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*The 45th in our series of expert comment and analysis, by **Jonathan Clarke**, former Counsellor at the British Embassy in Washington, now resident there as a foreign affairs commentator. As always, the views expressed are those of the author and not of Global Strategy Forum unless otherwise stated.*

The UK: Still Special Under Biden

Just prior to the US election when polls started pointing to a probable Biden win, a batch of *angst*-ridden articles burst across the British media. There were reports of something akin to panic at No. 10 that the Biden team had rebuffed British feelers to talk to the campaign and that, in contrast to the Trump Administration, the UK would not find an open door under Biden. Since the election itself, a more optimistic tone has emerged, with the Prime Minister reported to be 'very much looking forward' to working with the Biden Administration 'on a lot of very crucial stuff.'

What's the reality? Apart from betraying evidence of chronic British insecurity about the status of the 'Special Relationship', was there anything to these feelings that a Biden Administration would disadvantage the UK?

Those of us who were in Washington during the election see few signs that this was

the case. The campaign did not produce many laughs for the Biden side, but the British media worry-warting did introduce a moment of light relief. One comment that came our way from a Biden foreign policy adviser was to the effect: 'Don't the Brits see that our foreign policy types are totally in the mainstream, including on the Special Relationship. Most of us think that Brexit was an insane mistake, but that's now a done deal we have to make the best of.'

Additionally, they could not help thinking that it was a laughable misunderstanding on the British side that that there was a bond between President Trump and Prime Minister Johnson. While it was certainly true that Trump favoured Brexit, his buddy on that was the forever Brexiteer Nigel Farage, not the late-arrival Johnson. With the latter, Trump's relationships was, as with everyone, entirely transactional.

Some of Johnson's more hardline allies may wish it were otherwise, but there is very little inclination in Democratic circles to regard



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Johnson as a 'Trump across the waters.' There has been some suggestion that Biden does not warm to Johnson on the basis of the latter's remarks about Barack Obama's origins. Whatever truth there is in this - likely not much - Johnson is lucky that Biden is not someone who nurses grudges.

It's worth looking at two issues - Ireland and trade. The former is more salient than the latter. Biden is a devout Catholic with direct Irish ancestry. Attachment to the North Ireland peace process as a major US success runs deep in Democratic foreign policy lore, starting well before Bill Clinton and his association with the Good Friday Agreement. Any British steps that, rightly or wrongly, are seen as reopening this history will engender pushback. British ministers will be well advised to weight their options carefully. On trade, while the rhetoric is less favourable, the reality is unchanged. Despite the apparent imaginings of some British trade ministers, trade deals are not in the gift of President, but are the prerogative of the Congress. US sectional interests, be they agricultural, pharmaceutical or digital, will need to be taken care of under Biden - exactly as they would have been under Trump.

On the wider front, those prominently mentioned as possible foreign and defense policy appointments — Susan Rice as Secretary of State, Tony Blinken as Chief of Staff or National Security Adviser, Michele Flournoy as Secretary of Defense, Mike Morel as Director of National Intelligence, Mike Vickers as CIA Chief - are all well-known in London. They, and others like them, are in turn deeply familiar with the UK's oversize

contribution in international affairs, including on defence and intelligence. With the strategic ethos of the Biden Administration, as was underlined in his victory speech of November 7th, being on 'healing', including with US allies, there will be plenty of common ground between Washington and London on issues like climate change, Iran, the trajectory of relations with Russia and China and handling of COVID-19, where the UK prowess on vaccine development is well respected.

If this sounds a touch too good to be true, it may be. The US is now a changed and changing country which looks and feels less like one rooted in its European heritage. The cultural influence of Asia and Latin America, alongside a serious intent to come to terms with the past of slavery and the racial injustices of the present - no Democratic leader dismisses these as 'woke' and British commentators will do so at their peril - result in a nation with new bearings. The British are going to have to work harder in Washington. Those who dream of undiluted Transatlanticism, let alone an Anglosphere restoration will be disappointed. But none of this is unnavigable, especially by the world-beating Rolls-Royce government machine that is at the disposal of British ministers.

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