

Opinion UK foreign policy

Starmer's dilemma: America or Europe?

Trump has laid waste to the Atlantic alliance — the Greenland crisis shows what needs to be done

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You could touch the relief in Whitehall. Donald Trump's retreat from his threatened annexation of Greenland spared Britain the economic recession that would have been likely to follow a transatlantic trade war. But there was more. For Sir Keir Starmer's government, the US about-turn deferred a painful moment of strategic reckoning. Britain has long been America's best, and most dependent, ally in Europe. A decade ago, the Brexit vote put it outside its neighbours in the EU. It is not going to be easy to turn history on its head.

In Paris, policymakers talk about Britain's Suez question. The British and French agree that, absent the guarantee once provided by the Americans, European security requires partnership between the continent's two nuclear-armed powers. Germany will boast [the largest military](#), but Britain and France have the global strategic outlook and experience. Then comes "the question". Will Starmer, the French ask, choose Europe over the US when the stakes really count?

Seventy years have passed since the then prime minister Anthony Eden declared that the Channel was wider than the Atlantic. The 1956 military expedition to take back the Suez Canal from Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser was an Anglo-French affair — the last gasp of two empires in decline. Kept in the dark, Dwight Eisenhower's US administration reacted with fury. Faced with a run on sterling, Eden buckled. His successor Harold Macmillan bet Britain's future on the "special relationship". The memory lives on in Paris.

Cross-Channel relations have improved greatly during the past 18 months. Starmer's Labour government has rebuilt bridges burned by the Conservatives through Brexit. Vladimir Putin's war against Ukraine has brought together Britain, France and Germany at the head of a coalition of the willing in support of Kyiv. Diplomats say Starmer, Germany's Friedrich Merz and France's Emmanuel Macron have an easy relationship. London has signed a new defence pact with Berlin, and London and Paris are collaborating on nuclear modernisation.

For Europe, the Greenland crisis has clarified what needs to be done as Trump lays waste to the Atlantic alliance. There are still holdouts clinging to the idea that the old order can be rescued. And there are renegades, such as Hungary's Viktor Orbán, who want to be best pals with both Putin and Trump. But most leaders now agree with Canada's [Mark Carney](#) who, in an eloquent truth-telling exercise in Davos this week, pointed out that nostalgia is not a strategy. There is no going back.

Macron's calls for European strategic autonomy used to be dismissed in Berlin as an expression of the French anti-Americanism once articulated by Charles de Gaulle. Trump's vulgar disdain for Europe, voiced again in Davos, has made Gaullism respectable. Merz is among Trump's most robust critics. Germany has made its choice.

Not yet Starmer. True, Trump's threat to annex the territory of a Nato partner saw a notable stiffening in the prime minister's rhetoric. But left unanswered was how far would Britain have gone if the EU had responded to Trump's tariff threat with trade sanctions. Would the UK have joined the EU in retaliation? It was a decision, British diplomats admit, the government was mightily relieved to be spared.

There are reasons for the reticence. The stakes were spelled out during a Downing Street press conference when Starmer twice alluded to UK reliance on the US to keep its nuclear deterrent operational. The Trident submarine-based missile system may technically be "independent" but the missiles require regular servicing in the US.

Senior officials in the Whitehall security establishment tell the prime minister that unravelling transatlantic defence and intelligence collaboration and breaking with military equipment dependency would take decades. They are right — but all the more reason to set off now. And the US has compelling reasons of its own to avoid a sudden rupture, not least its listening, tracking and air bases in Britain.

Trump's imperial presidency has limits. A forecast setback in America's midterm elections, you hear the nostalgists say, will impose further constraints. They are daydreaming. The hard truth is that, whatever happens to Trump, the old Atlantic order, rooted in shared values and trust as well as mutual interest, cannot be remade.

The EU has not been idle. Defence budgets are rising, Brussels is keeping Ukraine afloat financially with a €90bn loan, and the EU's new Security Action for Europe programme has set a framework for continent-wide military procurement. For all that, there remains a reluctance in national capitals to add substance to rhetoric if it means weighing collective action against narrow national interests. For France, rebuilding military industrial capacity seems part of Macron's project only when French manufacturers are in charge. Paris has fallen out with Berlin over plans for a new generation of fighter aircraft and done its best to keep British companies out of the Safe programme.

It is left to Starmer, though, to make the biggest leap. Welcome as it has been, re-engagement with the EU has been limited. The government, you hear Britain's partners say, has not invested serious political capital and is still hedging its bets. It needs to build trust. They have a point. Trump's volte-face has removed the immediate pressure but this is a stay rather than a reprieve. Britain's security is inextricably tied to Europe. The Suez question has to be answered. The policy of pretending otherwise has run out of road.

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