

# President Trump's 'Fortress America'

**The foreign policy vision of the new Republican administration: From 'lonely superpower' to 'imperial isolationism'**

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## **The foreign policy vision of the new Republican administration: From 'lonely superpower' to 'imperial isolationism'<sup>1</sup>**

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**ABSTRACT:** The present analysis aims to identify the core elements of the ideological infrastructure that motivates and guides the foreign policy of the Republican administration and President Donald Trump. The research methodology is based on the analysis of presidential discourse and actions, doctrinal documents (e.g., Project 2025), and statements from key figures in the president's inner circle, correlated with their impact on international politics. The central conclusion is that Trump's foreign policy vision in a second term could be characterized as an "imperial isolationism" of Jacksonian and paleoconservative-exemptionalist inspiration, representing a break from traditional U.S. foreign policy, with significant consequences for the international order and relations with allies.

**KEYWORDS:** Donald Trump; Jacksonianism; exemptionalism; imperial isolationism; political discourse; political action.

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<sup>1</sup> This publication draws exclusively on open-source materials. The opinions expressed herein are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the institution.

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## INTRODUCTION

Even before assuming his second term in the White House, Donald Trump embarked on a series of bellicose public statements targeting some of America's traditional allies—Canada, Mexico, Panama, and Denmark. In multiple public appearances, the then-president-elect suggested that [Greenland should become part of the U.S.](#), [Canada should join as the 51st state](#), and [Panama should return the eponymous canal](#). Mexico, for its part, faced threats of a trade war through increased tariffs on goods exported to the U.S. Upon taking office, Donald Trump continued this trajectory, launching trade wars with neighbours, pressuring Denmark over Greenland, and even proposing a U.S. takeover of the Gaza Strip after the current Israel-Hamas conflict—with the intent of transforming it into the "[Riviera of the Middle East](#)," which could be "[better than Monaco](#)."

Not least, his approach to U.S. involvement in resolving the Russo-Ukrainian war suggests, at minimum, a profound shift in perspective regarding America's vision of the friend-foe distinction—recalibrating relations with Russia and Ukraine. We are thus witnessing a succession of actions, decisions, and political statements on the international stage that appear to mark a radical departure from traditional U.S. foreign policy, creating acute uncertainty among the community of states—whether among America's traditional allies (such as NATO members) or its competitors and adversaries (like China, Iran, or even Russia). From this perspective, identifying an "Ariadne's thread" capable of decoding Washington's seemingly contradictory messaging becomes an absolute necessity.

All these developments legitimately compel us to raise a series of questions about the direction of American foreign policy during Donald Trump's second term. What lies behind the new president's bellicose intentions? Is this merely a form of posturing and the characteristically chaotic communication style we came to expect from President Trump during his first term, or can we identify recurring patterns that reveal a coherent model capable of explaining – and even predicting – the political actions of Washington's executive branch? What are the key dimensions of the foreign policy vision defining President Trump's second term?



Thus, the objective of this research is to identify the core elements of the ideological infrastructure that motivates and guides the foreign policy decisions and actions of the Republican administration and President Trump. To this end, I will focus on analyzing the actions, decisions, and statements of the president, members of the Trump administration and cabinet, as well as his political allies during the first month and a half of the new term.

Methodologically, to achieve the research objective, I have chosen to investigate the following sources: on one hand, *presidential discourse and actions* as expressions of the executive branch of government; on the other, a comprehensive *body of texts* that doctrinally and ideologically address the major directions of executive action in a Republican administration (e.g., Project 2025). Thirdly, I have examined *statements and interviews* from figures within the so-called "Trump world" (the president's inner circle), as well as individuals associated with Project 2025 or conservative opinion leaders involved in governance and the Republican Party. Additionally, I have considered as a variable Trump's personality and the ideas he has publicly promoted over the last four decades.

Simultaneously, I determined that merely investigating the aforementioned aspects, while necessary, would not be sufficient in terms of relevance. To address this, I chose to also observe their impact on the international political environment - as *the action(discourse)/reaction dynamic serves as an excellent litmus test* for assessing the consistency and relevance of the identified ideational elements. Thus, *the reiteration and reinforcement of certain ideas and principles within a dynamic context indicate that these are central to the Trump administration* rather than merely transient issues designed to fuel media spectacle.

The gathered information was systematized and analyzed in relation to the four major traditions of U.S. foreign policy thought - Jacksonian, Jeffersonian, Hamiltonian, and Wilsonian - which had previously been operationalized for easier data interpretation along the isolationism/internationalism dimensions, using indicators such as national interest, relations with partners, and international institutions and organizations.

## THE NEW AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY

### Political Lessons from the First Term

Is Trump's Second Term a Repetition or a Continuation of 2016-2020? The answer to this question is absolutely essential for gaining a clear understanding of the current directions in American foreign policy, as well as the coherence of Washington's political actions and decisions. Consequently, before discussing the research findings, the two Trump administrations must be contextualized to clarify that *there is a substantive difference between them*.

In this regard, we can identify the following key elements:

- During his first term, the American president *lacked governance experience* - he didn't fully grasp the subtleties of Washington politics, the power and influence networks, or the key figures who could have supported him.
- He also lacked a ***cohesive and loyal team*** capable of effectively implementing his ideas, as evidenced by frequent personnel changes - Trump *holds the record for the highest staff turnover in White House and cabinet history during a president's first term*.
- While Trump's political vision has remained largely consistent over the decades of his public life, he initially ***lacked a detailed, clear strategy*** for translating his ideas into actionable policies.
- Critically, during his first term Trump didn't enjoy ***unconditional support from the Republican Party***, which was embroiled in internal struggles between MAGA supporters and the neoconservative elite that had dominated the party since Reagan. This resulted in inconsistent policy decisions and frequent pushback even from within his own administration.

These limitations appear completely absent in his current term:

- Trump has capitalized on his first-term experience, now navigating Washington's power circles with much greater dexterity. As I'll demonstrate, his strengthened political position both within and beyond the Republican Party has made him a formidable force in Washington, giving him crucial bargaining power to advance his agenda.

- This experience enabled him to propose (and get Congressional approval for) an [unorthodox yet intensely loyal government team](#) that appears significantly more effective at implementing his decisions and political agenda.

His administration now shares a common set of political values and objectives, with many members involved in drafting the Heritage Foundation's comprehensive 2023 policy blueprint "[Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise](#)" (known publicly as Project 2025). This provides both a clear vision for the presidential transition and a detailed medium-to-long term political program that successfully bridges MAGA and neoconservative agendas. In other words, President Trump now benefits from both a dedicated team and a systematic ideological framework to implement his vision.

- Additionally, being in his final term and *free from electoral pressures* (at least for the time being<sup>3</sup>), Trump can adopt much more decisive political positions both domestically and internationally.

Another critically important element is that during Biden's four-year term, Donald Trump focused on remaking the Republican Party in his own image, ensuring his supporters would emerge victorious in [the internal conflict between neoconservative factions and the MAGA movement](#). The result has been a genuine and seemingly profound transformation of the party, which has shifted several degrees rightward on the political spectrum. So-called Reaganite neoconservatives are now labeled RINOs (Republicans In Name Only), being systematically expelled from the party or marginalized through various methods. The most common tactic has been MAGA candidates challenging them in primaries, accusing them of aligning with the corrupt "deep state" system or being proponents of globalism (a substitute term for the internationalist positions held by neoconservatives). **Donald Trump's strategy for ensuring governance coherence thus appears to be successfully guided by the principle of "Unity Through Loyalty."**

We can therefore see that this is no longer comparable to the 2016-2020 period, when we essentially witnessed an ideologically incoherent governance style focused more on media

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<sup>3</sup> Since Republican Representative Andy Ogles has filed a resolution in the House to amend the 22nd Amendment by raising the presidential term limit from two to three terms, there now exists at least a slight possibility of its passage - [https://ogles.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/ogles.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/PIH-OGLES\\_006%20%28Constitutional%20Amendment%29.pdf](https://ogles.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/ogles.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/PIH-OGLES_006%20%28Constitutional%20Amendment%29.pdf)

spectacle and emotionally charged yet inconsistent populist rhetoric. In 2025, Donald Trump has both a team and a detailed political project—which he's implementing with unwavering determination during at least the first month and a half of his new term—whose ideological foundations I will examine below.

## The Outlines of a New Foreign Policy

The political positions of the American president and his cabinet must be understood within a broader ideological context, which our research has identified as part of long-standing traditions in American political thought—*Jacksonianism* and *exemptionalist<sup>4</sup> paleoconservatism*.

- **1. *Jacksonianism*** is one of the major intellectual traditions in American political thought and, essentially, one of the multiple expressions (alongside Jeffersonianism, Hamiltonianism, and Wilsonianism) of the exceptionalist doctrine reflected in U.S. foreign policy and international relations (Mead, 2002). Jacksonian exceptionalism holds that America's uniqueness lies in its singular dedication to protecting the equality and dignity of individual American citizens (Mead, 2017, 3). Consequently, foreign policy must always serve to enhance the security and prosperity of Americans at home.

This stance was clearly articulated by Secretary of State Marco Rubio during a joint press conference with Costa Rican President Rodrigo Chaves on February 4, 2025, where Rubio conditioned foreign aid on serving the national interest, defined as a "[stronger, more prosperous, and more secure America](#)."

At the same time, Jacksonians are deeply concerned with countering forces (usually domestic) that, in their view, seek to undermine America's exceptional character—transforming the state from a protector into an oppressor (Mead, 2017, 4). Hence, they define patriotism as loyalty to America's exceptionalist principles, coupled with an unyielding intolerance toward internationalist schools of thought (Wilsonian and Hamiltonian). Jacksonians accuse these factions of deliberately diluting America's uniqueness through involvement in "globalist" multilateral arrangements—a point they share with exemptionalist paleoconservatives—which ultimately erode U.S. sovereignty.

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<sup>4</sup> Not to be confused with exceptionalism.

- **2. *Paleoconservatism*** (or the Old Right) is the ideological force behind the Christian-nationalist New Right within MAGA. Marginalized for over half a century, paleoconservatism defines itself in opposition to Reagan-era neoconservatism, which it accuses of betraying the conservative movement's foundational principles. In the early 1990s, paleoconservatives briefly entered the spotlight with Pat Buchanan's Republican presidential campaign. [Like Trump today](#), Buchanan invoked American patriotism to "put America First," blaming the GOP establishment for embracing a "[globalist, interventionist, open-borders ideology](#)." This remains a central theme in Trump's rhetoric and fuels a wide range of conspiracy theories on the American right—some of which the current president himself has endorsed.
- **3. *Exemptionalism*** refers to a particular (and historically marginal, yet recurrent) stance in American politics, arguing that any U.S. engagement in multilateral institutions directly undermines its ability to self-govern (Stewart, 2025; cf. Ruggie in Ignatieff, 2005). It is an extreme form of Jacksonianism that, combined with paleoconservative ideas, structures the foreign policy vision of the current Washington administration.

**The Jacksonian Realism of President Trump**, as evidenced through his speeches, interviews, and various other public interventions, is constructed upon two principal dimensions: anti-internationalist independencism (exemptionalism), originating in the 19th century, and an [exceptionalist vision](#) that, in Trump's case, manifests as a distinct nostalgia for the [Gilded Age](#) of the late 19th century. This vision is characterized by: a. The exponential growth of American economic power through rapid manufacturing expansion; b. The oligarchization of the economy, marked by relatively weak labor market regulations, [aggressive protectionism with high tariff barriers](#), and an extremely lenient corporate taxation system; c. [Aggressive territorial expansionism](#). To these elements must be added [economic nationalism](#), embodied in the autarkic myth of "Fortress America"—shielded by tariff barriers and protectionist policies—which, in President Trump's rhetoric, takes the form of the claim that "the American nation is being plundered" by its global trade partners.

Of course, we must also account for Trump's personal disposition. He sees himself as a [staunch successor to Andrew Jackson's tradition](#), adopting an aggressive (some might say authoritarian) presidential model akin to [Richard Nixon's](#), while also expressing [deep](#)



[admiration for President McKinley](#). Additionally, his [propensity for conspiracy theories](#) significantly shapes his [political discourse and actions](#), particularly concerning the exemptionalist dimension.

Consequently, the foreign policy approach of Trump's second administration is far clearer and more trenchant than during his 2016-2020 term. What was once mere criticism of the post-1945 liberal international order (see Clarke and Ricketts, 2016, 14) has now evolved into an overt challenge, framed through the lens of Jacksonian and paleoconservative exemptionalist tradition in the name of national interest.

The only unpredictable variable—just as in the 2016-2020 period—remains Trump himself. While his decisions are now grounded in a relatively clear set of political ideas and values, they remain subject to his uncompromising, highly assertive, mercurial, and authoritarian personality type.

## **ELEMENTS OF THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION'S FOREIGN POLICY VISION – JACKSONIAN-INSPIRED *IMPERIAL ISOLATIONISM***

- **Economic Dimension:** The administration's economic vision entails a [deliberate decoupling from global supply chains](#) and an ambitious effort to reconstitute the United States as a manufacturing superpower, mirroring its economic dominance during the latter half of the 19th century and the first six decades of the 20th century. This strategy simultaneously signals a marked transition toward an *expansionist model* - securing access to critical resources, markets, and even territories through unequal bilateral agreements, economic warfare, coercive pressure, and the explicit threat or actual use of force as a legitimate instrument of national interest, including against traditional allies. A characteristic manifestation of this approach will be the seemingly excessive and strategically opaque application of tariffs in international economic relations. The theoretical underpinnings of this strategy rest on two core beliefs: first, that import tariffs will eventually generate sufficient revenue to mitigate the precarious situation created by America's uncontrolled and escalating external debt; second, that comprehensive protectionist policies may ultimately enable the complete elimination of income taxation. Without delving into excessive detail, the new Trump administration seeks to address the socioeconomic challenges stemming from the post-

1960s transition from manufacturing to an innovation and service-based economy, including the disruptive effects of production automation, through the implementation of 19th century policy solutions that are fundamentally incongruent with 21st century economic realities.

- **Political Dimension:** The administration's political approach [reconceptualizes American national interest](#) through a dual lens of domestic economic gain and maximal independence from any international institutional obligations that might constrain U.S. self-governance. This necessitates the abandonment of *Pax Americana* as the hegemonic model that underpinned the post-WWII international order, the rejection of multilateralism, and the adoption of flexible, interest-driven bilateral or even unilateral positions. Given that the dominant paradigm remains exceptionally constrained - deliberately disregarding the complexity and nuances of international politics and economics - we can anticipate ostensibly contradictory actions and decisions in the near future. However, these can all be subsumed under the common denominator of a reductionist national interest framework, understood in simplistic terms and consequently proving counterproductive.
- **Security Dimension:** The United States will participate in or initiate security arrangements only when either its direct interests are implicated or when facing an immediate threat or act of aggression. This necessitates a comprehensive reevaluation of existing security commitments involving the American state, as well as its global network of bilateral partnerships, filtered through the aforementioned considerations<sup>5</sup>. Currently, only two categories of interests can be clearly identified: national and global-national interests. The former primarily concerns the welfare of the American people, conceptualized as the global protection of elements essential for preserving and enhancing U.S. citizen prosperity. The latter relates to preventing or containing nuclear proliferation, understood as an existential threat to the American state.

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<sup>5</sup> A pertinent example in this regard is provided by the [U.S. military strikes against Houthi targets in Yemen](#).

## CONSEQUENCES

- ***The U.S. becomes a de facto revisionist state in the international system*** – calling into question not only the institutions and organizations fundamental to the international order but also the territorial integrity of certain states within the system, such as Canada or Denmark.
- ***A collapse of trust in the U.S. as an ally or economic partner:*** Even if the U.S. attempts to return to the old order in the future, Pandora's box has been opened. Traditional U.S. allies—whether in Europe, North America, or Asia—already view interactions with Washington's policymakers with suspicion, considering decoupling from U.S.-integrated systems (whether security or economic) to diversify their partnership options and compensate for America's absence, unpredictability, and limited engagement.
- ***A likely reinvention of NATO, possibly even without U.S. participation.*** In any case, security management on the European continent will fall to European powers, which will need to find the most effective way to align their interests around a common vision. This will most likely center on ***preserving—at the regional level—a rules-based liberal order*** (or some variant of it), with military and security arrangements reflecting a continued commitment to liberal democratic values.
- ***A high probability of triggering a recession or even a global economic crisis by late 2025 or early 2026, as a direct result of the shocks caused by the U.S. attempt to reorder international economic relations according to its own interests.***
- ***The U.S. withdrawal from key international institutional arrangements or organizations fundamental to the global order—such as the UN, WTO, etc.*** This would be a continuation of an existing trend, following the abandonment of the Paris Accords, exit from the World Health Organization, and other UN-system bodies (e.g., the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and UNESCO—actions that, at the time of writing, were under consideration).
- The adoption (or mere imitation for "conformity") of foreign policy directions similar to those pursued by Washington ***will prove economically and politically unsustainable*** for small and medium-sized states in the medium to long term.



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