

# **‘Brexit’ and the Politics of Resilience in the US-UK Special Relationship**

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Draft paper prepared for the 3<sup>rd</sup> International Conference on Public Policy  
Singapore, 28-30 June

## **Introduction**

Ever since British voters decided that the UK should leave the European Union in the referendum on 23 June 2016, Britain finds itself in a period of great constitutional, political and economic uncertainty. Depending on the specific shape and form ‘Brexit’ will take, the economic costs and opportunities of that decision as well as its ramifications for the British political landscape will likely play out differently. If leaving the EU will trigger a second referendum on Scottish independence or undermine the settlement in Northern Ireland the very existence of the United Kingdom might be put into question. In any case, it will take years, if not decades, for the full consequences of ‘Brexit’ to become clear.

An integral dimension to the uncertainty created by the vote to leave the EU concerns post-‘Brexit’ Britain’s place in the world. While this is evidently the case for its relationship to the EU and future trading links, it is also true for its foreign policy orientation more broadly. Membership to the EU had been a cornerstone of Britain’s foreign policy for the last 40 years and has underpinned its role in the international arena (Gaskarth 2014). In terms of Winston Churchill’s three circles of British influence in the world, the Commonwealth, the “English-speaking world”, and Europe, which continues to be a widely used conceptual prism through which policy-makers and commentators make sense of Britain’s external relations (Daddow/Gaskarth 2011: 12-15), the EU had come to be seen as the “inner circle” (Niblett 2015: 20-29) which was most critical to British foreign policy. As recently as 2013, a major review conducted by the British government concluded that it was strongly in Britain’s interest to pursue its foreign policy objectives through the EU (HM Government 2013: 87).

Against this background, it is no exaggeration to say that ‘Brexit’ constitutes a major rupture that requires “the largest rewiring of British foreign policy since World War II” (Raphael 2016). The outcome of the referendum represents a formidable shock to British foreign policy

making that challenges old expectations and invalidates much of the established strategic thinking about Britain's place in the world (Legro 2005: 13-16; Whitman 2016: 522-529). In other words, British foreign policy is at a "critical juncture" and faces an "interpretative moment" which is marked by structural openings for foreign policy change and meaning giving but which also creates social demands for closing down these openings in order to reduce uncertainty and re-establish a more settled structural context of foreign policy making (Capoccia/Kelemen 2007: 347-350; Krebs 2015: 44-46).

This uncertainty about post-'Brexit' British foreign policy very much includes the future of Britain's relationship to the US. Ever since Winston Churchill coined the term in his famous 'iron curtain' speech on 5 March 1946, this relationship is routinely described as 'special' to capture its closeness and intimacy which set it apart from 'normal' bilateral relations (Dumbrell 2006: 11-12). While the substance of such claims to 'specialness' (Danchev 1996) is subject to longstanding political and academic debates (see Reynolds 1986; Ovendale 1998) and has always been seen somewhat more sceptical on the American side (Dumbrell 2004: 437), for Britain the existence of a 'special relationship' between the two countries is a constitutive part of its foreign policy identity (Wallace/Phillips 2009: 280-282; Gaskarth 2013: 59-70).

The British vote to leave the EU, however, potentially constitutes an existential crisis of the 'special relationship' that puts it under pressure from two sides. First, 'Brexit' might further reduce the value the US attaches to this relationship (Oliver/Williams 2016: 558-565). For the US, its close partnership with the UK is not least an indirect means to secure influence on the future direction of the EU and get privileged access to insider knowledge about EU politics (Dumbrell 2004: 444-445; Self 2010: 107-111). Since the role of the UK as an interlocutor between the US and the EU largely depends on Britain being an influential player inside the Union, it will be much reduced after the UK has left the EU (Whitman 2016: 528). 'Brexit' might thus reinforce incentives for the US to 'pivot' its relations to Europe away from the UK towards countries with more leverage on EU policy, most notably Germany (Banks/O'Mahoney 2016; Jones 2016).

Second, public support for leaving the EU signalled an inward-looking and isolationist mood of sizeable segments in British society which appear to prioritise autonomy from international commitments over influence in international politics (Foster 2016). Although the foreign policy outlooks of 'Brexit' supporters are clearly diverse, with some advocating a more, not

less Atlanticist orientation of the UK, the outcome of the EU referendum at the very least indicates that the domestic constituency for an internationalist British foreign policy that would underpin the special relationship is fragile. Specifically, British governments might find it ever more difficult in the post-‘Brexit’ environment to secure domestic support for foreign policies designed to prove Britain’s worth as America’s foremost ally, not least in US-led military interventions, which has been central to sustaining the special relationship in the past (Danchev 2007). Britain disengaging from its commitments in the special relationship, in turn, would further add to US doubts about the value of that relationship.

‘Brexit’ might thus trigger a self-reinforcing dynamic of weakening both the US and the British interest in and commitment to their relationship which would undermine a central pillar to its ‘specialness’. At the same time, it is important to note that the special relationship has repeatedly confounded expectations of its imminent demise in the past (see Dickie 1994). In fact, the relationship has shown a remarkable capability to withstand internal and external crises (Dobson/Marsh 2014: 674-680) to an extent that it has been described as having a “Lazarus-like quality” (Marsh/Baylis 2006: 173). This endurance in the face of crises has variably been put down to a commonality of interest and highly institutionalised cooperation in particular in the fields of intelligence and nuclear policy, extensive business and civil society links as well as common sentiment resting on a shared language and culture and similar ideological outlooks (Wallace/Phillips 2009).

While these stabilisers of the special relationship will continue to operate, at least to an extent, after Britain has left the EU, this paper will focus on another source of resilience which is foregrounded by ‘Brexit’ and which has not been much acknowledged in existing scholarship. This source rests on the ontological security needs of states and the ontological security special relationships can provide. Specifically, the argument is that the uncertainty around ‘Brexit’ and Britain’s post-‘Brexit’ foreign policy identity reinforces the UK’s dependence on the special relationship as a source of its ontological security. From this perspective, the expectation is that British foreign policy should redouble its efforts to maintain the special relationship and to affirm its role as junior partner to that relationship. The extent to which this will be successful in sustaining the special relationship in the post-‘Brexit’ environment will depend not least on how US administrations will reciprocate UK ontological security seeking.

The paper will develop its argument in two steps. The next section will make the theoretical case that the concept of ontological security opens up a promising analytical perspective on resilience mechanisms in special relationships in general and the post-‘Brexit’ UK-US relationship in particular. Such a perspective assumes that states act as if they were motivated primarily by ontological security needs and regards special relationships as patterns of interaction which help states fulfil such needs. The paper will then move on to explore how the British government has sought to signal its continued commitment to the special relationship and thus to stabilise that relationship since the ‘Brexit’ referendum. In particular, this has involved symbolic reaffirmations of the special relationship as well as confirmations that Britain will remain committed to its followership tasks in the relationship.

### **Ontological Security Seeking as a Resilience Mechanism in Special Relationships**

Ontological security refers to an actor’s “stable sense of self-identity” which comes from a “sense of continuity and order in events” (Giddens 1991: 54, 243). The agency of actors depends on such ontological security because it stabilises their cognitive environment and reduces uncertainty which is a necessary precondition for purposeful behaviour. Ontological security prevents actors from being paralysed and incapacitated by fundamental anxieties of not knowing how to cope with potential but unspecified threats and risks and of being overwhelmed by external events. Like physical security, ontological security is a primary need of any social actor because it is constitutive of their capacity to act (Mitzen 2006a: 272-273). Social actors achieve ontological security by developing a “protective cocoon” (Giddens 1991: 40), their basic trust system, which allows them to bracket knowledge of potential threats to their self-identity and thus to reduce uncertainty. Ontologically secure actors take the existential parameters of their actions for granted and trust in the overall cognitive stability of their environment. The key mechanism through which actors generate such basic trust, in turn, is the routinisation of social relationships to significant others (Mitzen 2006b: 346-347). Routinized social relations involve habitual patterns of interaction and are an important source of cognitive certainty. They are essential defences of social actors against threats to their self-identity. Since the routines embedded in social relationships are crucial anchors of an actor’s sense of self, they become loaded with emotional significance. In other words, actors become attached to routinized social relations because of their anxiety that on the other side of these routines “chaos lurks” (Giddens 1991: 36). The ontological security needs

of actors are thus an important cognitive-affective stabiliser of their social relations (Mitzen 2006a: 271-272). At the same time, the very reliance of actors on routinized social relations as a source of their ontological security links the fulfilment of their ontological security needs to the appraisal of significant others and to the predictable behaviour of their partners within routinized relationships (Giddens 1991: 38).

Starting out from an understanding of states as social actors, the assumption that states act in the international system “as if” they were ontological security-seekers (Mitzen 2006b: 352) has already proven useful in investigating different patterns of interstate relations in international politics. Most notably, this analytical perspective has shed important new light on conflictual dynamics such as the security dilemma (Mitzen 2006b) as well as on the foundations of interstate friendship (Berenskoetter 2007).

Following this line of argument, the paper suggests that the assumption of states as ontological security-seekers can also be usefully applied to the analysis of special relationships (see Harnisch 2015: 40-41; Oppermann/Hansel 2016), including the relations between the US and the UK. Specifically, the argument is that the ontological security needs of states can usefully be seen as the most fundamental “motivational glue” (Mitzen 2006a: 279) to their special relationships and that this assumption provides a promising theoretical starting point for studying the resilience of such relationships in international politics. Thus, the ontological security perspective would emphasise the intrinsic emotional attachment of states to the routines and cognitive certainty of special relationships and thus predict the stability of such relationships as well as their capacity to outlive changes in their environment. Notably, ontological security-seekers should be motivated to stabilise their special relationships in particular in critical situations, such as ‘Brexit’, which threaten their self-identity even if material or normative incentives for doing so are weak or ambiguous (Steele 2005: 538).

From this theoretical perspective, the expectation is that the ontological security needs of the partners to a special relationship will incentivise them to employ resilience mechanisms when they perceive their relationship to be under threat. Starting out from an understanding of “resilience-as-maintenance” (Bourbeau 2015: 383), such mechanisms involve processes of adaptation and reaffirmation of the special relationship that foster the capacity of the relationship to persist and endure in the face of adversity. Specifically, the assumption of states as ontological security-seekers points towards the importance of two distinct, but

related resilience mechanisms in special relationships. The first mechanism works through public assurances and symbolic affirmations of the special quality of a relationship. Such assurances and affirmations are often part and parcel of the routines of special relations, not least as a means of overcoming crises. They serve to restore narrative order in times of uncertainty about the future of a special relationship which is a source of ontological security for its partners (Krebs 2015: 38-39). The second mechanism involves the confirmation (or adjustment) of junior and senior partner roles on which asymmetric special relationships like the US-UK relationship rest (Marsh/Baylis 2006). The mutual acceptance of such a division of labour and the leader- and followership tasks that come with it are critical for the stability and endurance of asymmetric special relationships and thus for the certainty and ontological security they provide.

It is important to note, moreover, that special relationships will also often be asymmetrical in the sense of how much their partners depend on them for their ontological security. Some states may have more alternative sources of ontological security and are less vulnerable in their self-identity than others. One partner to a special relationship may thus be more attached to it than the other. It follows that the initiative to instantiate resilience mechanisms in special relationships will likely come from the state that is more reliant on such a relationship for its ontological security. In the case of the post-‘Brexit’ US-UK special relationship, it is fair to say that this state is clearly the UK. Given the deep uncertainty created by ‘Brexit’ about Britain’s place in the world and the central role of the special relationship for Britain’s foreign policy identity, Britain’s ontological security depends more than ever on the ‘specialness’ of its relations to the US. The following analysis will therefore focus on British efforts to preserve that ‘specialness’ through the two resilience mechanisms spelled out above. As far as this is already possible, the analysis will also seek to attend to how the Trump Administration responds to such advances from the UK since this will be critical for whether or not the special relationship will indeed endure in the post-‘Brexit’ environment.

### **Maintaining the Special Relationship after ‘Brexit’**

The capacity of the special relationship to weather the uncertainty thrown up by the British decision to leave the European Union will critically depend on the willingness and ability of the UK to dispel US doubts raised or reinforced by ‘Brexit’ about Britain’s continued commitment to the relationship as well as about the value of that relationship to the US. At

the same time, the pressures and incentives for the British government in conducting its relations with the US are partly contradictory. On one hand, the strong British interest in a free trade deal with the US as well as the UK's reliance on its relations with the US to counter any perceived loss of influence or reputation in the international arena would both suggest efforts on part of the British government to maintain the 'specialness' of the UK-US relationship (Bew/Elefteriu 2016: 5). Given the unpopularity of President Trump and some of his controversial policies, for example on immigration, in the UK, however, being seen to cosy up to the Trump administration would carry significant domestic political costs for the British government. This became evident, most notably, with the widespread public protest and political opposition against a planned state visit of President Trump to the UK (Mason 2017). More generally, the domestic political incentives for the British government are not to feed public images of Britain as America's 'poodle' and to forestall accusations of being subservient to the US (Azubuike 2005). Also, putting a priority on demonstrating Britain's closeness to the US might conflict with attempts of the British government to seek closer economic and diplomatic relations with the emerging powers if this contradicts US security interests (Oliver 2016: 702) and further complicate negotiations with the EU about the post-'Brexit' EU-UK relationship (Henley/Rankin 2017).

In other words, the material incentives and pressures under which the British government has to navigate its relationship to the US after 'Brexit' are ambiguous and appear to pull in different directions. In contrast, starting out from a theoretical perspective that foregrounds post-'Brexit' Britain's ontological security needs would expect these needs to override any such unclear material incentives and to drive the British government towards an all-out embrace of the special relationship. Specifically, the expectation is that the British government would prioritise the continuity and stability of US-UK relations and seek to signal its unchanged attachment to the 'specialness' of these relations not least in order to bind the Trump administration to that relationship as well. The following analysis explores two pathways to this purpose and suggests that the initial empirical record of US-UK relations after the 'Brexit' vote in Britain and the election of President Trump in the US is in line with what an ontological security perspective would predict. These two pathways consist of mutual assurances and symbolic affirmations of the special relationship as well as UK commitments to the followership tasks that come from its junior partner role in that relationships. Taken

together, the two pathways work as resilience mechanisms for the post-‘Brexit’ special relationship.

### *Mutual Assurances and Symbolic Affirmations of the Special Relationship*

In the international arena, the British referendum to leave the EU has widely been framed in terms of a decision that heralds a more inward-looking and less engaged posture of the UK in international politics. ‘Brexit’ feeds a perception that the UK might be retrenching from its international commitments and heading towards isolationism (Oliver 2016: 694). This ties in with a common critique of the foreign policy of the Cameron governments already before the EU referendum that Britain has taken a lower profile and become a less influential actor in European security. The impression is that the UK has moved from the “first team” to the “reserve bench” in international politics (Niblett 2015: 10). Cases that are often invoked to substantiate this critique include Britain’s absence from diplomatic efforts at negotiating the Minsk agreements over the conflict in Eastern Ukraine and its decision not to take military action against the Assad Regime in Syria in 2013. On the side of the US, such concerns with the future role of the UK in international affairs have further added to debates about the value and reliability of Britain as America’s foremost strategic partner in Europe (Oliver/Williams 2016: 555). These debates have been further vitalised by ‘Brexit’ which a range of US officials and commentators expect to disqualify the UK from its privileged partnership with the US and to weaken the special relationship (Barber 2016).

Against this background, the first priority of the British government in sustaining the special relationship was to counter an emerging narrative of Britain turning its back on the world and to reassure the US of its unchanged attachment to the special relationship (Whitman 2016: 523-528). To this end, the government engaged in a sustained discourse about the “Global Britain” that would emerge from the decision to leave the EU and about the importance and strength of the special relationship in the post-‘Brexit’ environment. These efforts were reciprocated both by the outgoing Obama administration and the incoming Trump administration which repeatedly made the point that ‘Brexit’ will not affect the relevance and stability of the special relationship. The symbolic high point of these mutual assurances of the continued ‘specialness’ of US-UK relations came with the first official visit of the British Prime Minister Theresa May to Washington DC in late January 2017. From the perspective of ontological security, such re-affirmations of ‘specialness’ should not be seen as empty



rhetoric or mere window-dressing. Rather, they serve as self-assurances and external validation of self-identity and provide narrative order and cognitive certainty. They are thus part and parcel of the ontological security which both partners, but in particular the UK, derive from the special relationship and thereby contribute to the resilience of that relationship in the face of 'Brexit'.

In the discursive contest that unfolded immediately after the referendum about the meaning of the vote for Britain's place in the world, leading 'Brexit' campaigners and the UK government made a concerted effort to present the referendum result as a decision for a more, not less, internationalist, outward-looking and open Britain. This was to forestall perceptions that 'Brexit' implies 'little Englanderism' and isolationism (Bew/Elefteriu 2016: 3). Already a few days after the referendum, Boris Johnson, the most popular face of the 'Leave' argument, used his column in the Eurosceptic Daily Telegraph to spin 'Brexit' in a way that contrasted with the predominantly nationalist and inward-facing message of the 'Leave' side during the referendum campaign:

"I believe that millions of people who voted Leave were [...] inspired by the belief that Britain is a great country, and that outside the job-destroying coils of EU bureaucracy we can survive and thrive as never before. [...] We should be incredibly proud and positive about the UK, and what it can now achieve. [...] There is every cause for optimism; a Britain rebooted, reset, renewed and able to engage with the whole world." (Johnson 2016a)

This early intervention into the debate set the tone for the 'Global Britain' theme which the UK government under Prime Minister Theresa May developed as its main frame to shape the discourse about Britain's foreign policy orientation after 'Brexit'. That frame became the common thread of the attempts of the May government to reassure and convince domestic and international audiences of what 'Brexit' will (and will not) mean for Britain's future approach to international politics. As foreign minister, in his first official visit to the United Nations in New York, for example, Boris Johnson made a point to distance Britain's decision to leave the European Union from the 'America first' message of the then Republican nominee for the US Presidency, Donald Trump:

"I would draw a very, very strong contrast between Brexit and any kind of isolationism. [...] Brexit means us being more outward-looking, more engaged, more enthusiastic and committed on the world stage than ever before." (quoted in England 2016)

Similarly, Prime Minister May used high-profile speeches to emphasise that Britain will “continue to make the case for liberalism and globalisation” and to show “calm, determined, global leadership to shape a new era of globalisation” (May 2016a) and that she expects post-‘Brexit’ Britain to be “more outward looking than ever” (May 2017a). This is, according to May, how the referendum result should be understood:

“[T]he British people voted for change. [...] They voted to leave the European Union and embrace the world. [...] The result of the referendum was not a decision to turn inward and retreat from the world. Because Britain’s history and culture is profoundly internationalist. [...] June the 23<sup>rd</sup> was not the moment Britain chose to step back from the world. It was the moment we chose to build a truly Global Britain.” (May 2017a)

Moreover, the UK government made sure to deliver the ‘Global Britain’ message directly to American audiences and the US administration in particular. The first such opportunity came with the visit to London of the then US Secretary of State, John Kerry, who was assured by Boris Johnson that Britain would become “an even greater global nation” (Little 2016) after it had left the European Union. Another high-profile occasion to make the same point was Theresa May’s address to the Republican Party Conference in which the Prime Minister spelled out her vision of “the new, global Britain that emerges after Brexit”:

“As Americans know, the United Kingdom is by instinct and history a great, global nation that recognises its responsibilities to the world. And as we end our membership of the European Union – as the British people voted with determination and quiet resolve to do last year – we have the opportunity to reassert our belief in a confident, sovereign and global Britain, ready to build relationships with old friends and new allies alike [...] and to become even more global and internationalist in action and in spirit.” (May 2017b)

On a more specific level, the UK government complemented its ‘Global Britain’ discourse with public affirmations of the continued ‘specialness’ of Britain’s relations to the US after ‘Brexit’. These affirmations weave together past achievements of the special relationship and the promise and prospects of a reinvigorated post-‘Brexit’ relationship to establish a sense of continuity that transcends Britain’s decision to leave the European Union. The fullest example for this pattern is again Theresa May’s (2017b) above-cited speech to the Republican Party Conference in which she reminded her audience of the “unique and special relationship that exists between [the UK and the UK]”:

“[T]he leadership provided by our two countries through the special relationship has done more than win wars and overcome adversity. It made the modern world. [...] It is my honour and privilege to stand before you today [...] to join hands as we pick up that mantle of leadership once more, to renew our special relationship and to recommit ourselves to the responsibility of leadership in the modern world. [...] So as we rediscover our confidence together – as you renew your nation just as we renew ours – we have the opportunity – indeed the responsibility – to renew the special relationship for this new age. We have the opportunity to lead, together, again.” (May 2017b)

Importantly, the assurances of the UK government since the EU referendum that post-‘Brexit’ Britain will remain committed to an internationalist foreign policy outlook and the special relationship in particular were from the outset mirrored by the US. Immediately after the referendum, a range of voices in the US, including President Barack Obama, reassured the UK that the outcome of the vote will not affect the ‘specialness’ of the US-UK relationship. While Obama’s pro-‘Remain’ interventions in the referendum campaign and in particular his comment that ‘Brexit’ would put the UK at the “back of the queue” for any trade deal with the US (Asthana/Mason 2016) raised doubts as to whether a decision for Britain to leave the European Union would put the US commitment to the special relationship into question, he went out of his way after the referendum to dispel such doubts: “One thing that will not change is the special relationship that exists between our two nations” (Dyer et al. 2016). Similar reactions to the referendum result came, among others, from Bob Corker, the Chairman of the Senate foreign relations committee, Paul Ryan, the Republican Speaker of the House, and John Kirby, the spokesperson of the State Department (Roberts/Smith 2016). When President Obama congratulated Theresa May on becoming Prime Minister in July 2016 in what was reported to have been a “warm” phone call (Dathan 2016a), he assured her that he will work to “protect and deepen” (Revesz 2016) the special relationship. Only a few days later, US Secretary of State, John Kerry, visited the UK specifically to reinforce this commitment:

“I’ve returned to London today to reaffirm ourselves the special and unbreakable ties between the United States and the United Kingdom and these are more than words [...]. This is a genuine expression of a feeling of friendship and it is built up over years

and years of common sacrifice, common endeavor, common interests, common values that have been shared consistently between us". (Dathan 2016b)

As for Donald Trump, in contrast to President Obama, he has spoken out in favour of 'Brexit' during the UK referendum campaign (Reuters 2016) and welcomed the result already as presidential candidate. Trump was also quick to promise he would maintain the special relationship if elected President (Harvey 2016) and, in a jibe at President Obama, made clear that under his Presidency Britain would "always be at the front of the line". In his view, "zero will change" in US-UK relations because of 'Brexit' (Johnson 2016b).

The as yet strongest symbolic reaffirmation of the 'specialness' of US-UK relations since the referendum and since Donald Trump took office, in turn, came with Prime Minister May's visit to Washington in January 2017. To begin with, the two sides singled out the fact that May was the first foreign Head of Government to pay an official visit to the newly elected US President in Washington: "This is our first visit, so, great honour" (Trump 2017). For May, the invitation to the White House was "an indication of the strength and importance of the special relationship" (May 2017c). What is more, both President Trump and Prime Minister May used the visit as a platform to praise the special quality of the relationship between their two countries. The highest-profile public manifestation of this was a joint press conference of the two leaders in the White House on 27 January. Trump used that occasion to praise the "free and independent Britain" that emerged from the decision to leave the European Union and to give his strongest endorsement of the special relationship yet since becoming President:

"The special relationship between our two countries has been one of the great forces in history for justice and for peace [...]. Today the United States renews our deep bonds with Britain [...]. We pledge our lasting support to this most special relationship. Together, America and the United Kingdom are a beacon for prosperity and the rule of law. [...] [O]ur relationship has never been stronger." (Trump 2017)

Even more notably, perhaps, Theresa May reported at the press conference that she had extended an invitation to President Trump for a state visit to the UK which Trump has accepted. She explicitly framed this invitation in terms of the special relationship:

"[I]n a further sign of importance in that relationship, I have today been able to convey her Majesty, the Queen's hope that President Trump and the First Lady would pay a state visit to the United Kingdom later this year, and I'm delighted that the President has accepted that invitation." (May 2017c)

While the special honour of such state visits is a long-standing British diplomatic tool to reinforce or improve bilateral diplomatic and economic relations, this invitation was quite unusual in coming so early in the Trump Presidency.

To sum up, the immediate period since the British EU referendum before the 'Brexit' negotiations had even started were marked by a flurry of diplomatic activity to assert the continued 'specialness' of the US-UK relationship and to pre-empt the perception that the British decision to leave the European Union might call this relationship into question. In particular, this took the form of the UK government promoting a narrative of 'Global Britain' and making a range of symbolic gestures to reaffirm their commitment to the special relationship which were reciprocated by the US. That practice, in turn, was instrumental in creating a sense of stability and continuity of the special relationship at a time when the uncertainty around 'Brexit' heightened the British dependence on this relationship for its ontological security. In other words, the UK's post-'Brexit' ontological security needs found expression in public assurances and symbolic re-affirmations of the special relationship which, in turn, contribute to the resilience and endurance of that relationship.

#### *Confirming the British Junior Partner Role in the Special Relationship*

The US-UK special relationship rests on a mutually accepted division between senior and junior partner roles. The relationship is an example of strongly asymmetric special relations in which the US leads and the UK is expected to fulfil followership tasks. In the post-World War II period, it has always been a key premise of UK strategic foreign policy thinking that the UK must prove its absolute commitment to these tasks in order to keep the US attached to the special relationship and to avoid the risk of abandonment (Snyder 1997: 180). Successive generations of British foreign policy makers have considered such commitments to the UK's junior partner role as critical for maintaining the special quality of US-UK relations (Dumbrell 2004). In return, the UK hoped to gain "power by proxy" (Reynolds 1991: 178) in terms of getting privileged access to and influence on US foreign policy making as well as with a view to enhancing its power, status and prestige in the international arena more broadly (Porter 2010: 358-360; Wallace/Phillips 2009: 274-282).

The followership tasks that emanate from the UK's junior partner role in the special relationship are primarily around two main areas. First, the UK is expected to offer public and diplomatic support for the US in the international arena. Thus, one of the guiding principles

of British foreign policy since World War II has precisely been to seek to position itself side by side with the US on major international issues. In what has been described as the “don’t be rude to the Americans school” (Greenwood 2002: 213), British governments have above all been anxious to avoid public confrontation with the US on such issues and rather tended to pledge its allegiance to US foreign policy decisions and interests. For British foreign policy decision makers, this was part of the bargain in the special relationship which ensured that UK interests would be heard and carry weight in Washington (Dunne: 2004: 895-898; Danchev 2007).

Second, Britain’s commitment to its junior partner role in the special relationship is being judged in terms of its willingness and ability to make meaningful contributions to US security interests that go beyond public and diplomatic support (Oppermann 2015: 244-246). The very close intelligence cooperation between the US and the UK would be an important case in point. What has come to be seen as the critical litmus test of such contributions, however, is the UK’s capacity and readiness to provide logistical and, most notably, military support to NATO and US-led military interventions. In the words of former UK Prime Minister, Tony Blair, the ultimate question the US asks of British followership in the special relationship is: “Are you prepared to commit, are you prepared to be there when the shooting starts?” (Blair 2002). In particular with regard to the second area of followership tasks, questions began to arise about the UK’s commitment to its junior partner role in the special relationship already before the British EU membership referendum. In the wake of Prime Minister Cameron’s failure to secure parliamentary backing for military action against the Assad Regime in Syria in August 2013, for example, such questions not least revolved around the UK becoming more reluctant to participate in international military interventions partly as a legacy of the Iraq war (Kaarbo/Kenealy 2017). More fundamentally, the cuts of the UK defence budget (19%) and the Foreign Office budget (16%) implemented by the 2010-2015 coalition government (Niblett 2015: 9-14) raised longer term doubts about the capacity of the UK to meet its defence obligations in NATO and to interoperate with US forces in joint military missions (Oliver/Williams 2016: 555). Seen from the US, the future trajectory of UK defence spending, in particular, stands out as a crucial indicator for the extent to which the UK remained committed to its followership tasks in the special relationship (Dyer et al. 2016).

Along these lines, existing doubts and questions about the UK’s junior partner role in the special relationship have only become more imminent due to the uncertainty created by the

'Brexit' referendum. In response, the UK government has since the referendum actively sought to dispel such doubts and to assert its commitment to its followership tasks and the division of junior and senior partner roles that is constitutive of the US-UK special relationship. The focus of these efforts has been precisely on the critical questions of UK defence spending and its military contributions to NATO. Most notably, the May government has reconfirmed the British commitment to the NATO target on defence expenditure and emphasised its forerunner role in that regard. In her speech to the Republican Party Conference in January 2017, the Prime Minister singled out this point explicitly:

“Sovereign countries cannot outsource their security and prosperity to America. [...] This is something Britain has always understood. It is why Britain is the only country in the G20 – other than yours – to meet its commitment to spend 2% of GDP on defence, and to invest 30% of that in upgrading equipment. [...] And it is why the government I lead will increase spending on defence in every year of this Parliament.”  
(May 2017b)

As further proof of the UK commitment to keep up strong defence capabilities, May reminded her audience that her government has secured parliamentary approval to go ahead with renewing the UK nuclear deterrent and that it has invested in new F-35 strike aircraft for the new British aircraft carriers. In this context of her speech, May also let it be known that she had raised the importance of meeting the NATO targets on defence spending with other European leaders. In other words, the message of the British government since the 'Brexit' decision has been that the UK will continue to make the necessary investments to ensure that it remains a capable military partner to the US and that it will support diplomatic efforts of the US to make other European partners take on a greater share of the NATO defence burden as well.

Further to this, Prime Minister May has used her visit to the US to emphasise the UK's continued commitment to make strong contributions to European and international security 'on the ground'. For example, the British government has agreed shortly after the 'Brexit' referendum to deploy 650 troops to Estonia and Poland to strengthen NATO's forward presence in Eastern Europe and it has committed to place another 3000 troops on call as part of a NATO rapid-response unit (Riley-Smith 2016). Also, May pointed out in her speech to the Republican Party Conference that the UK is reinforcing its troop commitments to the NATO Resolute Support mission in Afghanistan and to a range of peacekeeping operations in Kosovo,

South Sudan and Somalia and she emphasised Britain's "determination to take on and defeat Daesh" (May 2017b).

On the US side, such signals of Britain stepping up its efforts in fulfilling its junior partner role in the special relationship were from the outset anticipated and validated. The Obama Administration was quick after the British referendum to emphasise the vital contributions the UK makes to international security, including intelligence sharing and the fight against international terrorism, and made it clear that it was committed not to let 'Brexit' derail the close Anglo-American ties in this field (Roberts/Smith 2016). Specifically, the US did not expect 'Brexit' to have a significant impact on the UK's role in NATO and insisted, in the words of the then US Ambassador to the United Nations, Susan Rice, that the UK "will remain a key leader with the NATO Alliance" (Chambers 2016). Thus, the US expectation precisely was that the UK would become more, not less, determined after 'Brexit' to prove its unchanged worth to NATO and as a junior partner to the US (Sengupta 2016).

From an ontological security perspective, the sustained efforts of the British government since the 'Brexit' referendum to communicate its commitment to fulfilling the UK's followership tasks in the special relationship are indicative of the strong motivation of the UK to foreground the stability and endurance of that relationship in order to mitigate the threat to its foreign policy identity originating from the decision to leave the European Union. These efforts, and their validation by the US, in turn, further contribute to the resilience of the special relationship in the post-'Brexit' environment.

## **Conclusion**

'Brexit' has plunged the UK into a period of great uncertainty. This uncertainty extends to post-'Brexit' Britain's place in the world and its overall foreign policy orientation. 'Brexit' puts into question key pillars of British foreign policy and constitutes a major threat to the UK's ontological security. Not least, Britain's decision to leave the European Union has the potential to weaken and undermine the US-UK special relationship which is central to the UK's foreign policy identity. At the same time, the uncertainty of the post-'Brexit' environment makes the UK more dependent on the special relationship for its ontological security than ever. While the material incentives for the British government in navigating the US-UK relationship are ambiguous and partly cross-cutting, the UK's ontological security needs unequivocally push it towards prioritising the stability and endurance of the special



relationship. British efforts to corroborate and reinforce the ‘specialness’ of UK-US relations are thus driven precisely by the need to overcome the ontological security threats posed by ‘Brexit’. Insofar as they are reciprocated by the US, these efforts, in turn, contribute to the resilience of the special relationship in the post-‘Brexit’ environment.

Specifically, the paper has explored two pathways through which the British government has sought to signal its unchanged commitment to the special relationship. First, it has engaged in a sustained discourse to assure the US of its attachment to the special relationship and it has used various occasions to symbolically affirm the ‘specialness’ of the relationship. Second, the British government has confirmed the UK’s junior partner role in the special relationship and its willingness and ability to fulfil critical followership tasks, in particular with regard to Britain’s contributions to NATO and US security interests more broadly. Both the Obama and Trump administrations have responded positively to these endeavours and have thereby contributed to the fulfilment of Britain’s ontological security needs.

From an ontological security perspective, the expectation, therefore, is that ‘Brexit’ should strengthen, not weaken the special relationship. However, a corollary of the argument is that the increased dependence of the UK on the special relationship for its ontological security amplifies the asymmetry of that relationship. This stands to further erode UK influence within the relationship and to ramp up the price Britain has to pay for upholding it. The toughest tests of the political will and capacity of the UK to remain committed to the special relationship might thus be still to come, for example if the US calls on the UK for support in future military interventions. The unsettled context of British post-‘Brexit’ domestic politics and the uncertainty over the Trump presidency make any predictions of how these tests might play out even harder. While the UK’s ontological security needs should reinforce the resilience of the special relationship, the ‘Lazarus-like’ quality still has to prove itself in face of the challenges the post-‘Brexit’ environment will likely hold in store.

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