

Transformation of World Order Under Trump Administration's Foreign Policy Approaches: Implications for Ukraine

Mykola Bielieskov



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Author

Mykola Bielieskov, Senior Analyst at Come Back Alive Initiatives Center, Chief Consultant of Defence Policy Department at National Institute for Strategic Studies

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wul. Akademika Bohomoltsia 5, Office 1, 01024 Kyiv, Ukraine
Telephone: +380444927443
<https://www.kas.de/en/web/ukraine>



© 2025 Centre for International Security
Borodina Inzhenera Street, 5-A, 02092 Kyiv, Ukraine
Telephone: +380999833140
<https://intsecurity.org/>

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Introduction

The current transformation of the international relations system is an objective process. The key characteristic of the current transitional period is the erosion of the system-forming role of the so-called political West (a coalition of economically developed democratic states led by the United States) and the strengthening of new centers of power that offer alternative modernization models. The G7's share of global GDP decreased from 66% in 1990 to 44% in 2022.

The key driver of this process is that countries like China and Russia managed over the past 35 years to use advantages of the US-built international relations system such as free trade and globalization processes to build up their own power potential, while avoiding internal democratization. The availability of resources and authoritarian forms of governance allowed Russia and China to challenge the current international relations system. This challenge takes various forms but essentially amounts to promoting further erosion of the central role of the political West and establishing a so-called "fair multipolar world", according to the official rhetoric of these countries' leadership. The bipartisan consensus in the United States that economic modernization would eventually lead to political modernization in these countries has completely failed.

Russia's ongoing aggression against Ukraine is one indicator of this transformation process in the international relations system. Similarly, the inability of the US-led coalition of countries in 2022-2024 to fully isolate Russia, raise the cost of aggression to unacceptable levels, and completely deprive it of resources to implement its policy toward Ukraine, directly reflects and results from the transformation described above. This transformation of the international relations system is characterized by the erosion of the central role of the political West led by the United States and the emergence of new centers of power that pursue, if not openly anti-American policy, then at least attempt to conduct neutral foreign policy.

Problem Analysis

Formally, it was Donald Trump's first administration that, in the National Security Strategy (December 2017), first since the end of the Cold War recorded the return of great power competition to the world political agenda along with China and Russia's attempts to undermine US positions in the world as an objective reality. And this idea was perhaps the only one with which the Joseph Biden administration agreed, if we analyze the strategic documents of that team.

However, the mere recognition of this process as reflecting objective trends in the international relations system does not mean a shared vision of what policy the United States should pursue under these conditions. The Joseph Biden administration proceeded from the assumption that US foreign policy and strategy should be aimed at protecting relevant norms and security systems at global and regional levels. After all, the collapse of the current "rules-based international order", which was formed as a result of World War II, means the possibility of a new global war.

However, the Donald Trump administration and the 47th US President himself view the protection of the "rules-based order" differently. In fact, significant skepticism about this order can be traced in the rhetoric of the White House chief and his team representatives. The idea that the current world order is actually disadvantageous to the United States runs as a refrain through official statements. Indeed, the key beneficiaries of the order created after 1945, according to Trump and his team (especially in the last 30-35 years), became either US adversaries, such as China, where the main production was relocated, or allies, such as Germany, who neglected their own security to enhance economic competitiveness. And this while the United States suffered significant direct and indirect losses through trade balance deficits, excessive defense spending and growing budget deficits, as well as increasing national debt. As a result, the rules-based order, from Donald Trump and his team's perspective, is not worth actively defending – despite the strengthening of revisionist states like China or Russia, as well as the destructive behavior of these states in the international arena, which increasingly threatens both the United States and its allies and partners.

A corollary of Donald Trump's skepticism about the "rules-based order" is the actual neglect of various international alliances and partnerships that the United States has built since 1945. In the Joseph Biden administration's view, alliances and partnerships were perceived as a kind of force multiplier that is a competitive advantage for the United States. Such a view was traditional for the United States after World War II. At the same time, in Donald Trump's view, alliances and partnerships actually do not strengthen but burden the United States in many ways. This refers to the need to coordinate relevant policies with other countries, which takes time and means loss of freedom of action. In addition, the US security umbrella for allies through extended deterrence is an additional burden on the United States. In practice, such hostility

toward allies and partners is reflected in various unfriendly trade initiatives that affect both US competitors, such as China, and allies and partners equally.

The same skepticism is observed in Donald Trump and his team regarding other aspects that until now were part of the US foreign policy consensus after 1945. This concerns both free trade with further liberalization of the international trade regime and the promotion of democracy worldwide. Criticism of free trade is an important part of Donald Trump's domestic political positioning – referring to working class representatives (up to 5 million people) who lost jobs due to the relocation of production abroad. Similarly, promoting the spread of democracy worldwide and, consequently, countering attempts by authoritarian regimes to undermine democracy in other countries is not a priority for the 47th US President.

Overall, Donald Trump's policy often sees the intertwining of foreign and domestic policy with negative consequences for maintaining the current world order. In fact, part of Donald Trump's domestic political platform is criticism of traditional elites (the so-called "Washington Swamp") in terms of results in US foreign policy over the past 30-35 years. This concerns not only the loss of millions of jobs by Americans due to the relocation of production abroad, a side effect of which was China's rise. This criticism also concerns protracted wars in the Middle East that cost the United States trillions of dollars with dubious results in terms of regional stability. In fact, Donald Trump uses for domestic political purposes the growing public skepticism about the benefits for the United States of continued involvement in Eurasian stability issues. In Ukraine's case, such intertwining occurs regarding the 2016 cases (the Paul Manafort case in Trump's campaign) and 2019-2020 (the Zelenskyy-Trump phone call that led to the impeachment attempt against Donald Trump). These cases caused skepticism about Ukraine and contributed to using the thesis about Ukraine's excessive corruption in other cases to repel opposition attacks in the United States against Donald Trump.

Another important distinctive feature in Donald Trump's foreign policy worldview is the implicit idea of "might makes right", which is the direct opposite of the concept of the rule of law and relevant norms. This is essentially a vulgarized version of the thesis that "the strong do what they consider necessary, and the weak must suffer". In practice, this is reflected in Trump's personal refusal to criticize Russia's original aggression in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, as well as the thesis that Ukraine could have prevented the expansion of aggression in 2022 through concessions that would practically mean loss of sovereignty and independence. Similarly revealing at the beginning of Trump's second term were theses about possible US territorial expansion through establishing direct physical control over Greenland, Canada, and the Panama Canal as part of a larger plan to return American greatness ("Make America Great Again"). Such interpretation of greatness – through territorial expansion – differs little from Russia's position toward Ukraine and actually legitimizes Russia's corresponding aggressive actions.

In the aggregate of these factors and nuances, the United States is transforming under Donald Trump from a state that supports the relevant order and guarantees the peaceful nature of transformation into a state that either distances itself from relevant tasks or actually contributes to further erosion of this order. In some cases, there is an

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impression that the United States aims for complete destruction of the relevant order with a subsequent new concert of great powers based on division of spheres of influence and interests.

In Donald Trump and his entourage's worldview, there is clear neglect of the consensus on US foreign policy that was developed after 1945 during the Cold War and after its end during the so-called unipolar moment. Unlike the first term of 2017-2021, Donald Trump can now more freely implement foreign policy due to several factors.

First, key positions (Department of Defense, State Department, National Security Council) are headed by people selected based on personal loyalty to Donald Trump and more closely follow the "America First" policy – in contrast to the corresponding bureaucrats of Donald Trump's first term, who generally professed traditional views on the positioning, role, and place of the United States in the world, as well as American national interests. Similarly, the US Republican Party, which currently controls both chambers of the US Congress, has undergone significant evolution over the past 10 years in its worldview regarding optimal foreign policy and priorities. Today, the Republican Party reflects Donald Trump's priorities – while supporters of the agenda proposed by Ronald Reagan (investment in alliances, active opposition to aggressive states, promotion of free trade and democracy) are isolated and marginalized. Similarly, the bureaucratic apparatus that carries this tradition is under constant pressure from political appointees as well as the Department of Government Efficiency. Attempts to influence the executive branch through court decisions are criticized through the thesis that the judiciary actually usurps this power without having a mandate of trust, unlike the government or Congress. Similarly, supporters of the traditional approach in US foreign policy who are in think tanks or media face constant criticism from Donald Trump supporters as representatives of bankrupt elites and supporters of the US foreign policy consensus, whose results over the past 35 years are rather negative.

However, one should not make the mistake of considering Donald Trump an isolationist. The fact that Donald Trump and his team refuse to follow traditional approaches and priorities of US foreign policy does not make the 47th President an isolationist. Rather, it is about following a narrower understanding of US national interest that is no longer associated with the international relations system of which the United States has been the architect since 1945. This, in turn, makes Donald Trump a nationalist, not an isolationist. The 47th US President does not propose closing in on themselves, although sometimes he does sound individual refrains more similar to the isolationist tradition (about "two beautiful oceans" that are the natural protection of the United States). Rather, it is about such global policy that will benefit the United States in a narrower (often business) sense, such as changing trade regimes in favor of the States, active development of new markets through arms and energy sales.

This all well reflects the change in the balance of power within the Republican Party, which in the context of foreign policy since the beginning of the Cold War has been divided into factions of internationalists, nationalists, and isolationists. Today, the dominant coalition is that of nationalists and isolationists – in contrast to the coalition of internationalists and nationalists during the Cold War. This all found its reflection in

the rather motley coalition that supports Donald Trump and works with him in government. Classic representatives of internationalists are either isolated in the Senate (Mitch McConnell) or House of Representatives or changed their previous position in exchange for a government position (Marco Rubio). This is while the dominant link is nationalists (especially on trade regime issues) and isolationists (which Vice President JD Vance leans toward).

Such radical change in US foreign policy under conditions of transformation of the international relations system is a significant challenge for national foreign policy under conditions of ongoing Russia's aggression. In fact, the Ukraine's strategy is based on arguing why it is beneficial for partners to help Ukraine – as opposed to ignoring the relevant issues – to attract various resources (weapons, training, intelligence data, macroeconomic assistance). However, the arguments developed in 2022-2024 resonate weakly among Donald Trump and his team representatives. This concerns the following:

1. The power of negative precedent of global character for the stability of the international relations system in case of Russia's hypothetical success;
2. The domino theory in Central and Eastern Europe in case of Ukraine's collapse;
3. Resource savings through supporting Ukraine as opposed to the need to directly counter Russia;
4. Damage to US international image and credibility in case of Ukraine's collapse and Russia's victory (due to significant resources invested by the United States in supporting Ukraine);
5. The need to support a young democracy that became the object of aggression by an autocratic regime.

Each of these arguments is not fully convincing for the Donald Trump administration. In the first case, the 47th US President does not see benefits for the United States in defending the existing order and, consequently, preventing a negative precedent of global scale in case of Russia's success. In the second case, we see skepticism about Russia's ability to effectively project power further west even in case of subjugating a significant part of Ukraine. In the third case, the US President's administration believes that Europe should take on the main costs in terms of assistance to Ukraine – this is how the United States plans to save resources. In the fourth case, Donald Trump and his supporters emphasize that the Ukraine-Russia war is "Biden's war", and therefore Russia's hypothetical success should not affect the image of the United States, which is now headed by a new administration. Finally, positioning in the paradigm of "global confrontation of democracy against autocracies", which the Biden administration liked to emphasize, does not find response in the Trump administration, for which protecting and promoting democracy is not a priority.

All this occurs in the context of Donald Trump and his team's skepticism about the role and place of the United States in European security. Traditionally, the United States

through NATO was the key state that guaranteed stability and security on the continent. However, today there is a reassessment of the US role and place in European security. The key complaint of the 47th US President and his team is the refusal of European NATO allies to spend enough on defense and shifting the corresponding responsibility to the United States under conditions where the challenge from China is determined as key in the context of international relations system transformation. This state of affairs is considered unacceptable.

As a result, the Donald Trump administration proposed to its NATO allies in Europe to revise the terms of the current Transatlantic deal, using threats about possible US withdrawal from the Alliance. These proposals are based on a multiple increase in defense spending (from 2% to 5% of GDP), as well as Europe taking on key responsibility for supporting Ukraine. At the same time, the United States is changing its positioning in the Alliance – from key system-forming to point presence with various niche capabilities in case of extreme need.

The updated Transatlantic deal was partially enshrined in the results of the 2025 Hague NATO Summit, where Alliance countries agreed to increase defense spending to 5% by 2035 (3,5% for actual defense spending, and 1,5% for defense-related spending). However, in the case of Europe taking responsibility for supporting Ukraine, problems arise, as European states currently do not possess sufficient capacity in terms of production of ammunition for air defense and missile defense systems, surface-to-surface strike systems, various types of reconnaissance means to fully replace the United States here and now.

This problem is part of a larger problem – namely, changes in US policy regarding the Russia-Ukraine war. In less than half a year since the beginning of Donald Trump's second term, the United States has evolved from a party that actively supports Ukraine to a mediator in the process of attempting conflict settlement, and from mediation to actual distancing from attempts to settle the conflict.

The evolution of US positioning in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war occurred within the logic of Donald Trump and his team's worldview regarding the international relations system under transformation conditions. This concerns general skepticism about the benefits of the current world order for the United States and the need to actively defend it; skepticism about the central role of the United States in guaranteeing security on the European continent; latent adherence to "might makes right" as opposed to the rule of law and norms; non-priority of supporting democratic regimes under conditions of external threat from autocracies.

The key direct consequence of this was the refusal to use available financial resources to assist Ukraine within the PDA instrument (use of existing stocks of weapons and military equipment of the US Armed Forces), as well as the uncertain future of weapons and military equipment contracted in 2022-2024 by the Biden administration within the USAI initiative totaling 35 billion US dollars.

Such developments directly conflict with the stated goal of the US administration regarding rapid settlement of the Russia-Ukraine war. Reducing assistance to Ukraine sends the wrong signal to Moscow about the need to adjust political demands toward their reduction. On the contrary, Russia consistently defends maximalist demands regarding not only territorial concessions but also restrictions on Ukraine's sovereignty and defense capabilities. At the same time, encouraging signals from the United States toward Russia – such as skepticism about Ukraine's NATO membership, as well as general criticism of the "open door policy in the Alliance", proposals for economic cooperation in case of settlement and implementation of joint projects – proved insufficient to convince Russia to change its maximalist positions. At the same time, the Donald Trump administration's assessment of mutual exhaustion of the parties and, consequently, Ukraine and Russia's readiness for compromise settlement also proved erroneous. Russia's intransigence and maximalist demands are an indirect reflection of Russian leadership's confidence in the ability to continue maintaining the corresponding intensity of combat operations. The Trump administration's unwillingness to continue the policy of assisting Ukraine and pressuring Russia is within the logic of "not letting Ukraine lose, not letting Russia win". And this only strengthens Russian leadership's confidence that the Russian side will manage to create conditions for imposing maximalist demands before Russia's ability to maintain the corresponding intensity of combat operations is questioned.

Therefore, all this creates a challenge regarding further constructive US engagement under the Donald Trump administration on Ukraine's side under conditions of ongoing Russian aggression. The approaches chosen today have not yielded proper results. This concerns not only creating certain positive stimulus for the United States through potential future profits from implementing agreements on rare earth metals extraction. The bet that Donald Trump will sooner or later begin to perceive Russia's unwillingness to make concessions as a personal insult, despite all encouraging signals from Washington, which will eventually lead to a radical US turn toward a more desirable policy of assisting Ukraine and pressuring Russia, also does not yield positive results. Similarly, dialogue with Russia and bilateral negotiations in Istanbul did not yield results in terms of presenting Russia as a spoiler of the peace process initiated by Donald Trump. Although recently the US President increasingly talks about Russia's position being an obstacle to rapid settlement.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Expectations of a radical US turn toward more forceful opposition to Russia based on Donald Trump's personal sympathies and antipathies regarding Vladimir Putin do not take into account the following:

- ▶ The current US position regarding the Russia-Ukraine war reflects deep-seated perceptions of Donald Trump and his team regarding US interests and priorities in the international arena;
- ▶ This position is also part of Donald Trump's domestic political positioning, who presents himself as the antithesis to the failed foreign policy consensus of traditional US elites that prevailed since 1945.

In fact, from a domestic political perspective, it is difficult for Donald Trump to accept as the only possible course regarding the Russia-Ukraine war the approach developed by the Joseph Biden administration based on the philosophy of "strengthen Ukraine and weaken Russia so that Ukraine does not lose and Russia does not win". This is overlaid by the lack of systematic approach and chaotic nature of both the US President personally and his team in terms of decision-making and implementation. Together, this makes it extremely difficult to find relevant arguments that could convince Donald Trump to return to more favorable approaches for Ukraine regarding the war with Russia. In fact, one of the key problems is finding traditional rational arguments that systemic politicians are accustomed to, but not Donald Trump or his closest entourage.

Under these conditions, Ukraine today can only continue the chosen course, hoping for Donald Trump's disappointment in attempts to reach agreements with Russia due to the Kremlin's intransigence. This course includes several important aspects. Namely – avoiding any public quarrels with the Trump administration at the official level that could be used by Russia. Part of this process is continuing participation in the negotiation track with Russia, despite the lack of any results in terms of finding a settlement formula acceptable to Ukraine.

Parallel to this, Ukraine must continue to maintain its support coalition in the United States that formed in 2022, which includes pro-Ukrainian legislators, officials, defense industry, analysts, and media. It is worth maintaining professional, unemotional dialogue with think tanks in the United States that are more skeptical about providing support to Ukraine but work with the Donald Trump administration (such as The Heritage Foundation).

An important element of this approach is further commercialization of interaction with the United States by promoting the thesis about Ukraine's readiness to independently or together with Europe purchase US defense industry products that are critical for conducting effective actions within the corresponding military strategy by Ukraine's

Defense Forces. In the long term, it is worth using Ukraine's defense industry developments for joint production and strengthening US security itself.

Although these measures do not guarantee success, they are the only possible ones under current conditions, and they preserve the chance to use a possible change in the Donald Trump administration's positioning in a more favorable direction for Ukraine under conditions of ongoing Russia's aggression.