



## Article

# Brexit and ‘Specialness’: Mapping the UK–US Relationship in the *New York Times* and *The Guardian* Newspapers

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**Abstract:** At a time of renewed power struggles among nations, especially with the rise of China and Russia, the UK’s loss of leverage as a key player in the European Union following Brexit makes its relationship with the United States more crucial than ever before. That relationship, which is traditionally conceptualised as being ‘special’, undergirds international relations discourses in media spaces and political and academic communities on both sides of the Atlantic. Drawing on news coverage by the *New York Times* and *The Guardian* (UK) newspapers, this article explores how the media frame the UK–US relationship against the backdrop of Brexit. The discussion is predicated on the understanding that important sources of information can influence not only people’s perceptions but also how they think about an issue. The study concludes that while a special relationship is still a contested notion, a resilient and abiding alliance between the two countries is alleviating the impact of Brexit.

**Keywords:** alliance; Atlantic bridge; Brexit; *New York Times*; news framing; special relationship; *The Guardian*



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## 1. Introduction

On 23 June 2016, more than 17.4 million Britons voted for a divorce from the European Union, while 16.1 million voted to remain in the bloc. For the first time in its history, the Union lost a member, an important and influential key player. The unprecedented event reverberated around the world and triggered political changes in the UK, which led to the defenestration of David Cameron as prime minister by his party and the election of Theresa May as his successor. Significantly, it brought into sharp relief the relationship between the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US) as well as the relationship between the US and Europe. For decades, the UK had served as a bridge between the US and continental Europe. The bridge metaphor undergirded British foreign policy and granted the UK “a unique mediating function which was valued in Brussels and in Washington, amplifying UK’s power in both capitals” (*The Guardian* 2019). Brexit burnt the bridge. As a result, the UK is no longer an Atlantic bridge between the US and continental Europe. Crucially, due to Brexit, the UK cannot exercise “significant influence over the policies of a market of 450 million people . . . [and seems] likely to be a poorer, smaller country” (Wilson 2017, p. 543). Consequently, it no longer influences policies on economic matters in a bloc with which the US traded \$1.3b in goods and services in 2018 (Fuchs 2019).

Although the United States has multiple relationships, given its status as a super-power, its partnership with the UK is conceptualised as ‘special’ for a variety of reasons, notwithstanding persistent misgivings about its veracity. This perception of ‘specialness’ is reflected in media coverage, political discourse as well as in research interest. Media interest highlights the pivotal socio-political and cultural roles of the news media as critical sources of information and their potential and capacity to influence and shape public opinion. McQuail asserts that the media “provide occasions, links, channels, arenas and platforms for information and ideas to circulate” (McQuail 2010, p. 8). This provision produces long-term influence on audiences and as Berry et al. argue, the media help to

structure social reality through the way in which “stories are contextualised and framed, [and how] the information that is present (and absent) impacts on how the public understand issues and assigns responsibility and perceives policy issues” (Berry et al. 2021, p. 2803). From this standpoint, the news media “are influential in setting the public agenda, and their coverage of the day’s events aids the cognitive mindset of the public in terms of ranking of important news makers and issues” (Melkote 2009, p. 548). Anchored on this understanding, the purpose of this study is to examine the ways in which the *New York Times* (NYT) and *The Guardian* (UK) construct narratives about the relationship between the UK and the US against the backdrop of Brexit. It also explores how the two newspapers frame the relationship from a historical perspective. The discussion is predicated on the understanding that the way in which the newspapers construct the narratives provides informational building blocks for the construction of public opinion about Brexit.

Brexit, a portmanteau word, (Britain and exit), that captures the UK’s withdrawal from the European Union, dominated socio-political, economic and cultural discourses months before a referendum in June 2016. Triggered by public concern about immigration, nationalism, the economy and anti-EU sentiments championed by Eurosceptics, David Cameron, in an attempt to rein in infighting over Europe in the Conservative Party, offered the country a referendum on EU membership. Cameron was confident voters would choose to remain, but on 23 June 2016, 52 percent of voters chose a withdrawal from the EU while 48 percent of voters preferred to remain. Campaigners for the exit, or what Zappettini and Krzyżanowski (2019) call a critical juncture, said it was a decisive move ‘to claim back’ the country from EU bureaucracy and create new pathways that would usher in a “Global Britain” liberated to cultivate strong ties with countries outside the EU regulatory orbit. The campaign for Brexit and the fallouts of the outcome of the referendum have dominated headlines in the NYT and *The Guardian* and provide a scaffolding for debates about the UK–US relationship. This article examines how the two newspapers framed the narratives. The paper is organised into five sections, starting with this brief introduction, which is followed by the research method and conceptual framework. The third section outlines an overview of the UK–US relationship, while the fourth section presents an analysis of the two newspapers based on the research questions and segues into a discussion and a conclusion in the last section.

## 2. Conceptual and Methodological Framework

A qualitative research approach, specifically a news framing analysis, drives this study. Framing analysis as a dynamic research process investigates conceptual tools utilised by the media to select, interpret, evaluate and convey information. It entails selecting and excluding certain issues in ways that can influence knowledge of events and issues. Entman asserts that framing “plays a major role in the exertion of political power and the frame in a news text is really the imprint of power—it registers the identity of actors or interests that competed to dominate the text” (Entman 1993, p. 52). The reference to power is germane to this study, given the power dynamics of the UK–US relationship.

News frames enable journalists to evaluate the importance of conflicting information because frames can enlarge or miniaturise events and issues. From this perspective, the frames journalists use influence and shape social and political reality and define public understanding due to their focus on specific aspects and themes of a story for a deepening of cultural resonance. This is particularly notable when dealing with complex issues such as international affairs and foreign policy. In the context of this study, framing is defined as media reconstruction and systematic representation of reality in ways that could influence how audiences perceive the world.

The *New York Times* and *The Guardian* were selected for this study in recognition of their elite status as high-profile news sources in the world. In January 2023, both were among the top ten biggest news sites by a number of visits, with the NYT being the fastest-growing news website in the world (Majid 2023). The NYT as an influential media organisation in the United States, is capable of shaping and impacting individual attitudes and public policy

(Barnett and Lee 2020, p. 336). Published in New York City since 1851, its print version is the largest local metropolitan newspaper in the US and the third-largest newspaper overall (Akinro 2020).

*The Guardian* is “one of the grand old players of the British journalism establishment” (Chadwick and Collister 2014, p. 2421), and, according to Ofcom, the UK communication watchdog is the most widely read digital newspaper. Only the *Daily Mail*’s online products attract more visitors among UK print media organisations (Ofcom 2022). In 2014, *The Guardian* became the first British media organisation to win a Pulitzer Prize, the most prestigious award in journalism (Cole 2015). The paper celebrated its bicentenary in May 2021. As high-profile newspapers, the *NYT* and *The Guardian* are instruments of power capable of exerting influence through the ways in which they frame in and frame out ideas and information for their audiences. Their coverage of issues reinforces dominant viewpoints and filters out alternative discourses.

Given its exploratory nature, this study is based on a dataset that was extracted from the Pro-Quest Newspaper database and the websites of the newspapers using the search terms “UK-US special relationship”, “UK-US relationship + Brexit,” The first search term produced 791 hits while the second had 95 articles in the *NYT*. In *The Guardian* both search terms produced 384 and 330 pages of results. Using ‘sort by relevance’ as a filter, 152 articles were selected from the *NYT* and ten pages out of thirty-three were selected from *The Guardian* for analysis. The time frame for the *NYT* was from May 1997 to January 2023. This was to acknowledge the intersection of the tenures of President Bill Clinton and Prime Minister Tony Blair because as the *NYT* noted, “perhaps it was predestined that America’s “New Democrat” President and Britain’s “New Labor” Prime Minister would give fresh life to the idea of a “special relationship” (Mitchell 1997). The two leaders represented new-generation politics. Blair’s approach to the UK–US relationship, for example, typified ‘specialness’, especially after the paradigm-shifting event of 9/11. The period was also chosen to reflect a time of contemporary collaborations between the two countries and close personal relationships among some of their political leaders. Selected articles included news stories, editorials, features and commentaries. Although these are different genres of media content, they were considered appropriate for analysis because they embody frames used to construct narratives. Editorials, for example, as the ‘voice’ of news media, reveal ideological and political allegiance. All headlines and sentences that had the phrase ‘special relationship’ as well as ‘Brexit’ in the context of the UK–US relationship were coded and analysed to establish the perspective from which the special relationship metaphor was used. All references to the relationship were also coded to identify alternative phrases that the newspapers employ in their coverage and to determine if the phrases upheld the notion of ‘specialness.’

In view of the above, the guiding questions for this study were:

RQ1: Do the *NYT* and *The Guardian* employ the special relationship metaphor in their coverage of the UK–US relationship?

RQ2: How do the *NYT* and *The Guardian* frame the Anglo-American relationship?

RQ3: Does the coverage of the UK–US relationship affirm a perception of a special bond between the two countries?

RQ4: How do the newspapers frame the UK–US relationship against the backdrop of Brexit?

### 3. Special Relationship: An Overview

Seldom had a vote in one country generated so much interest in other parts of the world, as did the UK’s 2016 referendum on EU membership. The build-up to the referendum attracted media coverage in leading news organisations, including the *NYT* and *The Guardian* newspapers. Influential political leaders broke protocol to reveal their opinion on the matter, with some of them urging the UK to remain in the Union. President Barack Obama of the United States was unequivocal about his support for the UK’s continuous membership of the EU. He justified his interest by evoking a special relationship between the UK and the US. “So, I will say, with the candor of a friend, that the outcome of your

decision is a matter of deep interest to the United States,” President Obama wrote in an opinion piece published as he arrived in London for a visit in April 2016. He noted that in the face of challenges to peace and security, the two countries could only tackle them by relying “on one another, on our special relationship, and on the partnerships that lead to progress.” Belonging to the EU, he stressed, “makes Britain even greater.” (Obama 2016).

The notion of a special relationship between the UK and the US underpins British foreign policy, and political elites of both countries routinely give rhetorical prominence to this special tie and underscore its uniqueness in their interaction with one another. For instance, in 2022, a few minutes after Liz Truss made her first statement as a prime minister outside No 10 Downing Street, US President Joe Biden posted a congratulatory message on Twitter: “I look forward to deepening the special relationship between our countries and working in close cooperation on global challenges, including continued support for Ukraine as it defends itself against Russian aggression” (Landler and Castle 2022). In 2021, Anthony Blinken, the US Secretary of State, described the relationship as ‘enduring,’ ‘effective,’ ‘dynamic’ and “close to the hearts of the American people” (Wylle 2021). He attributed its resilience and longevity to “ties of friendship, family, history, shared values, and shared sacrifice.” (Wylle 2021). Donald Trump also highlighted the ‘specialness’ of the relationship in 2017 soon after his inauguration as the 45th president of the United States. He told Theresa May, the UK prime minister at the time, that “the special relationship between our two countries has been one of the great forces in history for justice and for peace. We have one of the great bonds” (Wheatcroft 2017). In response to the declaration, May extended an invitation for a state visit to President Trump as an “indication of the strength and importance of the special relationship that exists between our two countries, a relationship based on the bonds of history, of family, kinship and common interests” (Wheatcroft 2017). During his first visit to the UK as president, Trump upgraded the relationship to the “highest level of special” (Smith 2018).

The invocation of a special bond between the UK and the US suggests a strong sense of affection and esteem between the two countries. However, this perception of ‘specialness’ has historically been more relevant to the UK and less precious to the US. Helmut Schmidt, the late German chancellor, for example, reportedly said the relationship was so special that only one side knew about it (Evans 2010). Some commentators contend that the relationship is spoken of “largely in British accents” (Dumbrell 2009, p. 65) and the ‘special relation’ phrase traditionally comes “easily to the lips of Britons who seek to establish a respectable modicum of partnership in the UK’s dealing with the world’s most powerful nation” (Dumbrell 2004, p. 437). In *The Churchill Complex: The Rise and Fall of the Special Relationship*, Buruma (2020) observes that “the Anglo-American relationship has been more special in London than in Washington.” Notwithstanding this view of an asymmetrical relationship, the UK–US bond is of perennial interest to scholars and political elites and features frequently in international political discourses.

Winston Churchill, a former UK prime minister and wartime leader, is credited with coining the phrase, which is often traced to a speech he made in the House of Commons in 1945 (Rasmussen and McCormick 1993). Churchillian rhetoric about the relationship was based on a “joint inheritance, a shared history, shared belief in the great principles of freedom and the rights of man” (Brown 2008).

The roots of the UK–US special relationship can be traced to the Second World War and the Cold War. Dumbrell notes that during “World War II and in the early phase of the Cold War, the two countries developed a uniquely intimate combination of defence and intelligence linkages” as a response to the perceived mutual threat generated by the Second World War (Dumbrell 2004, p. 437). Significantly, the relationship has provided scaffolding for British foreign and defence policies for many decades and serves as a condensational symbol in the discourse about the transatlantic relationship. It encapsulates a range of complex interactions between the two countries, which Russett (1963) suggests cover trade, migration, investment, communication and military linkages. To Wallace and Phillips, the relationship embeds “specific security arrangements which have persisted, largely



unquestioned, through the ups and downs of political relations at the top: close links between the two countries' armed forces; access to defence technology and procurement; intelligence ties . . . ." (Wallace and Phillips 2009, p. 263). In simple terms, the relationship can be described as balancing on a tripod. The first leg is a unique shared identity, the second is trade and commerce and the third is common geostrategic orientation, specifically the shared assumption that the two countries have a responsibility for global order (Sperling 2010). Within the geostrategic orientation component is embedded intelligence and military and nuclear power arrangements, with the intelligence component considered the most special. Sperling argues that the unique nature of UK–US relations:

Provides an emotional resonance for the American and British foreign policy elites and electorates that sustains close relations between both states, even when interests diverge. Moreover, when conflicts do erupt, the common bonds forged by history and a shared culture erect a barrier to a permanent rupture or recurring distrust of the other's motives. (Sperling 2010, p. 16)

To explain the nature of the relationship, scholars have proposed a range of frameworks of interpretations. Rasmussen and McCormick suggest a three-level analytical framework, which covers "personal ties between leaders, elite cooperation, and mass sentiment" (Rasmussen and McCormick 1993, p. 516). To them, the first level is problematic, partly because of the brevity of political tenures. They argue that if the special nature of the relationship was down to the personality compatibilities of leaders, it would be too ephemeral to be 'special' because top leaders remain in power only for a short time. Tony Blair, for example, worked with two American presidents when he was prime minister of the UK and president Barack Obama with two UK prime ministers. While Rasmussen and McCormick acknowledge that anchoring the relationship on elite cooperation makes it more enduring, they note that given the turnover of elites, that framework is also capricious. The most functional approach to understanding UK–US relations is to view it from a mass sentiments level. From this standpoint, they assert, "mass sentiments must be the heart of any extraordinary stable and enduring linkage between countries" (Rasmussen and McCormick 1993, pp. 517–18).

Dobson and Marsh categorise the Anglo-American relationship into two schools of interpretation: the school of sentiment and the school of interest (Dobson and Marsh 2013). This framework was pioneered by Danchev (1996), who categorised the relationship into three schools, namely, the evangelical, the functional and the terminal. The first is concerned with cultural values and identity, the second adopts a utility of instrumentality approach, and the third applies 'endism' to the special relationship. 'Endism' suggests the possibility of a termination of the relationship in the context of 'specialness.' The school of sentiment aligns with what Svendsen refers to as "supportive evangelicalism"—a perspective that favours sentimental values and personal ties, while the school of interest reflects the "functionalism" nature of the relationship (Svendsen 2011, p. 343). Scholars from the school of sentiment downplay the significance of national interest while emphasising a "common language, common history, common culture and common values" (Xu 2016, p. 1208).

Political elites in the UK, unlike scholars, tend to conceptualise the relationship as a discursive label that highlights sentiment, emotional and personal ties while scholars take a more pragmatic approach that emphasises national interest. These two positions can be categorised under the schools of sentiment and interest. Political elites attribute the longevity of the UK–US relations to deeply embedded shared values, a view not shared by scholars. Bartlett (1992), for example, argues that the durability of the relationship is linked to common fears and interests. Dumbrell attributes the longevity of the relationship to "habits of cooperation, bureaucratic contact and (especially) defence and intelligence personnel interviewing" (Dumbrell 2006, pp. 131–32). Svendsen offers three key reasons for the durability of the relationship, arguing that it is essential for the UK:

to maintain and extend Britain's influence in the international arena ('Pax Britannica'); second, to allow Britain to 'punch above its weight' (militarily, diplomati-

cally and commercially); and third, for Britain to continue its privileged access to, and its at least potential influence on, the US. Another key long-term UK foreign policy intention is to play a wider pivotal role in international affairs". (Svendsen 2011, p. 343)

For the UK, the relationship conveys influence and privilege and enables the country to play significant global roles in partnership with the United States. Buruma, for example, notes that "clinging to the Special Relationship was one way for the British to maintain an illusion that the glow of its finest hours under Roosevelt and Churchill had not been totally extinguished" (Buruma 2020).

From the foregoing, scholars and political elite acknowledge the 'specialness' of the relationship, a view that has been explored and interrogated to establish its authenticity, durability and uniqueness. Vucetic, for example, examined the relationship against the backdrop of national identity and concluded that the special relationship was rooted not only in elite beliefs but also in "a wider societal acceptance of the global hegemony of 'American' democratic neoliberalism" (Vucetic 2016, p. 272). Bartlett plotted the relationship from the end of the Second World War to the first Gulf War and detailed how it has been tested and how the partners have worked closely to sustain it (Bartlett 1992). Most of the debate, however, has been from political, foreign policy, international relations and diplomacy perspectives. This study takes a detour by examining it through journalistic lenses broadly and specifically by focusing on the *New York Times*, and *The Guardian* (UK), high-profile newspapers. This approach is driven by the understanding that the news media are involved in providing 'frames' that enable readers to make sense of the world or as McQuail phrased it, the "media work most directly on consciousness by providing the constructed images of the world and of social life and the definitions of social reality" (McQuail 1977, p. 76). From this standpoint, this study seeks to examine the notion of a special tie between the UK and the US, particularly against the backdrop of Brexit. The discussion that follows is driven by four research questions.

#### 4. UK–US Relationship: A Journalistic Perspective

RQ1: Do the *NYT* and *The Guardian* employ the "special relationship" metaphor?

This question was concerned with the ways in which the two newspapers use the 'special relationship' metaphor in their coverage of the UK–US relationship. The analysis shows that both newspapers employ the metaphor extensively in all relevant articles. However, in the *NYT*, it is used primarily from the British perspective, thus confirming the suggestion that the relationship is special to the UK and not necessarily so to the US. Phrases such as "The 'special relationship' those British leaders have long believed exists between their country and the United States," "Britain has long been anxious about its 'special relationship' with the United States" (Bennhold 2016, p. A9), convey the message that the UK places more value on the relationship than the US. In many instances, the paper makes it clear that when American leaders use the phrase, it is essential to flatter the UK: "President Obama referred to the 'special relationship' enjoyed by Britain and the United States—always a way to warm British hearts" (Bennhold 2016). The paper frames the UK as a needy ally ready to "share defense burdens to which other allies have been less committed" (Cowell and Burns 2008, p. A10) and willing to accept a subordinate position by serving American interests.

Unlike the *NYT*, *The Guardian* has no discernible perspective in terms of identifying with one country or the other. Rather, it adopts a mordant tone in its use of the phrase as in "Cameron cannot afford to wreck the so-called special relationship" (Wintour et al. 2010, p. 8). The paper appears to be dismissive of the sentiments associated with the phrase as evident in "Obama's gushing language was in the familiar tradition of recent US presidents who score an easy hit with visiting British prime ministers by lavishing them with praise and hailing the Anglo-American special relationship" (Watt 2012a, p. 10). In most of its coverage, *The Guardian* appeared indifferent to the notion of 'specialness', noting that it is dependent on equality, which is lacking in the relationship. Peter Jay, former British

ambassador to the US, writing in *The Guardian*, noted: “Most American presidents have felt no special regard for Britain or the British, but have supposed that custom and courtesy to British visitors requires them to utter the magic patter in the Oval Office or the Rose Garden” (Jay 1997, p. 4). Overall, while both newspapers use the phrase, their perspective differs.

RQ2: How do the *NYT* and *The Guardian* frame the UK–US relationship?

To the *NYT*, the UK–US relationship is an alliance. This suggests a more pragmatic and shrewd political approach rather than a sentimental viewpoint. This perspective locates the *NYT* in the school of interest rather than the school of sentiment. To the *NYT*, the relationship is all about national interest, not sentiment. Accordingly, the UK is the “most dependable”, “closest”, “reliable”, “robust”, and “vital”, “most trusted”, “trustworthy”, “principal”, “steadfast”, “strategic” and “durable” ally of the United States. The paper described a meeting between Prime Minister Blair and President Bush as “tending to the United States’ strongest alliance” (Tyler 2004, p. A7). President George W. Bush in a speech at Whitehall Palace in London said the two countries had an “alliance of conviction and might”, and Britain is “our closest friend.” When President Barack Obama addressed the UK Parliament in 2011, the paper reported that the UK and the US were “indispensable partners” (Landler 2011, p. A14). These lexical choices underscore a pragmatic and functional view of the relationship. Basically, the functionalist perspective is the dominant frame in the *NYT*’s coverage of the relationship.

According to *The Guardian*, the special relationship is an illusion of relevance and greatness for UK politicians seeking leverage in their interaction with their American counterparts in pursuit of political aspirations. The paper claimed as far back as 1997 that “no one calls [the relationship] ‘special anymore’ (Black 1997, p. 1), but acknowledges that the UK is “an ever-faithful ally” of the US and the two countries are “the most intimate allies.” To *The Guardian*, the UK and US have a “much touted, often overstated “special relationship” (Tisdall 2009, p. 10) and what is “still seen as a ‘special relationship’ has a hoary and sentimental grip of old intimacies” (White 2008, p. 14). Clinging to the relationship, the paper notes enable the UK to punch beyond its weight and reach.

RQ3: Do the newspapers’ coverage affirm the notion of a special relationship?

Prior to Brexit, the special relationship was framed as a contested notion in the two newspapers. To the *NYT*, the phrase was only used as a ploy by American political elites to promote national interest and consequently was devoid of evangelical or sentimental underpinnings associated with the British perspective. The coverage did not accord a ‘special’ undertone, rather, it affirmed a strong bond between the two countries. The relationship (the paper noted) was not only close but old and tested as well. As will be detailed in response to research question four, the paper’s tone in the coverage of Brexit hinted at a shift in the framing of the relationship.

For *The Guardian*, the relationship is undergirded by the attitude of the elite. For example, “Prime ministers of all hues, from Harold Macmillan to Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair, have fostered the idea that the two largest English-speaking countries enjoy a historic bond which elevates their relationship to a special level” (Watt 2010, p. 11). The paper routinely highlights how “US presidents have gone to great lengths over the years to massage British sensitivities over the Anglo-American special relationship” (Watt 2012b, p. 20). Unlike the *NYT*, *The Guardian* appears to lack a distinct frame for the UK–US relationship. The coverage does not support the notion of a privileged relationship or provide an alternative understanding of the nature of the alliance. Rather, the paper presents an ambivalent view, which suggests the UK has no influence on the United States and therefore, cannot claim to be special. It asserts “there is no symmetry of clout in the ‘special relationship.’ One side is a superpower, the other is not” (*The Guardian* 2019). This assertion highlights UK’s subservient position. To *The Guardian*, the relationship is simply a partnership driven by shared interests, with the UK contributing global intelligence capability and military resources.

RQ4: How did the newspapers frame the UK–US relationship against the backdrop of Brexit?

There was a significant shift in the *NYT*'s tone of coverage in the build-up to the referendum. During the campaign, the paper projected itself as a concerned ally committed to protecting the UK from a calamitous decision and consistently highlighted that Brexit was not in the UK's national interest. The paper's coverage of the Brexit campaign exemplified its discretionary power to set an agenda on the meaning and implication of Brexit and framed narratives in ways that favoured the 'Remain' campaign. There was no question about its unequivocal support of the UK's membership in the EU. It regularly argued that "Leaving the E.U would hurt Britain's economy," as "Britons will be poorer if they leave the EU." Moreover, withdrawing from the union was "highly unlikely to yield the economic bounty supporters have promised and it would leave Britain more isolated and probably poorer." (6 March 2016). The paper's opposition to Brexit was conveyed in seven editorials in 2016, and each underscored the benefits of the UK remaining in the EU and the disadvantages of a divorce from it. Most of its opinion writers expressed incredulity over Brexit before and after the referendum. They asserted that Brexit "would be an act of folly," a threat to the special relationship and "could be the worst news yet for the trans-Atlantic community, particularly for Britain and the United States, and very bad news for the entire world" (Talbott 2016). President Obama's warning that "a Britain outside the EU bloc could not count on maintaining its current economic relationship with the United States" was interpreted as signalling that America has "no intention of forming some new, closer relationship with Brexit Britain" (Cowell 2016).

Although the paper was optimistic that "however frightening Brexit may appear on the morning after, the political, economic and security institutions of the West are solid and flexible, and with time they will adjust to the new reality," it stressed that "there should be no illusion: It will be a very different reality" (24 June 2016).

It could be argued, though, that the *NYT*'s strong support for UK's EU membership was not as altruistic as it was framed but was driven by national interest. Part of what made the UK–US relationship special was "Britain's ability to act for Washington with the Europeans, to bridge the gap" (Sanger 2016). Thus, the result of the referendum was of "major import to the United States" (Talbott 2016). The paper acknowledged that with Brexit, the US lost a direct line to continental Europe and as a result, had an urgent challenge to find a replacement for a "most reliable, sympathetic partner in the hallways of European capitals," adding that "it will not be easy" (25 June 2016).

Unlike the *NYT*, *The Guardian* maintained its ambivalent tone in the coverage of Brexit. It continued to argue that the idea of a special relationship was "a tired notion" because it lacked symmetry. Failure to grasp this reality, it noted, was "a weakness among Eurosceptics" (8 August 2019). Brexit, the paper asserted, meant the UK no longer had any leverage because "for decades, British foreign policy was designed on the principle of the bridge between the US and continental Europe . . . Brexit knocked down one supporting pillar of that bridge" (8 August 2019). Opting out of the EU, made the UK less relevant and less significant to the United States, thus confirming the view that the 'specialness' in the relationship was dependent on UK's usefulness to the US. While voting to leave the EU made the relationship more critical, *The Guardian* emphasised that "EU exit would damage the relationship" because the UK was no longer a gateway to Europe for the United States.

For *The Guardian*, the special relationship "is really the story of how successive British politicians and diplomats have tried, with mixed success, to guide, cajole and manipulate US leaders from a position of ever-increasing weakness. On the American side, it is a story of hard-headed exploitation of US advantage, rendered more palatable by spurious expressions of undying amity." (28 April 2019).

Although *The Guardian* presented a somewhat neutral position in the coverage of Brexit, compared to the *NYT*, its support for UK's EU membership was discernible. This was conveyed through the way it challenged claims that Brexit would secure fresh trade



deals with the US and described Boris Johnson's promise of a 'global Britain' as a myth (5 May 2021). It interpreted voting to leave the EU as a folly of surrendering influence.

Brexiteers, the paper noted:

Were seduced by some imaginary future where Britain would somehow meet on equal terms. The idea the US would put our interests ahead of its own was always fanciful, based on nothing more than a puff of nostalgia for a transatlantic economic relationship that only ever existed in wartime. The dewy-eyed view of the "special relationship" has always been in London, not Washington. (Kibasi 2021)

To *The Guardian*, Britain's global role is shrinking due to Brexit and its impact. The "special relationship that Churchill fought so hard to establish, the paper argues, could be on its last legs" (Tisdall 2019).

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

As one of the key actors in a discursive chain, the media facilitate legitimacy and resonance in public discourse through their interaction with claim makers and institutional gatekeepers (Zappettini 2019). In the coverage of Brexit, the media produced texts "aimed at forming public opinion and persuading voters in favour of a particular choice by legitimising a specific political goal or course of action as the 'right' choice (in this case leaving or remaining in the EU)" (Zappettini 2019, p. 407). This was applicable to the *NYT* and *The Guardian*. Although President Obama asserted that the outcome of the vote would not affect the special relationship, it was apparent that the UK lost its status as an Atlantic bridge when it withdrew from the EU. Wilson (2017, pp. 554–55), argues that "a United Kingdom outside the EU is less useful to the United States" and "over the medium to long-term Brexit will make the United Kingdom a less appealing country to the United States economically, diplomatically and even in terms of sentiment."

Public discourse about the UK–US relationship from a British perspective often echoes Churchillian nostalgia, which hinges on historical ties. The *NYT* and *The Guardian* adopt a more pragmatic approach. The dominant frame in the representation of the relationship confirms the rhetoric of a unique bond is muted on the American side and underscores inequality. The *NYT* applies alternative formulations in its framing and repeatedly uses the 'special' metaphor only from a British perspective. Overall, the newspaper frames the UK–US relationship as an alliance, which points to a commitment to share resources, support and fight side by side for each country's national interest. While *The Guardian* is not as explicit as the *NYT*, it also applies a measured tone in its coverage. The paper routinely infers the relationship is not special, thus rejecting a sentimental and emotional attachment between the two countries.

Conceptualising the relationship as an alliance locates it in the school of interest and functionalism, an indication that it is not driven by a sentimental value of shared heritage, despite a strong sense of collective identity. This perspective resonates with scholars who tend to conceptualise the relationship as anchoring to interests rather than sentiments. Xu and Rees, for example, note that alliances are functional and effective when "allies share a reciprocal relationship, with each of them providing some utility that is indispensable to advance their shared geostrategic interests" (Xu and Rees 2018, p. 496). The *NYT* elucidates this perspective and frames the UK as a strategic asset to the US in its areas of interest. This understanding undergirded its coverage of Brexit.

Although the *NYT* accentuates the importance of the alliance, it plays down the 'specialness' to underscore how almost without exception since World War II, British leaders have pursued what they call a "special relationship" with the United States as a cornerstone of their foreign policy. The use of phrases such as the supposed "special relationship" between Britain and the United States", "the so-called special relationship is perhaps not so special", "what the British still, rather hopefully, call the "special relationship," evokes a sense of vulnerability on the part of the UK and underlines the *NYT*'s detached position. The paper is routinely disparaging in its comments about the UK's media framing of the

relationship and notes that: “Britain’s press pays a lot of attention to every facet of how its prime ministers are treated by American presidents; any slight, real or imagined is examined . . . .” (Cooper 2010). It describes British media’s response to mundane actions by the American political elite as neurotic agonising over whether British-American ties are still special or merely essential.

As outlined earlier in this article, the UK–US relationship takes its bearing from the Second World War and the Cold War. From the analysis of the two newspapers, it could be argued that another type of war has been a driving force in recent years. The war against terror provided a mortar that bonded the two countries during the Blair–Bush era and affirmed the understanding that alliances pull resources together to tackle a shared threat. This united front was challenged by President Biden’s approach to the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan in 2021 without the involvement of the UK. Biden’s unilateral action suggested the UK was no longer seen as a significant partner in the Afghanistan mission despite having been the staunchest supporter of the American-led military action. *The Guardian* reported that ‘the US president, Joe Biden, rejected pleas from Britain for the humanitarian airlift to continue beyond 31 August, triggering claims from Conservative MPs that the “special relationship” is over and that US–UK relations were “about to enter their lowest point since Suez”’ (Sabbagh et al. 2021).

UK political elites in recent times appear to be less sentimental about the UK–US relationship. For instance, Boris Johnson, former UK prime minister, reportedly pushed back when Biden alluded to the relationship being special during their first phone conversation after Biden was elected president of the United States. Additionally, in her historically short tenure as prime minister, Truss showed no interest in developing a close relationship with President Biden and “little reverence for the special relationship between Britain and the US “It’s special but not exclusive,” she said last year, noting that “Britain had other important allies like Australia, India and European countries” (Landler 2022). As foreign secretary under Johnson, she averred that the UK need not “compete for the affection of the United States. Britons, she said, should not worry “like some teenage girl at a party if we’re not considered to be good enough” (Landler 2022). Rishi Sunak, her successor, is yet to disclose his position on the nature of the relationship. Under his leadership, “British foreign policy appears to be in flux and there has been no invocation of the special relationship, and no celebration of Britain and the US leading the west” (Kettle 2022). Although the White House reported that when Sunak spoke to President Biden a few hours after becoming prime minister, they “reaffirmed the ‘special relationship’ between the US and Britain,” it is not clear if the two leaders will seek to foster a close partnership.

Remarkably, the use of the ‘special’ metaphor has been discouraged by UK political elites. In March 2010, the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee recommended that the ‘special relationship’ metaphor should no longer be used to describe UK–US relations. Following an inquiry into Anglo-American relations and the implications of foreign policy, the committee reported:

We conclude that the UK has an extremely close and valuable relationship with the US in specific areas of co-operation, for instance in the fields of intelligence and security; that the historic, trading and cultural links between the two countries are profound; and that the two countries share common values in their commitment to freedom, democracy and the rule of law. However, the use of the phrase ‘the special relationship’ in its historical sense, to describe the totality of the ever-evolving UKUS relationship, is potentially misleading, and we recommend that its use should be avoided. (House of Commons Report 2010, para. 48)

The Committee acknowledged that the survival and success of the UK–US relations were dependent on the usefulness of Britain to the United States as an efficient ally. It also recognised that the Anglo-American partnership was not crucial to the United States.

This analysis of news media framing of the UK–US relationship, using articles published by the *New York Times* and *The Guardian* (UK), extends the discourse on the two countries’ partnership. The alliance/ally frames identified in the newspapers confirm

assertions that the relationship is more precious to the UK than to the US. They also explain the durability of the relationship. Decades of interactions between the two countries have resulted in a deeply interlaced relationship with economic, military, intelligence and security issues.

The survival of the Anglo-American relationship has been challenged several times over the decades, but on each occasion, it manifested what Marsh and Baylis (2006) call a “Lazarus-like quality.” From that standpoint, it is not presumptuous to postulate that Brexit will not actualise Danchev’s ‘endism’ prediction (Danchev 1996) because there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the alliance is important to both countries. However, contrary to the expectations of supporters of Brexit, a trade deal between the two countries is still elusive. It appears President Barack Obama was on point when he warned that Brexit would put Britain at risk of relegation as a global trading power. As international trade secretary, Truss expected a free-trade agreement with Washington to be “the crowning glory of Britain’s triumphant liberation from Brussels: an apotheosis of economic sovereignty and transatlantic solidarity” (Behr 2022). On the contrary, Larry Summers, former US trade secretary, says “Britain has no leverage. Britain is desperate” as a result of Brexit (Mason 2019). Brexit has skewed the balance of power in trade negotiation and exacerbated the UK’s vulnerability.

Although the UK appears to be at the “back of the queue” in the trade deals because of Brexit, there are documented instances of expressions of sentimental attachment, what Xu and Rees describe as “favourable feelings or affection . . . at both the societal and the elite level” (Xu and Rees 2018, p. 497). On that understanding, this paper concludes that despite the newspapers’ somewhat distant and condescending use of the special relationship metaphor, the alliance’s survival is guaranteed because its roots go deep and are capable of withstanding threats to its existence. Moreover, the relationship is mutually beneficial because it advances the geostrategic interests of both countries. The two newspapers acknowledged that in spite of their detached and pragmatic approach in their framing of the relationship. A scaffolding of shared heritage, historical experience, common language, cultural affinities, democratic system of government and market economies provides a dynamic and resilient support structure that Brexit cannot dismantle. The conflation of the mutual economic and political interests of the two countries is still pertinent, despite the political reconfiguration. As a US States Department spokesperson asserted: “The special relationship remains a special relationship. We’re confident that, no matter what the implications are of this vote, that the relationship between the United States and UK will remain as strong as ever.” (Roberts and Smith 2016).

Most studies of the special relationship have been from political, foreign policy, international relations and diplomacy angles. This study provides a different and insightful perspective and consequently expands knowledge by examining how the *NYT* and *The Guardian*, acting as mediators, frame the UK–US bond in ways that could influence policy and public opinion about a significant bilateral relationship. It provides a fresh framework for understanding and insights into the relationship in the context of Brexit. This notwithstanding, it must be acknowledged that the study has limitations, an obvious criticism being the use of two newspapers for the analysis, which could be taken as an attempt to conflate the *NYT* and *The Guardian*’s perspective and public discourse on the special relationship. The justification for this limitation is the understanding that the two newspapers offer elite opinions and a snapshot of contemporary perspectives.

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