

The Second Trump Era: The Quest for American Hegemony Without Leadership - Ziya Öniş



The second Trump presidency has started in a more dramatic fashion than the first one. What Trump has accomplished in the early weeks of the new era has effectively dismantled any notion of American leadership for a liberal international order based on liberal norms and democratic values. The Trumpian world is predicated on the exercise of unrestrained power and self-interest. Trump's "America First" strategy does not mean a retreat of the United States from the global arena to focus on domestic issues such as unemployment, migration, and industrial regeneration. Rather, it signifies a new kind of foreign policy activism based on self-interest completely devoid of any moral or humanitarian concern. The underlying logic of Trump's foreign policy is ultra-transactionalism, deal-making, and a complete dismissal of small powers.

Perhaps the most immediate consequence of the new era concerns the complete fragmentation of the Western Alliance. The transatlantic rift had existed for some time as American Presidents from Obama onwards emphasized the need for the Europeans to share part of their defense burden, as the United States wished to focus on the Indo-Pacific and contain the phenomenal rise of China. The Western Alliance experienced a process of temporary re-unification during the Biden Administration and the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. With the second term, however, the Transatlantic rift has reappeared on a much larger scale. One of the major effects of the second Trump term will be on the future of Europe, as the Europeans will push in concrete terms for greater strategic autonomy, which will lead to significant increases in defense spending, a more nuanced approach to China, as well as seeking new alignments with key countries of the global South.

Trump's second term is likely to create more instability on a global scale. Clearly, the Russians have been empowered by Trump's actions. Acquisition of territory by force is no longer a violation of international law but perfectly acceptable behavior in a new world where countries with more power have every right and justification to invade others and expand their territories. Turning attention to another site of major regional conflict with truly global implications, further regional instability appears to be inevitable as Netanyahu's Israel, with the full backing of the US and Trump, aims to establish complete control over Gaza and thereby wipe out the Palestinians from their homeland in the process. Trump's plans for the Gaza Strip after the departure of Palestinians as a new Mediterranean Riviera with enormous opportunities for construction business and tourism has been greeted with astonishment and contempt in all countries around the world as well as large segments of American society who see the world differently from Trump on many of these issues. The likes of Ukrainians or Palestinians have no place in the Trumpian world, where only great powers or powerful individuals have the right to exist.

The real gainers of Trump's second term are likely to be Russia and China. Putin must be relieved by the fact that Zelenskyy has been called by Trump a "dictator" and has been identified as the main person responsible for the war; in contrast, the real aggressor is freed from any responsibility. Clearly, the way that Trump

has portrayed the issue, it appears that Putin's invasion of Ukraine was a legitimate act. From a longer-term perspective, as happens in all crises of the post-Western world, China is likely to emerge as the big winner of the second Trump era. With the Americans vacating the leadership role and pursuing pure self-interest, the Chinese will increasingly try to fill the void by expanding their spheres of influence around the world and project a vision of responsible leadership. Authoritarian elements of various shades around the world, including far-right, ultra-nationalist parties in Europe and authoritarian right-wing populist leaders in the global South, are likely to receive a boost from the new Trump term, as they seek to expand their influence and consolidate their power and legitimacy in their domestic contexts. In short, the swing from liberal democracy towards different shades of authoritarianism, which has been taking place over the past ten or fifteen years, is likely to accelerate further, as the world's leading democracy experiences a powerful authoritarian turn in its domestic politics.

What is ironic is that the US will lose its global influence, whilst the prospects of recovery of its relative decline against China appear rather improbable considering the underlying structural trends and the growing shift of manufacturing activity that has shifted to China in recent decades. A large segment of the population in the United States, including many who voted for Trump, are likely to suffer massive expenditure cuts in basic social services and entitlements, notably in the realm of health care. The real winners in the United States of the new Trump term are the big corporations, notably in the realm of big-tech, oil refining, and defense industries. Major oil companies will likely capitalize on the removal of key environmental regulations. The US defense industry will no doubt have a boost from the rising demand from Europe, as the European countries seek to expand their defense capabilities over a short space of time. At a global level, the uncertainty, insecurity, and unpredictability of the second Trump term will naturally boost investment in defense around the world, which will inevitably work in favor of the American armaments industry. The United States under the new Trump administration has steadily moved away from a model of democratic capitalism to a plutocracy or oligarchic capitalism. It is no wonder that key billionaires like Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, and Mark Zuckerberg have occupied key seats in Trump's inauguration ceremony and have provided their relentless support for the new president. Indeed, Elon Musk occupies a key cabinet post in the new government, empowered by the single-minded objective

of cutting down on government agencies and critical layers of bureaucracy.

Finally, one of the most dramatic effects of the second Trump administration is likely to take place in the realm of environmental pollution and policies to deal with climate change. In the domestic sphere, we already see a strong trend towards deregulation, which will create more profits for oil companies but a reduction in the welfare of society at large. At the global level, the impact will be equally dramatic. The withdrawal of the United States from the International Climate Agreements will clearly encourage many countries and leaders around the world who are quite lukewarm towards adopting steps to deal with the dramatic effects of climate change and environmental degradation. Moreover, in a world of growing instability, with the erosion and collapse of rule-based order, a growing number of states will shift their attention to security and deference and away from existential threats posed by global warming and environmental destruction.

The new Trump term signals a period of moral decay. It is likely to be an era where powerful states and corporations will have the space to expand their spheres of influence at the expense of the weak without any moral constraints. It will be interesting to observe the counter-reactions or counter-movements that will emerge both in American domestic politics and in the global political economy towards the new Trump term in the coming years.



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