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## **A New America? Global Security Implications**

*By Adam Garfinkle*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*The world is about to become a meaner, poorer, and more dangerous place for want of America as a provider of common security goods.*

### **COMMENTARY**

Even before, but especially since November 5, 2024, an avalanche of commentary and prognostication has tumbled down to the still-reading public regarding American foreign and national security policy under a second Trump Administration. It is sprawled nearly everywhere from nearly everywhere in many languages, from genuine experts and experienced policymakers to mere journalists and social media trolls alike.

The problem, even with serious commentary, is that few of its authors have training in psychiatry. They are thus repeating the error of Trump's first term in over-thinking that he is granularly predictable. What David Brooks wrote in his May 17, 2017, *New York Times* column is still true; indeed, it is probably truer now that a clear electoral victory has swelled Trump's ego:

"We've got this perverse situation in which the vast analytic powers of the entire world are being spent trying to understand a guy whose thoughts are often just six fireflies beeping randomly in a jar".

That said, a consensus of experts does exist based on the known parameters of Trump's worldview and its likely impact on US policies insofar as the President takes an active interest in them. And his interest focus will matter given the deep divisions in the President's retinue, as illustrated by the vicious spat over the H1-B visa programme and early disagreement concerning TikTok.

It's cheap fun and an easy attention-draw to ridicule expert assessments, but in this case, Dean Acheson's quip that "things are not always as they seem, but sometimes they are" comes in handy. The general expert assessment is as correct as it seems, this time around, tempered by the usual caveats, and that alone provides sound advice for foreign governments: Keep your head down, don't act weak so as to attract the attention of someone who always punches down, and mostly sane second- or third-tier US officials will be your interlocutors.

## **The Foreign Policy Fallout**

Trump's fulminations on the eve of the Inaugural against Denmark, Canada, and Panama – all treaty allies or partners – with nary a disparaging word directed toward powerful authoritarian countries show his penchant for punching down. Trump prefers to intimidate small and friendly countries than risk annoying more powerful and ruthless dictators.

More importantly, the punching down instinct vividly displays Trump's zero-sum, only-winners-and-losers "law of the jungle" mindset. He ridicules advocacy of human rights, democracy promotion, international organisations and "community", and any and every appeal to the "better angels" of human nature. Trump doesn't believe there is any such nature, only effusions of illusions he equates with weakness. Isaiah Berlin described another person who shared Trump's disdain for bourgeois morality: He

". . . sought to obliterate all references to eternal justice, the equality of man, the rights of individuals or nations, the liberty of conscience, the fight for civilization, and other phrases that were the stock in trade . . . of the democratic movements of his time; he looked upon these as so much worthless cant".

Wherefrom this quote? Berlin's 1939 biography of.....Karl Marx. Ironic, no?

The zero-sum, Social Darwinist, "law of the jungle" mindset of America First 2.0 – again, insofar as Trump wishes to actively engage himself in setting policy directions – predicts to seven changes in the US policy that the world has come to expect and rely on.

1. There can be no genuine alliances, only transactional relationships predicated on relative strengths and weaknesses. The US alliance system will endure on paper, but its heart and credibility will soon be shredded.
2. There can be no concept of common security goods, for it contradicts the premise of a zero-sum world. The likelihood that in a world with no normative core of shared global values and interests the United States would have to spend a lot more to get a lot less security simply doesn't occur to Trump.
3. The longstanding US policy of supplying massive humanitarian assistance in the face of overwhelming natural disasters – like the December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami – will end. So will budgets for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and US participation in the functional agencies of the United Nations drop sharply – or cease altogether. The MAGA

world thinks of foreign assistance and development capacity-building as an unwonted charity, exactly the same way it thinks of welfare at home.

4. The idea of binding or even useful international law and international cooperation to confront common environmental and human rights challenges (like trafficking in persons) will attract scant support from a second Trump Administration. Similarly, functionally oriented regional organisations like ASEAN will be dismissed as feckless and so pointless. Trump will probably not attend the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) opening session, and the Secretary of State will probably not visit ASEAN conclaves.
5. International trade will be seen not as a mutually beneficial spinoff of comparative advantage but only as a winners-and-losers competition. Tariffs may harm all sides from a narrow economic perspective, but Trump will apply them when they hurt foreigners more than they hurt Americans.
6. Trump will increase the number of donor ambassadors relative to Foreign Service Officers (FSO), because he disparages the ethos of the professional Foreign Service and desires more direct influence via his chosen envoys. The clout of FSO Deputy Chiefs of Missions will ebb in most cases.
7. US policy will be untethered from analytical assessment of its interests and bound instead to Trump's prickly and unpredictable sense of *amour propre*. US isolationism will thus be prone to unpredictable unilateralist military spasms of uncertain nature and consequence.

## Reactions

The predictable and predicted general reactions and associated outcomes to these changes are essentially threefold.

1. In the absence of a more or less disinterested, distanced dispute mediator and resource provider, most of the 194 members of the United Nations will be forced to rely more on self-help. In some key cases, that will lead to a desire to acquire weapons of mass destruction as an alternative to the direct and indirect balm formerly provided by the US security umbrella. WMD proliferation married to the uncertain consequences of marrying Artificial Intelligence to military systems may create structural instability in the global security environment.
2. Second, the US has never been "the indispensable nation" in the late Madeleine Albright's use of the phrase, but it has been in the late Samuel Huntington's understanding of it, to wit: The United States cannot have its way without allies, but the world cannot get anything important done at the global level without the United States. Hence, a great many worthy projects will fail of conception and implementation. Everyone will consequently be worse off.
3. Third, the absence of the US as a reliable guardian against the outbreak of regional war will likely induce excessive risk-taking in some actors and excessive caution in others.

“The strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must”, famously wrote Thucydides in the Melian Dialogue of 416 BCE. That is the revenant world before us, only with nuclear weapons. If you have never read the Melian Dialogue, this would be a good time to do so.

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