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# Trump(ism) Threatens Liberal World Order, and US Constitutional-Democratic Norms

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## A second Trump presidency would throw some traditional foreign policies into disarray, and beckons a dictatorship at home

A growing divide in US foreign policy circles signals a significant shift in America's global role and challenges the liberal world order long championed by the US foreign policy establishment. This rift pits proponents of the traditional post-1945 US-led imperial-internationalist system of multilateral institutions and globalization against those favouring a rival imperial strategy based on "vital" interests. The latter represents a more transactional, weaponized bilateral approach, especially in international economic and trade relations, but also in regard to military interventionism for "humanitarian" or other purportedly "idealist" purposes. But make no mistake, US globalism is merely recalibrating, not fundamentally transforming, remaining a coercive superstate bent on primacy.

This global coercive strategy has its domestic counterpart: dictatorship. At home, Trump has declared he would be a dictator on the first day – abolish all regulation of fossil fuel corporations and deport millions of illegal immigrants. More recently, Trump promised Christian evangelicals that if they vote for him in November, they need *never vote again*.<sup>1</sup> Trump's fingerprints are all over the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025 which promises to invoke laws to bring troops onto US streets to repress democratic rights to protest, to give the president complete control over executive agencies by dismissing thousands of career civil servants in favour of his political appointees, curtail the rights of workers and trade unions, and diminish checks and balances that have been the mainstay of the US constitution since 1787.<sup>2</sup> That is, an even more coercive state wedded to naked corporate interests. On top of that, the US Supreme Court recently ruled that a former president is presumed to be exempt from legal actions taken in their official capacity.<sup>3</sup>

Trump's pick for vice president, JD Vance, is tech billionaire Peter Thiel's creation. And like his hi-tech benefactor – who is on record as stating, "I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible" – Vance, and the GOP more widely, no longer believe in constitutional norms let alone democratic rights.<sup>4</sup> And this reflects rising authoritarian politics – and political donations – to Trump but also pressure from such tech billionaires on the Kamala Harris campaign to fire anyone who dare try to regulate cryptocurrency.<sup>5</sup>

In the United States and in the world, therefore, Trump and Trumpism stand for militarism, authoritarianism, and the untrammelled power of the corporation protected by a coercive state.

1 "Trump Declines to Back Away From 'You Don't Have to Vote Again' Line," *The New York Times*, 30/7/2024, accessed on 11/8/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/azg32l>

2 Robert Kuttner, "Could a Trump Dictatorship Be Resisted?," *The American Prospect*, 9/7/2024, accessed on 11/8/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/r7yee>

3 Ali Harb, "How Supreme Court's immunity ruling 'transforms' US presidency," *Aljazeera*, 1/7/2024, accessed on 11/8/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/ma2ok>

4 Gil Duran, "Where J.D. Vance Gets His Weird, Terrifying Techno-Authoritarian Ideas," *Politics*, 22/7/2024, accessed on 11/8/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/bqkm8>

5 Tyler Walicek, "Why Are More Tech Leaders Pivoting to Trump? Follow the Crypto," *Truthout*, 3/8/2024, accessed on 11/8/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/g2mqb>

In this article we explore how a potential second Trump presidency might navigate complex foreign policy issues, potentially maintaining certain aspects of US global strategy while disrupting others. It also examines how Trump's foreign policy positions, along with those of his ideological allies worldwide, may shape a shifting global order trending towards multipolarity. The trend towards authoritarianism and fascism in the US is occurring simultaneously as popular outrage and opposition to 'forever wars' and economic precarity continues, to which US elites regardless of party have little to offer other than further repression. Fascism at home at a time of increased geopolitical tensions and a turbulent and changing global distribution of power indicates deep and enduring crises at the heart of both systems, domestic and international.

## 'Intervention' or 'isolation' are two sides of the same coin, but not identical in policy terms

The age-old debate between 'interventionism' and 'isolationism', a recurring theme at least since President McKinley's era of aggressive imperialism, has resurfaced with Donald Trump spearheading a vital-interests-driven 'neo-isolationist' movement. Trump's revival of the "America First" slogan, originally coined by President Wilson to affirm World War I neutrality, advocates for strategic restraint and prioritizing direct US elite interests over global interventionism in defence of "values".

Recall that President Trump pulled the US out of the global Paris climate change mitigation effort. He criticized and withdrew funding from organizations like WHO and UNESCO. In the Middle East he shifted the US Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, which Biden has not reversed. Notably, he became one of the few modern US presidents whose tenure did not initiate a new war, echoing George Kennan's critique of "impractical idealism" in US foreign policy. He also laid the groundwork for the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Trump was far more friendly to Russia than the liberal establishment could stomach.

As the 2024 election approaches, key foreign policy challenges include managing relations with China and Russia, NATO commitments, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its wider regional ramifications. While President Biden favours simultaneously pressuring both China and Russia, Trump and some Republicans advocate a more cautious approach to Russia and a more confrontational stance towards China.<sup>6</sup>

## The Russia Problem and Trump's Potential Return

Trump's possible return to the White House in 2025 could significantly challenge the bipartisan suspicion of Russia prevalent among America's foreign policy elite. His "America First" approach stands in stark contrast to the established, more confrontational stance towards Moscow shared by much of Washington's national security and strategic community.

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<sup>6</sup> Inderjeet Parmar & Thomas Furse, "The Trump administration, the far-right and world politics," *Globalizations*, Vol. 20, No. 5(2023), p: 799–813, at: <https://n9.cl/xkaljr>

While the Biden administration has taken a hard line against Russia's actions in Ukraine through diplomatic offensives, NATO mobilization, and severe economic and financial sanctions, Trump's approach aligns more closely with realist perspectives. Scholars like John Mearsheimer argue that containing Russia is less critical than focusing on China as the primary peer competitor to the United States.<sup>7</sup>

Trump's potential Russia policy finds unlikely allies across the political spectrum. Far-right figures like Tucker Carlson, and the House Freedom Caucus, and left-wing thinkers like Noam Chomsky have criticized NATO expansion as a trigger for Russian aggression. This convergence of far-left and far-right views on Russia policy resonates with US public opinion which in the past two decades has become exhausted by "forever wars".<sup>8</sup> It signals a new emphasis on "restraint" in US foreign policy backed by the Right (Kochs) and liberals (Soros et al).<sup>9</sup>

If re-elected, Trump is likely to pursue a more pragmatic, transactional approach to Russia, weighing costs and benefits to the US rather than adhering to traditional adversarial stances. This strategy may prioritize keeping Russia disengaged from China over confronting it as a regional hegemon. However, such an approach would face significant opposition both domestically and internationally, as it did during his first term.<sup>10</sup>

## Trump's Peace Envoys: Modi and Orban

The recent "peace missions" to Moscow by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, both allies of Trump, offer a glimpse into how international relations might shift under a potential second Trump presidency. Orban even went to the extent of stating "There's only one way you can solve it (Russia-Ukraine war).<sup>11</sup> You've got to bring President Trump back." Their diplomatic manoeuvres, occurring as Trump eyes a return to power, suggest a willingness to challenge current US foreign policy directives.

These unauthorised diplomatic overtures have been poorly received in Brussels and Washington. The European Parliament condemned Orban's trip as a violation of EU foreign policy, while US Ambassador to India Eric Garcetti reminded New Delhi of the limits of "strategic autonomy"<sup>12</sup> during times of conflict.

7 "John Mearsheimer: Is China the Real Winner of Ukraine War?", Endgame Podcast (*youtube*), 28/4/2023, accessed on 11/8/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/fvq68>

8 Alexander Hill, "We don't have to engage in hysterical crusades against Russia and China," *Responsible Statecraft*, 14/2/2023, accessed on 11/8/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/mqiod>

9 Inderjeet Parmar, "Washington's newest thinktank is fomenting a revolution in US foreign affairs – and a retreat from interventionism," *CITY University of London*, 3/3/2020, at: <https://n9.cl/wdb1d>

10 Natasha Bertrand, "How a Russian disinfo op got Trump impeached," *Politico*, 22/1/2020, accessed on 11/8/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/uv2bz>

11 "Trump claims 'very tough guy' Orbán wants him back in office," *Euronews*, 19/7/2024, accessed on 11/8/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/7tkva>

12 "Agree to disagree": India reacts to US envoy's 'no strategic autonomy' comment," *The Times of India*, 19/2024/7/, accessed on 11/2024/8/, at: <https://n9.cl/7qy21f>

As the 2024 US presidential election approaches, the actions of leaders like Modi and Orban take on new significance. Their “peace missions” to Moscow may be less about brokering peace and more about positioning themselves and their countries for a possible shift in the global power structure under a potential Trump presidency.

This evolving politics highlights the complex interplay between domestic US politics and global diplomacy. It also underscores the challenges a potential second Trump administration would face in reshaping America’s foreign policy, particularly regarding Russia and the broader international order.

## Trump the Disrupter: A Wild Card on Taiwan and China Policy?

While Trump’s potential approach to Ukraine seems clearer, his stance on Taiwan remains uncertain. Trump has accused Taiwan of snatching America’s crown<sup>13</sup> in the \$500 billion business of making computer chips and dominating the computer chip industry. He has already suggested that Taiwan should pay for US protection, casting doubt on Washington’s continued support for the island democracy.

During Biden’s presidency, tensions over Taiwan have intensified, particularly following House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s controversial visit in August 2022. The Washington strategic community believes China intends to seize Taiwan militarily by 2027, though America’s commitment to Taiwan’s defence remains strategically ambiguous.

Trump’s China policy is likely to maintain the bipartisan consensus on restricting Beijing’s global role. He is expected to continue imposing punitive tariffs on Chinese imports, potentially facing opposition only from affected businesses. Trump’s previous term saw increased Freedom of Navigation patrols in the South China Sea and a bolstering of Obama’s “Pivot to Asia” policy. A second Trump term might see more provocative naval activities in the region and a strengthened security arm of the QUAD alliance.

However, Trump’s China strategy, while potentially strong, may lack coherence. It’s unclear whether he would articulate a clear vision for winning the competition with China rather than merely managing it.

The role of Viktor Orban, Trump’s ally in Europe, complicates matters. Orban has deepened Hungary’s engagement with China, welcoming investments from firms like Huawei and Chinese electric vehicle-maker BYD.<sup>14</sup> More recently, it is reported that Hungary has received loan of €1 billion from three Chinese banks.<sup>15</sup> This irritates both the EU and US who view China as the primary threat to US supremacy.

<sup>13</sup> “Wayne Chang,” “Trump says Taiwan stole America’s chip industry. But that’s not true,” *CNN*, 24/7/2024, accessed on 11/8/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/9u23x>

<sup>14</sup> “China: Top electric automaker BYD to build plant in Hungary,” *DW*, 22/12/2023, accessed on 11/8/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/uq3q6>

<sup>15</sup> Csongor Körömi, “Hungary quietly takes €1B loan from Chinese banks,” *Politico*, 25/7/2024, accessed on 11/8/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/3svif>

## German Woes

Brussels has already set up a team<sup>16</sup> to respond to the sudden policy shifts that Trump may announce on free trade and Ukraine. A similar crisis group has been constituted in Berlin<sup>17</sup> to chart out the scenarios that are likely to play out in case of Trump's victory in November's US presidential election. Echoing Trump's old logic and carrying on his legacy, JD Vance, Trump's running mate, wrote in the *Financial Times*, in February that Europe needs to stand on its own and reduce its security dependence on America. He further said, "We owe it to our European partners to be honest:<sup>18</sup> Americans want allies in Europe, not client states, and our generosity in Ukraine is coming to an end."

Of course, a Trump second term will not be confronted by the iron lady, Angela Merkel, nor a functioning Nord-Stream pipeline. However, Germany worries about the vulnerabilities in its energy supplies that are now dependent on LNG imports from the US. Thus, Washington can use energy to demand greater defence spending and commitments from Berlin. Alternatively, any attempts by Germany to diversify its energy supplies may be resisted by the US. The lack of strategic autonomy in German foreign policy is a concern that America under Trump is not likely to appreciate.

Germany will not like the use of Victor Orban by Trump to disrupt European Union proceedings. EU has already tasted Orban's self styled initiatives to move from Moscow to Mar-a-Lago (Trump's residence) after assuming the rotating presidency of the EU Council on July 1. <sup>19</sup> In a telling move, the Hungarian premier was denied the opportunity to address the Parliament on taking over the rotating presidency of the EU Council, effectively muzzling his agenda under the provocative slogan "Make Europe Great Again."

## Trump's Reactionary International with Modi and Orban: Counterpart to Domestic Authoritarianism

It is increasingly clear that US elites have largely given up on constitutional norms and protections, and such domestic authoritarianism is directly linked with key aspects of an increasingly militarized American foreign policy exempt from international law. The two main parties perform the rituals of opposition and government but have a basic underlying unity in repressing genuine dissent and protest at home, and any international law or regime that challenges its core interests. Witness the repressive reactions of the Trump administration to popular anti-fascist protests after the murder by police of George Floyd.<sup>20</sup> And the repressive policing in cities and states led by Democratic mayors

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<sup>16</sup> "EU sets up team to prepare for Donald Trump's potential return to power," *Financial Times*, accessed on 11/8/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/7l9l5>

<sup>17</sup> "Isolated Germany fears a second Trump term," *Financial Times*, accessed on 11/8/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/dvgar>

<sup>18</sup> "JD Vance: Europe must stand on its own two feet on defence," *Financial Times*, accessed on 11/8/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/ff9e3>

<sup>19</sup> Jeremy Fleming-Jones, "Orbán's big Hungarian presidency speech blocked by European Parliament," Euro News, 9/7/2024, accessed on 11/8/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/12sfb>

<sup>20</sup> "George Floyd protests show how the US has retreated from its position as a world leader," *the Conversation*, 5/5/2020, accessed on 11/8/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/eexx4>



and governors of those very same rebellions against racist police violence. Both sets of political leaders set aside democratic rights in favour of direct repression. Recall the state violence unleashed against Cop City protestors, and against students on college campuses peacefully protesting Israel's genocidal war on the people of Gaza. And the impunity with which Israel has been supported in its genocidal war in Gaza, despite rulings of both the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice.

American imperial global plans to maintain and deepen its hegemony are challenged at home and abroad. In response, the US is barrelling towards greater political violence by the far right – protected and promoted by the state – and outright state repression. That repression also serves to stifle dissent and protest against the unleashing of American military violence in a world no longer willing to accept US diktat.

Trump and Trumpism took many decades to develop. Trump has recreated the GOP in his own image, serving as the “blunt instrument” for far more coherent ideological forces in America.<sup>21</sup> Hence, we are seeing more clearly revealed the truth of Martin Luther King jr's words, linking America's racism and white supremacism at home with its aggressions in Vietnam, and calling for the American people to link their struggles with the people of Vietnam: “I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today – my own government...”<sup>22</sup>

Just as elite US foreign policy is linked with its domestic political economy, so are the strategies of the opponents of class and racial oppression and imperial wars. The world crisis is at heart also an American crisis, and vice versa. For now there does not seem to be any end in sight.

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<sup>21</sup> Doug Bandow, “Trump Is Blunt and Right About NATO,” *CATO Institute*, 22/2/2024, accessed on 11/8/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/xrus09>; Publius Decius Mus, “The Flight 93 Election, The election of 2016 will test whether virtù remains in the core of the American nation,” *Claremont Review of Books* 5/9/2016, accessed on 11/8/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/xkaap>

<sup>22</sup> “Excerpts from Martin Luther King, Jr., “Beyond Vietnam”: Speech at Riverside Church Meeting, New York, N.Y., April 4, 1967. In Clayborne Carson et al., eds., *Eyes on the Prize: A Reader and Guide* (New York: Penguin, 1987), 201-04,” at: <https://n9.cl/4msiod>