessed agency: it negotiated, made decisions and entered into an agreement. But the range of feasible choices was shaped by strategic interdependence. This is precisely the type of relationship that the concept of asymmetric interdependence is designed to capture. The Chagos case therefore represents diplomatic asymmetry without implying the disappearance of British agency.

8. BRITISH PUBLIC OPINION AND THE CHANGING SOCIAL FOUNDATION

The transformation of the UK-US relationship is not limited to government policy. Public opinion provides an additional indicator of the changing political foundations of the relationship. The British Foreign Policy Group's 2025 Annual Survey provides particularly important evidence.

The survey found that British trust in the United States to act responsibly in the world declined from 53% in 2024 to 38% in 2025, while 41% reported distrust. It also found that 62% of Britons believed the UK should move closer to the European Union following developments in US policy (British Foreign policy group, 2025).

The survey also reported that 33% of respondents identified President Trump's actions as a major threat to UK national security, compared with 32% identifying terrorism and 25% identifying the rise of China (British Foreign policy group,

2025). These figures should not be interpreted as evidence that British society has rejected the United States. Rather, they demonstrate a changing perception of the relationship. The British public may simultaneously recognize the strategic importance of the United States and become more sceptical of excessive dependence upon Washington. This distinction is important. The relevant question is not: America or Europe? It is: How should Britain manage its relationships with both?

The public-opinion evidence therefore complements the article's argument about strategic diversification. It suggests that the political foundations supporting an exclusively Atlantic interpretation of British foreign policy have become less secure.

9. BRITAIN'S STRATEGIC DIVERSIFICATION

Britain's renewed engagement with Europe provides another important indication of post-Brexit strategic change. Brexit was initially associated with the expectation that Britain could develop a broader global role while reducing its institutional dependence on Europe. Yet geography did not change. Britain remains a European state whose economic and security interests are deeply connected to developments on the continent. This reality has become increasingly visible in the post-Brexit period.

In May 2025, the UK and EU agreed a new Security and Defence Partnership establishing a framework for cooperation across areas including support for Ukraine, hybrid threats, maritime security, space security, cyber issues and critical infrastructure (UK Government, 2025). The partnership does not represent a return to EU membership. Nor does it replace NATO or the UK- US relationship. Instead, it demonstrates a process of strategic diversification.

Britain continues to require American intelligence, defence technology and military cooperation. At the same time, Britain has strong incentives to increase its capacity to operate with European partners. The 2025 UK-EU Security and Defence Partnership explicitly states that the framework is intended to complement Britain's bilateral partnerships with European states and its commitment to NATO (UK Government, 2025). This is important because diversification should not be interpreted as abandonment. It is a strategy for reducing vulnerability. A state that depends upon one partner for critical capabilities may become vulnerable if that partner changes its preferences. Developing additional partnerships can therefore increase strategic resilience.

The UK's renewed engagement with Europe can be understood in precisely these terms. Britain is not choosing between Washington and Europe. It is attempting to maintain both while increasing its capacity to operate when their interests diverge. This represents a form of hedging through diversification.

10. DISCUSSION: FROM SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP TO MANAGED ASYMMETRY

The three cases demonstrate that the contemporary UK-US relationship cannot adequately be described as either a conventional equal partnership or a relationship in terminal decline. AUKUS demonstrates continuing strategic intimacy but also technological and capability dependence. Northern Ireland demonstrates the economic constraints created by Britain's position within multiple external relationships.

Chagos demonstrates how strategic considerations can shape British diplomatic choices concerning sovereignty and international law. Across these cases, a consistent pattern emerges. The United States possesses greater material capabilities and therefore greater capacity to absorb the costs of disagreement. Britain nevertheless retains important sources of influence, including intelligence capabilities, military assets, diplomatic networks and institutional expertise. The relationship is therefore asymmetric but not one-sided. This distinction is crucial. The UK-US relationship is better understood as: mutual dependence + unequal capabilities + variable bargaining power.

The United Kingdom needs the United States more in some strategic domains than Washington needs Britain. But Washington also has reasons to maintain close cooperation with London. Britain remains an important intelligence partner, NATO ally, military contributor and diplomatic actor. The resulting relationship is therefore not one of domination. It is one of unequal bargaining power within mutual interdependence. Recent British parliamentary analysis strongly supports this interpretation. The House of Lords International Relations and Defence Committee's 2026 report argues that the UK should move away from sentimentality surrounding the "special relationship" and instead recognise that the future relationship is likely to be more transactional and interest-based. It also recommends reducing excessive reliance on the United States while strengthening other partnerships (House of Lords international Relations and Defence Committee, 2026).

This is remarkably close to the central argument developed in this article. The transformation can therefore be represented as follows: Historical model Shared history → Shared values → Trust → Partnership Emerging model

Interests → Capabilities → Burden-sharing → Bargaining → Strategic calculation. This does not mean that shared values have disappeared. Rather, they are increasingly insufficient on their own to explain the relationship. The relationship remains cooperative because substantial interests continue to overlap. But cooperation is becoming more explicitly conditional upon national interests and strategic calculations.

This is why the term managed asymmetry is useful. Britain is not attempting to eliminate dependence on Washington. Such an objective would be unrealistic. Instead, it is attempting to manage that dependence.

The UK can do this through:

1. strengthening European security partnerships;

2. maintaining NATO commitments;
3. investing in domestic defence capabilities;
4. preserving intelligence cooperation;
5. diversifying economic partnerships; and
6. retaining diplomatic flexibility.

Strategic diversification therefore represents not the end of the special relationship but an attempt to make that relationship more resilient.

11. CONCLUSION

This article has examined how Brexit has reshaped the UK-US special relationship. The evidence does not support the conclusion that the relationship has collapsed. Nor does it support the expectation that Brexit automatically produced a stronger and more equal Anglo-American partnership. Instead, Brexit has made visible an asymmetry that was present throughout the history of the relationship but was frequently softened by historical affinity, institutional cooperation and shared political identity.

The AUKUS case demonstrates that Britain remains deeply embedded in American-led strategic structures. At the same time, participation in advanced defence cooperation illustrates the continuing importance of American technological and strategic capabilities.

The Northern Ireland case demonstrates that Brexit did not free Britain from external economic constraints. Instead, Britain remains positioned between multiple centres of economic and political influence, particularly Europe and the United States.

The Chagos case demonstrates how sovereignty and strategic dependence can intersect. The 2025 UK-Mauritius agreement transferred sovereignty arrangements concerning the Chagos Archipelago while securing the continued operation of Diego Garcia, which the British government regards as strategically vital to the UK-US Defence relationship (UK Government, 2025) (Ministry of Defence, & Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, 2025). Public opinion provides further evidence of change. The decline in British trust in the United States and increased support for closer European cooperation indicate that the social foundations of the traditional special relationship are becoming less secure (British Foreign policy group, 2025). At the same time, Britain's 2025 Security and Defence Partnership with the European Union demonstrates that London is not responding to these changes by abandoning the United States. Instead, Britain is developing additional partnerships that can increase strategic resilience (UK Government, 2025). The central conclusion is therefore that the UK-US special relationship is being reconfigured rather than abandoned.

The relationship remains strategically important. Its institutional foundations remain extensive. Its military and intelligence cooperation remains deep. But its political character is changing. Historical affinity remains relevant, yet interests, capabilities and bargaining power increasingly determine the terms on which cooperation takes place. The post-Brexit relationship is consequently best understood as a form of asymmetric interdependence. Britain continues to derive substantial benefits from the United States while possessing less capacity to shape American preferences than Washington possesses to influence the strategic environment in which Britain operates. The appropriate British response is therefore not withdrawal from the relationship. Nor is it unconditional dependence. It is strategic diversification. By strengthening European partnerships while preserving transatlantic cooperation, Britain can seek to reduce vulnerability without sacrificing the benefits of the US relationship.

The future of the special relationship will therefore depend less on whether policymakers continue to describe it as "special" and more on whether it continues to produce outcomes that serve the interests of both states. The post-Brexit relationship is neither dead nor unchanged. It is evolving from a relationship heavily justified through historical affinity toward a more explicitly pragmatic partnership characterised by mutual but unequal dependence, bargaining and strategic calculation. The transformation can therefore be summarised as: From affinity to asymmetry, and from asymmetry toward managed interdependence.

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