

United Kingdom's Prime Minister Visits President Trump

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The Special Relationship

On January 27, 2017, United Kingdom (UK) Prime Minister Theresa May is scheduled to be the first foreign leader to meet with President Donald Trump at the White House. Officials on both sides regard the visit as an important opening discussion intended to set the tone of relations between the two leaders and reaffirm key priorities for the U.S.-UK "special relationship." Many U.S. officials and Members of Congress have traditionally viewed the United Kingdom as the United States' closest ally, citing the two countries' extensive and long-standing cooperation on security and defense issues, intelligence, counterterrorism, and many other shared interests. The United States and the UK are also major trade and investment partners.

Theresa May and Brexit

Nearly 52% of British voters in the June 23, 2016, referendum on European Union (EU) membership answered that the UK should leave the EU (British exit from the EU is often referred to as "Brexit"). Prime Minister David Cameron, who led the campaign to remain, subsequently resigned, and Theresa May took over as the UK's prime minister on July 13, 2016. As the longest-serving home secretary in modern times, May oversaw the UK's counterterrorism, policing, crime, and immigration policies for six years. A Member of Parliament since 1997, she is the UK's second female prime minister (after Margaret Thatcher). During the Brexit referendum campaign, May aligned herself with the Remain campaign but did not take an outspoken role.

Brexit remains the predominant issue in UK politics. Prime Minister May has indicated that she intends to initiate withdrawal negotiations by triggering [Article 50 of the EU treaty](#) before the end of March 2017. On January 24, 2017, the UK Supreme Court ruled that Parliament must vote on whether Article 50 can be invoked. Although the government expects to secure Parliament's approval and proceed with its timeline, considerable uncertainty remains about how the negotiations between the UK and the EU on the terms of departure will proceed and the subsequent shape of UK relations with the EU.

In a [speech on January 17, 2017](#), Prime Minister May indicated that her government intends to negotiate a so-called

"hard Brexit," meaning a full departure from the EU single market and customs union and a full restoration of British sovereignty over lawmaking, including with regard to controlling immigration. The prime minister also indicated that the UK would attempt to negotiate a free-trade agreement with the EU to secure as much access to the EU market as possible.

The initial two-year window for the exit negotiations indicates that the UK could formally leave the EU in the first half of 2019, although [some analysts](#) suggest the likelihood of a far lengthier process. The withdrawal agreement could entail a transition period that stretches the process beyond two years, and EU officials assert that the completion of a free-trade agreement likely will take considerably longer.

Opportunity and Uncertainty

With the inauguration of President Trump, [some observers](#) sense an opportunity to strengthen the bonds of the U.S.-UK relationship. In a [postelection phone call](#) with Prime Minister May, President Trump reportedly spoke about the importance of the relationship and his close personal connections to the UK. This week's meeting is expected to launch a preliminary discussion about the outlines of a possible U.S.-UK free-trade agreement that could be concluded after the UK departs the EU. [Having expressed](#) strong support for Brexit and ambivalence about the future of the EU, President Trump has indicated he favors reaching such an agreement quickly. Members of Congress also have backed negotiating a free-trade agreement with the UK. Although the UK cannot formally negotiate trade agreements until it leaves the EU, some suggest that positive indications of a likely future agreement with the United States could help bolster the UK's position in its upcoming negotiations with the EU on the terms of Brexit and the UK's post-Brexit economic relationship with the EU.

The meeting is also expected to include discussions of issues on which the two leaders' viewpoints appear to differ. President Trump [has asserted](#) that NATO is important to him but obsolete because it does not adequately address terrorism and that the alliance is unfair to the United States because many European countries do not spend enough on defense. Observers expect that Prime Minister May is likely to argue for the continued centrality of NATO to European security and the deterrence of Russian aggression, while cautioning President Trump about potential overtures to Russian President Vladimir Putin. Despite tensions between the UK and EU over Brexit, May also reiterated in her January 17 speech that a greater unraveling of the EU is not in the best interests of the UK. On issues such as combating the Islamic State and seeking to end the conflict in Syria, President Trump and Prime Minister May are likely to hold relatively compatible starting points. In contrast, President Trump has expressed opposition to the Iran nuclear deal and skepticism about the Paris climate agreement, both of which are supported by the UK government. Counterterrorism cooperation is expected to remain close, but [differences could arise](#) depending on the types of initiatives pursued by the Trump Administration.

While the UK government seeks to forge a mutually beneficial partnership, [many in the UK](#) remain concerned and uncertain about what to expect from the new U.S. Administration. Numerous British politicians, including Prime Minister May, were [critical](#) of Trump during the U.S. election campaign. In January 2016, Members of Parliament [debated](#) whether Trump should be banned from the UK due to statements he made during the campaign (although Parliament did not decide to do so). In response to domestic critics of her outreach to the Trump Administration, Prime Minister May has [asserted](#) that, "It is the special relationship that allows us to say when something is unacceptable. Whenever there is something I find unacceptable, I won't be afraid to say that to Donald Trump."