

# Order and Ideology

## Why the Trump Administration is Re-defining American Power and Purpose

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# Preface

The velocity of changes brought about by the most recent recalibration of US foreign policy under the second Trump administration and the repercussions it has on the state of the world have been hard to keep up with. In Europe, while some people may have been mentally prepared for the attacks on the liberal international order that has shaped global relations since the end of World War II, few have found the right approach to counter these challenges as yet. Beyond the immediate threat to Greenland, many signals point to different forms of engagement and disengagement. For instance, the US withdrawal from several international organisations indicates its rejection of global governance within the UN framework, as Trump has stressed several times, or even the end of multilateralism as we know it. While no one can perfectly predict what further developments we have to expect, some likely trajectories have already emerged. Foreign policy and security politics expert Melanie Sisson, based in Washington D.C., debates some of the scenarios for the near future. In her analysis of the connection between domestic and foreign policy, Melanie Sisson dissects the rationales and the consequences of an anti-liberal agenda of current US politics that already affects the established international order and will no doubt keep Europe and the rest of the world on its toes for quite some time to come.

Die Geschwindigkeit der Veränderungen, die die jüngste Neukalibrierung der US-Außenpolitik unter der zweiten Trump-Administration mit sich bringt, und die Auswirkungen auf den Zustand der Welt sind schwer zu überblicken. In Europa mögen zwar einige Menschen mental auf die Angriffe auf die liberale internationale Ordnung, die die globalen Beziehungen seit dem Ende des Zweiten Weltkriegs geprägt hat, vorbereitet gewesen sein, aber nur wenige haben bisher den richtigen Ansatz gefunden, um diesen Herausforderungen zu begegnen. Abgesehen von der unmittelbaren Bedrohung Grönlands deuten viele Signale auf verschiedene Formen des Engagements und des Rückzugs hin. So deutet der Rückzug der USA aus mehreren internationalen Organisationen darauf hin, dass sie die Global Governance im Rahmen der Vereinten Nationen ablehnen, wie Trump mehrfach betont hat, oder sogar auf das Ende des Multilateralismus, wie wir ihn kennen, dringen. Auch wenn niemand genau vorhersagen kann, welche weiteren Entwicklungen wir zu erwarten haben, so haben sich doch bereits einige wahrscheinliche Entwicklungen abgezeichnet. Die in Washington D.C. ansässige Expertin für Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik, Melanie Sisson, erörtert einige der Szenarien für die nahe Zukunft. In ihrer Analyse des Zusammenhangs zwischen Innen- und Außenpolitik analysiert Melanie Sisson die Gründe und Folgen einer antiliberalen Agenda der aktuellen US-Politik, die sich bereits auf die etablierte internationale Ordnung auswirkt und Europa und den Rest der Welt zweifellos noch eine ganze Weile auf Trab halten wird.

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**Abstract:** This paper analyses the foreign policy orientation of the second Trump administration. It argues that this does not represent an attempt at reform, but rather a fundamental departure from the liberal international order that has existed since the Second World War. Contrary to initial assumptions, the administration is not pursuing the goal of making the existing order more efficient or cost-effective, but rather views the international order as increasingly irrelevant. Foreign policy is instead understood as an instrument of a domestic, explicitly anti-liberal project that aims to promote social hierarchies, traditional role models and the prioritisation of a collectively defined 'common good' over individual rights. First, the emergence and logic of the liberal post-war order is traced and shown how it linked economic globalisation, military alliances and liberal values. Afterwards the three foreign policy factions within the Trump administration are described: primacists, prioritizers and 'America First' supporters, with the latter – embodied by Trump and especially Vice President J.D. Vance – increasingly dominating. The rise of anti-liberalism is leading to deglobalisation, selective bilateral trade relations, a withdrawal from alliances and a military strategy that focuses more strongly on homeland security. Particularly noteworthy here is the possible de-escalation of the confrontation with China, as global leadership claims are being deliberately abandoned. Overall, the analysis highlights the profound redefinition of American power, identity and foreign policy objectives, the implementation of which is heavily dependent on domestic political dynamics and Trump's personal behaviour.

**Abstract:** Dieses Paper analysiert die außenpolitische Ausrichtung der zweiten Trump-Administration. Es wird argumentiert, dass sie keinen Reformversuch, sondern eine grundlegende Abkehr von der seit dem Zweiten Weltkrieg bestehenden liberalen internationalen Ordnung darstellt. Entgegen anfänglicher Annahmen verfolgt die Regierung nicht das Ziel, die bestehende Ordnung effizienter oder kostengünstiger zu gestalten, sondern betrachtet die internationale Ordnung als zunehmend irrelevant. Außenpolitik wird vielmehr als Instrument eines innenpolitischen, explizit anti-liberalen Projekts verstanden, das auf soziale Hierarchien, traditionelle Rollenbilder und die Priorisierung eines kollektiv definierten „Gemeinwohls“ gegenüber individuellen Rechten abzielt. Zunächst wird die Entstehung und Logik der liberalen Nachkriegsordnung nachgezeichnet und aufgezeigt, wie diese wirtschaftliche Globalisierung, militärische Allianzen und liberale Werte miteinander verband. Anschließend die drei außenpolitischen Fraktionen innerhalb der Trump-Administration beschrieben: Primazisten, Priorisierer und „America-First“-Anhänger, wobei letztere – verkörpert durch Trump und insbesondere Vizepräsident J.D. Vance – zunehmend dominieren. Der Aufstieg des Anti-Liberalismus führt zu Deglobalisierung, selektiven bilateralen Handelsbeziehungen, einem Rückzug aus Allianzen und einer stärker auf Heimatschutz fokussierten Militärstrategie führt. Besonders bemerkenswert ist dabei die mögliche Entschärfung der Konfrontation mit China, da globale Führungsansprüche bewusst aufgegeben werden. Insgesamt arbeitet die Analyse die tiefgreifende Neudefinition amerikanischer Macht, Identität und außenpolitischer Zielsetzung heraus, deren Umsetzung stark von innenpolitischen Dynamiken und Trumps persönlichem Verhalten abhängig ist.

## 1. Introduction

There was no shortage of reason to believe that Donald J. Trump's second presidential term would mark the end of 80 years of continuity in U.S. foreign policy. Many have absorbed it, in the event, like the death of an elderly loved one: the loss was perhaps not unexpected, but the pain of experiencing it still comes as a surprise.

Most in the establishment West reacted to the initial shock by convincing themselves that the Trump administration's design was to preserve the post-World War II international order, but to correct it such that the United States is paying less into it and getting more out of it (Chellaney 2025). Leaders in foreign capitals thus readied themselves for a moderate military rebalance, and were prepared to treat Trump's tariff regime as prelude to a reconciliation of accounts (De Hoop Scheffer 2025). They have since been disabused of these notions by Trump's repeated shakedowns of defense allies under the guise of burden-sharing, his fast and loose use of military force irrespective of international legal conventions, and by his even faster and looser use of economic coercion.

Many thus now have come to worry that the administration's intent is in fact to undermine the post-World War II international order entirely (Patrick 2025). That it prefers instead an order characterized by "spheres of influence" (Wong 2025), in which the powerful ride herd in their own regions and occasionally engage in ostentatious summity to address irritants and cut deals. Still others have concluded that Trump is simply an agent of chaos—idiosyncratic, id-driven, and strategically incoherent (Beauchamp 2025).

It has become clear, however, that the Trump administration has no interest in international order at all – that it finds the very notion to be a "cloud-castle abstraction" (U.S. Department of War 2026). It believes this fiction, moreover, has only distracted U.S. foreign policy from its true purpose: creating the external conditions necessary to support an American way of life in which central authority holds consolidated power; in which rigid hierarchies govern public and private life; in which a "common good" overrides individual rights; and in which social advancement depends, in the administration's own terms, on merit—conformity to one's designated role in society (The White House 2025). In this reading, U.S. foreign policy serves a deeper, anti-liberal domestic project; the international order is incidental at best, and any harm done to it is irrelevant.

## 2. The long arc of liberal order

Most of America's national security class—politicians, military practitioners, academics, think tank researchers, and the media commentariat—know, as an intellectual matter, that foreign policy is an expression of domestic political objectives. The post-World War II international order, however, made it possible to treat the two not as a principal-agent relationship, but like a blood-brain barrier—selectively permeable, but still mostly separate.

The United States had emerged from the searing experiences of fighting Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan to find itself in a staring contest with an ideologically hostile and

nuclear-armed Soviet Union. This circumstance reduced the foreign policy portfolio to a small set of priorities: creating conditions that supported U.S. macroeconomic growth, defending the territory and citizenry of the United States against physical attack, and preventing Soviet communist expansion, territorially and ideologically.

Policymakers realized the economic arm of this agenda through the intentional design of a free trade regime to be managed through technocratic economic institutions—thus the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). They addressed defense of the homeland and supporting resistance to attempts at communist incursion wherever they might emerge through entry into mutual defense treaties in Europe and Asia and military interventionism. This involved posturing substantial U.S. military assets on allied territories and included the gauzy protection of the U.S. nuclear arsenal.

This post-war model of U.S. presence and participation in the politics of regions other than its own intensified after the demise of the Soviet Union. With U.S. encouragement, even more states formally entered into the order's free trade regime via the GATT's successor institution, the World Trade Organization (WTO).

Indeed, it was under U.S. tutelage that China implemented sufficient domestic economic reforms to join the club. The addition of these new markets, most especially China's, rapidly and dramatically changed the practices through which and places in which U.S. industries manufactured their goods. The 2001 al Qaeda attacks similarly jolted U.S. defense policy, and overseas military activity surged first to prosecute and then to sustain long wars and small battles against terrorist organizations worldwide.

This agenda for what America wished to happen out there worked hand in glove with orthodoxies for how America should operate over here. Open international trade was the logical corollary to liberal capitalism's belief that supply and demand together with minimally regulated factors of production was a happy marriage that would birth efficiency, innovation, and profit. Communism and then terrorism were antichrist to American democracy and perceived as properly consuming the attention, blood, and treasure of the U.S. military.

These threats, moreover, were best met "as far from our borders as possible", and so the U.S. military was, from the first, designed and stationed to be able to "rapidly deploy forces in any desired direction" to defend allied territory, and to be of "sufficient strength and depth to restrain enemy forces from penetrating vital areas". This base-centric defensive construct evolved after the cold war into a model of expeditionary power projection, wherein the U.S. military wouldn't wait for dragons to come at it, but would instead go after them, even if they were sometimes very far afield.

For decades, these U.S. economic and security agendas appeared to be wildly successful. They were credited with enabling the United States to beat the Soviet Union without having to fight it and seamlessly transitioned from being the cause of victory to being its

legacy. In the 1990s the U.S. military was entirely unparalleled and could, as memorably described in the 2018 U.S. National Defense Strategy, “generally deploy our forces when we wanted, assemble them where we wanted, and operate how we wanted”.

The U.S. economy, built to satisfy the consumptive and wealth-accumulating appetites of its citizens, was the largest in the world. It wasn’t until the financial crisis of 2008 that the excesses and externalities of both arms of American strategy began to harvest negative returns and to call into question the alignment between foreign policy and domestic politics.

### 3. Three factions, one president

The compositions and causes of the factions that have since come to be associated with populism, and then populism with Trump, are many and varied. With his election to a second term, however, this diversity of motivations has been distilled into three groups, each with aspirations for the administration’s foreign policy.

One such group, the primacists, believes the post-war order generally did well for all nations. And so, its members, most visibly if increasingly weakly represented by Secretary of State Marco Rubio, remain mostly supportive of the post-war order, inclusive of the use of institutions to wield influence, U.S. attachment to Europe—albeit with the demand that Europe do more for itself—and a large, globally distributed military.

The second collection of aspirants, the prioritizers, believes the post-war order did too well for China. Their most prominent avatar is Undersecretary for Policy at the Department of Defense, Elbridge Colby, and there remain a small number of China hawks who were not Loomered (Lowell/Gedeon 2025) from the National Security Council (NSC) along with former National Security Advisor Mike Waltz. Their view is best understood as regarding the international order as epiphenomenal to U.S. military power. This makes them largely agnostic about maintaining the order itself but zealous about maintaining U.S. military advantage, especially in East Asia.

Then there is the third set, the America firsters, with Trump as figurehead and Vice President J.D. Vance as vanguard, which believes that the post-war order has been bad for America. That it has caused the United States to do too much, for too long, in too many places, and that serving U.S. interests means pivoting to America: freeing the U.S. of the burdens of being the anchor-state of globalization, returning U.S. forces to the Western hemisphere (Lubold et al. 2025), investing in the Golden Dome missile defense system (U.S. Department of War 2025), and leaving the politics of other regions to other regions.

Those in the fight to have their vision win the day do so under unusual conditions. Trump the man reportedly is prone to recency bias: s/he who speaks to Trump last, it turns out, often speaks to Trump best. Trump the president, moreover, seems to have no fixed worldview so much as a desire to change the terms of relationships with countries that, in

his view, have done America dirty. Those who used trade to leach the United States of its status as an industrial powerhouse. Wealthy allies who swindled Americans out of their money. The intermingled, intercontinental, liberal elites who diluted American masculinity and imposed new rules about the treatment of race, gender, sexuality, and the environment. The only essential for Trump and Vance when it comes to what happens out there, therefore, is that Americans no longer suffer this litany of ill effects over here.

## 4. An anti-liberal remedy

Trump's nature and the influences swirling around him means that anticipating the administration's policies is as fruitful as trying to predict which kernel of corn will be the next to pop. Whatever their sequence, however, and despite their occasional inconsistencies and even dissonances, the trend line in the Trump administration's foreign policy has thus far been bent by a set of populist pressures, some of which clearly comport with Trump's own intuitions and convictions and others to which he is at least indifferent. These pressures are most directly represented in the administration by Vice President, J.D. Vance (Packer 2025).

Vance's current political views reflect a measure of genuine concern for the portion of American citizens whose experience is that the U.S. economy, and so the U.S. government that structures and maintains it, has not been working in their interests (Vance 2016). These are people for whom, factually, the rapid and, with the addition of China, the massive expansion of the post-war free trade regime caused their jobs first to be offshore and now to be automated. They are the people whose wages, factually, stagnated and who can see plainly that they are on the wrong end of income and wealth inequality curves that show no sign of tilting in their favor. They are the people, as a result, who feel the U.S. economy does not enable them to have a good life, who believe that it is doing even worse for their children, and who worry that it will do worse yet for their grandchildren.

These sentiments too often get conflated with the differences in culture that differences in prosperity tend to produce. They are not all the illegitimate grievances of flyover America, and neither are they all evidence of a retrograde conservatism that wishes to recreate the past. What they are is a rejection of the idea that aggregate metrics —productivity, stock performance, wealth generation, corporate profits —are a meaningful way to measure whether the economy is working.

The populist rhetoric of campaign speeches and policy pronouncements is not especially clear about what the objective and metric of U.S. economic policy ought to be instead, other than that it should be to do better for the working and middle classes. The specifics of what that means and of how to do it are left to the tweedy lectures, articles, and books being produced by a collection of American economists, legal experts, and political philosophers. Oren Cass (American Compass 2026), Adrian Vermeule (Harvard Law School 2025), Patrick Deneen (University of Notre Dame 2026), and Sohrab Ahmari (Ahmari 2021) are the intellectuals most associated with populist conservatism, and most closely connected to Vice President Vance.

The convention is to call these men, and the philosophical tradition with which they affiliate themselves, post-liberal. This fashioning, however, gives inadequate expression to what the movement actually is, which is an explicit rejection of the foundational principles of liberal philosophy, politics, and economics. These men are not post-liberal, they are anti-liberal (Kagan 2024).

Although each enters the debate about political economy from slightly oblique angles and differ on some matters, the figureheads of anti-liberalism nonetheless share a set of foundational convictions. The most essential of these is that the individual is not the proper object of government attention, economic or otherwise. The government, that is, should be indifferent to the flourishing of any one person, and so the government should not orient its actions – its policies —around creating conditions that facilitate the individual's pursuit of happiness, health, wealth, and well-being.

The anti-liberal view does not require total abnegation of the idea of individualism, or of individual rights, but its reason for recognizing rights differs from that of the liberal view. Liberalism has a maximalist understanding of individualism and therefore of individual rights. For liberalism, rights are both intrinsic, as in the right to be alive and to think, and behavioral, the right to act. In this way, individual rights are the means through which each person is able first to define what constitutes a good life, and then to live it. Government exists to prevent any one person from imposing a view of what constitutes a good life on any other person, and the government itself is prohibited from intruding into domains believed essential to an individual's autonomy.

Anti-liberalism has a minimalist understanding of individual rights, one in which rights are primarily intrinsic with some secondary behavioral implications. Liberalism fixes these rights in place and makes them inalienable. Anti-liberalism demands that individual rights can, and occasionally must, be taken away or given away when doing so is required to promote or protect "the common good": a societal order within which people enjoy a safe, social, productive, and moral life. The order is what is "common" across people, and so the constancy and quality with which it operates is the "good".

In a well-ordered society people understand and undertake their roles in producing the common good. For anti-liberals, knowledge about one's place in the social order and the responsibilities that adhere to it are best derived from and recognizable in widespread acceptance of inherited traditions and customs.

Anti-liberals are mostly opaque about what, precisely, rises to the standard of being a "tradition" or a "custom", and they are always careful to make space for them to be locally determined and therefore to differ in the particulars. They also, however, ascribe to traditions and customs something close to universality, arguing that "practices of care, patience, humility, reverence, respect, and modesty" are as desired by the agnostic as by the religious, that they are recognizable in most and possibly all faiths, and that they are transmissible across generations. Properly crafted and judiciously enforced laws are thus

supplements, instructing and assisting people in perpetuating these customary ways of living and in developing from them an appropriate civic morality: the habit of prioritizing the social order over satisfying individual interests and desires.

The well-ordered society thus requires acceptance of public hierarchy, empowering some members to craft the laws and some to enforce them. There is also the matter of private hierarchy which even the most verbose accounts of anti-liberalism access only obliquely, smuggling it in through their references to inherited traditions and customs. It is not irrelevant, after all, that Deneen, Vermeule, Ahmari, and Vance are all committed Christians; that they privilege the traditional family; that they are fertility advocates; and that they are all men.

The anti-liberal prescription, therefore, is a series of social and economic correctives that cohere into a system of cooperative production and exchange to support the formation of financially viable, traditionalist, common good associations: families, communities, and congregations. Such rightly oriented policies, it goes, will eliminate the elevation of individualism, most especially as expressed through non-traditional representations of identity like gender, sexuality, and reproduction. They will facilitate place-permanence by creating steady and stable opportunities for labor and vocational employment. They will encourage marriage, childbearing, and child rearing, and they will invest in education and training programs that equip people to occupy their segment of the well-ordered society.

Economic activism —protectionism and market intervention—is necessary to establish such a system. Trade policy must support the reindustrialization of America so that general labor and vocational jobs are less migratory and more available. Immigration policy and border security must reduce the supply of labor to favor native employment at higher wages — wages that enable households to live comfortably on one income. Tax and regulatory policies must give industry easier access to, and more say over, factors of production, most especially energy. Laissez faire economics and globalization, in other words, with their fixation on tabulating achievements that accrue to the individual and that find affirmation in national aggregates of productivity, stock performance, and wealth generation, must be shed like a vestigial tail.

## 5. America apart

At the one year mark, the internecine warfare inside Trump's professional and personal networks seems to be resolving in favor of the anti-liberals. Mike Waltz, Trump's former National Security Advisor since demoted to U.N. Ambassador, was widely recognized as one of a small number of people inside the administration with a record of being supportive of the post-war order's emphasis on liberal economics, globalization, and military engagement. While Marco Rubio the Congressional legislator was similarly known to defend the basic tenets of the post-war order, Marco Rubio the Secretary of State and now also interim National Security Advisor avowedly does not. In early May 2025, President Trump identified Rubio and Vice President J.D. Vance as possible successors. In late May,

Trump—the chair of the NSC—fired half of the Council's staff and established Vance's national security adviser as its Deputy Director.

If this trend toward anti-liberalism continues, and certainly if it intensifies, the consequences for U.S. foreign policy will be substantial. Extracting the commitment to liberalism from U.S. economics and politics would be like deboning a fish in one pull.

The entirety of the current U.S. alliance structure and its global military presence are held together by three core beliefs. The first is that the United States is politically most stable when its economy can exchange freely with others. The second is that this economic exchange requires U.S. access to be uninterrupted by the territorial ambitions of other states. The third is that U.S. security is greatest in a world populated by states that are liberal in kind, even if not the same in type. These convictions produced and have sustained not just globalization, but also U.S. defense treaties and partnerships in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. They also explain the willingness of the United States to dispatch its military to serve as the guarantor of transit over and under the world's seas and through its skies.

Trump's personal position on globalization is by now crystal clear. His antipathy for a system of trade that rides on the U.S. dollar and is administered by third-party technocratic institutions like the WTO, however, should not be mistaken as an affinity for autarky. His own preferences, and the broader anti-liberal agenda, are perfectly compatible with, and are beginning to express themselves in trade deals that are bilateral, sector-specific, and either short-term or designed to be renegotiated as conditions change.

This ad hoc approach to trade frees the U.S. military of the work of underwriting the global economy. U.S. forces do not have to ensure that "the arteries of the global economy—cyber space, air and oceans"—"remain open and free" for all, but instead can be dispatched only when needed to secure the transit of its own people, exports, and imports. Deglobalized trade thus makes the possibility of disruptions caused by distant events and aggressions far less concerning for the United States. It also suggests that if territorially hungry regimes are wise enough to keep U.S. trade interests from being collateral damage in their landgrabs, then an anti-liberal America might very well be very content to leave well enough alone. Vice President Vance put this view on accidental display in the now-infamous Signal chat, in which his contributions were the following: "Three percent of US trade runs through the suez [sic]. 40 percent of European trade does...I just hate bailing Europe out again", though, "if there are things we can do upfront to minimize risk to Saudi oil facilities we should do it." (Al Jazeera 2025).

Vance's disaffection with Europe, of course, is the product of an admixture of judgments. He shares Trump's view that the continent is "woke, weak and freeloading" (Kempe 2025). That it has benefitted disproportionately from the architecture of post-war transatlanticism, taking advantage of the United States economically through unfair trade arrangements, and militarily through NATO. As he made clear in Munich in 2025, these problems are only magnified by what he views as European nations' unwillingness to defend their

cultural identities against immigration, and their traditions against progressive ideologies (Franke 2025). With no desire to sustain globalization, and absent any ideological fealty, the wide and deep U.S. alliance structure—and certainly its lesser commitments to partners and friends—can hardly be expected to stand.

## 6. An America first Department of War

As its objections to the burdens of sustaining globalization have become more strenuous, so too has the United States become more literalist about using its military to "Defend the U.S. Homeland" (U.S. Department of War 2026). The administration's National Defense Strategy (NDS), released in late January 2026, is patently not designed to meet threats "as far from our borders as possible". It is, instead, oriented around self-hardening. Its emphasis is on the role of U.S. forces in the Western hemisphere, prioritizing "efforts to seal our border" and to "counter narco-terrorists". It also notes, somewhat understatedly given the 36 strikes on boats in the Caribbean and 126 dead that preceded it, that it will "take decisive action unilaterally" to do so. The NDS also indulges Trump's fantasy of building a golden shield around the country by cramming vast sums of money into an overstuffed Pentagon that already has difficulty transforming cash into capability (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2025).

The consequences for Europe and for the Middle East are likely to be substantial and complicated. The most interesting, important, and perhaps salutary element of an anti-liberal American foreign policy, however, is becoming evident in its approach to the relationship with China.

Although the Obama administration was first to announce openly that the United States needed to pay more attention to China, it was the first Trump administration that actually did so (Council on Foreign Relations 2026). Its 2018 National Defense Strategy named China a "near peer competitor" and the military's "pacing challenge"—code for: the adversary we must be able to defeat in war. White House and defense officials were vocal and dogmatic about preventing China from overtaking Taiwan (Bush/Hass 2024). The U.S. Trade Representative and Department of Commerce imposed tariffs and export controls (Bown 2020, Bown 2025).

The Biden administration entered and exited office even more punchy about China than the Trump team before it. The Biden NSC was populated by people who believe that China has malign intent, that it seeks to displace the United States as the world's dominant power, and that it wishes to create an international order that is rent-seeking, encouraging of internal repression, and tolerant of external aggression (Thompson et al. 2022). Biden left Trump's trade restrictions in place, added aggressive controls on technology exports (Allen 2024), and sought to expand and tighten regional defense arrangements (Gallo 2024).

Although it is still taking shape, there is good reason to think that U.S.-China relations during the second Trump administration will be less confrontational and, possibly, more constructive. Officials in the first Trump administration and those of the Biden term share a zeal for confronting China because they find China's illiberalism threatening or otherwise anathema, and were trained to think about international relations as a perpetual contest among states in which all seek advantage over each other. The logic of this realist paradigm is appealingly simple. Large stores of natural resources, stable societies, productive economies, and technological innovation all beget military power. Military power causes states to try to rule first their regions, and then the world, and so war is inevitable.

Trump did not attend the same schools as the national security elites that surround him in Washington, and so his worldview is far less encumbered by the political science literature on great power politics. For Trump, America First isn't an agenda to ensure that America is in charge, it's an agenda to ensure that it isn't—this role is precisely what he sees as having damaged the United States in the first place. Under Trump, the United States doesn't want to set the terms of international order and so whether China wishes to do so matters less than Beijing's willingness to reconcile the books on terms of trade—the perpetual source of Trump's China dyspepsia. And on the matter of trade, China thus far seems prepared to negotiate if fruitful (Gallo 2024) and to persevere if not (Bao 2025), and so either an active accord, or a passive equilibrium, is likely to be found.

Whether Vance—the U.S. Marine Corporal and Yale law school graduate—shares Trump's disinterest in American global leadership as a matter of conviction or a matter of expediency isn't entirely clear. What is clear is that he ascended to his current political heights not by toeing the establishment, anti-China line, but by standing on the wallets of a network of Silicon Valley billionaires (Mac/Schleifer 2024). These are people whose current fortunes, and whose ability to grow those fortunes, are directly affected by the extent of access they have to Chinese commodities, Chinese markets, and Chinese talent.

Similarly, despite the chest-thumping *cris de Coeur* of those who believe that as goes Taiwan so goes America's status as the world's number one power (Pottinger/Gallagher 2024), Trump does not seem to agree or particularly to care. Insofar as he has had anything to say about the self-governing island that China claims is really its own, it has had to do with what he alleges was Taiwan's theft of America's semiconductor industry (Mody 2024). And Taiwan received no special favors on Liberation Day (Walters 2025), though Trump did exempt semiconductors—for America's sake, not Taiwan's.

Vance's position, yet again, is more opaque. When criticism bubbled up from within Republican ranks about Elbridge Colby—who is a hawk's hawk on China and a hedgehog on the matter of defending Taiwan—Vance stepped in to block and tackle (Svirnovskiy 2025), going so far as to offer introductory remarks at Colby's confirmation hearing (Fox News 2025). But he's said little on Colby, or on Taiwan, since, and has staked out a general position against non-essential military commitments and unnecessary wars (Mitchell 2025). These features of the administration might incline and equip it to engage with

Beijing on Taiwan in a manner that was unavailable to its predecessors, perhaps making military crisis less likely. Which, undeniably, is for the good.

Trump the man, of course, is a seemingly non-ideological creature. There is no reason to believe he has any familiarity with how or why the liberal tradition in western political philosophy produced an individual rights-based domestic order, and there is no reason to disbelieve just how much he reviles the woke-ist caricature of it. There is equally no reason to believe that Trump's relationship to anti-liberalism reflects any learnedness about or devotion to Christian theology's definition of civic or moral virtue, and there is no reason to disbelieve his attraction to its emphasis on centralized authority and hierarchy.

And so, many things are still possible. Trump might be a savvy operator who knows what he wants from foreign policy, or he might be an ideological intermediary for Vance and his fellow anti-liberal travelers. It is also possible that this view of the administration's foreign policy is an overinterpretation of available evidence (Tooze 2025). Even if it isn't, the Trump administration's ability to implement it is highly contingent—on how flexible or fragile domestic political constraints ultimately prove to be, on Vance's success in walking the high wire between pleasing and manipulating his boss, and on the biggest contingency of all: Trump himself.

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