

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Bracing for Trump 2.0

His Possible Return Inspires Fear in America's Allies—and Hope in Its Rivals

By Daniel W. Drezner

September 5, 2023

For most countries, the Biden administration's foreign policy represents a return to normality after the chaos of the Trump years. Long-standing allies and partners have seen their relationships strengthened. Autocrats no longer deal with a U.S. president who wants to emulate them. Great-power rivals face a United States that is dedicated to outcompeting them. For many observers, it is hard not to conclude that under President Joe Biden, the United States has returned to the postwar tradition of liberal internationalism. In this view, the Trump administration was an ephemeral blip rather than an inflection point. Equilibrium has been restored.

Beneath the superficial calm, however, many global actors are anxious about the 2024 U.S. presidential election. Despite four criminal indictments, Donald Trump is the runaway frontrunner to win the GOP nomination for president. Assuming he does, current polling shows a neck-and-neck race between Trump and Biden in the general election. It would be reckless for other world leaders to dismiss the possibility of a second Trump term beginning on January 20, 2025. Indeed, the person who knows this best is Biden himself. In his first joint address to Congress, Biden said that in conversations with world leaders, he has “made it known that America is back,” and their responses have tended to be a variation of “But for how long?”

To understand international relations for the next 15 months, observers will need to factor in how the possibility of a second Trump term affects U.S. influence in the world. U.S. allies and adversaries alike are already taking it into account. Foreign leaders recognize that a second term for Trump would be even more extreme and chaotic than his first term. The prospect that he could return to the White House will encourage hedging in the United States' allies—and stiffen the resolve of its adversaries. Russian and Chinese officials, for instance, have told analysts that they hope Trump is reelected. For Russia, Trump's return to power would mean less Western support for Ukraine; for China, it would mean the fraying of U.S. alliances with countries such as Japan and South Korea that help constrain Beijing. The Biden administration's best foreign policy move over the next year will not be a diplomatic or military initiative—it will be to demonstrate that Trump is unlikely to win in November 2024.

During his first term, Trump scrambled the dense network of alliances and partnerships that the United States had built over the previous 75 years. For long-standing allies in Europe, Latin America, and the Pacific Rim, the United States suddenly exhibited a bewildering array of capricious behavior. Trump blasted allies for not contributing enough to collective security and for allegedly robbing the United States blind on trade deals. He repeatedly threatened to exit previously sacrosanct agreements including NATO, the World Trade Organization, the U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement, and NAFTA. By contrast, although U.S. adversaries also had to deal with the occasional tantrum from Trump, it was for them in many ways the best of times. Trump bent over backward to ingratiate himself with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Chinese President Xi Jinping, and the North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. His administration yo-yoed between coercing and accommodating these states, with the latter tactic usually winning out. These autocrats happily pocketed gains from the United States' strained relations with allies. Xi could go to Davos in 2017 and effectively declare that China, rather than the United States, was the status quo power. Putin could bide his time while the Trump White House withdrew the U.S. ambassador from Ukraine and withheld Javelin weapons systems in an effort to coerce Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky into aiding Trump's 2020 reelection campaign. There was no need for Putin or Xi to act recklessly when their rival was self-sabotaging.

Biden's victory over Trump in 2020 ended much of this bizarre behavior. Biden has reasserted traditional alliances to an extent not seen since U.S. President George H. W. Bush. As Richard Haass, the former president of the Council on Foreign Relations, has put it, Biden has transformed U.S. foreign policy "from 'America first' to alliances first." Biden consulted widely with European leaders in crafting the U.S. response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, resulting in a degree of transatlantic cooperation that has surprised even Putin. Similarly, the administration has garnered support from numerous allies to counter China: imposing export controls in consultation with Japan and the Netherlands; bolstering the Quad, a defense coalition made up of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States; and developing the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, a U.S.-led talking shop of 14 countries, including Indonesia, South Korea, Thailand, and Vietnam. Public opinion polling conducted across a group of 23 countries as varied as Hungary, Japan, and Nigeria shows that much of the world holds more positive attitudes toward the United States under Biden than it did under Trump.

At the same time, rivals such as Russia and China have had to adjust to a U.S. president who walks the walk as well as talks the talk on great-power competition. Trump ranted and raved and lashed out at China, but in the end, he was more interested in making deals than in advancing U.S. interests—demonstrated, for

instance, by his push to finalize the Phase One trade agreement with China in early 2020 without pressing Chinese authorities about the emerging COVID-19 pandemic. His approach to Russia was mercurial; Trump himself has said that he was the “apple of [Putin’s] eye.” By contrast, the Biden administration has proved ready and willing to mobilize the federal government to counter both these autocracies—the CHIPS and Science Act and the Inflation Reduction Act are far more ambitious pieces of legislation than anything passed during the Trump years. These measures aim to accomplish what Trump only talked about: “home shoring” critical industrial sectors.

Biden has also been far more adept at attracting new allies and partners. NATO has expanded to include Finland and is soon likely to count Sweden in, as well. The trilateral partnership between Japan, South Korea, and the United States in Northeast Asia has been strengthened; the gathering of these countries’ leaders at Camp David in August would have been unthinkable during the Trump years. Biden will sign a strategic partnership agreement with Vietnam during a state visit to Hanoi in September, deepening ties between two countries wary of Chinese expansionism. The AUKUS pact with Australia and the United Kingdom has cemented security cooperation with these key allies. The United States has bolstered bilateral cooperation with Taiwan. Both Russian and Chinese firms are discovering that their ability to freeload off the liberal international order has been compromised.

Foreign leaders recognize that a second term for Trump would be even more extreme and chaotic than his first term.

As U.S. adversaries find themselves increasingly isolated, many elites in these countries are holding out hope for a future windfall—heralded by Trump’s return to the presidency in 2025. China watchers report hearing more mentions of Trump in their visits to Beijing than they do in the United States. Chinese officials hope that a new Trump administration will fray U.S. alliances again. As for Russia, policymakers in Europe and the United States agree that Putin is unlikely to change his tactics in Ukraine until after the 2024 election. An anonymous U.S. official told CNN in August: “Putin knows Trump will help him. And so do the Ukrainians and our European partners.” Allies in Europe are also contemplating—or, rather, dreading—a second Trump term.

Some observers argue that although Trump executed an unconventional foreign policy when he was president, he did not act on his worst impulses. He did not

withdraw the United States from either the WTO or NATO, nor did he remove U.S. troops from across the Pacific Rim. These pundits hold that Trump's second term would just reprise the bluster of his first term.

Such equanimity is misplaced. A second Trump term would transpire with countervailing institutions that are even weaker than they were in 2016. Trump would be supported by congressional Republicans who are far more Trumpish in their outlook than the old-guard GOP leadership of five years ago. According to *The New York Times*, Trump, if reelected, “plans to scour the intelligence agencies, the State Department and the defense bureaucracies to remove officials he has vilified as ‘the sick political class that hates our country.’” Trump's own foreign policy team would likely feature hardly anyone with a significant record of leadership in diplomacy or the military that could put the brakes on his wildest ideas—in other words, there will no longer be any adults in the room. There will be no James Mattis, the secretary of defense under Trump's first term, or even a John Bolton, a former national security adviser, to talk Trump out of his rash actions or persuade him that he cannot bomb Mexico or that he is incapable of ending Russia's invasion of Ukraine in a single day. Trump's second term would most closely resemble the chaotic last few months of Trump's first term, when the 45th president came close to bombing Iran and unilaterally withdrawing all U.S. troops from a variety of trouble spots such as Somalia and Syria. As one former German official told *The New York Times*, “Trump has experience now and knows what levers to pull, and he's angry.” Another European official compared a second Trump to the Terminator of the second film in the franchise, which featured a cyborg assassin even more lethal and sophisticated than the original played by Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Throughout his first term, Trump frequently held U.S. foreign policy hostage to his own political whims. He has faced some consequences; his demands that Zelensky relay damaging information about Biden (regardless of whether it was true) in return for sending Kyiv arms resulted in one of his two impeachments. If Trump is reelected despite these two impeachments—and four fresh criminal indictments—he will feel truly unconstrained and unrepentant. A second Trump term would make the first one look like a garden party.

TRUMP-PROOFING THE WORLD ORDER

It is worth remembering that the foreign diplomatic corps believed that Trump would be reelected in 2020. U.S. allies feared that Trump would do what he tried to do during his lame-duck period in late 2020: withdraw U.S. forces from the world. Unless and until it becomes manifestly obvious that Trump will lose, it would be malpractice for the rest of the world to discount the threats and opportunities posed

by a second Trump term. If anything, the stakes are higher now than four years ago. The responses to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and China's economic rise have more closely enmeshed U.S. and allied foreign policy. If Trump were to take over the helm of U.S. foreign policy, the result would be a much broader unraveling. U.S. allies have no choice but to craft hedging strategies for the next year, in case wartime sanctions against Russia are disrupted or Trump wants to be best friends with Kim Jong Un again. This explains why some eastern European countries and France are also pushing allies to admit Ukraine into NATO sooner rather than later, anticipating that Trump might turn his back on Kyiv as the war with Russia rages on.

At the same time, countries such as Russia, China, and North Korea have every incentive to resist U.S. pressure in the hopes that a second Trump term will offer them foreign policy salvation. It will therefore be highly unlikely that China will allow for a warming of bilateral ties or that Russia will provide any indication that it is interested in serious peace negotiations before the election. It is arguably in Beijing's and Moscow's interest to do everything in their power to make it seem as though the world will be on fire if Biden is reelected.

The Biden administration can respond to these behaviors by institutionalizing as much of the United States' current foreign policy as possible. As the sanctions against Russia become the new normal, the United States would be wise to develop a new organization akin to the Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Controls—also known as CoCom—that existed during the Cold War to manage the strategic embargo of the Soviet bloc. Such a structure might also prove useful in coordinating the export controls the United States wants erected against China. The more congressional buy-in that the Biden administration can secure, the harder it would be for Trump to reverse course.

Trump frequently held U.S. foreign policy hostage to his own political whims.

Biden can also exploit the possibility of Trump's return to bargain with recalcitrant allies and long-standing adversaries. Trump's hostile rhetoric toward Mexico might make it easier for Biden to pressure Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador to allow accommodations in handling migration and narcotics trafficking. Faced with a choice between acceding to Biden's wishes that Mexico cooperate on migration strategies and the threat of Trump deploying the U.S. military on Mexican soil, Mexican authorities might find the former option more palatable.

Similarly, Trump's demonstrated hostility toward Iran might enable Biden to jumpstart nuclear negotiations with the theocrats in Tehran in a manner that makes it more costly for Trump to pull out of a deal again—for instance, by transferring frozen Iranian assets to third parties such as Qatar in advance of any deal, which would help insulate negotiations from White House whims.

But the best move the Biden administration can make in response to the possibility of a second Trump term is to reduce the odds that Trump will be reelected. As long as there is a chance that Trump or someone like him will win the presidency, the rest of the world will doubt the durability of any U.S. grand strategy. The current administration needs to defeat Trumpism as well as Trump.

This does not mean using nefarious means to stay in power; the surest route to U.S. decline is for Trump's political opponents to adopt Trump's tactics. Rather, the Biden team needs to use the campaign trail to remind Americans of the chaos of the Trump years while stressing the tangible accomplishments of Biden's more traditional foreign policy approach. Under Biden, NATO is stronger than ever, as are America's Pacific Rim relationships. Biden's approach to China is multilateral, not unilateral—and polling demonstrates that most Americans like it when the United States acts with multilateral support. If Biden defeats Trump a second time while running on a foreign policy platform of liberal internationalism, allies could trust more ambitious forms of cooperation with the United States. Adversaries would recognize that they cannot simply hold out and hope U.S. policymakers change their minds. Echoing William Jennings Bryan's three presidential defeats a century ago, Trump's third loss of the popular vote in 2024 would send a powerful signal that isolationist and populist sentiments in the United States are trending toward remission.

- DANIEL W. DREZNER is Professor of International Politics at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University and the author of *The Ideas Industry*.

Putin Races Against the Clock

The Dangers of a Desperate Russia

Daniel Baer