

Concerns grow inside Downing Street as polls point to Biden victory

Win for the Democrats could leave Boris Johnson scrambling to rebuild ‘special relationship’

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British officials have not been able to meet a single senior member of Joe Biden’s foreign policy team in recent weeks, hampering Downing Street’s preparations for what might happen should the Democratic candidate win next week’s election.

Foreign Office staff had hoped to meet Mr Biden’s closest foreign policy advisers in the run-up to the presidential election on November 3, but senior officials in London and Washington said the UK had been rebuffed as part of a strategy by his team to avoid meeting foreign governments during the campaign.

The lack of contact has made it harder for Boris Johnson’s government to plan for what might happen should Mr Biden win, as polls predict. Mr Johnson has formed a strong bond with Donald Trump, the US president, and some in London are concerned they have not been able to foster such close links with his opponent, potentially throwing the future of a US-UK trade agreement into doubt.

“Biden’s team is being very cautious with their contacts, especially after all the Russian stuff at the last election,” one British official said. Mr Trump has been mired in scandal since the beginning of his presidency because of allegations about connections between his 2016 campaign and Russian officials.

A Biden official said that neither of the former vice-president’s top foreign policy officials — Tony Blinken and Jake Sullivan — had made “any substantive contact with British officials”.

Mr Johnson’s relationship with Mr Trump, who backed Brexit and calls his British counterpart “Britain Trump”, is much closer. Downing Street was hoping the good will between the two leaders would help smooth the path of a trade deal, London’s top priority when it comes to its relations with Washington.

But with Mr Biden nine points ahead in the polls just over a week before the election, Mr Johnson’s advisers are concerned that momentum towards a trade agreement could soon be lost.

The main problem, say those involved in the trade negotiations, is time.

Both parties are working on a tight deadline, given that a US law governing the ratification of trade agreements expires in July. That law allows trade deals to be fast tracked through Congress, but to be covered by it, a US-UK agreement must be in place by April — just four months after a new president enters office.

As a result, British officials have been trying to draw up trade proposals that are more likely to win Mr Biden's approval, such as including tougher protections for the environment and workers' rights.

"We need to be able to turn around to a new administration, and say, 'Look we're almost done — would you like to Bidenise this agreement?'," said one UK official. "You can have a bit more on labour, a bit more on the environment, and you can claim that as an early win."

British diplomats accept, however, that if Mr Biden does come to power, securing a trade deal with the UK is unlikely to be high on his agenda. Dan Ikenson, director of trade policy studies at the Cato Institute, said: "The UK is desperate for a deal that the likely incoming US government doesn't much care about."

Instead, many believe Mr Biden is likely to follow the lead of Mr Obama in making Berlin his primary relationship in Europe. "Biden is an old fashioned Atlanticist," said John Kerr, a former British ambassador to Washington. "But [Angela] Merkel and Merkel's successor will be the main interest in America." The US does have a special relationship with a country but it is Ireland, not the UK.

Even if a deal can be agreed, it could still be scuppered if the UK leaves the EU without a deal, or with a deal that US politicians believe undermines the Good Friday Agreement, the peace deal that settled three decades of sectarian violence in Ireland.

Mr Biden, who is proud of his Irish roots, has warned publicly he would make a trade deal contingent on respecting the Northern Irish peace plan. And even under a second Trump administration, Democratic members of Congress say they will veto any trade agreement they believe threatens the peace deal.

Sam Lowe, senior research fellow at the Centre for European Reform, said: "The US does have a special relationship with a country but it is Ireland, not the UK." In the countdown to the 2020 election, stay on top of the big campaign issues with our newsletter on US power and politics with columnists Rana Foroohar and Edward Luce.

Despite this, Mr Johnson is closer to Mr Biden on many policy issues than he is to Mr Trump — including the environment, Iran and multilateralism in general. The UK is chairing both the G7 and the UN climate talks in 2021, and Number 10 is hoping to use those positions to focus on those issues.

Simon Fraser, former head of the Foreign Office, said: "On defence spending and Nato they will try to re-engage America more enthusiastically in the Nato alliance. They will look for ways to get America re-engaged in multilateralism, for example in support for international institutions such as the World Health Organization and the World Trade Organization."

On diplomacy with China, however, while the combative nature of relations between Washington and Beijing would be likely to ease under a Biden presidency, he is unlikely to take a radically different policy position to his predecessor.

"The US has become anti-China," Mr Kerr argued. "The fear about losing US hegemony will be the same under Trump or Biden."