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# Donald Trump's Spheres of Influence Strategic Doctrine: What is it? And What Are the Global Consequences of it?

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*The second Trump administration is disrupting both longstanding U.S. foreign policy and the foundations of the liberal world order. Under Trump 2.0, America has junked its strategic policy of global liberal hegemony in favor of a doctrine of spheres of influence. At bottom, Washington now pursues a coercive, rapacious, power-driven approach to the broader Western hemisphere, threatening and bullying neighbors and allies, while at the same time leaving Russia and China with the requisite space and freedom to do as they wish in their own geopolitical backyards. The dramatic transformation in U.S. foreign policy is rapidly ushering in a new global order that is grounded in a tripolar structure (U.S., Russia, and China) that privileges great power interests and aggression at the expense of the old rules, norms, and institutions of the post-WWII era. As the old order is weakened, if not wiped clean away, the international system today lacks firm guardrails, and the security of the global weak is especially at risk. What can somewhat ameliorate this emerging problem is a non-aggression compact, or even a concert, among the three superpowers, as this could dampen the prospect of a hegemonic war and keep each out of the others' sphere of influence.*

Donald Trump is now roughly five months into his second non-consecutive term as U.S. president, and in that short time his administration has made a number of foreign policy statements and actions that have drawn considerable scrutiny and ire—inside America and abroad. While it is very early in Trump's second term, it is worth the effort to determine what the words and deeds of the Trump administration might mean for U.S. foreign policy and beyond.

The foreign policy of Trump's first term was a mishmash of unilateralism, transactionalism, economic nationalism, and nascent retrenchment. Trump's inexperience and the presence of pro-establishment senior level officials in his inner circle, in combination, served to stymie the kind of clear, decisive and bold change in

U.S. foreign policy that he promised on the campaign trail. At the end of Trump's first term in office, the foreign policy status quo largely, though shakily, held. Surely, America's overseas commitments were questioned by allies, the U.S. seemed to be a half-hearted supporter of the existing global order, and even minor appeals to human rights and democracy were abandoned, still, America under Trump mostly continued to pursue a policy of liberal hegemony. The U.S. remained the dominant global power and projected it around the world as it desired—as evidenced by the use of force in Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, Yemen, and Iraq (where Iranian General Qassem Soleimani was killed in a brazen attack).

In contrast to Trump 1.0, the early signs of Trump's second term clearly show that he and his team are fully intent on moving the U.S. in a different direction. Trump 2.0 is embracing a set of foreign policies that can be collectively best described as a "spheres of influence"[1] doctrine. Specifically, I argue that The White House is actively pursuing a doctrine of American dominance in the Western Hemisphere and retrenchment from most of the rest of the world, effectively ceding those areas to Russia and Chinese expansionism in exchange for more tranquil bilateral ties. The effect is that the U.S. is actively weakening and abandoning the post-World War II collaborative, Western-dominated order, which gave rise to a host of international laws, rules, and norms, it crucially helped to create and support, in favor of a tripolar world (the U.S., Russia, and China) dominated by power, force, and coercion.

This paper proceeds in three parts. First, I discuss the domestic factors that have caused or enabled Donald Trump to push the U.S. away from its longstanding policy of global leadership, support for human rights and democracy, and strengthening and propping up the liberal world order and toward a spheres of influence doctrine. Second, I explicate the nuts and bolts of Trump's spheres of influence doctrine, showing how U.S. policy might play out in the broader Americas, Europe, the Indo-Pacific, the Middle East, and Africa. Finally, the paper distills the possible tsunamic implications of a spheres of influence doctrine for the global order.

## Domestic Sources of U.S. Foreign Policy Change

For the bulk of the post-cold war era, the U.S. has pursued a strategic policy that has been widely labeled as "liberal hegemony" (Walt, 2018; Mearsheimer, 2018). This

[1] Following on the work of scholars such as Hans Morgenthau (1948) and John Mearsheimer (2001), I define spheres of influence as regions, or parts of regions, in which the great powers exercise significant diplomatic, economic, military influence over foreign nations' external policies and behavior and at times over their internal domestic processes and policies. The great powers seek spheres of influence because of the strategic benefits they can provide or enhance, such as resources, raw materials, buffer zones, power projection capabilities, and security, among other things.

policy was all about supporting democratic movements and strengthening existing democracies, standing up for global human rights, encouraging free trade, and working through regional and global international institutions and agreements. Liberal hegemony aimed to refashion the international order to serve U.S. interests and to remake countries in America's image. Still, the last 35 years of U.S. foreign policy, no matter how well intentioned, has wrought considerable excesses and overexpansion through perpetual wars, foreign occupations, and endless military missions. That, in turn, over the last 10 to 15 years, has sparked a political backlash inside the U.S. against an active, interventionist, global foreign policy among citizens and elites who think America has devoted far too much time and resources overseas and believe it needs to better attend to domestic issues and problems.

Donald Trump capitalized on the shifting foreign policy mood of the American electorate to capture the presidency in 2016. He ran on and tried to implement a policy program of unilateralism, economic nationalism, and retrenchment—the core components of the Trump America First agenda. While Trump's base of political support enthusiastically embraced these policies, the complete implementation of his agenda was domestically stymied and ultimately large parts of liberal hegemony were left intact: the free trading system was upheld, U.S. relations with allies and partners were shaken but maintained, global institutions were heavily criticized but not fatally enervated, and America's foreign troop presence was still large and untouched. At bottom, Trump's first term in office was littered with various internal axes of resistance—from the so-called Deep State, Trump's cabinet, and Democrats in Congress, among others—that protested against downsizing U.S. foreign policy and American national interests. Trump 2.0 faces a radically different domestic political landscape. President Trump is in a much more favorable position, relative to when he first entered office in January 2017, to single-handedly reshaping American foreign policy in line with his America First policy platform.

The below three factors are the necessary conditions that have allowed Trump the possibility to significantly mold U.S. foreign policy around his preferences and attitudes. Without seismic domestic political change in the U.S., Trump could not implement his foreign policy vision as holistically as he has so far.

First, the Trump administration is filled with "Make America Great Again" (or MAGA) loyalists who are unlikely to resist or gum up Trump policy and its implementation; establishment figures are few and far between in Trump's new inner

circle, and those who fit that description, like Secretary of State Marco Rubio, know that loyalty is the key to their continued tenure in office.

Second, the White House has the benefit of learning from Trump 1.0 and has prepared well in-advance a whole-of-government working document—the infamous Project 2025—that presented a template to implement the MAGA agenda across the U.S. government and in various policy domains, including foreign policy (Project 2025). As a result, Team Trump came into office on January 20, 2025 fully prepared to hit the ground running. Regardless of what one thinks of the substance of Trump's second term foreign policy, a good argument could be made that it has been much more cohesive and integrated than what his administration demonstrated during Trump 1.0.

Third, Trump entered office in 2025 with the political wind at his back. The domestic legal U.S. cases against him have been dismissed. He won the November 2024 election by a bigger margin than he did in 2016. And the Democrats are demoralized, weak politically, and lack effective leadership to counter the barrage of news coming out of the White House on an almost hourly basis. At this point, Trump believes he has a mandate to impose his MAGA agenda on the U.S. government and U.S. domestic and foreign policy—indeed, he has voiced this very argument in public on several occasions. It is in this context that Trump and his team have moved quickly to implement a new policy agenda, before the Democrats, activists, academics and other groups in society even had a chance to fully organize and mobilize against it.

## Spheres of Influence

Put simply, the Trump administration is pursuing a spheres of influence doctrine. There are two parts to it. First, the U.S. seeks to dominate its perceived sphere of influence throughout the Americas and beyond. The second part of Trump's emerging doctrine points toward letting China and Russia do what they want in their own spheres of influence.

### *Power and Coercion in America's Backyard*

Whereas the 1823 Monroe Doctrine has been largely interpreted as referring to America's opposition to rival powers maintaining a physical presence or exerting influence in Latin America and the Caribbean, Trump appears to revive and broaden the term by incorporating upper North America and the Arctic as well (DeYoung, 2025). That Trump has broached the issue of seizing territory of foreign nations, and especially the territory of foreign allies, has understandably triggered fierce criticism—from the leaders of these countries and from foreign policy critics in the U.S. After all, it would violate

international law and settled international norms against territorial aggrandizement. Moreover, the U.S. itself has stood against redrawing the boundaries of countries and conquering territory throughout the post-WW2 era. And it has been a major bulwark against Russia doing exactly that in Ukraine and against Chinese provocative military moves against Taiwan and in the South and East China Seas. Turning against a fairly longstanding and conventional part of U.S. foreign policy worries countries in Trump's target, risks further knock-on violence and conflict over land and access to waterways from a host of revisionist actors worldwide, and threatens to destabilize the entire liberal world order.

Nevertheless, there is a logic that underpins Trump's push for an expanded, upgraded Monroe Doctrine. The ostensible goal is to ramp up U.S. power and block rival nations from encroaching in what the White House sees as America's local sphere of influence. In this case, the White House sees America's sphere of influence as extending from the Arctic, where Canada and Greenland meet those waters, down to the tip of South America, if not beyond. Additionally, to the east and west of the U.S., of course, the North Pacific and Atlantic Oceans also sit within America's sphere of influence. The Trump administration would like to block rival powers, particularly Russia and China, from permanently having a presence anywhere in those areas (Holland, Slattery, and Reid, 2025). Removing the presence of these powers enhances the security of the U.S., quite naturally. It extends the buffer zone which protects the U.S. homeland on all sides, keeping the world's second and third strongest powers effectively at a very long arm's length away from American turf. The remaining countries inside America's sphere of influence are largely weak, docile, and on non-hostile terms with the U.S., and so they pose little security concern to the Trump administration.

At the same time, the threat to seize territory from Panama, Canada, and Greenland (Denmark) has likely been designed to extract raw material power from and tighten America's influence over these nations. Already, Trump has played a role in toppling Justin Trudeau from power in Canada, and in Trudeau's place, Mark Carney, might be a prime minister more willing to negotiate with the White House (Murphy, 2025). In other words, the U.S. is coercing and bullying Canada, Mexico, Panama and Greenland (Denmark) with the ostensible goal of reaping a wide set of concessions—economic, political, security, and so on. Trump will likely settle for the creation of more military bases, cheaper shipping rates, changes in the terms of trade to America's advantage, and greater control over natural resources, and the like in/from these nations, rather than outright conquest or annexation of them. Additionally, with the U.S.

seemingly tightening its grip on the Americas, Trump will likely exert pressure on these countries to limit their public criticism of the U.S. and of the White House in particular.

*Retrenchment in Europe*

The U.S. plan to retrench starts in Europe. In Trump's first term, he threatened to remove the U.S. from NATO. Weakening America's commitment to NATO is on the table, according to reports, as is downsizing, if not removing—either partially or completely—American troops stationed in Europe (Kube, Lee, and Tsirkin, 2025; Lubold, DeLuce, and Kube, 2025). Retrenchment in Europe is also evident in Trump's efforts to broker peace in Ukraine. Trump has effectively let Putin off the hook for any war crimes or for initiating the war by portraying Ukraine as an aggressor (Spike, 2025) and blocking a UN resolution condemning Russian action (DeYoung, Hudson, and O'Grady, 2025). The Trump administration, via its Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, has signed off on Russia keeping Crimea and approximately twenty percent of Ukraine's eastern territory (Cook and Copp, 2025). Moreover, the U.S. is uninterested in giving Ukraine any post-war security guarantees or consenting to NATO membership for Ukraine anytime soon, which has caused alarm in Ukraine and European capitals (Gus, Barigazzi, and Kayali, 2025). The Trump administration has made it manifestly clear that it is up to the Europeans to provide military assistance and security guarantees to Ukraine going forward: Trump's position is that the U.S. is done protecting Ukraine, seeing it as not worth further investment and believing that America has gotten ripped off for what it has already contributed to Ukraine's defense.[2]

Trump's abandonment of Ukraine should prompt security experts to recall Thucydides' famous dictum in the Melian Dialog: "The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must." Ukraine has to suffer the indignities of losing territory because it is a weak, mid-sized country that left itself open and vulnerable to its stronger, more aggressive neighbor in Russia. Trump has adopted a harsh interpretation of international relations that accords respect and legitimacy to what the great powers do in the world, regardless if they violate any sense of moral or international law and human rights.

There are four main drivers of America's whiplash-like shift on the war in Ukraine—from pro-Ukraine and pro-Zelensky under Biden to pro-Russia and pro-Putin

[2] This is why the Trump administration is seeking the so-called "rare earths minerals deal." There was some initial speculation that U.S. acquisition of such minerals from Ukraine would be exchanged for the presence of U.S. troops there. But instead, Trump sees the minerals deal as pack payment for American military support for Zelensky and his nation.

with Trump back in the White House. First, while much has been written about how Trump likes foreign leaders who flatter him (Kanno-Youngs, 2025), what is even more important in Trump's worldview are the leaders who preside over large territories, strong militaries, and powerhouse economies. Put simply, Trump respects, admires, and sees as a peer Russia's Vladimir Putin and China's Xi Jinping—not because they lead authoritarian states, though Trump undoubtedly would like the domestic freedom to do what he pleases—because they rule formidable, powerful nations, ones that, in Trump's probable estimation, sit alongside the U.S. in the same echelon of great powers. Over the last ten years Trump has consistently used flowery language ("smart," "genius," "brilliant") to praise Putin and Xi. Other leaders who govern weaker states, including U.S. allies, are routinely ridiculed as "losers" and "weak," and, in Trump's view, are subject to the whims of big foreign powers and should receive little sympathy when bullied and taken advantage.

Second, Trump believes there are strategic benefits to cozying up to Russia. He has stated that he thinks he can split Russia from its rogue's gallery of partners, particularly China. In an October 2024 interview with Tucker Carlson, Trump declared that:

> *When I was a young guy, I loved, I always loved the whole thing, the concept of the history, and all of the things that can happen. The one thing — and I had a professor at the Wharton School of Finance, but we had history classes also.*
>
> *He said the one thing you never want to happen is you never want Russia and China uniting. We united them, because of the oil. We united them. Biden united them. It's a shame, the stupidity of what they have done.*
>
> *I'm going to have to un-unite them, and I think I can do that, too. I have to un-unite them. (Roll Call, 2024)*

That is a sensible, laudable goal, given that China is already a formidable power on the world stage and will likely be a full-spectrum peer competitor to the U.S. in the next 25 years if not before then. However, if that really is a serious goal of Trump, he would not—or at least should not—have announced it publicly. Why tell China what the U.S. is going to try to do on his watch? Why give China an incentive to double down on its relationship with Moscow, making it even stronger and more durable? Moreover, the so-called "Reverse Nixon" maneuver is unlikely to work, since Russia and China have a very strong relationship, built over decades, and based on a wide array of common

political, economic, and security interests. Plus, even if Russia was willing to let China go in exchange for better longstanding relations with Washington, it is doubtful that China would be content to let Russia leave its side. After all, Russia is China's useful junior partner that frustrates and undermines Europe, covers its back diplomatically in international meetings and institutions, aids and assists like-minded authoritarian regimes around the world, and weakens aspects of the liberal world order.

Instead, there are probably other strategic factors at play. More likely is that Trump sees benefits from upgraded ties and more frequent bilateral cooperation. Improved ties to Moscow means the chances of a U.S.-Russian war dramatically decline. Many on the right for years have lamented America's support for Ukraine because of the fear that escalating conflict between Ukraine and Russia could drag in the U.S., and by extension Europe, which would then put the world on the brink of World War III. Additionally, if the U.S. and Russia get to the point that they become geopolitical partners, they could cooperate on issues like nuclear non-proliferation, Arctic exploration and resource sharing, counterterrorism, and artificial intelligence. There are also economic benefits that Trump is considering, as it seems like he would like to pursue an economic reset between both countries, particularly jump starting U.S. business and investment opportunities in Russia. And on a related note, Putin himself "said in an interview with Russian state television that he is open to offering the United States access to rare minerals in Russian-occupied territory in Ukraine, as well as in Russia" (Kube, Lee, and De Luce, 2025).

Third, Trump's inner circle on national security is perfectly content to support a Russia-friendly policy. Unlike Trump 1.0, when members of Trump's staff like Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Secretary of Defense James Mattis, and Chief of Staff John Kelly played "bad cop" to Trump's "good cop" in dealings with and debates about Russia, there is relative harmony and uniformity in America's Russia policy. Trump's national security personnel these days regularly spout platitudes and at times outright falsities about Russia, showing a reluctance to blame Russia for any number of misdeeds abroad and at home. As just one example, in Vice President J.D. Vance's appearance at the 2025 Munich Security Conference, he largely waved off Russian meddling in European political systems (Atkinson, 2025), and Vance has a history of voicing on the record that he cares little about Ukraine and doesn't see Russian behavior as particularly predatory or aggressive (Sampson, 2024). And other Trump key advisers, like National Security Adviser Michael Waltz, Secretary of State Marco Rubio, and Defense chief Pete Hegseth, have publicly shielded Russia from U.S. media criticism, played up the idea of

a U.S.-Russian rapprochement, and lauded Trump's peace initiatives in Ukraine. Maybe these folks question Trump's Russia policy behind closed doors, but probably not, given the heavy emphasis that Trump reportedly put on loyalty—to him and to the America First agenda—in his second term hiring decisions (Keleman and Bowman, 2024; Lee, Madhani, and Colvin, 2025).

Certainly, Trump had good personal rapport and political relations with Putin in his first term, and that has already continued in the early days of his second term, despite the occasional hiccup. Trump has had several phone calls with Putin, orchestrated prisoner exchanges with Russia, and plans to meet with Putin soon. Recall that in Trump's first term, the U.S. had two Russia policies—one from the White House, which was friendly and grounded in good leader-to-leader relations, and a second one from Congress, the State Department, and the Pentagon, which was firm and tough, aimed at keeping Putin and Russia in a box. Those days are gone. Not only have Trump's national security team adopted a Russia-friendly stance, so has the entire Republican Party (with a few exceptions), which controls both the House and the Senate. Everyone around Trump has fallen in line with respect to Russia and all of the thorny issues that are connected to it. Absent any countervailing arguments or pressure from his national security staff and key advisers and Congress, and so far there are none, Trump's position on Russia and Putin and the war in Ukraine will continue to win the day.

Fourth, we should also consider the affinity that MAGA-world personalities and influencers in the U.S have for Russia. Many of them see Putin and Russia as political darlings and kin—in Putin, United Russia, and the entire Kremlin, they see fellow nationalists and conservatives who unabashedly crack down against political liberals, the LGBTQ+ community, immigrants, and other frowned-upon societal groups and movements (Dixon and Abbakumova, 2024). While this might seem trivial, it is not. These personalities, like Tucker Carlson, with their millions of followers and hundreds of millions of page/video-views, drive a narrative of Russia being put upon and put down, misjudged and misunderstood, and a force for good in a world of evil. This narrative about Russia dominates MAGA echo chambers and keeps Trump's base supportive and in sync with his moves to appease and establish friendlier ties with Russia. In short, the right-wing narratives about Putin and Russia reduce the political costs Trump suffers from pursuing a foreign policy that benefits Moscow.

Ultimately, what does this all add up to? Reports indicate that Russia is justifiably ecstatic with the transition from the Biden/Harris government back to Team Trump (Ramirez and Dickinson, 2025). Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said, "The new

[U.S.] administration is rapidly changing all foreign policy configurations. This largely coincides with our vision." (Guiffrida, 2025). That is an honest and accurate assessment. By halting military aid to and foregoing a post-war security commitment to Ukraine, the U.S. has left Ukraine vulnerable to continued Russian barrages right now and a second Russian invasion down the road. And by parroting Moscow's view of the war in Ukraine, the Trump administration has justified Russian expansionism. Plus, remember, during the 2024 presidential campaign, Trump claimed that Russia "can do whatever the hell they want" to any NATO member that hasn't fulfilled its two percent defense spending pledge (Sullivan, 2024), triggering worries that Trump 2.0 might not adhere to NATO's Article 5, leaving European countries on the frontline with Russia, like the Baltic States and Poland, vulnerable to a revanchist Russian attack. Altogether, it is clear that Trump's America has given Russia's carte blanche to do what it wants, whenever and however it pleases in its "near abroad."

The upside is that sour U.S.-Russia ties are ending and the prospect of a major conflict breaking out as a result of war in Ukraine have sharply diminished. Of course, a major issue—and something the Trump administration doesn't appear to worry about—is how wide and large does Russia view its sphere of influence. Does it include part of Ukraine, Georgia, Belarus, and Moldova? That is something the West might be able to live with. Or does it also include NATO members on its eastern flank? That would be an entirely different story, since the European powers, such as England, France, and Germany, would likely interpret Russian moves against any and all of those nations as a casus belli, triggering a full-scale military conflict. It is uncertain, at least right now, how the U.S. would view such Russian encroachment on NATO's turf.

### *Economic Confrontation and Lackluster Balancing in the Indo-Pacific*

Some Trump supporters might argue that reducing America's role in Europe will conceivably allow for the White House to more fully deal head-on with China's emergence in the Indo-Pacific and worldwide. Yes, that is something that could follow from a rebalancing away from Europe. It is questionable at best whether that will happen, though. Despite the new tariffs and tough talk on the campaign trail and in statements since becoming president again, Trump is probably not looking for a big tussle with China. Instead, the White House is primarily looking to make economic deals with Beijing—with the tariffs as a coercive means to that end—and would prefer a good working relationship with the Xi government. There probably will not be a vigorous,

consistent pushback from Team Trump on China, unless Beijing actively tries to undercut U.S. economic interests throughout the broader Asia.

Take Taiwan as an example. Taiwan is widely seen among academics, think tankers, and policymakers as the prime hotspot in U.S.-China relations that could lead to a great power war in the near future. Trump is not an ardent supporter of Taiwan's sovereignty and has questioned whether defending Taiwan is in America's national interest. In an interview with Bloomberg in the summer of 2024, Trump said: "No. 1, Taiwan. I know the people very well, respect them greatly. They did take about 100% of our chip business. I think, Taiwan should pay us for defense. You know, we're no different than an insurance company. Taiwan doesn't give us anything" (Bloomberg Businessweek, 2024). At the same time, Trump has also made comments that indicate that the U.S. could impose economic and military punishments to frustrate China in the event of an attack on Taiwan (Singh, 2024). Needless to say, Trump has offered mixed messages. At his core, Trump probably does not see Taiwan as a primary U.S. national interest. Nevertheless, a Chinese attack on Taiwan could be problematic for the U.S., though mostly because Trump would likely see it as a personal affront against him—that China opted for war against Taiwan because it believed Trump to be weak, non-confrontational, and afraid to stand up to Beijing.

The 2020 Phase 1 deal is fairly instructive about Trump's motives on China. It came during a tense time—there were existing political tensions between the U.S. and the China, it was the early days of COVID, a catastrophic respiratory disease for which Trump directly blamed China, and he had a group of advisers who were arguably more hawkish on China compared to his current team. At the time, the political headwinds were blowing against U.S.-China cooperation. Nevertheless, Trump eagerly sought an economic deal that was billed at the time as a "historic trade agreement." According to a White House factsheet, "As a result of President Donald J. Trump's leadership, the United States reached a historic and enforceable phase one agreement with China that achieves progress on a number of critical fronts. China has agreed to structural reforms in areas of intellectual property, technology transfer, agriculture, financial services, and currency and foreign exchange. The agreement includes a strong dispute resolution system to ensure effective implementation and enforcement" (Trump White House archives, 2019).

Most of this turned out to be nonsense, though. The Petersen Institute argues that "China bought only 58 percent of the US exports it had committed to purchase under the agreement, not even enough to reach its import levels from before the trade war. Put

differently, China bought *none* of the additional $200 billion of exports Trump's deal had promised" (Brown, 2022). The main value of the agreement was to prevent the trade war from spiraling to ever higher levels. That is about it. Even so, the lesson here is not that the deal failed, but that Trump sought it to stabilize Sino-U.S. relations, preventing them from spiraling out of control.

Since Trump has been back in the White House, the bulk of the talk on China has centered on the possible future push for diplomacy with Beijing and the ongoing trade war. In fact, these two topics are likely interrelated. Trump has openly said he would like to conduct arms control talks and discussions on jointly lowering defense spending with Beijing and Moscow. Meantime, Trump's tariffs on China, which in April spiked to 145%, has triggered reciprocal tariffs by Beijing and ominous threats of refusing to back down, preferring to "fight to the end" (Bao, 2025). While China appears to have been caught off guard by the speed which with the trade war has escalated, and has dug in its heels because it does not want to be viewed as bending to the will of Trump, the bilateral crisis is not as severe as it seems at first glance. Certainly, there is a risk that the trade war could continue to escalate and spill over into other bilateral issues. A better bet is that Trump is using the tariffs to work toward a new economic agreement that at least partially addresses America's economic issues with China—which would give him a deal that he can market as a political win to Americans and particularly his political base. After all, by the end of April, Trump has suggested that U.S. tariffs on China will "come down significantly" sometime soon, lauded his relationship with Xi Jinping, and expressed optimism that Beijing will come to the negotiating table to end the trade war (Gan and Jaramillo, 2025). And in May, Trump reduced most tariffs to roughly 30% as part of a 90-day reprieve (which is where they remain as of this writing), as hopes remain that a brokered Sino-U.S. deal will come to fruition.

Overall, it is doubtful that Trump will pursue a tough containment policy against China. Freedom of navigation operations (or FONOPs) will continue, and there is a good chance U.S.-India ties will continue to trend upward, given Trump's good personal rapport with Prime Minister Narendra Modi. On the other hand, Trump could pressure South Korea and Japan to pay for their own defense, as he did in his first term. The much-hyped democracy-authoritarian angle that Biden so heavily emphasized as a global rallying point to counter China has been scrapped by Trump. The trade tariffs—including a 10% general tariff, a 25% tariff on cars and auto parts, and a 25% tariff on steel and aluminum—harm a number of countries throughout the Indo-Pacific, including Vietnam, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan, among others (Bhargava, 2025). And many

countries throughout the region could conceivably get spooked by the world markets pinwheeling up and down amid U.S. economic uncertainty. Combined, these factors just might drive many in the region to seek upgraded economic relations with China, the EU, Latin America, and elsewhere at the expense of the U.S. The end result of which would create a weakened, less cohesive anti-China coalition and thus undercut any U.S.-led balancing efforts against Beijing.

Like Russia, China ought to be mostly happy with Trump back in power. Because Beijing tends to take any signs of unfavorable treatment toward China as a personal attack and provocation, there will be tense moments in U.S.-Sino relations in the next four years. And Xi Jinping likely finds Trump's unpredictable governing and policy leadership rather irritating. Still, China should find Trump highly preferable to Biden or Harris. In Trump, they have a president who is willing to make deals, seems disinclined to embrace rash, militant policies and desires stabilizing the relationship, and ultimately wants to grow the U.S. economy and stay out of other nations', including China's, internal affairs. Like Russia, China will find that it has the requisite space and freedom to do almost everything it wants in its sphere of influence in East, Southeast, and South Asia.

### *Retrenchment in the Middle East and Africa*

Despite Trump's outrageous claims of America taking over the Gaza strip and turning the area into "the Riviera of the Middle East," which suggests a bigger U.S. footprint in the Middle East, partial retrenchment or at least the status quo is the more likely path for U.S. foreign policy in the region. Trump wanted to pull U.S. troops out of Syria and Iraq during his first term, but faced serious pressure from the military to change his mind. Now that the Syrian civil war is finally over, and with pro-Trump figures in senior positions in the Pentagon, Trump has been able to get his way on force reduction in Syria. The Department of Defense spokesperson Sean Parnell announced in April that the military intends to cut its troop levels in Syria by half, to under 1,000 (Stewart and Volcovici, 2025). With Assad out of power and Iran, along with its proxies Hamas and Hezbollah, rapidly losing regional power and influence and posing less of a dangerous threat to its neighbors, there a compelling reason for Trump to pull the plug on more U.S. forces stationed throughout the Middle East in the days ahead. After all, Israel and the Sunni powers are ascendant, having effectively defanged Iran and rolled back Tehran's

influence in Gaza, Syria, and Lebanon, and so there is far less of a need for a U.S. military presence in the region.

Indeed, Iran is so weakened that it has willingly come back to the negotiating table with the U.S. to talk about its nuclear program. Without Iran suffering a series of strategic setbacks over the last two years, along with a withered economy, it would not have agreed to nuclear talks with the Trump administration—a administration that has been very unfriendly to Tehran. During Trump's first term, he pulled the U.S. out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018, put back into place a raft on sanctions on Iran, and ordered the assassination of General Qasem Soleimani in 2020, among other things. The ongoing talks are a sign that Iran simply recognizes the powerful forces arrayed against it—notably, the U.S. and Israel—and the very likely high political, economic, and military damage that would result from a hot war with Jerusalem and/or Washington. *The New York Times* reports that Iranian clerics view the potential domestic fallout from a war as an existential threat to the Islamic Republic itself that must be avoided (Fassihi, 2025). Meantime, from America's perspective, diplomacy with Iran just might yield a payoff in a strengthened nuclear deal, which would make Tehran less of a problem in Trump's eyes and allow the U.S. to de-emphasize the Middle East in the hierarchy of American security priorities. In other words, exploring negotiations with Iran should be viewed as a means to helping America to ease its way of the region.

The Abraham Accords, which normalized relations with countries in the Middle East and North Africa and Israel, were arguably the hallmark foreign policy achievement of Trump's first term. It is likely that the White House will try to build off of this success and fold more countries into the pact. Given the warm ties that Trump has with both Saudi Arabia and Israel, it is possible that we will see a renewed push to broker a rapprochement between Riyadh and Jerusalem. Given the ongoing war in Gaza and the very uncertain plight of the Palestinians, any Israel-Saudi Arabia deal would be extremely tough to seal at the moment, though Trump, in April 2025, expressed confidence that the Saudis will indeed join the Abraham Accords "very quickly" (Time Staff, 2025). Still, any forward progress toward expanding the Abraham Accords, much like productive talks with Iran, is consistent with the push for retrenchment. Pursuing measures that engender stability through rules and agreements allows the U.S. to maintain its regional interests—in the Gulf, in Israel's safety—without needing to ramp the use of coercive tools or a large military footprint.

The Trump administration's efforts to retrench from Africa are even further along. That should not be a surprise, given that Africa was a low priority to Trump during

his first term. He failed to visit Africa while president from 2017-2021. "During his four years in the White House, Trump welcomed only two Sub-Saharan African heads of state: Muhammadu Buhari of Nigeria and Uhuru Kenyatta of Kenya. His administration did not host a US-Africa summit" (Yade, 2024). During Trump 1.0, the main connective tissue to Africa was via the Abraham Accords, as Morocco and Sudan both normalized relations with Israel via the Trump-brokered agreement. On the campaign trail, Trump, Vance, or their surrogates failed to speak in any detail about Africa.

At this point, Team Trump has moved quickly to downsize America's presence in Africa. For instance, the White House is "considering eliminating U.S. Africa Command as part of downsizing, per two U.S. officials and someone familiar with the discussions. Considering moving AFRICOM to a subcommand position under EUCOM" (Kube, 2025). And Trump's order to scrap USAID, whose center of gravity was arguably in Africa, means U.S. money and various international humanitarian projects and personnel stationed throughout the continent (and in other parts of the world, of course) have stopped/are no longer working. While this will likely lead to an increase in human suffering in conflict zones and destitute areas, a shift away from human rights—which was a part of the State Department and USAID's mission when Joe Biden was president—should endear the Trump administration to African countries that have poor human right records and have criminalized LGBTQ+ people and programs, such as Senegal, Ghana, and Uganda. Furthermore, reports from NBC and CNBC News indicate that the White House is considering downsizing the State Department's presence throughout Africa, closing "non-essential embassies and consulates in Sub-Saharan Africa" (Doherty, 2025). Although Secretary of State Marco Rubio has denied the reports, consolidating and scaling back the State Department's efforts and focus on Africa is consistent with the America First program, which does not view Africa and especially sub-Saharan Africa as a vital American interest, and is thus a credible foreign policy reform that the Trump administration could pursue in his second term.

The odd wrinkle in Trump's Africa policy is his recent hostile obsession with South Africa. Bizarrely, Trump believes that South Africa is committing genocide against white Afrikaners. In response, Trump issued an executive order on February 7th that accused South Africa of racial discrimination and taking "aggressive positions towards the United States and its allies, including accusing Israel, not Hamas, of genocide in the International Court of Justice, and reinvigorating its relations with Iran to develop commercial, military, and nuclear arrangements" (The White House, 2025). The EO cut

aid and assistance to South Africa, offered asylum to white Afrikaners, and strained ties between the two countries. Afterward, on May 12, 59 white South Africans arrived in the U.S. as part of a resettlement program fast-tracked by the Trump administration—precisely at the same time in which the White House has paused all other refugee programs and is actively deporting thousands of undocumented individuals.

The one issue that cuts against Trump's preference for retrenchment in both the Middle East and Africa is his administration's enthusiasm for counterterrorism air strikes. After all, so far in 2025, the White House has authorized several air assaults against Houthi positions in Yemen, ISIS in Somalia, and Hurras al-Din in Syria. The appeal of the air strikes makes political sense. They tend to be relatively quick, low-cost counterterror missions, and offer a clear deliverable to domestic audiences. Counterterror air strikes result in the removal of specific terror targets from the battlefield, which the White House can use as evidence that it takes national security seriously and is actively protecting the U.S. against groups that seek to harm Americans and American interests. Still, counterterrorism of this sort likely does not require the roughly U.S. 5,000-10,000 troops in Africa and the Middle East that are focused strictly on terrorism and counterterrorism, and it probably could withstand minor downsizing. To this point, Trump has not commented on the size and duration of American counterterrorism efforts in either region and troop levels remain intact. If Trump's first term is a guide, despite his inclination to bring American troops back home, he could briefly ramp up forces in either or both regions to meet a particular terror threat, such as ISIS or al-Qaeda or the Houthis, and then quickly look extricate the U.S. from the conflict theaters (Burns and Knickmeyer, 2020; BBC, 2019; Lamothe and Gibbons-Neff, 2017; Starr, Browne, Gaouette, 2018; Burns and Miller, 2020).

America's presence in and prioritization of Africa and the Middle East opens or blocks opportunities for Russia and China to enhance their roles in both regions. Given America's strong relationship to Israel and the Sunni powers, the 40 plus U.S. military bases in the Middle East, the fall of Assad, and the high importance the Trump places on directly combatting groups like al-Qeada, ISIS, and the Houthis, among others, there probably are not many significant pathways for Russia or China to increase their standing and position in the Middle East and usurp America's dominance there. For now, Russia and China will have to settle for the role of secondary outside power in the Middle East. By contrast, Russia and China have a bigger window of opportunity in Africa. Both powers are already active on the continent. Russia acts as a security backstop for various African governments fighting insurgencies and terror groups, and almost every African

nation participates in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and uses Chinese technology. Moreover, Russia and China are connected to Africa through BRICS, which includes South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia as members and Nigeria and Uganda as partner states.

When we combine Russia's and China's activities in Africa with the relatively low level of importance that the Trump administration places on the continent, it is evident that both powers have the ability and sufficient room to expand their relationships with and portfolios on Africa. Plus, it is not as if Team Trump will protest against or seek to counterbalance further encroachments by either power in Africa. The main question, then, is whether Russia or China are interested in taking advantage of the window of opportunity to expand their roles in and commitment to Africa. Russia is fairly strained and exhausted from years of war with Ukraine and still has its hands full there, though it would undoubtedly relish having even stronger diplomatic and economic support from African nations—whether it has the bandwidth to explore such possibilities anytime soon is questionable at best. By contrast, China might dip its toes further in Africa in the near future. It currently has one confirmed military base in Djibouti and could seek dual-use ports in parts of East and West Africa, among others, so as to protect existing trade routes and BRI investments (Nantulya, 2025). If Beijing goes this route, it would help to extend China's global reach, upgrade its military capabilities, and give it the potential to eventually control key waterways, such as the Gulf of Guinea, Red Sea, or Mozambique Channel. That would be a major geopolitical game changer, forcing the White House—whomever is POTUS at this point—to reconsider and possibly elevate Africa's place in U.S. national interests.

## Implications of the New Trump Doctrine

This article sees four main consequences of Trump's Spheres of Influence Doctrine. First, the liberal world order is on life support. It is premature to declare it dead and over, because EU and NATO members will likely attempt to keep it alive until a more pro-Europe U.S. president takes office again. But that will be very difficult. And in the meantime, the existing order has been badly damaged. Norms against conquering territory, redrawing boundaries, and that aggressors should pay for their actions have been shattered. The impending resolution of the war in Ukraine has set a new precedent that conquest does indeed pay, if the stakes and interests are high enough for aggressors. Moreover, the norm that the U.S. stands up for the bullied, for the weak, around the world has been destroyed. These norms, collectively, have played an important part in

maintaining the sovereignty and territorial integrity of countries, and they have reassured smaller, weaker nations that in an anarchic international system, despite the absence of a world government and any international policing and military forces, there can still be a sense of global justice and fairness.

Additionally, the rules and institutions that provide guardrails for the world have been significantly weakened. Over the last six months, the U.S. has pulled out of the UN Human Rights Council, the Paris Climate Accords, The World Health Organization; renounced American commitments to the 1951 Refugee Convention; and knifed the WTO in its heart with various tariffs (Patrick, 2025). And that might not be all. The U.S. could withdraw from NATO, the World Bank, and a number of other overseas commitments, whether bilateral or multilateral. Unfortunately, the structural edifice of the international system that has been created, built up, and sustained since 1945 by the U.S. cannot function much longer without the full-throated support from the White House. Unless Trump changes course on his own or is convinced to do so by U.S. allies sometime soon, the international order will effectively turn into an optional arrangement in which a scattering of countries in the West and around the world agree to play by the old rules and norms while the rest of the globe ignores them and operates according to a might makes right guiding philosophy. That kind of a world order can limp along, but it is one that is mostly performative and hollow, adding little value to the security and prosperity of the entire system.

Second, the world's weak and small countries should be on high alert. In a world in which the weak are constant prey for opportunistic, revisionist, aggressive powers, and have few ways to seek redress for their victimization, these actors will be forced to be awfully creative to attend to their security needs and vulnerabilities. The weak will have to make tough choices about whether it is better to find safety in numbers, with other weaker, vulnerable nations, or to bandwagon with one or two dominant, bullying powers. International relations theory strongly suggests that balancing is the way to go, but unless much of the world ramps up its economic and military capabilities and improves in its ability cooperate on security and military affairs with other countries, then balancing will be difficult in practice. For instance, a Europe that has to balance against Russia without the U.S. would be a very tough spot. Certainly, the EU is by far the stronger economically than Russia, but it also lags light years behind Russia militarily. EU members spend less on defense, are not battle ready, and are unlikely to work well together on the battlefield without the U.S. as the connective linchpin. Russia could, if it so chose, pose a viable threat to Poland, Scandinavia, and the Baltic States. In this

scenario, the EU's best option would probably be to woo China, so that Beijing would pressure Moscow to cool off and back down.

Surely, Taiwan ought to be very nervous. Using the same logic they applied to Ukraine, Trump and his national security staff could decide that Taiwan is not worth the time, effort, and resources to defend in a bloody, costly war with China. Moreover, much like the White House now sees greater strategic benefits in having good relations with Russia than with Ukraine, it could make the same calculation with respect to China and Taiwan, believing that the U.S. gets more politically, economically, and militarily out of good relations with China than with Taiwan. Taipei can try the so-called "porcupine strategy," in which it tries to make itself impenetrable to Chinese forces invading from the air or sea. That might work, as long as Team Trump does not turn off the defense spigot to Taiwan, which it could. Should that happen, Taiwan would really be in a bind. It would very likely have to sue for peace, with the hope that it could negotiate a better agreement with Beijing than Hong Kong has.

Third, some non-great powers now formally tied to the U.S. might decide that going nuclear is the best option given credibility concerns about America (Hirsh, 2025). If the U.S. embarked on complete and total retrenchment from Europe, European NATO members would lack a security umbrella. French President Emmanuel Macron has suggested using France's nuclear arsenal as security shield and deterrence force against aggressors. Unfortunately, for Europe's NATO members, France has less than 300 nuclear weapons—a far cry from America's roughly 5500—which would be inadequate to protect more than two dozen nations. Moreover, non-U.S. NATO's conventional capabilities and war readiness would be massively tested should Russia launch a surprise attack against, say, Poland or the Baltic States. Recognizing the grave security consequences of being abandoned by America, Germany has already discussed the possibility of acquiring nuclear weapons, and frankly it would make sense for any NATO or pro-NATO state on the frontlines with Russia to consider seriously going nuclear.

South Korea and Japan face a similar dilemma. Life without the U.S., or with an indifferent U.S. or downsized American commitment, would be perilous for both countries. They would have to face a growing, assertive China and a rogue North Korea by themselves, alone and vulnerable. Whereas U.S. allies in Europe have NATO to give them hope that a collective response to Russia—if conflict does occur—could save the day, there is no analogous organization in East Asia, or anywhere in Asia. If regional events go haywire, South Korea and Japan, without the U.S., would face an existential security crisis that far surpasses what non-U.S. NATO would confront in a conflict with

Russia. Thus, the security imperative to go nuclear, in this scenario, would be particularly intense. It is no surprise that talk about nuclear weapons in both South Korea and Japan is on the rise, as elites and the public are highly aware of the security stakes and threats. Indeed, support for going nuclear tops 70% in South Korea (Ye Hee Lee, 2022). And while numbers in support in Japan lag behind their Korean counterparts, roughly 85% approve of discussing nuclear sharing with the U.S. (Akiyama, 2024).

There would be several international geopolitical consequences should more countries in the immediate to near-term go nuclear. Proliferation, particularly if several states enter the nuclear club, would irreparably weaken the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and make attempts at arms control agreements even more difficult than they are already are. We would likely see arms racing in Europe and in East Asia, if not beyond. The risk of preventive wars—started by neighboring countries seeking to destroy the facilities and arsenals of new nuclear states—would skyrocket. The overall level of inter-state tensions in Europe and the Indo-Pacific would grow to barely manageable levels and could spill over into other regions in the world. This is the kind of combustible, conflict-prone, Wild West kind of world we could enter as the U.S. steps back from its global security commitments.

Fourth, a Spheres of Influence Doctrine in today's international system empowers the three main great powers in the world—the U.S., Russia, and China. While the system is not tripolar in terms of economic and military capabilities—it is instead bipolar (Lind, 2024)—Trump's doctrine privileges the three global powers on the ground, in the real world, in such a way that it de facto institutionalizes a tripolar system—three dominant global powers, each with their own sphere of influence, each recognized by the others as powerful and their interests legitimate. Indeed, Trump has put out word that he is looking for three-way summit with Putin and Xi "when things calm down." This summit, according to Trump, would aim to cut nuclear arsenals and defense spending of the three powers, among other things. Trump has a habit in negotiations with foreign countries to seek a grand bargain—something that he has sought at various points with North Korea, China, and Iran.

With that in mind, it is logical to think that Trump is aspirationally looking for something similar with Russia and China in his second term. In fact, might Trump really be seeking something akin to a three-way informal concert that establishes solid, sustainable ties between the three countries? Stacie Goddard notes that "it should now be clear that Trump's vision of the world is not one of great-power competition but of great-power collusion: a 'concert' system akin to the one that shaped Europe during the

nineteenth century. What Trump wants is a world managed by strongmen who work together—not always harmoniously but always purposefully—to impose a shared vision of order on the rest of the world (Goddard, 2025)." For the sake of global stability and order, Trump and his national security team should pursue a three-way great power compact with diplomatic vigor. Below is one brief possible roadmap the White House could follow.

In short, the foundation of an informal concert could be a non-aggression pact among the U.S., Russia, and China that commits the three superpowers to peace with directly each other. That would lower the temperature of potential hostilities between the three and reduce the chances of hegemonic war in this new world order. And from there, it would be useful for the three powers to clarify the boundaries of the three spheres of influence to ensure that the they do not get dragged into conflict over unclear lines of demarcation of turf and to rein in meddling in the others' spheres of influence. Should that diplomatic cooperation prove successful, the U.S., Russia, and China could go even further. They could try to find mutual understandings on key global security threats and challenges, which just might provide the impetus for the three to cooperate as they seek to address them individually as well as collectively. Perhaps out of this hypothetical flurry of diplomatic activity, new, updated norms for the 21st century could emerge, which might provide some guardrails on inter-state behavior. If Trump went down this road of engaged diplomacy with Russia and China, the maybe the future of international relations will not be as unpredictable and violent as many Trump critics nowadays worry about and dread. Instead, it would be an effort to create stability and security in a world that lacks both right now. Truly, that would be a Nobel Prize-worthy achievement.

## Conclusion

Several issues bear watching going forward. First, a key question is whether America's new sphere of influence doctrine is enduring, or not. Given Trump's unpredictable, sometimes whimsical governing style, it is certainly possible that he could abandon his nascent doctrine in favor of something different six months from now. For instance, if Russia and China interpret Trump's strategy as a lack of interest in the world outside of America's sphere of influence and begin to expand their influence and physical presence, Trump could view this as a personal slight—as if China and Russia thought him weak and were thus taking advantage of him. That could motivate Trump to pursue a more globally active and engaged foreign policy, a retreat to a more conventional, establishment-minded U.S. foreign policy.

But let us assume that spheres of influence has some staying power for the U.S. A second issue is the extent to which the White House pursues retrenchment around the world. Does it seek a partial retrenchment, in which America downsizes its commitments to one or more regions? Or does it try to implement a complete retrenchment, in which the U.S. fully comes home? A reasonable hypothesis is that domestic politics and pressure from foreign allies will force the Trump administration to reluctantly adopt partial retrenchment.

A third issue is whether a spheres of influence doctrine outlives Trump 2.0. If the Republicans keep the White House in 2028, does the next president maintain, at least in rough form, the status quo doctrine, or move toward a more old guard, establishment strategic policy? If current Vice President J.D. Vance wins the 2028 presidential election, he is likely to keep and perhaps lean even more into a spheres of influence doctrine. Vance is arguably more of a true believer than Trump in the idea that retrenchment is a good thing for America. If a different Republican is the next president, then America's future direction becomes less clear. But if a Democrat wins in 2028, a new doctrine would certainly be endorsed by the White House. In that case, would the U.S. try to revert back to an Obama-Biden type foreign policy, or adopt a hybrid policy that combines elements of the Trump years with traditional Democratic interests and values? It is way too early to offer a clear speculative answer on that question, given that there is no leading Democratic contender for the next presidential nomination. Much will depend on how world events unfold over the next three plus years, how Trump's foreign policy is judged by the electorate, and where U.S. attitudes are on foreign policy and America's role in the world, among other things.

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