

US-UK relations

Trump launches attack on Starmer as UK-US tensions mount

‘Special relationship’ comes under increasing strain as president criticises some of the prime minister’s key policies

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Donald Trump renewed his attacks on Sir Keir Starmer on a bleak day for Britain’s fabled “special relationship” with the US, as the president criticised “problems” in London and UK policies on immigration and green energy.

Trump also used a White House press conference on Tuesday to increase his criticisms of a British deal to transfer sovereignty of the Chagos Islands, including a UK-US air base, to Mauritius. He had earlier claimed the deal smacked of “weakness” and “stupidity”.

The president's latest salvo against Britain highlighted rising tensions between the two traditional allies as the prime minister turned his back on Trump's proposed "board of peace" initiative and cleared the way for better relations with China.

Trump insisted he got along "very well" with Starmer and French President Emmanuel Macron, but his press conference added to the impression of increasingly dysfunctional relationships.

"They always treat me well," the president told reporters. "They get a little bit rough when I'm not around, but when I'm around they treat me very nicely."

He added: "You know, I like both of them. They're both liberal. They've got to straighten out their countries. London is having a lot of problems, and if you look at Paris, a lot of problems. They have two problems: immigration and energy."

Trump also appeared to misunderstand the deal struck by Starmer over the sovereignty of the Chagos Islands, suggesting that the UK was making a profit out of its transfer of the archipelago to Mauritius.

Asked about the deal, Trump said: "It's a reasonably important area of the globe, not anywhere near Greenland. But I think they should keep it. I don't know why they don't. Do they need money?"

Britain will pay more than £100mn a year for a long-term lease of the Diego Garcia air base from Mauritius and Downing Street declined to comment on Trump's claim.

Earlier Trump said in a post on his Truth Social platform that Britain had shown "total weakness" over the deal, which his administration had previously endorsed.

British officials believe that Trump was trying to suggest that if Britain could surrender sovereignty over the Chagos Islands — even with US approval — then perhaps one day Denmark might hand over Greenland to China. "That's the premise," said one official.

Meanwhile Starmer said this week he was “talking to allies about the terms of the board of peace”, a body proposed by Trump to oversee Gaza and other global hotspots.

But British officials said Starmer would not sign up to a body that charged a hefty membership fee for a permanent seat and included among its members Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Washington has sent out invitations to dozens of heads of state and government to join the board of peace, which Trump will chair. Countries that join the board will serve a limited three-year term unless they contribute more than \$1bn, according to the text of its charter.

The Kremlin said this week that Trump had invited Putin to sit on the board. It will sit above an advisory committee that will include former UK prime minister Sir Tony Blair.

One UK official said the “official position” was that the government was considering whether to sign up to the board.

They added: “But you don’t have to be a political genius to work out that paying \$1bn of taxpayers’ money to sit on a board with Putin isn’t going to fly. I don’t think people are going to sign up to it.”

UK foreign secretary Yvette Cooper told MPs on Tuesday: “Putin is not a man of peace, and I don’t think he belongs in any organisation with peace in the name.”

The initial social media attack by Trump on Starmer blindsided UK officials, even though the two leaders had held a chilly conversation on Sunday over the president’s aspirations to take control of Greenland, an approach described by the prime minister as “completely wrong”.

As Starmer digested Trump's onslaught, in another part of Whitehall the government was about to give a long-awaited green light to a Chinese "super embassy" in London, a scheme that had previously attracted criticism in Washington.

The clearance of the new embassy — dubbed "a colossal spy hub in the heart of our capital" by shadow foreign secretary Dame Priti Patel — paves the way for Starmer to visit Beijing next week, the first visit by a British prime minister since 2018.

With Trump claiming that China poses a threat in the Arctic that can only be addressed by the US taking control of Greenland, the embassy decision and Starmer's planned visit come at a highly sensitive moment.

Starmer has also declined to travel to Davos to meet Trump on Wednesday. Labour officials said that Starmer wanted to focus on domestic issues where possible.

In spite of the multiple flashpoints, Starmer's instincts are to keep talking to Trump and to try to contain public rows. "What's the alternative?" asked Lord Peter Mandelson, who Starmer sacked as UK ambassador to Washington last year. "Shouting at him from across the street with a megaphone?"

A big test for the relationship looms with plans, not officially confirmed, for King Charles to visit Washington in July to mark the 250th anniversary of the declaration of independence, a visit that is notionally a matter for Buckingham Palace.

Trump's public criticisms of Britain and his occasional suggestions that he would like to take over Canada, where King Charles is the head of state, have made the planned visit especially political and Downing Street will be closely involved.

Starmer has resisted suggestions that Britain might threaten the US with reciprocal tariffs to influence Trump's Greenland ambitions.

A trade war against a much bigger US economy would hurt Britain, the prime minister has warned.

The royal visit might appear to be one of the few levers at Starmer's disposal, although British officials rejected the idea the trip might be cancelled, insisting it was an important "people to people" show of affection between the UK and the US.

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