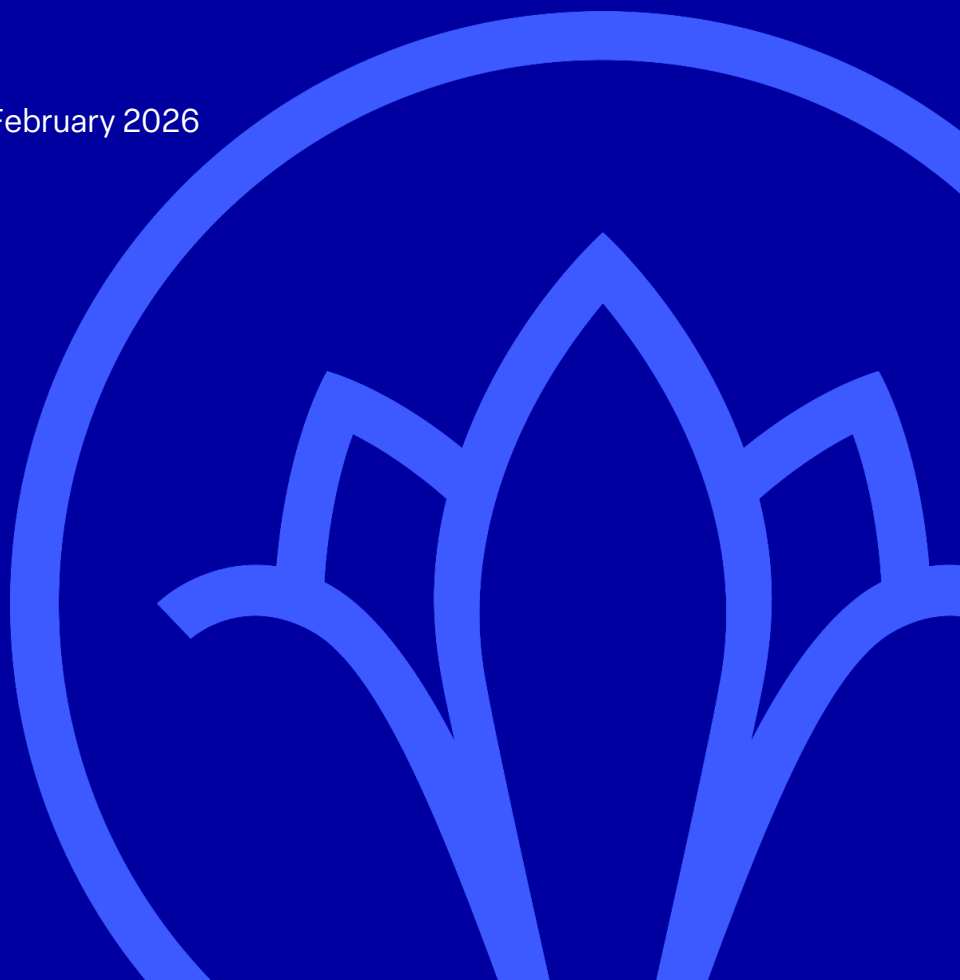




Report:
**America 250: celebrating and
advancing the UK-US partnership
through soft power, regional
collaboration, and technological
resilience**

Monday 23 – Wednesday 25 February 2026

In association with
Marshall Aid Commemoration
Commission and the Foreign,
Commonwealth & Development
Office



In association with



Marshall
Scholarships



Foreign, Commonwealth
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Executive Summary

Across three days of discussion, the dialogue examined the evolving character of the UK-US partnership in the year celebrating ‘America 250’, the 250th anniversary of the independence of the United States. Discussions framed the relationship as both historically resilient and currently fragile, with long-standing cooperation confronted by new uncertainties in domestic politics, contested value frameworks, and shifting global power dynamics. These factors suggest a need for bilateral strategies that are confident, adaptive and grounded in a realistic reading of political, social and technological change.

Soft power remains a vital pillar of bilateral cooperation, but one that requires intentional stewardship. While UK cultural and educational assets retain global resonance, meaningful influence in the United States now depends on reaching younger, more diverse and digitally-native audiences. Expanded educational exchanges (‘intellectual capital’ investment), investment in cultural and sports diplomacy, and greater engagement with and between under-represented communities, including those with disabilities, could help to achieve this. Concerns were raised that soft power institutions in both countries face structural pressures and funding challenges that may limit long-term impact unless new cross-sector models are built.

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Technology cooperation – spanning AI, quantum, semiconductors, space and climate-tech – was repeatedly identified as a central strategic opportunity. Both countries possess complementary strengths: the UK offers agility, world-class universities and innovation ecosystems, while the US contributes scale, capital and global reach. Yet issues such as regulatory divergence, energy supply and data centre capacity pressure, and geopolitical competition around supply chains, could be managed proactively to preserve the strategic edge of the partnership.

A core theme throughout the dialogue was the rising importance of subnational engagement and diplomacy. The future of the UK-US relationship will increasingly depend on subnational partnerships, including state-level, regional and city-level partnerships. These ties – rooted in universities, civil society, business clusters and diaspora networks – are emerging as stabilising assets capable of sustaining cooperation even during periods of divergence.

Looking forward, there were calls for sustained, multi-layered strategic engagement across the key themes that reinforced people-to-people ('human capital') pipelines, enabled subnational leadership, renewed investment in soft power, and positioned the UK and US as technology partners, with strengthened resilience in an increasingly multi-aligned geopolitical environment.

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1. Introduction: strategic context and emerging dynamics

The ‘America 250’ anniversary offers a moment to reflect on the UK-US relationship’s achievements and to consider how it should evolve amid a time of complex global change. The transatlantic partnership – often described as unique in its depth – has historically combined security cooperation, cultural exchange, economic interdependence, and shared democratic traditions.

Increasing domestic political polarisation is generating internal pressures that risk undermining foreign policy coherence and complicating traditional assumptions about shared Anglo-American values. Several voices urged a more nuanced understanding of the United States as a decentralised political system in which many levers of cooperation lie outside Washington.

At the global level, the re-emergence of strategic competition, particularly with China, has intensified the need for coordinated approaches to technology, standards, infrastructure, and security. Participants warned of the need to avoid complacency: while the relationship remains close, it is neither automatic nor static. Instead, it requires active investment, clear priorities, and a realistic appraisal of what each side brings to the partnership in an increasingly fragmented international environment.

2. The state of the relationship: resilience, fragmentation and recalibration

There was broad consensus that the relationship is at a crossroads. On one hand, the UK and US maintain high levels of cooperation in defence, intelligence, research, and trade and investment; on the other, some perceived a sense of drift and strategic uncertainty, compounded by what they saw as divergent regulatory approaches and friction over issues such as future energy security and aspects and interpretations of international law.

While the concept of ‘shared values’ has often been central to the partnership’s framing, its contemporary meaning is increasingly contested. For some, these values are anchored in democracy, freedom of expression and the rule of law; for others, political shifts in both countries highlighted points of divergence in areas such as equality, inclusion, multilateralism and climate policy. Caution was urged that the values rhetoric could be grounded in concrete actions and mutual respect rather than nostalgia.

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Symbolism continues to play a visible role in shaping perceptions of the bilateral relationship. The presence or absence of iconic cultural markers – e.g. UK Royal Family visits, references to the relationship between Churchill and Roosevelt in World War II, or the placement of the Churchill bust in the Oval Office – can serve as shorthand for and a barometer of deeper political relationship sentiment. However, there was a clear emphasis on adopting a confident and pragmatic posture grounded in shared interests rather than any historical or emotional attachments.

A notable thread was recognition that moments of profound political disruption require a policy of ‘strategic patience’. A dual strategy was proposed: maintaining strong federal relationships while expanding subnational, sectoral and community-based channels of engagement that are less vulnerable to political volatility.

3. Soft power: deep assets, new audiences and strategic renewal

Soft power emerged as a significant theme throughout the dialogue. It was repeatedly stressed that soft power – defined broadly as attraction, legitimacy and normative influence – remains a critical means of fostering trust between societies. However, participants warned against the risk of underutilising soft power assets and falling behind more assertive soft-power actors.

3.1. The evolving nature of soft power

As soft power now operates within a crowded global marketplace in which for example China, South Korea and Middle Eastern actors invest heavily in cultural outreach, digital media and education to shape global perceptions, particularly amongst global youth. Against this backdrop, there was clear emphasis on the UK and US being strategic, confident, adaptive and agile in how they deploy their strengths. For example, the UK could consider ways to best engage youth and minority audiences in the US who do not possess a natural affinity with the UK.

3.2. Broadening participation and inclusion

Discussions highlighted the need to reach audiences beyond traditional elites. For example, UK programmes such as the Marshall Scholarship, while impactful, might benefit from complementary pathways for vocational, community-based and regionally diverse participation. The Duke of Edinburgh’s Award Scheme was proposed as an example of a successful inclusive youth programme with potential for scalable expansion in the US, drawing on its foundations in the UK and increasing international reach. There was also an opportunity for the UK and the US to reassert their leadership

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in disability rights in the face of competition (and increasing financial support) from China and the Middle East.

3.3. Cultural and digital ecosystems

While UK soft power strengths lie in classical cultural exports such as film, theatre, heritage and academia, there were calls for the UK to also embrace contemporary cultural sector such as gaming, digital creation, diasporic communities and sports fandoms. In the US context, discussions stressed that the future of soft power lies in engaging the everyday cultural experiences shaping how younger Americans understand the world.

3.4. Funding, sustainability and institutional pressures

Soft power institutions face severe fiscal pressure. Universities, cultural bodies and public diplomacy organisations are managing rising costs, uncertainty around international student flows and fiscal uncertainty. Participants warned that without renewed investment in its soft power institutions and innovative financing models, the UK risked losing long-term influence in the US.

4. Technology and innovation: a strategic anchor for the next 30 years

Technology was widely viewed as one of the most promising, yet complex, avenues for future UK-US cooperation. While both countries are recognised as global leaders in Artificial Intelligence (AI) research, quantum computing, life sciences, and advanced engineering, including microchip innovation, discussion highlighted that their ability to harness these complementary strengths depends on managing regulatory, political and infrastructural constraints.

4.1. AI, standards and governance

The potential for closer collaboration between the UK AI Safety Institute and US entities was discussed, noting that subnational regulators may sometimes move before federal institutions. There was consensus that AI safety, governance and ethical assurance frameworks were critical areas for pluralistic cooperation.

4.2. Energy, data centres and environmental constraints

Concerns were raised about the environmental footprint of AI-driven data centre growth, especially related to increased energy demand and water usage. There was a clear call for a more coordinated transatlantic approach to data centre regulation, siting and grid modernisation, aimed at reconciling technological ambition with environmental stewardship.

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4.3. Space collaboration

Space was another area identified as an underdeveloped but high-potential frontier. Opportunities included space-traffic management, dual-use technology governance, small-satellite production, STEM training and joint innovation corridors. A comprehensive bilateral UK-US 'Space Dialogue' was proposed as a means to institutionalise progress.

4.4. Supply chains and geopolitical competition

Semiconductor dependencies, critical minerals, and the risk of over-reliance on non-allied suppliers were highlighted as pressing concerns. While neither the UK nor the US can achieve full technological autonomy, managed interdependence and plurilateral standard-setting can secure long-term resilience.

5. Subnational diplomacy: the expanding frontier of bilateral engagement

A key theme of the dialogue was the growing strategic importance of subnational diplomacy, encompassing states, cities, regions, and a wider ecosystem of actors, including universities, businesses and communities. Much of the most productive UK-US collaboration was seen to be taking place increasingly outside federal channels.

5.1. Why subnational matters

Subnational diplomacy was described as a stabilising force in times of national political volatility. When federal-level relationships could weaken or stall, state-to-state, city-to-city and university-to-university ties often continue uninterrupted. This strengthens economic resilience, cultural ties and long-term trust. Subnational engagement was also seen as a useful approach for the UK when dealing with a country as large and diverse as the US.

5.2. Emerging models

Potential examples included 'innovation corridors' between UK regions and US states, the modernisation of existing sister-city partnerships, and the creation of cross-Atlantic incubators and apprenticeships linked to specific sectors such as renewables, health-tech, advanced manufacturing and the creative industries. These models were seen as highly scalable, if adequately supported.

5.3. Barriers to overcome

Participants identified several obstacles:

- limited capacity within UK and US subnational institutions

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- difficulties navigating visa and mobility systems
- duplication of effort
- uneven awareness of regional assets on both sides of the Atlantic

These barriers underscored the need for mapping tools, coordinated strategies and mechanisms to reduce administrative and bureaucratic friction.

6. Strategic outlook: navigating a multi-aligned world (2026-2036)

Across discussions, the emerging global environment was described as “multi-aligned” – characterised by overlapping coalitions, flexible partnerships and selective alignment rather than rigid blocs. In this context, there was a clear emphasis on the need for the UK and US to remain nimble, pragmatic and proactive in shaping standards, forming alliances and strengthening resilience.

Participants suggested that future UK influence in the US will hinge on:

- its ability to leverage soft power assets strategically
- its credibility as a technology innovator
- its commitment to inclusive, broad-based people-to-people links
- its leadership in plurilateral governance frameworks
- its capacity to engage the US at federal, state and community levels simultaneously

The overarching message was that relationships need to be actively built, maintained and diversified. These cannot rely solely on history nor sentiment.

7. Policy recommendations

The following ideas emerged for the UK and US governments to consider as they develop bilateral strategies in areas including soft power, regional collaboration and technology:

A. For the UK Government

- 1 **A Soft Power Strategy** that prioritises diverse audiences, including younger and digitally-native communities, with measurable impact indicators.
- 2 **Expanded mobility pathways**, including youth mobility visas, reciprocal apprenticeships and research exchange frameworks.
- 3 **A Technology Infrastructure Roadmap** addressing energy, data-centre capacity, regulatory alignment and environmental considerations.

B. For the US Government

- 1 **Maintain bipartisan support** for cultural and academic exchange programmes.
- 2 **Support state-level international engagement** particularly with the UK, providing mechanisms for measurable outcomes.
- 3 **Advance cooperative standards** on e.g. AI assurance, quantum safety, Privacy Enhancing Technologies (PETs) and space-traffic management.

C. For both the UK and US

- 1 **Create People-to-People partnerships** funding scholarships, civic exchanges and regional partnerships.
- 2 **A 'Subnational Transatlantic Council'** to coordinate across UK regions, devolved governments, US states and cities, universities and businesses.
- 3 **Development of a Transatlantic Standards 'Sandbox'** for areas including AI, data-centre sustainability and space.
- 4 **A UK-US Space Innovation Compact** covering STEM pipelines, space-governance norms and small-satellite clusters.
- 5 **Launch of a shared IP toolkit** to streamline SME and university collaboration.
- 6 **Leverage the 2026 World Cup and 2028 Olympics** to anchor key moments for cultural diplomacy and regional engagement.

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8. Conclusion

The dialogue concluded that the UK-US relationship is entering a period of profound transformation. While there was still much to celebrate, its future strength will depend on the ability of both countries to invest in inclusive, sustainable and forward-looking forms of engagement. Soft power, technology leadership, subnational partnerships and resilient people-to-people ties will shape the next chapter more than traditional diplomatic channels alone. Maintaining influence in this environment requires strategic confidence, creativity and sustained commitment.

The message throughout the dialogue was clear: the relationship must be constantly worked on, renewed and modernised – not simply remembered.

Philip Everest

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