



## **The United Kingdom's Trump Trap**

### **How Special a Relationship?**

By David Goodhart

One sunny afternoon in Covent Garden this past summer, a street performer realized that an audience volunteer sounded American. "Please tell me you're not a Trump supporter!" the busker pleaded. "Er, no, I'm not," stammered the embarrassed young man—at which point, the London crowd cheered.

Trump's dealings with the United Kingdom have blown hot and cold. The United Kingdom's planned withdrawal from the EU makes its "special relationship" with the United States more significant than ever, and Trump has backed a comprehensive post-Brexit trade deal. Staying too close to Trump, however, could complicate the United Kingdom's other major diplomatic relationships.

The value of American support for the United Kingdom's controversial new approach to Europe is crucial, even if it has scarcely been registered by most commentators. Had the Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton won the presidential election, as expected, for example, the British government would now be even more isolated, and its path toward Brexit, even more complicated. A Clinton administration would likely have continued its predecessor's opposition to the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the EU and turned a cold shoulder to any new bilateral trade deal.

It is also interesting to consider how things might have played out had Trump won but Brexit lost, with David Cameron remaining British prime minister. London would probably have tacked closer to the pan-European chorus of Trump critics, or at least gone to ground—and one could easily imagine the new president being so annoyed that he would have begun unraveling the alliance in earnest. May's maneuvering has helped prevent tensions from boiling over and kept her country's options open.

European policymakers may have occasionally been frustrated with the Obama administration's foreign policy, but they could at least be confident that there was one and that it displayed some internal logic and coherence. No such confidence exists today.

The Trump era has jangled nerves on both sides of the Atlantic. But for all the shouting, it is not at all clear yet what major lasting impact, if any, it will have on US-European relations.