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Donald Trump

Trump hands May promise of 'stronger' special relationship

UK leader stands firm on Russian sanctions and urges White House to stand by Nato



During their press conference Donald Trump and Theresa May emphasised their personal chemistry © Bloomberg

JANUARY 27, 2017 by: **Demetri Sevastopulo** and **George Parker** in Washington

British prime minister Theresa May's mission to forge a special relationship with [Donald Trump](https://www.ft.com/donald-trump) (<https://www.ft.com/donald-trump>) appeared to bear some fruits on Friday as he hailed Britain's post-Brexit prospects at a White House meeting that even saw the pair hold hands.

The new US president used the visit to declare his deep enthusiasm for the UK, saying the "relationship had never been stronger" and to declare that Brexit would turn out to be a "blessing to the world".

At a very short joint press conference, Mrs May claimed to have secured his "100 per cent" commitment to Nato, although Mr Trump stayed silent on that point. Mr Trump also accepted an invitation to make a state visit to the UK later this year.

However, Mrs May's difficulty in treading the fine line between wooing the US leader and alienating British voters or her European allies was sometimes apparent. After a British reporter asked Mr Trump about concerns in Britain at his being the leader of the free world, Mr Trump joked: "This was your choice of a question? There goes that relationship."

Mr Trump also described Brexit as a "wonderful thing" and dismissed the EU as a bureaucratic and meddling "consortium". His apparent glee over Brexit will strain US relations with the rest of Europe. Mrs May had urged the president to accept that a strong EU was to the benefit of Britain and the wider world.

Mrs May also repeated her opposition to the relaxation of sanctions against Russia, another area of tension in the new relationship. She has also said that Britain would condemn any move by Mr Trump to [reintroduce torture \(http://next.ft.com/content/29dd7boa-e357-11e6-9645-c9357a75844a\)](http://next.ft.com/content/29dd7boa-e357-11e6-9645-c9357a75844a) as an interrogation technique with suspected terrorists.



Overall, the meeting between the two leaders was cordial © Getty

At times, the British prime minister appeared to be attempting to pull Mr Trump back into the western foreign policy mainstream, articulating stances on transatlantic issues that had been held by his predecessor, Barack Obama.

"We are united in our recognition of Nato as the bulwark of our collective defence and today we've reaffirmed our unshakeable commitment to this alliance," Mrs May said. "Mr President, I think you said you confirmed that you're 100 per cent behind Nato."

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Trump to call Putin as he considers lifting Russia sanctions (<http://next.ft.com/content/581eff4e-e49b-11e6-8405-9e5580d6e5fb>)

Theresa May sticks to Obama-era policy in White House meeting with US president

On Saturday Mr Trump is due to talk for the first time to [President Vladimir Putin](http://next.ft.com/content/581eff4e-e49b-11e6-8405-9e5580d6e5fb) (<http://next.ft.com/content/581eff4e-e49b-11e6-8405-9e5580d6e5fb>) as the White House considers lifting sanctions on the Kremlin over its actions in Ukraine.

According to congressional aides, the Trump team has already drafted an executive order to lift sanctions. They said they learnt of the draft from concerned career personnel at the National Security Council, who privately sounded the alarm.

Mr Trump said that while he wanted good relations with Russia, it was “very early to be talking about” lifting sanctions. “I don’t know the gentleman,” Mr Trump added. “I hope we have a fantastic

relationship. That’s possible. It’s also possible we won’t.”

Mrs May made clear she was sticking to [the established Obama-era policy](http://next.ft.com/content/4a9083ae-ad99-11e6-9cb3-bb8207902122) (<http://next.ft.com/content/4a9083ae-ad99-11e6-9cb3-bb8207902122>) of maintaining sanctions until the Kremlin lives up to the terms of a Ukrainian peace deal struck in Minsk in 2015 — the same stance as other European leaders, particularly Germany’s Angela Merkel.

“As far as the UK is concerned, we believe that sanctions should continue until that agreement is fully implemented,” Mrs May said.

Larry Sabato, a University of Virginia politics expert, said Mr Trump had done well by his own standards but that the press conference was one of the shortest he could remember — a different situation from the longer conferences held by Barack Obama.

“He gets an A because there were no embarrassing gaffes and he was civil instead of angry,” said Mr Sabato. “According to May, Trump is now 100 per cent in favour of Nato, the organisation he denounced as ‘obsolete’ and unworthy of US backing. Hmmm.”

Overall, the mood of the meeting was cordial. Mr Trump dutifully described the UK-US bond as “the special relationship” in the first sentence of his press conference. Later there were pictures of the president holding the prime minister’s hand in the colonnade outside the Oval Office.

Mr Trump said that “we are going to get on very well” and claimed that Mrs May was “a people person”, just like him. Mrs May replied: “We have already struck up a good relationship.”

Mrs May was the first foreign leader to visit Mr Trump in the White House. He will speak to Ms Merkel and President François Hollande of France on Saturday. The UK and other European nations have been concerned that he was not as supportive of Nato and was unwilling to recognise aggressive moves by Mr Putin in Ukraine and Syria.

Mr Trump has [sparked concern among allies \(http://next.ft.com/content/978c730e-dc04-11e6-9d7c-be108f1c1dce\)](http://next.ft.com/content/978c730e-dc04-11e6-9d7c-be108f1c1dce) in Europe and Asia by suggesting he was less enthusiastic of US alliances, mainly because he did not believe they were paying enough for their collective defence. He has also complained Nato was not focused sufficiently on tackling terrorism.

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Mrs May said they had discussed the importance of ensuring that Nato was “equipped to fight terrorism and cyber warfare as it is to fight more conventional forms of war” and said she had assured Mr Trump that she would continue efforts “to encourage my fellow European leaders to deliver on their commitments to spend two per cent of their GDP on defence so that the burden is more fairly shared.”

The cordial words came against the backdrop of an [escalating row \(http://next.ft.com/content/a6ecf4e2-e3eb-11e6-8405-9e5580d6e5fb\)](http://next.ft.com/content/a6ecf4e2-e3eb-11e6-8405-9e5580d6e5fb) between Mr Trump and another close US ally, President Enrique Peña Nieto of Mexico, who cancelled his own Washington visit after the White House pushed ahead with plans to build a wall on the southern border — and threatened import tariffs against Mexican goods to

recover the cost.

Mr Trump said he had “a very good call” on Friday [with the Mexican president \(http://next.ft.com/content/ff134eb4-e4c2-11e6-8405-9e5580d6e5fb\)](http://next.ft.com/content/ff134eb4-e4c2-11e6-8405-9e5580d6e5fb), insisting the two had “a really very good relationship”.

“We’re going to be renegotiating our trade deals and other aspects of our relationship with Mexico,” he added. “And in the end, I think it will be good for both countries.”

During the press conference with Mrs May, two seemingly mismatched leaders — a brash New York businessman and the methodical daughter of a vicar — emphasised both their personal chemistry and the enduring ties between their nations.

"I can tell you, I think we're going to get along very well," Mr Trump assured reporters, adding he was not as brash as portrayed.

Mrs May, wearing a red suit that matched Mr Trump's tie, also sought to emphasise similarities. "One of the things we have in common is we want to put the interests of working people right up there centre stage," she said.

Additional reporting by Joshua Chaffin in London

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