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Untrusted allies?

Trump's blunders have shaken Britain's trust in its "special relationship" with the US. With Brexit threatening decreased cooperation with the EU, the island nation will need to work hard on forging links with all its intelligence partners.

The US-UK special relationship is the cornerstone of British foreign policy. No other bilateral relationship is as important to the British government, and Britain has ensured in the decades since the end of the Second World War that its international partnerships and memberships are built around this relationship. While the partnership between Prime Ministers and Presidents has had moments of co-operation and friendship as well as those of fracture and distance, the relationship itself has remained strong. The 'five eyes' intelligence sharing commitment, comprising the US, the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand has been an important part of the relationship, demonstrating the shared global priorities of these five nations and the trust between them to fight the threat from their shared enemies. However, these long standing commitments are under greater threat than they have been in living memory. The election of Donald Trump to the White House has raised some difficult questions for the UK in terms of its foreign policy commitments, not because of who Donald Trump is but because of what his administration has allowed to happen on its watch.

First in the queue

When Trump was elected as President, many both inside the US and outside were shocked. The British government was keen to ensure the UK Prime Minister was the first in the queue to meet the new President, and Theresa May was dispatched to Washington with speed. The relationship between the two leaders seemed a little tense but certainly not unfriendly or lacking in common ground. But the warm words did not last long. Concerns over links between the Trump administration and Russia were raised during the US election campaign and gathered pace when he entered the White House. Trump himself refused to criticise Putin publicly, suggesting good relations between the US and

Russia were not just necessary but possible under his watch. While these issues may have caused some concern in the other 'five eye' nations, where Russia is generally considered to be one of the main international threats, Trump's blustering rhetoric persuaded many he would not adhere to his public statements in private. But the Manchester bombing on 22 May 2017 has got British authorities worried.

Information sharing is vital to the UK-US relationship. Both nations engage in it, along with their 'five eyes' allies. The basis of this relationship is shared priorities, shared enemies and shared confidentiality. Intelligence gathering worldwide relies upon the established principle that information is not shared without the express permission of the nation who gathered it, often at great risk to their operatives. Sharing information without prior authority can put undercover agents and intelligence gathering organisations in danger, meaning confidentiality is assumed until authorisation for release is given. The Trump administration had already raised concerns following reports they had allegedly shared information, gathered by the Israeli security services, with the Russian government without the prior authorisation of the Israeli government. In the aftermath of the Manchester bombing, the New York Times published photos of the scene, and released the bomber's name before he was officially named by the British government, Manchester police or the UK intelligence services.

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The leaks to the US press appear not to have come directly from the Trump administration. In fact, latest reports suggest they stemmed from a branch of the US government, keen to embarrass Trump internationally, something they partially achieved. But the issues the leak has raised are deeply concerning. How could sensitive and confidential information be shared by the UK with the US, only for it to be released to a newspaper, potentially derailing the investigation into associates and contacts of the Manchester bomber? How could this information be leaked by a branch of the US government? In the aftermath, attitudes hardened in Downing Street and the Home Office. The intelligence services, both in the US and the UK, began compartmentalising their own work, ensuring their own linkages would be unaffected by any fallout. While British police stopped sharing intelligence from the

Manchester investigation with the US government following the leak, other intelligence sharing continued after assurances were made to ensure confidentiality.

Britain's EU partners

The Brexit vote has only heightened these concerns. Britain has, for the last 45 years been a member of the European Union, participating in most aspects of the union, sharing information with our European colleagues. Brexit is unlikely to end the existing intelligence sharing, which is often seen by Britain as a lower priority than its links with the US and the other five eyes nations. But leaving the European club means intelligence sharing will become less easy, less expected, less routine - and that should worry the British government. Under normal circumstances, those concerns would have been eased by the UK's reliance on the US. Why fret about a slight decrease in European intelligence sharing when we are in a 'special relationship' with one of the biggest intelligence gathering nations on earth?

However, in light of the leaks from the US government, concerns over links between the Trump team and Russia and uncertainty over where Britain fits in an 'American first' administration, the British government must be deeply concerned about their future intelligence sharing plans. With no other alternatives, and a long standing relationship with the US to maintain, the plan will surely be to insulate the relationship against any damage which might be done by the current administration while trying to build strong links and encourage the kind of confidentiality which was always an expected part of the relationship under previous presidents. The British government has sought and received assurances, and the' five eyes' agreement will continue for now, though perhaps with rather more unease than before. Britain is discovering, perhaps not for the first time, the danger of pinning all of your hopes on one nation, only to discover that their practices and priorities might not mimic your own.



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