COMMENTARY

# The Second Trump Administration and Its Implications to the Global Order

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**ABSTRACT** *The prospect of a second Trump term has reignited global apprehensions, sparking renewed debates about the future trajectory of U.S. foreign policy and its broader implications for international relations. Would his administration once again pursue the "America First" approach, marked by isolationist tendencies, weakened multilateral frameworks, strained alliances, and often unpredictable policymaking style? Or might it chart a new path, potentially adapting to shifting global realities and responding to mounting challenges with a more measured and conciliatory strategy? This commentary seeks to delve into the heart of these debates by examining three key pillars: Trump's prior foreign policy decisions and their long-term impacts, his current campaign promises and rhetoric, and the evolving geopolitical challenges that await the U.S. on the world stage. Would a second term amplify the unpredictability of his first, further eroding trust in the U.S. as a global leader, or might it reflect lessons learned, offering a recalibrated strategy aimed at balancing national interests with global responsibilities.*

**Keywords:** Trump Administration, U.S., China, Russia, Middle East

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## Introduction

When President Trump won the election in 2016, there was a profound sense of shock and a significant degree of uncertainty about his approach to foreign policy. Many speculated that this era could mark a return to the isolationist tendencies that had characterized U.S. foreign policy prior to World War II. For proponents of this view, Trump's electoral victory symbolized the closing of a decades-long chapter of active global engagement, particularly through alliances and multilateralism.[1] During the campaign, Trump signaled not only increasingly isolationist sentiments but also expressed dissatisfaction with the U.S. alliances and partnerships in various parts of the world. His slogan "America First" became emblematic of this perspective, widely interpreted as a call to prioritize domestic interests over international commitments. For many, it suggested a reversion to the "factory settings" of U.S. foreign policy, where unilateralism and national self-interest would take precedence over cooperative frameworks.[2]

This initial alarm, however, began to subside to some extent when President-elect Trump started to assemble his cabinet. His early nominations, including James Mattis as Secretary of Defense and Rex Tillerson as Secretary of State, offered a degree of reassurance to both domestic and international observers. These appointments suggested that Trump's administration might balance his campaign rhetoric with more traditional and pragmatic approaches to U.S. foreign policy. The inclusion of experienced figures indicated the possibility of internal competition among different actors and agencies within the administration, which could temper the more extreme elements of Trump's campaign promises.[3]

During the four years of Trump's presidency, there was a constant reshuffling of his foreign policy team, leading to a prevailing sense of uncertainty and unpredictability regarding his foreign policy decisions. This volatility was compounded by his administration's apparent unwillingness to engage cooperatively in multilateral forums, which alarmed allies and global institutions alike. Trump's withdrawal from critical treaties, such as the Paris Climate Accord and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), generated significant concern about the erosion of international norms and the United States' commitment to global leadership. Particularly troubling for European allies were Trump's positions on NATO burden-sharing and trade relations with the European Union. His insistence on greater financial contributions from NATO member states, coupled with his imposition of tariffs and combative rhetoric on trade, raised serious questions about the reliability of the U.S. as a partner. These tensions strained transatlantic relations, leaving European allies to grapple with uncertainties about the future of their strategic partnerships with Washington.

On the other hand, Trump's foreign policy saw mixed results in address-

ing global crises. His administration's efforts to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue, including unprecedented summits with Kim Jong-Un, ultimately failed to produce any tangible agreements. Similarly, the "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran, aimed at forcing Tehran to renegotiate its nuclear program, fell short of its goals, as Iran continued to expand its nuclear activities in defiance of U.S. sanctions. Trump's approach to China also marked a significant shift in U.S. foreign policy, as his administration adopted an aggressive stance that resonated with many domestic institutions. His trade war with Beijing received mixed reactions within the U.S., reflecting deep divisions over its economic impact. However, Trump's framing of China as a strategic rival gained bipartisan support and set the tone for a more confrontational relationship that extended beyond his presidency.

**Trump's approach to China also marked a significant shift in U.S. foreign policy, as his administration adopted an aggressive stance that resonated with many domestic institutions**

In his second term, following four years of the Biden presidency, significant questions have arisen regarding potential continuities and ruptures in U.S. foreign policy. Candidate Trump's campaign messaging suggested a combination of reversals to policies from his first presidency and a more assertive embrace of the "America First" doctrine. This dual focus has left observers speculating on how his foreign policy approach might evolve during his renewed tenure in the White House. Trump's campaign emphasized potential changes to foreign trade policies far more than addressing strategic approaches to broader geopolitical challenges or global issues that have dominated international discourse in recent decades, such as climate change and the ongoing threat of global pandemics. While the Biden Administration framed its foreign policy through the lens of benefiting the "middle class," Trump largely avoided articulating a detailed policy vision. Instead, he focused on presenting a position in foreign affairs for "ordinary Americans," promising outcomes that would ostensibly bring tangible benefits to working- and middle-class communities.

After securing victory in the election, Trump's Administration moved swiftly to assemble a foreign policy and national security team. The speed and decisiveness of these appointments surprised many both domestically and internationally, signaling his intent to shape the course of U.S. foreign policy early in his second term. However, despite these rapid steps, Trump has yet to unveil a comprehensive roadmap detailing the broader foreign policy agenda for his administration. Instead, insights into his potential priorities have been

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gleaned from his public statements, social media posts, and, most notably, the individuals he has appointed to key positions within his foreign policy and national security apparatus. These appointments and statements have sparked widespread speculation and debate, with analysts attempting to discern whether Trump will double down on the unilateralist tendencies of his first term or pursue a more adaptive approach in response to the evolving global landscape.

In some areas, projections about Trump's foreign policy were grounded in more concrete facts and anecdotal evidence than in others. For instance, only three weeks after the election, President-elect Trump announced plans to impose a 25 percent tariff on imports from Canada and Mexico unless these countries took steps to curb the flow of illegal drugs —especially fentanyl— and illegal immigrants. Similarly, he proposed a 10 percent tariff on imports from China, explicitly linking the policy to China's role in the fentanyl crisis. [4] These announcements reflected a continuation of Trump's reliance on tariffs as a central tool in his foreign policy arsenal. This policy of President-elect Trump was not unexpected among observers of U.S. foreign policy. During the campaign, he had repeatedly framed tariffs as a key lever to pressure trading partners and renegotiate trade agreements on terms more favorable to the U.S. His rhetoric positioned tariffs as both a punitive measure and a bargaining chip, signaling to allies and adversaries alike that economic tools would remain a cornerstone of his international strategy.

However, even after the announcement, many analysts questioned whether these tariff threats represented a serious policy initiative or were merely a negotiation tactic designed to bring Canada, Mexico, and China to the table.[5] The skepticism stemmed from the potential economic consequences of such measures. A significant hike in tariff levels was expected to lead to price increases for consumer goods in the U.S., raising concerns about the domestic backlash that could follow. Additionally, the implementation of such aggressive trade policies risked escalating tensions with key economic partners and creating broader disruptions in global supply chains.[6] This ambiguity highlighted a recurring feature of Trump's approach to foreign policy: The blend of unpre-

dictability and transactionalism that left both domestic and international stakeholders guessing about his true intentions.

In other areas, speculation about the direction of Trump's foreign policy arose from the previous positions and statements of individuals nominated to key foreign policy and national security roles. Many of the names in the new administration, along with their track records and public statements on critical geopolitical issues such as the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, provided early clues and projections about the administration's likely stance on these crises.[7] However, the diversity of views within Trump's team also introduced an element of uncertainty. Significantly, there appears to be little consensus among some of the key personalities nominated to these crucial positions regarding the most pressing strategic and security challenges facing the U.S. today. Their differing opinions on issues ranging from great-power competition to regional conflicts have led analysts to anticipate potential friction within the administration. This internal division could result in heated debates and policy conflicts between various agencies and actors tasked with shaping U.S. foreign policy.[8]

However, these speculations also acknowledge the significant reality that President Trump, rather than his team of advisors and officials, can singlehandedly shape U.S. foreign policy in these critical areas. During his first term, Trump demonstrated a willingness to enact rapid changes within his foreign policy and national security team. Officials who disagreed with him or failed to align with his vision were frequently dismissed, underscoring his propensity to prioritize loyalty and alignment over institutional continuity. This pattern suggests that Trump's foreign policy might reflect his personal preferences and instincts more than the collective influence of a cohesive team. As a result, there could be a "Trump foreign policy" in practice, rather than a "Trump foreign policy team" actively shaping and implementing strategies. The transactional and highly centralized approach that characterized his first term may resurface, with major decisions emanating directly from the president rather than through collaboration with his advisors.

Under these circumstances, the most informed projections about the future of U.S. foreign policy in a second Trump Administration must consider several key factors. These include President Trump's domestic policy priorities, his most consistent campaign promises, his evident distaste for certain international engagements, his willingness to renegotiate or dismantle agreements brokered by previous administrations, and his distinctive approach to foreign policy decision-making. Together, these elements provide a framework for analyzing potential trajectories, although the outcomes remain uncertain and contingent upon shifting dynamics. For some of the key foreign policy challenges, an analysis of these variables can offer a rough roadmap with multiple scenarios.

## U.S.-China Relations

For nearly a decade, there has been a clear consensus among various U.S. agencies and institutions regarding the centrality of China in the nation's foreign policy and national security agenda. Both the Trump and Biden Administrations, through their respective National Security Strategy (NSS) documents, emphasized the paramount importance of addressing the challenges posed by China, prioritizing this issue over other foreign policy concerns. The 2017 National Security Strategy under President Trump identified China as a "strategic competitor."[9] The document explicitly highlighted how China challenged U.S. national interests across political, economic, military, and informational domains in ways unmatched by other adversaries or competitors.[10] This competitive framing set the stage for a more confrontational approach to U.S.-China relations during Trump's presidency.

In 2020, the Trump administration expanded on this perspective with the publication of the report *United States Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China.* This report outlined a comprehensive, whole-of-government strategy regarding the People's Republic of China (PRC). It articulated two primary objectives: First, to bolster the resilience of U.S. institutions, alliances, and partnerships to effectively counter challenges posed by the PRC; and second, to compel Beijing to curtail actions harmful to the United States' vital national interests and those of its allies and partners. The report also acknowledged the possibility of cooperation, stating, "Even as we compete with the PRC, we welcome cooperation where our interests align."[11] Despite this overarching competitive posture, Trump's personal approach to China often exhibited a more transactional nature. While his foreign policy team adhered to the principles of strategic competition outlined in the NSS and subsequent documents, Trump frequently engaged with China in ways that prioritized short-term economic gains and bilateral negotiations. This duality created a complex dynamic, with the administration pursuing a mix of confrontation and selective engagement, reflecting the interplay between institutional strategy and Trump's individual preferences.[12]

The Biden Administration adopted a similar approach to China in its foreign policy, albeit with a slightly different tone and framing. While maintaining the tariffs imposed on Chinese products during the Trump Administration —and even increasing them in some sectors, such as electric vehicles, solar panels, and electric vehicle batteries[13]— Biden Administration officials avoided explicitly labeling the policy as a "trade war" with China.[14] In its National Security Strategy document, the Biden Administration echoed the Trump Administration's assessment of China as a central challenge to U.S. interests. Biden's strategy identified China as "America's most consequential geopolitical challenge" and stated, "China, by contrast, is the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order

and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to advance that objective."[15] This framing highlighted the administration's view of China as a systemic competitor, capable of influencing global norms and institutions in ways that could undermine U.S. strategic interests. As a result, there was a significant degree of continuity between the Trump and Biden administrations in their policy toward China. Both prioritized countering China's influence while attempting to strengthen U.S. competitiveness in critical areas such as technology, defense, and international alliances.

With the return of a second Trump Administration, there will likely be a similar degree of continuity in U.S.-China relations, alongside some notable differences. The most consistent aspect is expected to manifest in trade policies and disputes with China. During his campaign, Trump pledged to impose a 60 percent tariff on all Chinese imports to the U.S., and after the election, he reiterated his intention to implement a 10 percent tax on all Chinese imports.[16] While specific figures have varied in media reports and analyses, there is broad consensus that trade policy will remain the centerpiece of Trump's approach to China. President Trump has long argued that the U.S. has been at a disadvantage in its economic relationship with China. He frequently claimed that the U.S. was "ripped off" by China through exploitative practices such as intellectual property theft, currency manipulation, export and industrial subsidies, and economic espionage.[17] His rhetoric has consistently framed the U.S.-China trade relationship as unfair, emphasizing the need for aggressive actions to protect American workers and reduce the country's significant bilateral trade deficit with China.[18]

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There are two key questions surrounding the future trade policies of a second Trump Administration. First, there is uncertainty about how the administration will design its trade policy without triggering a significant inflation spike in the U.S. Considering that one of the most decisive issues in the 2024 election was inflation, any major increase could erode the popularity of the president and undermine his primary source of domestic legitimacy.[19] Balancing aggressive trade measures, such as increased tariffs, with the need to avoid inflationary pressures will be a critical challenge for the administration. The second question pertains to the potential repercussions of such an escalatory trade policy. Specifically, the

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focus is on how China might respond to a renewed trade war or heightened tariff measures. Retaliatory actions by the Chinese government, ranging from imposing counter-tariffs to restricting U.S. companies' access to Chinese markets or leveraging supply chains for critical goods, could escalate tensions and lead to a full-blown trade conflict between the two nations.[20] A major trade conflict would carry significant economic risks, not just for the U.S. and China but for the global economy as well.

There will be several other issues in a second Trump administration that could resonate with policies from his first term. Among these, one of the most important —and potentially destabilizing— will revolve around technology. The increasing strategic importance of advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), quantum computing, and semiconductor production has already sparked significant discussions about their geopolitical implications.[21] During his first term, the Trump Administration took an aggressive stance against Beijing's state-led industrial policies. Trump introduced export controls on semiconductors and chipmaking equipment, specifically targeting China's ability to acquire these critical technologies. This was part of a broader effort to curb China's technological advancement, which the administration viewed as a threat to U.S. national security and economic competitiveness. He also took steps to increase the authority of U.S. regulators to review foreign acquisitions of American technology firms. Several attempted sales of U.S. technology companies to Chinese firms were blocked under this framework.[22]

In his second term, similar policies are expected from President Trump regarding technology and U.S.-China relations. During the campaign, Trump pledged to pursue technological decoupling from China, with a major emphasis on restricting the flow of critical technologies to Beijing. This agenda is likely to be reinforced by the Republican majority in both houses of Congress, which is expected to play a pivotal role in advancing such measures. In the immediate aftermath of the election, the Republican-led Congress demonstrated an increasing willingness to push forward comprehensive legislation, including outbound investment restrictions, sanctions, and enhanced export controls targeting critical technologies.[23] While there have been debates about the potential rollback of the CHIPS and Science Act under the new Trump Admin-

istration, early indications suggest that the policies will undergo revisions rather than a complete overhaul. These adjustments are likely to align with Trump's broader focus on ensuring that U.S. investments and resources primarily benefit domestic industries and protect national interests.[24] Regarding AI, a divergence of opinion has emerged within the new administration. While Congress strongly supports maintaining or even tightening restrictions on AI-related technologies to prevent their misuse by China, some CEOs of major U.S. tech companies who backed Trump's campaign have expressed concerns about the current restrictions. These corporate leaders are advocating for the relaxation of certain AI-related controls, arguing that such policies could hinder innovation and competitiveness within the U.S. tech sector. This tension between national security priorities and the interests of the private sector is likely to shape the administration's approach to AI policy moving forward.[25]

Regarding geopolitical issues such as Taiwan and the South China Sea, there has been no definitive policy declaration by the incoming Trump Administration. While the Taiwanese government has expressed optimism about the future of U.S.-Taiwan relations under Trump, significant uncertainties remain.[26] Certain constants in U.S. policy toward Taiwan, such as continued arms sales, are expected to persist during Trump's second term, reinforcing Washington's commitment to supporting Taiwan's defense capabilities. However, there is considerable uncertainty about how the U.S. might respond to sudden escalations between China and Taiwan. A particularly pressing concern is the question of U.S. policy in the event of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan.[27] On the campaign trail, Trump addressed this issue in a way that raised alarm in some quarters of the foreign policy community. When asked about the possibility of defending Taiwan, Trump remarked that Taiwan is 9,500 miles away from the U.S. but only 68 miles from China.[28] This statement has been interpreted by many as a signal of ambivalence about the extent of U.S. involvement in Taiwan's defense, generating significant concern among policymakers and analysts who fear it may embolden Beijing. Today many observers argue that Trump Administration's potential actions in such a critical scenario are likely to depend on the broader state of U.S.-China relations at the time. Analysts suggest that if relations are particularly tense, Washington may adopt a more assertive stance to counter Chinese aggression. Conversely, if the relationship is in a more neutral or transactional phase, Trump's response could prioritize negotiation or diplomatic engagement, reflecting his often pragmatic and deal-oriented approach to foreign policy.[29]

Regarding the South China Sea, many observers expect a continuation of the policies pursued during Trump's first term, which focused on countering China's assertiveness and strengthening alliances and partnerships throughout the region. In his



Ukrainian President Zelenskyy (R) poses for a photo with France's President Macron (C) and U.S. President-elect Trump (L) after their meeting at the Elysee Presidential Palace in Paris, France on December 7, 2024.

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first term, President Trump sought to deter a potential conflict between the U.S. and China in the South China Sea, opting for aggressive diplomatic postures without escalating to military confrontation.[30] His administration emphasized freedom of navigation operations and support for regional allies, sending a clear message about U.S. commitment to maintaining an open and rules-based maritime order. However, in his second term, it may be significantly harder to maintain this balance as tensions in the region have escalated dramatically. China's continued militarization of islands, expansion of its naval presence, and economic coercion of smaller nations have heightened the risks of miscalculation. Analysts argue that this shrinking margin for error makes it more challenging for either side to tolerate mistakes or provocative actions, raising the stakes for any incidents in the region.[31] So far, President Trump has not indicated any major policy changes regarding the South China Sea, signaling a potential continuation of his previous approach. However, the evolving dynamics of the region could require greater caution and strategic flexibility. The increased military activity and competition in the South China Sea underline the need for careful management of U.S.-China relations to avoid unintentional escalation.

A final important determinant of U.S.-China bilateral relations during this period will be the differing positions of key actors nominated to foreign policy and national security roles within the Trump Administration. One central question is whether President Trump will continue to operate with the transactional approach

he employed during his first term. This raises the possibility that, despite the presence of hawkish figures in his administration, such as Mike Waltz, David Perdue, and Marco Rubio, Trump might still pursue arrangements or agreements with the Chinese government. However, even if such agreements are reached, it remains uncertain whether Trump will be able to implement these policies in the face of resistance from these hawkish voices within his administration. There will likely be specific areas of contention among these actors, particularly on issues such as human rights and the treatment of Uyghurs in China. While these topics could emerge as key areas of concern for some members of the administration, it is unclear whether they will be prioritized in Trump's broader China policy or if they will remain sidelined in favor of more pragmatic or economic considerations.[32]

Conversely, there are also questions regarding the potential roles that more dovish members of Trump's foreign policy team might play during this period. One intriguing figure in this context is Elon Musk, who is expected by some experts to assume a significant role in shaping bilateral relations. Musk's immense influence over President Trump, coupled with his deep economic interests in China, has led to speculation that he could serve as a conciliatory figure, akin to the role Henry Kissinger played during the Nixon era.[33] Musk's unique position, as both a prominent businessman with substantial stakes in the Chinese market and a trusted advisor to Trump, positions him as a potential mediator in U.S.-China relations. If Musk does play such a role, it could exacerbate interagency and interpersonal tensions within the Trump Administration. The clash between hawkish and dovish factions would likely intensify, with disagreements over the appropriate course of action toward China. Furthermore, a hawkish Congress could step in to shape U.S. foreign policy by enacting new sanctions and restrictions, potentially constraining Trump's ability to adopt a conciliatory approach. In this complex environment, the direction of U.S.-China relations will depend not only on Trump's leadership style but also on the interplay of these internal dynamics, creating significant uncertainty about the trajectory of one of the world's most consequential bilateral relationships.

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## U.S.-Russia Relations

One of the most significant issues during Trump's Presidency will be

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U.S. policy toward Russia, particularly in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine. In his first term, U.S. policy toward Russia became deeply intertwined with domestic political controversies, complicating the administration's ability to manage bilateral relations. At the outset of his presidency, debates over Russian meddling in the 2016 election significantly strained U.S.-Russia relations. The situation escalated with the removal of Trump's first National Security Advisor, Michael Flynn,[34] and the fallout from the controversial Helsinki press conference, where Trump appeared to side with Putin over U.S. intelligence agencies.[35] These events fueled domestic pressure on the Trump Administration regarding its stance on Russia. In response to these pressures, Congress enacted legislation such as the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), which imposed significant sanctions on Russia.[36] Despite Trump's apparent personal affinity for Vladimir Putin and his expressed desire to improve U.S.-Russia relations, his administration took several actions that deepened the rift between the two nations. These included extending sanctions on Russia over the annexation of Crimea and withdrawing the U.S. from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, citing Russian violations.

For Trump's second term, one of the most puzzling and closely watched questions revolves around his policy toward the war in Ukraine. Even before the presidential campaign began, Trump asserted that Russia would not have invaded Ukraine if he had been president, accusing the Biden Administration of failing to foresee and prevent the conflict.[37] In his campaign, Trump made a bold promise to end the war within 24 hours if elected.[38] However, during presidential candidate debates, he avoided detailing specific strategies, instead emphasizing his preference for achieving peace in the region rather than ensuring Ukraine's victory over Russia.[39] While Trump has yet to present a detailed plan for ending the war, discussions have reportedly begun among his inner circle in Washington regarding potential approaches. These plans propose freezing the current lines of conflict to create an opportunity for negotiations and a possible settlement of the dispute. Another proposal involves establishing a heavily fortified demilitarized zone between Ukrainian and Russian forces to prevent further hostilities. A more contentious idea includes creating autonomous zones in the eastern regions of Ukraine, effectively granting Russia de facto control over parts of the

Donbas. Notably, all these proposed plans developed by Trump's advisors take Ukraine's membership in NATO off the table.[40] This stipulation aligns with Russia's long-standing demand and could serve as a bargaining chip in negotiations. However, such proposals have sparked concern among U.S. allies in Europe and Kyiv, as they may be perceived as concessions to Moscow, potentially undermining Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

President Trump and his team maintain a critical stance regarding the level of military aid provided by the U.S. to Ukraine, arguing that such extensive support for a foreign country is unsustainable in the long term. During his campaign, Trump pledged to "settle" the issue of military aid to Ukraine, emphasizing the need to reduce the financial burden on the U.S. and calling for greater contributions from European allies.[41] This position remains a cornerstone of his administration's approach to the conflict. Trump and his team argue that European nations, particularly NATO members, must step up their support for Ukraine, both financially and militarily. According to this perspective, the responsibility of supporting the war effort should not fall disproportionately on the U.S. In this context, many analysts suggest that the best-case scenario could involve Trump refraining from withdrawing from NATO while encouraging European allies to purchase U.S.-manufactured weapons for Ukraine. This would allow Trump to maintain U.S. influence within NATO while reducing the direct burden on American taxpayers.[42] Furthermore, Trump is expected to increase pressure on NATO member states to meet or exceed the 2 percent GDP threshold for defense spending, a commitment that many European allies have struggled to fulfill. In his first term, Trump frequently criticized NATO members for not contributing their fair share, and this is likely to remain a key focus in his second term. Such pressure could result in greater defense investments by European countries, aligning with Trump's broader goal of shifting the financial and logistical responsibility for Ukraine's defense to NATO allies.[43]

As with many aspects of foreign policy, personalities will play a critical role in shaping U.S.-Russia relations and addressing the crisis in Ukraine during Trump's second term. The relationship between President Trump and President Putin will likely serve as one of the most important determinants of U.S.-Russia dynamics during this period. Reports indicate that the two leaders have communicated at least seven times since 2021, highlighting an ongoing dialogue that could influence future policy directions.[44] In the meantime, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, recognizing the perceived chemistry between Trump and Putin, has also expressed a desire to cultivate cordial ties with Trump. Zelensky recently stated his willingness to work directly with Trump to resolve the conflict between Ukraine and Russia, signaling an openness to leveraging Trump's unique diplomatic style to bring an end to the war.[45] However, this chem-

istry, while potentially offering opportunities for dialogue, also raises concerns about the possibility of its misuse.

Further complicating the picture is the likely emergence of disputes within the Trump Administration itself over the direction of U.S.-Russia policy. While the administration includes prominent anti-Russian hawks such as Marco Rubio, who advocate for a tough stance against Moscow, it also features figures like Tulsi Gabbard, who have shown a willingness to engage with Russia and potentially improve relations. This division mirrors the dynamics observed in Trump's approach to China, where internal rivalries and competing priorities shaped policy outcomes. Ultimately, U.S. policy toward Russia will be determined by a complex interplay of factors, including interagency rivalries, the Congress-White House dynamic, and Trump's personal diplomacy with Putin. The involvement of Congress, particularly its more hawkish members, could act as a counterbalance to Trump's more conciliatory instincts, potentially leading to a fragmented and unpredictable Russia policy. These competing influences underscore the challenges of navigating one of the most contentious and consequential bilateral relationships of Trump's second term.

## U.S.-Middle East Relations

The Trump Administration's policy toward the Middle East is one of the most intricate and debated aspects of U.S. foreign policy in the years ahead. Among all policy areas, this region generates the most speculation and divergent projections due to its complexity and Trump's unpredictable approach. During his first term, several priorities shaped Trump's Middle East strategy, some of which had profound and lasting consequences for the region. One of the most significant policies was the "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran. The withdrawal of the U.S. from the JCPOA, commonly known as the Iran Nuclear Deal, marked a pivotal shift in U.S. policy.[46] Coupled with severe economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation, Trump's hawkish stance on Iran heightened tensions across the Middle East. However, despite this aggressive approach, Trump resisted direct military action against Iran, preferring to target Iranian proxies and militias operating in countries such as Iraq, Syria, and Yemen rather than engaging in a broader military conflict.

Simultaneously, Trump's Administration prioritized fostering Israeli dialogue with some Arab nations, culminating in the signing of the Abraham Accords. These agreements, which aimed to normalize relations between Israel and several Arab states, including the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, were presented as a major diplomatic achievement. Trump's ability to broker these agreements reflected a shift in the region's geopolitical dynamics, where concerns about Iran's influence helped bring former adversaries closer together. Trump also demonstrated staunch support

for Israel throughout his first term, taking unprecedented steps to bolster the U.S.-Israel relationship. His administration moved the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, a decision that broke with decades of U.S. policy and sparked controversy both domestically and internationally. Additionally, Trump distanced his administration from the traditional U.S. commitment to a two-state solution in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, further consolidating support for Israel while alienating the Palestinian leadership and people. The peace deal that his administration offered for the Palestinians was not even considered as a deal by the observers of the Israeli-Palestinian crisis.

In the four years since Trump left office, the Biden Administration faced significant challenges in addressing key issues in the Middle East. Despite multiple rounds of negotiations, the administration failed to secure a new nuclear deal with Iran. The absence of an agreement left the region in a state of heightened tension, with Iran continuing to expand its nuclear program and U.S.-led sanctions failing to curb its activities effectively. As part of the ongoing dialogue between Israel and Arab nations initiated under the Trump administration through the Abraham Accords, the Biden administration sought to broker a normalization agreement between Israel and Saudi Arabia. While some progress was made, a formal deal remained elusive, reflecting the complexities of the Saudi-Israeli relationship and broader geopolitical tensions in the region.

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One of the most significant developments during this period occurred in the aftermath of Hamas's attack on Israel on October 7. The Biden Administration's unequivocal support for Israel in its response to the attack sparked considerable challenges both domestically and internationally. Domestically, the administration faced criticism from segments of the U.S. public and lawmakers who expressed concerns about the humanitarian crisis and civilian casualties and loss unfolding in Gaza as a result of the Israeli attacks. Internationally, the unconditional backing of Israel strained U.S. relations with key partners in the region, as the U.S. image and favorability declined dramatically. Compounding these challenges were broader criticisms of Biden's Middle East policy. The chaotic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 raised questions about American reliability and commitment to its allies, while China's growing influence in Middle Eastern diplomacy further undermined U.S. leadership in the region. Beijing's active engagement, particularly in brokering the normalization of relations between

**The absence of a detailed roadmap or comprehensive strategic plan, coupled with the ideological diversity among Trump's appointees, suggests that his second term may be even more volatile and difficult to navigate than his first**

Saudi Arabia and Iran, highlighted the shifting balance of power and the increasing competition for influence in the Middle East.

After four years, Trump faces a new set of challenges in the Middle East, yet there appears to be no clear roadmap or comprehensive plan for addressing the multiple crises unfolding in the region. Iranian regional proxies, including Hezbollah, have been significantly weakened by Israeli strikes, but this has not diminished broader tensions between Israel and Iran. On the contrary, the dispute has escalated to direct conflict, with mutual missile attacks further destabilizing the region. On top of this, Iran's nuclear program has reportedly advanced considerably, adding to the urgency of addressing Tehran's ambitions.

These developments have created a volatile environment, with multiple flashpoints threatening to spiral into broader conflict. During his campaign, Trump expressed strong support for Israel's military actions against Iran and stated his willingness to back a military solution to curtail Iran's nuclear capabilities. However, a renewed "maximum pressure" campaign similar to his first term may prove more challenging to implement, given the deepening ties between Iran, Russia, and China. This trilateral alignment provides Tehran with economic, military, and diplomatic backing, reducing the effectiveness of unilateral U.S. sanctions and isolating Iran on the global stage. At the same time, the Iranian regime may seek to avoid direct confrontation with the U.S. under a second Trump Administration. Tehran could take steps to propose terms for a new agreement, potentially offering concessions in exchange for sanctions relief or other incentives. However, any deal would need to be favorable to Trump, aligning with his transactional approach and emphasis on securing a "better deal" than his predecessors.[47]

Regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict and Gaza, significant uncertainties remain about Trump's potential policies. During his campaign, Trump demonstrated unwavering support for Israel, emphasizing the need to back its military actions. However, during his victory speech, he also made a pointed remark, asserting that he would not forget Muslim-American voters. Many of these voters either supported him or abstained from voting for Biden, citing dissatisfaction with the Biden Administration's unconditional support for Israel during the ongoing conflict. Following the

election, Trump's appointments to critical national security and foreign policy positions provided concerns about the potential direction of his administration. Many of these appointees are ardent Israel supporters with little connection to or understanding of the conflict or interest in two state solution based on 1967 borders.[48] This composition of his team has left many Americans and observers in the region skeptical about the prospect of any meaningful policy changes or initiatives toward resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict or addressing the humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

Trump's social media posts have further reinforced this skepticism. While he called for the release of hostages held by Hamas, these statements did not indicate any willingness to pursue a ceasefire agreement or work toward lasting peace in the region. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu publicly expressed gratitude for Trump's comments and unwavering support for Israel, highlighting the alignment between Trump's position and the current Israeli government.[49] As it stands, Trump has articulated a clear position of support for Israel, however there is no coherent or actionable policy for advancing peace in the Middle East. Given the backgrounds and perspectives of his appointees, experts and observers remain doubtful about the likelihood of a major policy initiative from the Trump Administration to address the underlying issues of the conflict. Instead, there is a lingering hope —expressed by some supporters of Trump— that his stated desire to end "all wars around the world" might somehow extend to the Middle East, though no concrete plans or proposals have been outlined to date.

## Conclusion

The Trump Administration 2.0 is already generating significant repercussions worldwide, even before the President-elect formally assumes office. There is a growing consensus that Trump, emboldened by his recent electoral victory, will be more resolute and decisive in pursuing his foreign policy agenda. For the first time in 20 years, a Republican presidential candidate has won the popular vote, and the Republican Party now controls both houses of Congress. This consolidation of power grants Trump a considerable degree of freedom to shape and implement U.S. foreign policy without the level of opposition or legislative gridlock that characterized his first term. However, it remains uncertain how this newfound freedom will translate into concrete policies. Trump's second term presents both risks and opportunities: the potential for exacerbating superpower rivalries that could destabilize global security, as well as the chance to achieve diplomatic breakthroughs that could rival Nobel Peace Prize-level milestones.

Observers of U.S. foreign policy broadly agree that Trump's return to the White House will likely be marked by significant uncertainties and unpredictability. The absence of a detailed roadmap or comprehen-

sive strategic plan, coupled with the ideological diversity among Trump's appointees, suggests that his second term may be even more volatile and difficult to navigate than his first. Trump's distinctive leadership style —characterized by his transactional decision-making and tendency to prioritize short-term gains— may further amplify these challenges.

One of the most concerning aspects of Trump's second term is the continued absence of a coherent U.S. foreign policy strategy. This has been a persistent issue in American diplomacy for decades and appears poised to remain a defining flaw of his administration. This lack of strategic direction is especially pronounced in three critical areas: China, Russia, and the Middle East. These regions hold the keys to global stability, yet U.S. policies toward them remain riddled with speculation, inconsistencies, and gaps that leave allies and adversaries uncertain about American intentions.

As Trump prepares to enter his second term, the global community faces a U.S. administration that is both emboldened by its political position and constrained by its contradictions. Whether this period will result in historic strategic breakthroughs or deepen the unpredictability and incoherence that have come to characterize U.S. foreign policy remains one of the most pressing questions for the years ahead. Allies and adversaries alike will be closely watching to see how the Trump Administration manages this delicate balancing act.

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