

Between America and Europe

Britain's Strategic Outlook



(photo: A. Michailidis | Shutterstock)

The United Kingdom is facing a crucial question about its place in the world: where should its strategic loyalties lie in an increasingly unstable international order? For decades, the 'special relationship' with the United States has been at the centre of British foreign policy, reinforced by deep military, intelligence, and diplomatic ties. But growing doubt around the reliability of the United States following the re-election of President Donald Trump is forcing a national rethink. Is Britain experiencing the twilight of its transatlantic alignment? And if so, is the centre of gravity shifting, perhaps inevitably, towards Europe?



Recent findings from the Policy Institute at King's College London add weight to this conversation. In a nationally representative survey from December 2024, 53% of Britons said they would choose Europe over the United States as the United Kingdom's primary ally, if forced to pick. Just 31% favoured America. That's a dramatic reversal of public opinion compared to 1967, when the exact opposite was true: 53% backed America and only 33% favoured Europe in a similar scenario. This isn't just a curious historical footnote. It signals a deeper reassessment of Britain's global role. The reversal also highlights a generational shift. For younger Britons, Europe is not the alien continent it was often portrayed as in the post-war decades, but rather a familiar, if sometimes frustrating, political and cultural partner. The idea of Britain naturally looking across the Atlantic, with America as its closest ally, is no longer self-evident to a generation shaped as much by Brexit debates as by memories of wartime alliances.

Empire

Traditionally, British foreign policy has relied on three core elements: a close alliance with the United States, active engagement with Europe, and a global perspective grounded in trade and diplomacy. Since the end of World War II, the UK has tried to play the role of bridge-builder between Washington and Brussels, keeping the United States invested in European security while staying at the heart of Western decision-making. That model

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'A strain of US opinion sees alliances not as strategic assets but as burdens.' Pictured: HMS *Prince of Wales* in Tokyo while conducting Operation Highmast. An eight-month mission of Carrier Strike Group 25 to bolster the UK's commitment to the security of the Indo-Pacific region (photo: UK Ministry of Defence | Crown Copyright)

held through the Cold War, NATO expansion, and even the post-9/11 counterterrorism era. The United Kingdom often shaped its strategy to align closely with American interests, participating in joint missions from the Middle East to the Balkans. Intelligence collaboration between the two countries under the Five Eyes umbrella is arguably the most extensive in the world. In short, Britain built its strategic identity around interoperability with America.

Yet Britain's foreign policy has always been shadowed by an older tension, one that stretches back to the loss of empire. For decades, policymakers clung to the belief that Britain could still 'punch above its weight,' sustain-

ing global influence disproportionate to its size. This self-image was bolstered by the US alliance: by being Washington's closest partner, Britain could borrow strength and amplify its voice in global affairs. But this posture was also about avoiding a humbler identity as simply another medium-sized European power. Britain's difficulty today, caught between Washington and Brussels, is partly rooted in that old reluctance to accept the constraints of geography and scale.

But that foundation is showing signs of stress. The United States under Trump has been turning inward. His administration has pulled back from multilateralism and redefined America's global role in starkly transactional terms.



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Trump's stance particularly jarring. NATO has always been more than a contract; it has been a reassurance that the United States was committed to Europe's security in principle as well as in practice. To see this reassurance reduced to a conditional financial bargain undermines the very spirit of the alliance.

Trump's foreign policy vision is not rooted in shared values or collective security. It's pragmatic, deal-based, and driven by domestic political considerations. NATO, in this worldview, is not a stabilising force but rather a financial burden. Talk of unity and deterrence is replaced by that of withdrawal and division. This marks the sharpest departure from post-war consensus in living memory. And even beyond Trump, the strategic shift of the United States towards the Indo-Pacific raises questions about whether Europe can realistically remain its central concern. Britain, once a bridge between the two, risks becoming stranded if Washington's priorities lie thousands of miles away.

Serious strategic thinking

So, what does this mean for Britain? Prime Minister Keir Starmer has so far tried to avoid making a binary choice. He has stressed the importance of both transatlantic ties and deeper engagement with Europe. The Strategic Defence Review echoes this too. But the idea that we can have both equally is starting to look like wishful thinking. The pressure to choose is becoming structural rather than hypothetical. The days when Britain could claim the best of both worlds, America's ear in Washington and a seat at Europe's table, are over, not least because Brexit has removed the institutional leverage Britain once held within the EU.

The Trump administration's dismissive rhetoric, including a vice-presidential reference to Britain as just a 'random country', along with repeated threats to undermine NATO, have raised serious doubts about the future of American commitments to European security. More importantly, the instability of American politics has become an unavoidable factor. The issue is not just Trump himself, but what he represents: a strain of US opinion that sees alliances not as strategic assets but as burdens. Even if future administrations try to restore the old consensus, the knowledge that a large portion of the American electorate questions NATO's value will linger in British calculations.

Take Article 5 of the NATO treaty, the collective defence clause. Trump has openly questioned whether the United States should even honour it. This clause has only been invoked once, after the 9/11 attacks in the United States. That America was the beneficiary of this invocation makes

This is a moment for serious strategic thinking. Should the United Kingdom continue aligning with an increasingly erratic and unpredictable United States? Or should it double down on building stronger links with a Europe that, while not without its flaws, is developing a more coherent defence identity? Europe's own search for strategic autonomy has gathered momentum since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with countries like France and Germany advocating more coordinated defence spending and policy. Britain, although outside the EU, cannot afford to ignore this shift. To remain relevant, it must decide whether to remain at the margins of Europe's security evolution or to play an active role in shaping it.

Hoping that the United States will return to its old ways after Trump is not a strategy. Grand strategy requires action, not nostalgia. And right now, the most viable path



The Strategic Defence Review 2025 – Making Britain Safer: secure at home, strong abroad

On July 8th 2025 the British government released a new Strategic Defence Review (SDR). It signifies moving to warfighting readiness to deter threats and strengthen security in the Euro-Atlantic. According to the SDR: 'as the UK steps up to take on more responsibility for European security, we must have a 'NATO first' defence policy and lead within the Alliance.' Key focus areas are:

- **Move to warfighting readiness**—establishing a more lethal 'integrated force' equipped for the future, and strengthened homeland defence.
- **Engine for growth**—driving jobs and prosperity through a new partnership with industry, radical procurement reforms and backing UK businesses.
- **'NATO first'**—stepping up on European security by leading in NATO, with strengthened nuclear, new tech and updated conventional capabilities.
- **UK innovation driven by lessons from Ukraine**—harnessing drones, data and digital warfare to make our Armed Forces stronger and safer.
- **Whole-of-society approach**—widening participation in national resilience, and renewing the Nation's contract with those who serve.

Source: gov.uk

for the United Kingdom lies in Europe, in taking an active role in shaping European defence cooperation, rather than standing by passively. This does not mean abandoning the United States; rather, it means recalibrating the relationship so that Washington is one partner among others, not the sole anchor of British strategy. If Britain fails to make such adjustments, it risks drifting into strategic irrelevance: too dependent on America to lead in Europe, yet too marginal in Europe to matter in America.

This turning point is both a risk and an opening. Without American leadership, power vacuums will emerge that adversaries like Russia and China will be more than willing to fill. However, Europe, for the first time in decades, has a chance to step up and define its own strategic path less dependent on Washington, and Britain can help to lead that effort. The United Kingdom still boasts high-end military capabilities, global diplomatic reach, and a world-class intelligence network. It also brings to the table a legacy of international engagement and, crucially, a sense of renewed purpose. Yet leadership requires political courage. To admit openly that Europe is now the more natural partner would mean discarding the comforting myth of the special relationship, and British politicians have been reluctant to do so.

Sceptics will argue that shifting too far toward Europe might alienate the United States and harm the so-called 'special relationship.' But that relationship, as it stands today, is more emotional than strategic. It's a product of history, not a roadmap for the future. And as the KCL polling shows, the British public already senses this. They understand that our interests are increasingly aligned with Europe, not just geographically but in terms of values and shared threats. The shift in opinion since 1967 demonstrates that nostalgia for Churchill and Roosevelt no

longer defines national sentiment. For most Britons, the pressing issues are Russian aggression, economic security, and illegal migration — problems that Europe shares most directly and that America, increasingly preoccupied with Asia, cannot always prioritise.

In conclusion

Ultimately, this is about agency. Britain must take ownership of its foreign policy future. That means recognising when alliances evolve and having the courage to adapt. If Britain refuses to decide, it risks being pulled by events rather than shaping them. A drift between Washington and Brussels may satisfy short-term political caution, but it leaves the country vulnerable to being sidelined in both capitals. The choice is not whether to abandon the United States or embrace Europe exclusively, but whether to accept that Europe must now be the core of Britain's strategic outlook, with the United States as a key but secondary partner.

The United States can no longer serve as the sole anchor of British strategy. Europe, for all its imperfections, presents a chance not just for cooperation but for leadership. Britain has the means to be a driving force in shaping that future. The real question is whether we have the will. The ghosts of empire and the myths of the special relationship can no longer provide answers. What Britain needs now is clarity, honesty, and courage.

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