

UNITED STATES

The Costs of Trump's Foreign Policy Disruption

Donald Trump's embrace of power politics could be costly for the United States.



President Donald Trump at the White House on January 27, 2025. Carlos Barria / Reuters

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EXPERTS



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Donald Trump ran for the White House pledging to disrupt U.S. foreign policy. He has been true to his word during his first eleven days in office. Among other things, he has withdrawn the United States from the Paris Agreement and the World Health Organization, imposed a ninety-day pause on most U.S. foreign aid programs, called for relocating Palestinians from Gaza to Egypt and Jordan, and suggested he would use force to claim Greenland and retake the Panama Canal.

Trump says this disruption will provide big benefits for the United States. But will it? Ivo Daalder, a former U.S. ambassador to NATO, and I have a new piece in Foreign Affairs addressing that question. Color us skeptical that Trump's moves will produce the bonanza he predicts.

For decades, Trump has argued that the foreign policy the United States has pursued since the end of World War II has saddled it with policing the globe, allowing its friends, partners, and allies to free ride on its security guarantees while stealing American jobs. He sees world politics as a dog-eat-dog place where your friends can be as big a threat as your enemies. As we write:

Trump's skepticism about U.S. support for Ukraine and Taiwan, his eagerness to impose tariffs, and his threats to retake the Panama Canal, absorb Canada, and acquire Greenland make it clear that he envisions a return to nineteenth-century power politics and spheres of interest, even if he does not frame his foreign policy in those terms. In that era, the great powers of the day sought to divide the world into regions that each would dominate, regardless of the desires of those who lived there—a vision of the world that Trump explicitly echoes. Trump sees few significant U.S. interests outside the Western Hemisphere, considers alliances to be a drain on the U.S. Treasury, and believes the United States should dominate its neighborhood. His is a Thucydidean worldview—one in which "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must."

As the world's leading economic and military power, the United States can certainly coerce other countries, especially much weaker ones, to get what it wants. The flap with Colombia last weekend over Bogota's refusal to allow U.S. military planes carrying Colombians deported from the United States is a case in point. But Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan provide powerful reminders that hard power does not always carry the day. On the whole, playing the bully provides diminishing returns and will likely do more to harm U.S. interests than advance them.

Until now, Washington's network of alliances has granted the United States extraordinary influence in Europe and Asia, imposing constraints on Moscow and Beijing at a scale that neither power can replicate. Ceding that advantage will come at great cost to the United States: not only will erstwhile U.S. allies no longer follow Washington's lead, but many could also seek safety by aligning themselves more closely with Russia and China instead.

Beijing and Moscow certainly have been working for years, and increasingly together, to peel support away from Washington.

Those efforts will likely ramp up as Trump turns to threats to pressure friends and neighbors; as a result, Washington will almost surely lose some ability to attract support. China is especially well positioned to contest U.S. influence across the globe, including in the United States' own backyard. Trump does not offer other countries new opportunities; he demands concessions. Beijing, by contrast, is eager to do business around the world with its Belt and Road infrastructure initiative; it invests with few immediate conditions, and it speaks the language of win-win outcomes. Chinese firms also often offer competitive products at better prices than U.S. companies do. Unsurprisingly, China has already become the number one trading partner for many countries in the global South. And as Washington withdraws from international institutions such as the World Health Organization and the Paris climate agreement, Beijing is swiftly moving to fill the vacuum.

Perhaps none of this will come to pass. China and Russia may pursue short-sighted, ham-handed policies that lead other countries to forgive Trump's bullying. Joe Biden's efforts to reinvigorate U.S. global leadership benefitted greatly from China's wolf warrior diplomacy and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. As a general rule, however, it is unwise to base your strategy on the hope your competitors will misstep.

Or perhaps Secretary of State Marco Rubio and National Security Adviser Mike Waltz can succeed where the national security team in the first Trump administration failed. Like H.R. McMaster, Jim Mattis, and Rex Tillerson, Rubio and Waltz have conventional conservative internationalist views that would have fit with Republican presidential administrations before Trump. They might persuade Trump to see the value of courting friends while focusing his disruption on America's rivals rather than on its allies. But Trump's record offers little reason for optimism on that score. He eventually bristled at the advice that McMaster, Mattis, and Tillerson offered because it ran contrary to how he sees the world. Not surprisingly, none of the three made it to the third year of the first Trump presidency.

In any event, please do give the piece a read. And if you are interested, I also joined Ivo's podcast, World Review, to discuss our article with *Politico's* Matthew Kaminski, who has a recent essay that provides a nice bookend to what Ivo and I wrote.

Oscar Berry assisted in the preparation of this post.

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