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A New America? The Setting

By Adam Garfinkle

SYNOPSIS

Pax Americana is over abroad because American Exceptionalism, as we know it, is over at home. A new political imperative is promulgated: the right not to be right, not to be reasonable. A profound change seems to be setting its reach on the home front with yet undefined contours for American foreign policy.

COMMENTARY

At noon on January 20, 2025, a new era began in the United States of America, one that represents a profound deviation from the historically predicates of its Founding. The second election and inauguration of Donald Trump as President marks a discontinuity even sharper than that of the American Civil War two and a half centuries ago.

That discontinuity, long incubating in American popular culture and now flowed downstream into its main-street politics, will affect not only American domestic order but its foreign and national security policies, as well. The Liberal International Order, *Pax Americana* for short, is now over because belief in American Exceptionalism is over.

This is not because of pressures brought against the United States by foreign competitors and adversaries, but rather by dint of *We the People's* own hand. And what is happening is not to be confused with "decline": The United States still owns about 26 per cent of world gross national product, just as it did during the so-called unipolar moment at Cold War's end 33 years ago. This is a cultural paradigm shift with 360-degree political ramifications.

The impact on global geopolitics will in due course be profound, resembling the regional shatter belt of uncertainty and insecurity that always attends the collapse or,

in this rare instance the self-abnegation, of a major power. The shatter belt effect has most recently been illustrated by the collapsed USSR's wake, but in the US case, given the dominant role of the United States in creating and managing the post-World War II order, the coming shatter belt's roiled periphery will encompass nearly the whole world.

A Second Coming Unlike the First

Have no doubt: The shift in US policy will be far more profound than during Trump's first term. Disruptive as that was – especially for American allies who sensed a strong new disposition against the very idea of genuinely cooperative relationships as opposed to coldly transactional ones – it was but an inchoate hint of change compared to what is about to unfold.

Trump's first term was inflected by four limitations: (1) many in the Republican Party (GOP) did not buy into his Make America Great Again (MAGA) rhetoric and they occupied positions of influence in the bureaucracies (civil service, foreign service, professional intelligence community), and included Trump's own coterie of political appointees; (2) he lost the popular vote in November 2016, shrouding his mandate; (3) he was eight years younger and had no idea how the Federal government or the Presidency actually worked; and (4) his 2016 campaign was designed not to win election but to be an "infomercial" for the Trump brand, meaning preparations for taking office were rudimentary at best.

That was then; now: (1) the GOP and party "normies" like R.J. MacMaster, John Bolton, John Kelley, and James Mattis will have few damage-limiting counterparts in the second Trump Administration; (2) Trump won not only the popular vote but now has both houses of Congress and most of the Federal judiciary – including the Supreme Court – in his pocket; (3) he has a better idea of what the powers of the Presidency are or can be, especially now that he believes himself to be above the law; and (4) he and the MAGA brain trust have spent four years planning for the moment at hand with the help of right-wing think-tanks like the Heritage Foundation and its Project 2025 plan for reactionary upheaval.

What Happened Before the Inauguration

The transition period between November 5, 2024, and January 20, 2025, hinted at the coming policy discontinuity. Three granular aspects of it stand out, as does one huge general aspect.

First, no incoming Administration since the 1947 National Security Act has sought to bypass the security clearance process for its prospective Senate-confirmed appointees. That, based on the MAGA conspiracy mentality postulating a Deep State, has made the transition shallow and difficult. As important, Trump's nomination of Tulsi Gabbard as Director of National Intelligence has put key US allies on notice that sensitive intelligence sharing, even among the Anglospheric Five Eyes, is a thing of the past.

Second, no incoming Administration has proposed so many manifestly unqualified and inappropriate candidates for Senate confirmation, candidates that in many cases have

expressed opposition to the very missions of their assigned departments and agencies. No previous Administration has stated from the top a willingness to indulge in routine recess appointments and long subsist with “acting” departmental Secretaries and agency Directors should the Senate decline to confirm White House candidates.

Third, while all incoming Administrations are partisan/political to some extent, none have summarily fired departmental and agency appointment holders from the National Security Council staff, as Trumpian Michael Waltz has done. Another Trumpian, Michael Anton as Director of Policy Planning in the State Department, has required a “loyalist oath” be administered: it consists of explicit attestation that the November 2020 Presidential election was stolen from Donald Trump by a Democratic/Deep State conspiracy, and that Joe Biden was not a legitimately elected President.

Since few employees of the targeted relevant grades believe that to be true, those willing to attest to the Big Lie to get a job will have ended their careers if a non-MAGA administration again comes to power. That will sire an acute adverse selection process for certain appointment holders at the NSC and perhaps elsewhere in the wider national security interagency set-up. No “Team-B” reality checks on ideological groupthink can be expected, as existed in Trump’s first term.

What is the Meaning of What Happened?

Donald Trump’s re-election and post-election manoeuvres have in effect ratified the Big Lie as extant truth in the deeply polarised American psyche, even though no evidence for its truth exists or ever has. Trump and MAGA have thus reprised in our own time José Ortega y Gasset’s observation from *The Revolt of the Masses* from nearly a century ago: The Fascist and Syndicalist species, he wrote, were “characterized by . . . a type of man who did not care to give reasons or even to be right, but who was simply resolved to impose his opinions. That was the novelty: the right not to be right, not to be reasonable: ‘the reason of unreason’.” concretised a political novelty: the right not to be right, not to be reasonable.

Thus has the 6 January 2021 insurrection at the Capitol, summoned by Trump to foil the certification of the November 2020 election, become through the sheer insistence on not being right or reasonable – or fact-based – a patriotic uprising against a fraud-perpetrating deep state conspiracy. Its jailed criminals, pardoned and released on Trump’s first day as expected, are now hailed from the pinnacle of American political power as freedom fighters.

Having managed to transform a failed coup attempt into a new story of patriotic bravery, ratified by the result of the 5 November 2024 US presidential election, the MAGA movement has relocated America’s political process onto the set of a surrealist Hollywood movie. Truth has become whatever hegemonic narrative can be made to stick, by any means necessary. The future path of the United States of America, having never in two and a half centuries of independent life experienced any form of collective madness on this scale, is now anyone’s guess.

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