

MAGA GOES GLOBAL: TRUMP'S PLAN FOR EUROPE

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SUMMARY

- Whether he knows it or not, Donald Trump has a “big plan” for America and the world that was 40 years in the making.
- Trump’s foreign policy is an extension of his domestic policy. Europeans are an extension of his political opposition at home—and everyone is out to rip him and America off.
- In turn, the president is overhauling the way the US works at home and functions abroad. His methods in both arenas are: elimination, transformation and subjugation.
- Abroad, this means he is eliminating the ties that bind the US to Europe, trying to transform Europe in his image and attempting to intimidate any transatlantic resistance into submission.
- Europeans need to respond in kind. They should reshape the rules-based order to salvage what they can, fight back against the assault on their democratic model, resist coercion and diversify away from the US.

Think big, act big

Donald Trump has never been one to shy away from the grandiose. “I like thinking big. To me it’s very simple: if you’re going to be thinking anyway, you might as well think big,” he wrote in “The Art of the Deal”. He did a lot more than think in the first three months of his second stint as US president.

Trump’s first 100 days were record breaking. He signed over 140 executive orders, more than any other president at that point in their term—including Franklin D. Roosevelt during the second world war. The Trump administration faces a record number of lawsuits too, shattering the president’s own benchmark from his first term. His April 2nd mass tariff announcement alone destroyed as much as \$10trn in stock values in less than a week, equivalent to around half the GDP of the European Union.

Consequences be damned, Trump is doing big things. And he is doing them quickly, in domestic and foreign policy. The transatlantic relationship is not exempt. The first quarter of 2025 saw an onslaught on European interests: the indiscriminate tariffs, the pressure on Ukraine to accept land losses, the support for nationalist voices in Europe. This is not to mention the neo-imperial coveting of Greenland (and Canada). My ECFR colleagues Majda Ruge, Jeremy Shapiro and I had anticipated some of these disruptions. But the scope, speed and brutality with which the new administration is implementing its agenda is astonishing.

In a mere three months, European citizens have come to barely recognise their biggest ally. America suddenly seems ready to bend over backwards for its strategic rival Russia; while mistreating its closest partners. The Trump administration also appears to have launched an all-out war on US society, dismantling the pillars of the country’s own liberal democracy and abandoning its historic role as leader of the free world. It is as if America and Europe are not even on the same side anymore.

If it seems that way, it is because that is the plan. Of course, Trump maintains his chaotic personal style. Just as he is undisciplined in his speeches, he also goes off-script in enacting policy. He imposed massive global tariffs which he claimed would transform the global economy, just to pause them a week later because people “were getting yippy”. He promised to end the war in Ukraine in just 24 hours, and then threatened to walk away from the whole thing. He tore up a functioning Iran nuclear deal in his first term, but now says that he wants one back on the table. What is more, his administration remains understaffed and is undergoing brutal restructuring; political appointees hold at times vastly diverging views. Prospects of petty gain mean policy directions swerve overnight. It will therefore remain excruciatingly difficult to predict US policy outcomes.

But, much like in his speeches, there is order in the chaos. Trump intends his presidency to be deeply transformative, at home and abroad. He promised his supporters as much on the campaign trail: he would have to get rid of those who are destroying America or “[we] won’t have a country anymore”. Anyone standing in the way—Democrats or Europeans—will be confronted. The end point is thus clear, even if the route is full of detours.

This policy brief shows that, beneath the capricious social media posts and seemingly disjointed pronouncements, Trump’s foreign policy has a clear throughline: it is his domestic agenda, exported.

First, the paper analyses Trump’s long-held belief that both liberals and foreigners are ripping off America. From this conviction, empowered by his MAGA-fuelled Republican majority, comes Trump’s aim to conduct an all-out assault on the bastions where the power of liberals and foreigners resides, at home and abroad. Doing so, he claims, will put the country back on the right track. Europeans are part of this and cannot escape the brute force of Trump’s one-size-fits-all policy.

Second, the brief shows where Europeans can find form behind the frenzy. Trump is implementing a “big plan” to rid America of liberal and foreign constraints. His highly political agenda is carried out by the many MAGA ideologues, supporters, loyalists around him. The plan is all about what Trump wants, but it is not just Trump undertaking it. Intentionally or not, Trump and his MAGA camp are using the same three methods at home and abroad: elimination, transformation and subjugation. At home, they seek to eliminate the “deep state”, transform liberal America into nationalist America and subjugate opponents into submission or capitulation. Abroad, they seek to eliminate alliances and international commitments, transform Western liberal democratic allies into nationalist vassals and subjugate opponents into exploitative transactions.

Finally, the paper explains what Europeans can do in the face of Trump’s apparent determination to crush them like he crushes his political enemies. This time around, Europeans cannot just appease Trump, try to delay his decisions, or distract him as they wait for better days. A big plan requires a big response. Instead, they will have to reinvent the rules-based order to work without US leadership, fight back against the assault on their democratic model, and eventually diversify away from the United States.

Trump’s one-size-fits-all politics

Trump past is Trump present. Unlike career politicians who adapt to the times, for decades Trump has been remarkably consistent in his political beliefs and opinions. He seems to value consistency and believe it is part of his brand. Three months before his first election in 2016, he tweeted “I have always been the same person-remain true to self. The media wants me to change but it would be very dishonest to supporters to do so!”

Trump at home is Trump abroad. Unlike past presidents for whom politics supposedly stopped at the water’s edge, Trump does not even pretend. He treats foreign affairs as a tool to score political points, beat up political adversaries and blame US failures on foreigners. Indeed, he has long instinctively resorted to the “populist politization of foreign policy” described by political scientist David Cadier in 2024, in which foreign policy is formulated based on domestic political interests. Trump’s decisions on the world stage are therefore best understood as an extension of US politics, as another front line in America’s culture wars.

Whether they like it or not, Trump’s idiosyncratic worldview means Europe plays a part in the American political drama. Liberals and Democrats are the enemy within; Europeans are their extension outside. Europe is a reference, an influential player in American culture. Trump intends to contain that influence. Europe is thus a symbol of the political ideals Trump seeks to eliminate, transform and subjugate.



A supporter of Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump holds up a Playboy Magazine with Trump on the cover during a campaign rally on Monday, April 25, 2016, in Wilkes-Barre, Pa. (Jake Danna Stevens/The Times & Tribune via AP) © [picture alliance](#) / AP Images Jake Danna Stevens

Home is abroad

Trump has a unique capacity to describe the misfortunes of Americans through the nefarious role of foreign countries and the complicity of weak US leaders. To view Trump's rhetoric on Mexico, China and Panama through the lens of foreign policy is therefore missing the point; for Trump, domestic and foreign policy are one and the same. The outside world is very much to blame for what is happening inside the country, and former leaders are complicit for their weakness in letting this happen.

This is not new. As a young billionaire and socialite, Trump was already enmeshing judgements on domestic politics and foreign policy. In a *Playboy* magazine [interview](#) in 1990,

for example, Trump covered in the same breath real estate deals in New York and “so-called allies ripping off America”. He dismissed former president Jimmy Carter as weak for failing to complete a six-mile race and as equally weak for failing to rescue embassy staff in the Iran hostage crisis. Foreign affairs were personal: Trump made good money from foreigners. The Japanese were buying his luxury real estate in the 1980s, Saudis and Kuwaitis were spending millions in his casinos in the 1990s, and a Chinese bank paid millions to rent space in Trump Tower in the 2010s.

His views have also remained consistent. In a September 1987 open letter in the *New York Times*, *Boston Globe* and *Washington Post*, Trump suggested that Japan, Saudi Arabia and other allies should “pay” the US for securing the Persian Gulf for “their” interests. Thirty-seven years later his administration is compiling the costs associated with bombing the Houthis in Yemen and plans to “levy” them on Europeans. When he first announced his presidential candidacy in 2015, he repeatedly stated that Mexico was not sending its best people, but instead criminals and rapists. He lamented that Americans spent trillions of dollars and thousands of lives in Iraq and now they could not even travel there. He opined that Americans could not get jobs because China had stolen their jobs.

And he still uses such rhetoric in 2025. Trump tackled the very same points as in 2015 during the first address to Congress of his second presidential term. He reiterated that every country on Earth was ripping America off; all the presidents before him were weak and allowed and even encouraged other nations to take advantage. Illegals and terrorists have flooded the country, welcomed by the Biden administration. The Panama Canal was given away by Carter, but now the US is taking it back.

Liberals are Europeans

Trump’s conviction that everyone is out to rip him (and America) off seems to have infused his politics with a profound sense of grievance, and a longing for redress and payback. His political opponents are the objects of his ire. That goes for Democrats and anyone else who resists him, including centrist Republicans. They obstruct his goals, they are judgy, they are weak and they force America to support their woke ideology.

After his surprise win in 2016, the new president saw his victory as tainted by revelations of Russian information meddling during the campaign. He remains mired in resentment about this. But instead of blaming Russia, Trump blames the media and the liberal establishment for denying him the legitimacy and respect he felt he deserved. He has even claimed they wronged Vladimir Putin: Trump and Russia's leader "went through a hell of a lot" together; both were victims of a witch-hunt.

The clash with the liberal establishment only intensified during Trump's first term. US civil society mobilised against his anti-immigration platform, his anti-climate policies and his judicial agenda. This likely helped the Democrats reclaim the House in the 2018 midterms. Science became a battleground during the covid-19 pandemic. The resistance reached its peak in the summer of 2020, when the "Black Lives Matter" racial justice movement swept the country in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. As the term drew to a close, Trump scorned liberal America's criticism of his record as "Trump Derangement Syndrome", claiming instead to have delivered the "best economy ever" and to have saved the world with the covid vaccine.



His disdain for his opponents grew even deeper following his defeat in the 2020 election (though, of course, he continues to assert he won). After the January 6th attack on the Capitol, he rewrote the violence as a "day of love" and recast those charged with crimes as "hostages". His calls to "drain the swamp" morphed into lambasting the "deep state" for obstructing his goals. His real political enemies were now not just Democrats, but everywhere the liberal left

continued to exercise intellectual dominance: the federal bureaucracy, state and local governments of liberal states and cities, universities, science and research institutions, non-profits, the media and even Hollywood. In his first campaign speech ahead of the 2024 election he proclaimed: “Either the deep state destroys America, or we destroy the deep state.”

For Trump and his acolytes, only an all-out assault can defeat the liberal ideology embedded in America’s government, civil society and culture. The key to this assault is speed. Steve Bannon’s exhortation to “flood the zone” with “muzzle velocity” is not just about inundating the media and overwhelming his political opponents so they cannot process what is happening. It is also about destroying as many pockets of resistance as possible before political conditions (pesky mid-term elections, for example) make it impossible to continue.

There will be no mercy: Trump seeks no accommodation with his opponents, and he believes they will never accommodate him. In his Congressional address in March 2025, he said of Democrats “there is absolutely nothing I can say to make them happy or to make them stand or smile or applaud”. A house so infested with pests, in Trump’s world, can only be burnt to the ground and rebuilt.

Europeans are liberals

Trump views Europe as an extension of his political opponents at home. Europeans are no better than Democrats. They, too, rip off America, they obstruct his goals and they are judgy. Worse, they are weak and they force America to support their security. The same liberal cultural political elite that has delegitimised and disrespected him in America populates the ranks of the European leadership.

The president is convinced that Europeans are pulling a fast one on America, just like all America’s other partners. He said as much in April 2025 when he announced a 20% tariff on all imports from the EU (along with dozens of other tariff hikes): Europeans are “very, very tough traders” that “rip us off”. At various points in the past, he has argued the EU was invented to “screw the United States”, describing the union as a “foe” to America, “worse than China”, because it runs high commercial imbalances.

But the distaste is not only about trade competition. The very concept of the EU is an abomination in Trump’s eyes. Its bureaucracy is an enemy to his business instincts and interests. In a speech in Warsaw in 2017, he denounced the “steady creep of government bureaucracy that drains the vitality and wealth of the people”, appearing to compare Europe’s bureaucracy to that of the Soviet Union. And, as always, the grievance is personal: Trump is under the impression that the EU and its environmental regulations are to blame for stopping

him from building a seawall in front of a golf course he acquired in Ireland in 2014.

This grievance is shared in his base. And it goes deeper than mere resentment of bureaucratic hurdles. Europeans' ritualistic discourse of shared values that bind the US and Europe is alien to Trump and his MAGA supporters. They view the US as having little in common with socialist, secular, pacifist Europeans; who preach values to the US but are unable to defend themselves. Trumpists were offended by the European Parliament's 2022 resolution calling on the US to protect abortion rights ahead of the Supreme Court's "Dobbs ruling". And they are aggrieved by European criticism of their social model more broadly (private healthcare, for instance, the death penalty and the right to bear arms). [1] This all looks to Trump and his followers like foreign interference in matters that do not concern Europe. It does not help that Europe (Scandinavia in particular) often serves as a reference for American liberals of an ideal social democratic welfare system.

As well as being judgmental, the Europe in Trump's mind is weak and profiteering. He respects strength and standing up for oneself. In March 2025, the infamous Signal chat among members of his administration over bombing the Houthis laid bare the administration's views of Europeans: the US would have to bomb Yemen, even though securing the Red Sea is to Europe's benefit, because Europeans are too weak to do it themselves. The consensus was that Europe is parasitic and will have to start paying for the services rendered. The vice-president, J.D. Vance, wrote: "I just hate bailing Europeans out again". Defence secretary Pete Hegseth concurred, calling Europeans "PATHETIC" (caps all his own). Trump used the same word to describe Europe in April when announcing his tariffs.

Pete Hegseth

VP: I fully share your loathing of European free-loading. It's PATHETIC.

But Mike is correct, we are the only ones on the planet (on our side of the ledger) who can do this. Nobody else even close. Question is timing. I feel like now is as good a time as any, given POTUS directive to reopen shipping lanes. I think we should go; but POTUS still retains 24 hours of decision space.



8:49 AM ⓘ

S M

As I heard it, the president was clear: green light, but we soon make clear to Egypt and Europe what we expect in return. We also need to figure out how to enforce such a requirement. EG, if Europe doesn't remunerate, then what? If the US successfully restores freedom of navigation at great cost there needs to be some further economic gain extracted in return.

SM

9:35 AM ⓘ

Pete Hegseth

Agree



9:46 AM ⓘ

Ukraine occupies a special place in the administration's adversarial approach to Europe. And Trump himself detests the topic perhaps more than any other. The country has brought him nothing but trouble. His 2016 campaign chief of staff Paul Manafort was charged for failing to disclose his lobbying in Ukraine. Moreover, Trump's first impeachment trial resulted from his demand to Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky that he find dirt on Joe Biden's son, Hunter, in exchange for congressionally appropriated military support. Trump, for his part, defended it as a "perfect phone call" and denied any wrongdoing.

With Trumpian consistency, the president's dislike for Ukraine's leader deepened on the 2024 campaign trail, when Zelensky visited an ammunition factory in Pennsylvania with the state's Democratic governor Josh Shapiro. The MAGA crowd still cite the incident as proof that Zelensky picked a side. Since Trump's re-election, he has been perpetually annoyed by what he sees as Zelensky's reluctance to get on board with the "peace in 24 hours" plan, culminating in the infamous Oval Office confrontation between Trump, Vance and Zelensky.

These events likely combine in the US president's mind to mean that Zelensky protects and helps Democrats; but he does not extend the same treatment to Trump and his people. And Trump hates being anyone's sucker.

Trump's big plan at home and abroad

Trump abroad is Trump at home. As such, and whether he knows it or not, his strategies to enact policy in both arenas are nearly identical. To "Make America Great Again", the US needs a leader who takes back power, exercises full force on his opponents and partners alike and extracts concessions from everyone.

The same way Trump is attacking the deep state that opposes his agenda in the US, he is also attacking the alliances and international institutions that obstruct his goals on the global stage. He eliminates the national and international constraints that limit his action. He transforms culture and ideas that are anathema to his political views and works to replace them. He subjugates opponents, offering those who are cornered the opportunity to bend the knee and compromise—or be gone.

Eliminating limits

As discussed, Trump blames the deep state for limiting his power in his first administration. He also blames alliances and international institutions for limiting his capacity to act on the world stage. The domestic mission for his second term is therefore to destroy the deep state

and to contract out the federal government. The foreign one is to eliminate international commitments and free America from its allies. In pursuit of these goals, he is wresting power from Congress, the judiciary and the states; but also from international organisations, alliances and all rival centres of power. If he succeeds, he will become the sole decider of US policy—including foreign policy.

At home

Trump profoundly distrusts the federal government he heads and believes that the civil service is constantly working against him and his policy decisions. On the campaign trail he routinely railed against the deep state and promised to “drain the swamp” of federal employees. With this goal in mind, Trump and his allies spent the four years of the Biden administration devising a plan that would enable them to reshape the federal bureaucracy in Trump’s image. The playbook the Heritage Foundation think-tank put together to lay the groundwork for Trump’s return, “Project 2025”, included plenty of ideas on how to drastically reduce the size and scope of the federal government.

One of these recommendations was to reclassify civil servant positions as political appointments (known as “Schedule Policy/Career”). Accordingly, among the 26 other executive orders he signed on day one, Trump reclassified as many as 50,000 civil servant positions—granting himself the ability to fire their occupants at will. That the change would unsettle the federal workforce was a bonus. In a closed-door presentation in 2022, Russell Vought, one of the main authors of Project 2025 and now director of the Office of Management and Budget, put it like this: “We want the bureaucrats to be traumatically affected. We want when they wake up in the morning, [sic] we want them to not want to go to work because they are increasingly viewed as the villains.” Vilification of civil servants is a central theme of the second Trump administration, and many of them are already experiencing the desired trauma.

Knock, knock ... it's @DOGE



3:50 am · 29 Apr 2025 · 71.8M Views

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Trump's most notorious effort to combat the deep state was the creation of the so-called Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), under the pretext of modernising government and maximising productivity. In reality, with billionaire businessman Elon Musk at the helm, DOGE is delivering an important political goal: cutting through the meat of the federal state as quickly and deeply as possible to weaken the capacity of the bureaucracy to oppose Trump's agenda. DOGE's initial aim was to cut federal spending in half (about one trillion dollars) in 130 days—although the ambition has since been revised significantly downward. Still, Musk and his DOGE team have accessed federal payroll systems to identify “waste” and focused on cutting programmes and agencies such as the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, as well as moved to sell federal buildings. They have also begun large layoffs of the federal workforce, using similar methods to those the billionaire used at X and other businesses.

Elimination policies have had immediate effects on parts of the federal government. Tens of thousands of jobs have been slashed. The development agency USAID has been gutted. By March 2025, 90% of its grants and 83% of its programmes had been cancelled and thousands of its 10,000 employees had been fired. The administration plans to terminate virtually all positions by September 2025. The Department of Education (DOE) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) are facing a similar fate, with the DOE initiating plans for a reduction in force of nearly 50% and the EPA setting out to cut its staff by 65%.

Eliminating large chunks of the bureaucracy in this way is meant to free the Trump administration from the constraints of past choices. To that end, the administration is also systematically targeting rules decided in a prior era for reconsideration. It has homed in on Biden-era environmental rules, including rolling back mandates on electric vehicles and coal-fired power plants. But it has also abandoned decades-old regulations, such as protections for migratory birds. Every future rule must eliminate those of the past: a January 31st executive order directed regulators to eliminate ten current regulations for every one they introduce.

Additionally, the president claims that he can practise “impoundment”, by which he can refuse to spend money appropriated by Congress if he does not like what it is being used for. For example, he can slash the budgets of agencies he wants to weaken or close even if Congress has passed their budgets. As he promised during the campaign, impoundment allows him to “obliterate the deep state, drain the swamp, and starve the warmongers—and the globalists—out of our government.” Withholding earmarked money reduces path dependency in future budget and policy decisions: Trump will not be a prisoner of the past.

Ultimately, Trump and his camp have pushed to concentrate executive power in the president's hands—and therefore eliminate the risk of the weakness he loathes so much.

Following the so-called unitary executive theory, according to which the Constitution (Article II Section 1) attributes all executive powers to the president, Trump signed an executive order to bring all independent federal regulatory agencies under direct presidential authority. This gives the president the power to fire the agencies' heads and control any new regulation they put in place. In the long term, the administration seems determined to provoke a legal fight to get the Supreme Court to declare presidential authority over the entirety of the federal government, potentially jeopardising the independence of bodies as autonomous as the Federal Reserve.

This adds up to a much smaller federal state, a politicised bureaucracy and the demise of independent agencies. In short, the elimination strategy will make the 47th US president more central and powerful than any before.

Abroad

Trump also refuses to be prisoner of the past when it comes to the United States' international commitments. The same way he is going after the entrenched powers within the federal government, Trump wants rid of anything that attaches the US to international institutions or foreign countries.

Upon taking office, Trump promptly withdrew—again—from the Paris Climate Agreement. This time, however, he also opted out of the World Health Organization and the UN Human Rights Council; and stopped funding UNRWA (the UN agency for Palestinian refugees) and the World Trade Organization. He then ordered his secretary of state Marco Rubio to review US membership of all international intergovernmental organisations, which could lead to the end of the country's participation in the World Bank and the IMF. What is more, the administration plans to downsize the State Department's staff by 15% and to defund international broadcasting efforts, such as Voice of America. A leaked April 2025 memo suggested much more may be to come, such as eliminating US contributions to the UN's and NATO's common funding and shuttering dozens of American embassies and consulates all over the world.

The worst kind of foreign commitments from Trump's perspective are military alliances. They make no sense to him, as the US is bound to protect countries that are too weak to defend themselves. These "weakling" states, meanwhile, thrive and compete economically with their protector. Trump made this clear in his Playboy interview: "We Americans are laughed at around the world [...] for defending wealthy nations for nothing, nations that would be wiped off the face of the earth in about fifteen minutes if it weren't for us." Forty-five years later, Trump seems obsessed by the bad deal he is getting out of NATO. If the US

needed its NATO allies' help, would they oblige? "Hum, I'm not so sure," he mused in April 2025.

Trump's scepticism over NATO is echoed in a new generation of American policymakers, such as Dan Caldwell who joined the administration as an advisor to Hegseth. Many such political appointees to Pentagon positions have expressed a desire to restrain American foreign policy. They are determined to shift US military resources away from Europe and back to the US or to Asia. Central to this is an aim to change the United States' relationship with its allies. A 1983 quote by Irving Kristol is making its way around Trumpist circles: "dependency corrupts and absolute dependency corrupts absolutely". Hegseth echoed this message in his first address in Brussels: "The United States will no longer tolerate an imbalanced relationship which encourages dependency."

At the time of writing, this rhetoric had just begun to turn into action. On April 8th, the US announced it was withdrawing military personnel from an aid hub for Ukraine based in the Polish city of Rzeszow. Senior officials also proposed standing down 10,000 light infantry troops stationed in Poland, Romania and the Baltic states over the rest of 2025. Transferring or offloading weapon systems from Europe to Asia or back to the US may be on the next on the to-do list, as suggested in a Heritage Foundation report by Alex Velez-Green (who was appointed to the Pentagon by the new administration). These strategic assets may include air and missile defences; ground-based long-range fires; and critical enablers such as intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) drones.

Unsurprisingly, US commitments to Ukraine may be the single biggest problem for Trump and his MAGA camp, as they see it as a conflict in which America should never have been so involved. The war also forces the US into an adversarial relationship with Russia at a moment when Trump would much rather deal with the country on an equal footing to discuss geopolitical challenges, in particular limiting nuclear weapons arsenals. Having promised and failed to end the war in 24 hours, Trump aims to obtain a ceasefire, however short, in order to claim victory and turn the page. If he does not get his win, he may just walk away.



The White House
@WhiteHouse



"IT'S LIBERATION DAY IN AMERICA!" –President Trump



Donald J. Trump
@realDonaldTrump

IT'S LIBERATION DAY IN AMERICA!

3:27 pm · 2 Apr 2025 · 3.8M Views

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1.7K



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Finally, Trump views free trade agreements as highly burdensome. He dubbed April 2nd, the day he announced massive hikes in tariffs across the world, “Liberation Day”. This implies the president does not find free trade freeing; instead, his liberty to impose high tariffs on partners and competitors is the real liberation.

In short, America will be ripped off no longer—either as an obedient military protector or as a naive trade buddy. Trump wants a clean break from the past. And he wants it whatever the cost, whether that is trashing the federal state at home or decimating America’s leadership abroad.

Transforming culture

Trump and his MAGA camp believe a dominant liberal establishment has skewed US culture towards a weak progressive ideology that does a disservice to America. This ideology is being fed by a “globalist elite”, chief among them Europeans. The new administration is therefore going after all the liberal holdouts, at home and abroad.

At home

Since his return to the White House, Trump has used the levers of the federal government to try to drag American political culture away from liberalism and progressivism. The post-Obama era had seen profound societal transformations in favour of women’s and LGBTQ+ rights, as well as the fight against systemic racism. Yet, as the Democratic Party positioned itself as the champion of civil rights, the Republican Party—specifically its conservative base—increasingly identified itself in opposition to that progress. Trump and his MAGA camp believe that the “woke agenda” (liberalism) is making America weak (like Europe) and preventing it from being great. They seem convinced that the dominant position of liberal values in American culture is a political construct, and that it needs to be crushed if conservatives want to restore the “natural order”. Trump thus aims to transform the cultural direction of US society.

Starting from day one, Trump issued executive orders that targeted “the tyranny” of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, which he accuses of fostering “anti-white racism”. Building on the Supreme Court’s 2023 decision to end affirmative action, these orders have undone decades’ worth of protection against discrimination. Indeed, they have overridden executive orders that stretched all the way back to the civil rights era, such as the 1965 “equal employment opportunity” order. Trump thus ended DEI initiatives within the federal government and imposed limits on federal contractors and the private sector, which now risk

being charged with violating civil rights laws if they practise positive discrimination to level the playing field in favour of minorities.

The president is also attacking years of progress in gender equality. Just as he did in his 2015 campaign book “Crippled America”, Trump extols supposedly male-centric values of leadership such as authority, force, strength and even violence. He was a frequent guest on manosphere podcasts during his 2024 campaign, where he would often refer to his love for ultimate fighting and his friendship with UFC executive Dana White. Once in power, Trump directed the federal government to interpret “sex” as a binary biological classification, banning accommodations for transgender people and federal support for gender affirming care. He rescinded federal funding to any educational institution or athletic association that allows transgender women to participate in women’s sports. The administration also pressed Romania to lift its travel ban on self-proclaimed misogynist Andrew Tate and his brother. (The pair have been charged with human trafficking and money laundering but are nonetheless heroes of the manosphere and of one Tucker Carlson.)

The cult of the strongman and the obsession with the weakness of “woke culture” extends to the Pentagon. Biden, elected on the heels of the Black Lives Matter movement, selected Lloyd Austin as the first black US secretary of defence. The former president also encouraged Austin and his cabinet members to fight systemic racism and address far-right extremism within their respective organisations. This generated a backlash, with Republicans claiming the initiative demoralised troops and bordered on “anti-American indoctrination”. Upon taking office, Trump fired the chair of the joint chiefs, General CQ Brown (a black man) and the chief of naval operations, Admiral Lisa Franchetti (a white woman). Moreover, the president signed an executive order in January 2025 that bars people from serving in the armed forces if they express a gender identity different from the one they were assigned at birth. Trump’s defence secretary, for his part, has long defended the idea that the US military has been distracted from its capacity to wage war by “woke ideology”. In his confirmation hearing, Hegseth promised to bring “the warrior culture back to the Department of Defense”.



President Donald Trump holds a signed an executive order relating to school discipline policies as Education Secretary Linda McMahon listens in the Oval Office of the White House, Wednesday, April 23, 2025, in Washington. © picture alliance / ASSOCIATED PRESS Alex Brandon

Similarly to elimination, transformation requires the new administration to rewrite the past and reorientate the future. On the latter, Trump ordered the rescinding of federal funding of gender and race theory teachings in primary schools, claiming that schools are “imprinting anti-American, subversive, harmful, and false ideologies on our Nation’s children”. On the former, he promises to restore “truth and sanity” to American history. A March 27th executive order stipulates that federal monuments and museums should not “inappropriately disparage Americans past or living (including persons living in colonial times), and instead focus on the greatness of the achievements and progress of the American people or [...] the beauty, abundance, and grandeur of the American landscape.” The National Endowment for the Humanities, in turn, abruptly cancelled 85% of its grants to museums and historical sites, redirecting part of the money to Trump’s patriotic sculpture garden project. Trump is slashing federal science funding too, and defunding libraries and the arts. He fired the board of the

Kennedy Center, the United States' national cultural centre, and installed himself at its helm. And, in the name of “restoring truth and sanity to American history”, he directed the vice-president to rid the Smithsonian Institution of “all improper ideology”, which could affect even the national zoo.

Seemingly no segments of American public life are safe: the media are another cultural stronghold which Trump accuses of liberal bias and seeks to transform. The president started to address this supposed bias with an executive order that reversed misinformation regulation on social media platforms. The administration then dismantled the parent organisation of Voice of America, putting all its employees on leave; and in May 2025 the president signed an executive order defunding the public broadcasters NPR and PBS, which he accuses of being “anti-American” and “communist”.

No matter that Trump was elected by a diverse electorate: he is making good on his promise to fight “race- and sex-favoritism” and to re-establish “meritocracy and a colorblind society”. That is the society he claims to believe in, and that is how he will transform America.

Abroad

It is also how he will transform the world—though Trump's MAGA acolytes carry a lot of the weight in disseminating the president's anti-diversity message abroad. This message has begun to take hold in some parts of the world, emboldening leaders there to begin cultural purges of their own.

Aid has become a battleground. American foreign and development aid had always integrated human rights objectives, such as women's rights, girls' education and the defence of LGBTQ+ rights, and even promoted liberal democracy in recipients' countries. But upon taking office, Trump dismantled his country's main aid provider (USAID) and has ridiculed the concept of promoting values or human rights. In his address to Congress in February 2025, the president linked what he claims to be ludicrous DEI foreign aid funding with examples in foreign countries, which he found equally laughable: “\$8 million to promote LGBTQI+ in the African nation of Lesotho, which nobody has ever heard of.” According to Trump, these are the wrong values for America. And that means they are the wrong values for the world.

As Trump knows what is best for the world, his administration is trying to influence the choices of the United States' foreign partners. In February 2025, the administration imposed sanctions on the International Criminal Court (ICC) and its personnel, as well as their family members, for investigating and prosecuting Israel's alleged war crimes. The decision provided cover for Viktor Orban to withdraw Hungary from the ICC, which enabled the prime

minister to welcome his Israeli counterpart Binyamin Netanyahu for a state visit—undermining both the EU’s legal authority from within and the credibility of international law.

It did not stop there. In March, US embassies in several European states sent a letter to foreign contractors from these countries. The letter spelled out that, if they wanted to continue working with the US administration, they should stop implementing DEI initiatives. This may contradict national laws: in France, for example, executive boards are required by law to be composed of at least 40% women board members. In the words of Clément Beaune, former French minister for European affairs, the letter amounted to the US imposing “extraterritorial values”—values in line with Trump’s America.

The Trumpist challenge to European democracies has even evolved to include accusing Europeans of anti-democratic practices. At the 2025 Munich Security Conference, Vance denounced what he claims is a European “threat from within”. Proceeding to give a lesson on democracy, the vice-president criticised the late 2024 cancellation of Romania’s presidential election on suspicion of Russian meddling. He lamented other “restrictions” on free expression too, claiming that anti-feminist, anti-Muslim and anti-abortion activists experience repression. Moreover, he excoriated European efforts to combat “so-called misinformation” as “digital censorship”. The speech represented a chilling reversal of the value pyramid, comparable in its shock value to Putin’s 2007 broadside against the West at the very same conference.

It almost seems like gaslighting. Now, Europeans stand accused of democratic backsliding, meddling with electoral processes and repressing free speech. This continued in April 2025, when Marine Le Pen, leader of the far-right National Rally and a main contender for the French presidential election in 2027, was convicted of embezzlement and barred from office for five years. Trump’s allies showered her with support, insinuating that the judicial decision behind her conviction was politically motivated. Trump even compared her fate to his, saying : “That sounds like this country, that sounds very much like this country”. Elon Musk joined a Kremlin spokesman and a chorus of far-right leaders in Europe in accusing the “radical left” of “[jailing] their opponents”.

This theme found a new target in May, when Musk criticized the German government's decision to label the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party an extremist group and potentially ban it, calling the designation an "extreme attack on democracy". He was joined by Vance, who castigated the German government in a post of his own: "The West tore down the Berlin wall together. And it has been rebuilt—not by the Soviets or the Russians, but by the German establishment."

MAGA's solidarity with conservative, nationalist and populist movements in Europe has an objective: finding partners for Trump's effort to transform global culture. Bannon steered this ship in Trump's first term; Musk has now taken the wheel. In the months leading up to Trump taking office, Musk lent his global reach via X to far-right leaders in Britain, France and Germany. This angered liberals, prompting the French president Emmanuel Macron to denounce the "reactionary internationale" that seemed to be forming. Musk also propped up the leader of the AfD ahead of Germany's 2025 federal election, well before his outrage at the party being branded extremist. He expressed support for the Spanish far-right party Vox too, and made a video appearance at a conference of Italy's League.

Make Europe Great Again! #MEGA #Patriots



👤 Tom Vandendriessche and 9 others

12:45 pm · 13 Nov 2024 · 28K Views

💬 31

↻ 230

❤️ 877

🔖 30

📌

💬 Read 31 replies

European movements such as these are natural partners for Trumpists. They share the sense of victimisation. They share the grievances against “the system”. They even co-opt MAGA rhetoric: “Make Europe Great Again” was the slogan for the “Patriots for Europe” summit held in February 2025. Ultranationalist Romanian presidential candidate George Simion proudly claimed to be “perfectly aligned ideologically with the MAGA movement” ahead of his 40% win in the first round of the rescheduled election in May. In turn, US conservatives flock to Europe to support these movements. The American Conservative Union has announced that it will hold the 2025 spinoff of its major conference, “CPAC”, in Poland. Only Hungary has previously hosted the conference in Europe. Polish conservatives likely hope that CPAC will

serve as a forum of cooperation for right-wing politicians and ultimately strengthen transatlantic relations.

But Trump's transformation agenda will only be truly fulfilled when the EU itself changes. In March 2025 the Heritage Foundation hosted a closed-door discussion on a report by two hard-right European think-tanks. This report denounced the bloc as a supranational entity that centralises power at the expense of national sovereignty. The participants in the discussion welcomed its suggestions on changing the bloc from within as a contribution to invigorating a new era of transatlantic relations.

As analysts Sophia Besch and Tara Varma wrote in April 2025, this alliance of revisionists is leading to a different kind of transatlanticism that pursues a different set of priorities. Even if some European nationalists are cautious when it comes to their relationship with the US, Trump's big cultural plan for America and Europe still unites partners across the pond.

Subjugating opponents

Trump turns to subjugation when he is unable to eliminate those who resist him or transform them in his image. He believes in projecting strength and even exercising force as a way to obtain favourable outcomes. He devalues and mocks the very idea of cooperation. Since he returned to the Oval Office, the president has acted with ferocity, seemingly convinced that any opposition to his agenda must be crushed. At home, Trump is showing no mercy against his political enemies. Abroad he seems unfazed about the anxiety he generates among his partners. Ultimately, Trump aims to renegotiate deals in his sole favour—whether they relate to law firms or international trade.

At home

Subjugation starts with payback. On the campaign trail, Trump promised his supporters he would deliver vengeance: "I am your warrior. I am your justice. And for those who have been wronged and betrayed: I am your retribution." And he followed through on these threats as quickly as possible. He immediately fired more than a dozen Justice Department prosecutors and a group of FBI agents who worked on the January 6th Capitol riots and the investigation into Trump's mishandling of classified documents. Moreover, Trump's new FBI director Kash Patel published an enemies list of those who wronged the president between 2016 and 2023. No one on the list is off limits: in February Trump pulled the security details of former members of his national security team, including John Bolton, Mark Esper and Mike Pompeo, among others. He also revoked the security clearances of his former adversaries, Biden and Kamala Harris. Trump went as far as to demand criminal investigations against two first-term

officials: Miles Taylor (for the offence of writing a book about “the adults in the room”) and Christopher Krebs (for the crime of claiming that the 2020 presidential election was free and fair).

The private sector is not immune to Trump’s subjugation. In early March 2025 Trump issued an executive order scattered with personal attacks and innuendo that suspended the security clearances and access to government buildings of the law firm Perkins Coie. Trump’s grudge against the firm has been festering since the 2016 election, when it represented Hillary Clinton’s campaign.



Donald J. Trump 
@realDonaldTrump

I'm suing the law firm of Perkins Coie for their egregious and unlawful acts, in particular the conduct of a specific member of this firm, only to find out that the Judge assigned to this case is Beryl Howell, an Obama appointment, and a highly biased and unfair disaster. She ruled against me in the past, in a shocking display of sick judicial temperament, on a case that ended up working out very well for me, on appeal. Her ruling was so pathologically bad that it became the “talk of the town.” I could have a 100% perfect case and she would angrily rule against me. It’s called Trump Derangement Syndrome, and she’s got a bad case of it. To put it nicely, Beryl Howell is an unmitigated train wreck. NO JUSTICE!!!

10.9k ReTruths **46.1k** Likes

Apr 23, 2025, 2:35 PM



In mid-March, the law firm Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison (known as Paul Weiss) was similarly targeted for its pro bono work against perpetrators of the January 6th attack on the US Capitol. Since then, the administration has hit at least five more law firms, potentially blocking opponents of the administration from obtaining the representation they need. Some of the firms have responded to this existential threat to their business model by seeking accommodation. Paul Weiss, for example, reached an agreement with the administration that

lifted the order in exchange for \$40m in pro bono services to projects Trump says he cares about, including assistance to veterans and combating anti-Semitism.

To subjugate his opponents, Trump seeks points of leverage. The administration is forcing universities (a stronghold against his conservative agenda) into submission. In March 2025, Trump accused universities of poor security practices and anti-Semitism. He also directed the Department of Justice to form a “Federal Task Force to Combat Anti-Semitism”. This focused on ten universities that saw large protests following the October 7th attacks and Israel’s subsequent war in Gaza. The administration has continued to level the charge of reckless security practices and rampant antisemitism against top universities—Princeton, the University of Pennsylvania, Harvard, no matter the prestige—and has paused billions of dollars of federal contracts and grants.

But it is repression against Columbia University that has come to symbolise the administration’s techniques. The university is an epicentre for pro-Palestinian mobilisation. Accordingly, in March the administration stripped Columbia of \$400m in federal grant money, sending a list of demands the university would have to comply with regarding campus security and academic choices for it to be restored. Coincidentally, \$400m is the same amount Columbia refused to pay Trump for one of his properties in 2001: there is no statute of limitations on Trump’s personal grudges and desire for retribution.

The administration has also targeted individual students, using their visa status as leverage. In March Mahmoud Khalil, one of the leaders of the student protests at Columbia and a legal permanent US resident, was arrested with a view to deportation (without being charged with any crimes). Over 1,800 other students from more than 200 institutions have had their visas and green cards revoked, merely for exercising their right to free speech in protests or publishing their writing about the war in Gaza. Going after universities and students poses little political risk to Trump. This is because holding a university degree is a strong predictor of how a US voter picks a candidate. The correlation only became stronger after the 2016 election: both blocs moved in their respective directions by nearly 5 points. And in 2024 Trump won among non-college graduates by 13 points while Harris won among college graduates by 14 points.

Intimidation lies at the heart of Trump’s migration policies more broadly. To show off his hardline methods, the president has rolled back established protections, expedited deportations and expanded detention facilities such as the “Guantanamo Migrant Operations Center”. Trump frames migrants as an existential threat to America, thereby empowering his camp to resort to extremes. This includes invoking the 1798 Alien Enemies Act to deport suspected members of Venezuelan gangs, or sending Salvadorians to President Nayib

Bukele's mega prisons. Ultimately, the objective is to instil fear in the hearts of anyone who may worry about their status, combined with a fantasy of pushing them to leave (“remigration”). Trauma, once again, is the tool.

Local governments are also subject to intimidation attempts. Trump publicly threatened the governor of Maine with a freeze on federal funding over her resistance to preventing participation of transgender girls in school sports. He similarly announced that his administration is “working on papers to withhold all federal funding” from cities that traditionally limit their cooperation with the government on immigration enforcement (or, “sanctuary cities”). Trump has even resorted to judicial threats to intimidate elected officials into obedience: in April 2025, a local judge in Wisconsin was arrested on suspicion of helping an immigrant evade authorities, in what looks like a warning to other judges to comply with Trump's agenda.

On the flip side, Trump has used the Department of Justice to do favours for people he may later need. For example, Trump pardoned crypto-entrepreneur Arthur Hayes, who had been convicted for failing to prevent money laundering on his platform. The Trump administration also dismantled key crypto enforcement units, signaling judicial leniency toward executives aligned with his deregulatory agenda. Another example involved New York City mayor Eric Adams, who was facing federal corruption charges. Not long after a private meeting between the two men at Mar-a-Lago, Trump's Department of Justice moved to dismiss the charge arguing it “restricted” the mayor's ability to address “illegal immigration and violent crime”. Seven prosecutors for the Department of Justice resigned over the decision, with one of them explicitly calling the decision a quid pro quo in her letter of resignation.

US author and journalist Jonathan Rauch has used Max Weber's patrimonialism qualification to describe this Trumpian web of asks and favours. That is, Trump and his camp have established a system that dismisses procedures in favour of personal relationships or personal antagonism. This corrupts the system by establishing a norm of currying favours and circumventing rules.

In Trump's America, patrimonialism goes hand in hand with subjugation. The resistant can be crushed to send a message, or they can be pressed into bending the knee.

Abroad

Outside America, Trump does not have the same capacity to enact vengeance or seek retribution. But that does not stop him attempting to intimidate those who resist and trying to establish patrimonial relations. To do so, Trump uses the “anchoring” technique. In business,

this involves making a first offer in negotiations that is outside the norm or extremely harsh, thereby ensuring that the counteroffer is already in one's favour. In diplomacy, Trump's reading of the anchoring technique translates into aggressive behaviour, bordering on imperial expansion.

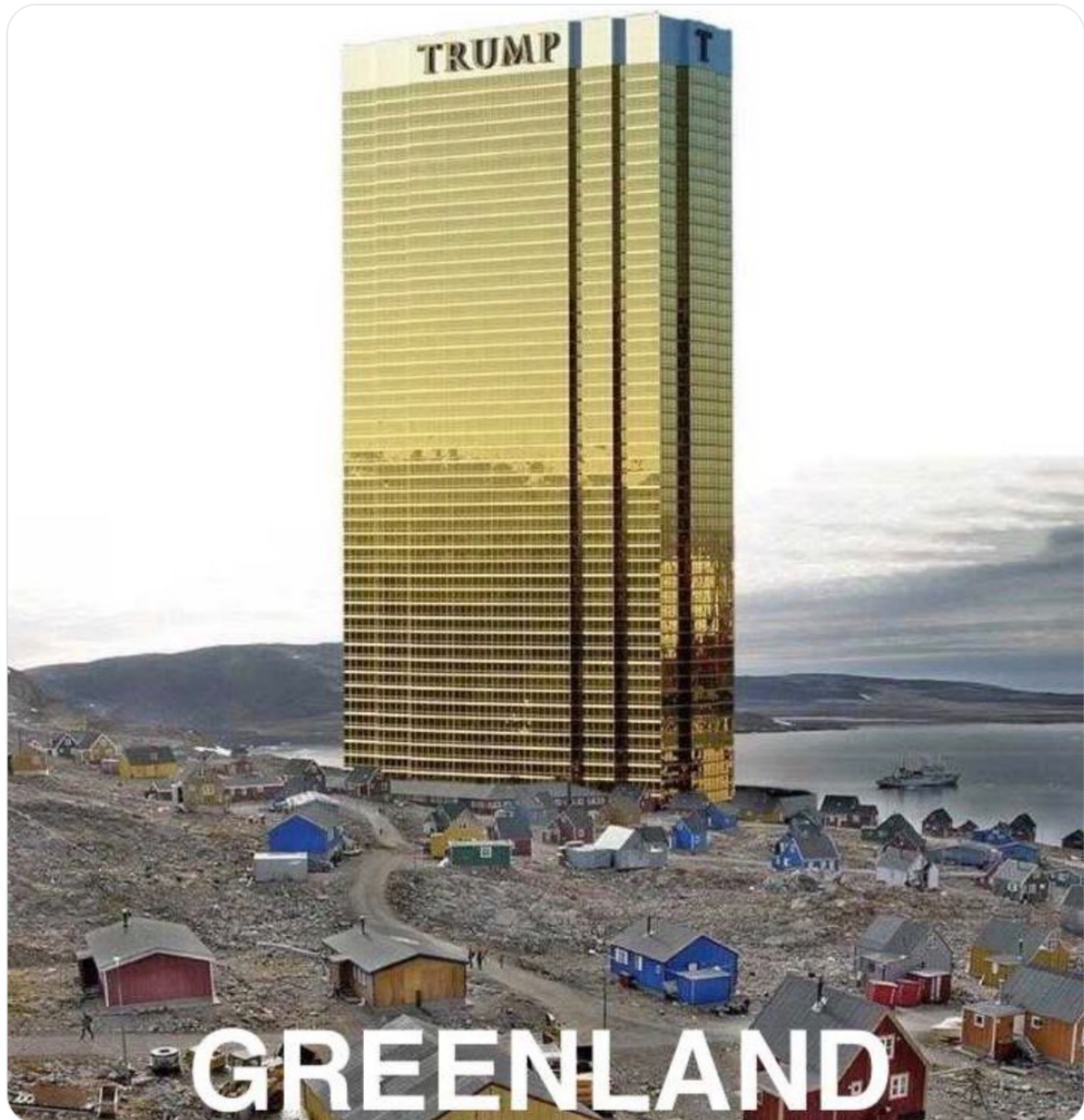
One of the most surprising developments for Europeans since Trump took office has been his apparent disregard for territorial integrity. Trump has said he would "take back" the Panama Canal from the Chinese." He has called on Canada to become the United States' 51st state. And his coveting extends to European territory, too.



Donald J. Trump ✓
@realDonaldTrump



I promise not to do this to Greenland!



1:07 AM · Aug 20, 2019

29K

65K

238K

2.7K



Read 29.6K replies

Trump has had his eye on Greenland, the world's largest island, for years. In 2019 he floated the purchase of the Arctic territory and tried publicly to press the Danes into selling via Twitter, posting an edited image of a quaint Greenlandic town superimposed with a golden skyscraper emblazoned with his name. However absurd, however outside the norm, with this tweet, Trump had laid the groundwork for future negotiations over Greenland.

Then, before taking office for his second term, president-elect Trump reiterated his interest in acquiring Greenland “for national security reasons”. In the lead-up to his inauguration he sent his son Don Jr. in the Trump plane to re-establish his interest in control of the island. As president, and despite the anger and concern of his allies, Trump continues to suggest that the US will eventually “get” Greenland. He has repeatedly refused to rule out the use of force. Moreover, Vance visited the territory in late March, using the opportunity to bash Denmark's governance of the territory and complain that the country was “not [being] a good ally” to the US. But anchoring has a cost in foreign affairs: Danes increasingly view the US less as an ally and more as a threat.

As in the case of Greenland, Trump often voices a desire for himself or America to come out of any situation as “the winner”. For example, he claimed that when the US intervened in Iraq, America should at least have “taken the oil”. The same logic applies to the April 2025 deal with Ukraine that grants the US access to Ukraine's deposits of critical minerals in return for military support. This deal was signed following months of contentious negotiations, including the infamous Oval Office meeting, during which the US president repeated “you don't have the cards right now. With us, you start having cards.” Trump thus imposes out-of-the-ordinary demands on allies and partners to force them into either confrontation or appeasement—effectively subjugating them to his will.

One of the starkest examples of this has been his trade war and his tariff threats. Trump's apparent conviction that the US is the dominant economic power in all trading relationships led him to announce massive tariffs on all America's trading partners. His goals seem to have been to build leverage for negotiations and to redirect trade flows. But US stocks immediately plummeted, countries retaliated, bond traders got spooked and Trump backpedalled to a 10% universal baseline less than 13 hours after the tariffs went live—and just a week after “Liberation Day”.

And yet Trump still appeared unfazed, claiming that more than 75 countries called to renegotiate and that their leaders were “kissing his ass”. This suggests tariffs are bound to return as long as the president feels the need to build leverage. When asked about potential European retaliation to tariffs, he made his feelings clear: “They can’t. They can try. But they can’t. [...] We are the pot of gold. We’re the one that everybody wants.” Total self-confidence is a key asset in high stakes negotiations.

Again, it has always been this way for Trump. In 1990, when asked by *Playboy* magazine, “what’s the first thing President Trump would do upon entering the Oval Office?” Trump answered: “Many things. A toughness of attitude would prevail. I’d throw a tax on every Mercedes-Benz rolling into this country and on all Japanese products, and we’d have wonderful allies again.” Thirty-five years later, he is still playing it tough, imposing tariffs on his allies willy-nilly, and believing they will still be wonderful partners—that is, ones who obey his wishes.

Trump's methods at home and abroad

Search in table

Category	Domain	Aims	Techniques
Elimination	At home	▸ Undermine institutional checks and balances ▸ Reduce the power of the bureaucracy ▸ Destroy the “deep state” ▸ Concentrate power in executive hands	▸ Create DOGE ▸ Mass layoffs in federal workforce ▸ Shutter agencies ▸ Reclassify civil service positions as political appointments ▸ Roll back regulations ▸ Impoundment of funds ▸ Bring independent agencies under presidential authority
	Abroad	▸ Eliminate international constraints ▸ Limit US global responsibilities and multilateral obligations ▸ Increase US unilateral freedom of action	▸ Withdraw from international agreements (eg, Paris Agreement) ▸ Exit multilateral institutions (eg, WHO) ▸ Reduce NATO commitment ▸ End US commitment to Ukraine
Transformation	At home	▸ Shift political culture away from liberalism and progressivism ▸ Destroy the influence of “woke-ism” ▸ Establish a “merit-based”, “colour-blind” society ▸ Make American culture more receptive to conservative, nationalist values	▸ Eliminate DEI initiatives in the federal state and beyond ▸ Defund gender and race studies ▸ Defund climate science and public media ▸ Promote a “warrior” culture ▸ Revise historical narratives ▸ Change leadership in cultural institutions
	Abroad	▸ Redirect US global action away from humanitarian aid and development ▸ Weaken Europe as a model for liberal America ▸ Undermine European liberal democracies	▸ Dismantle USAID ▸ Impose sanctions on the International Criminal Court ▸ Denounce European democracies as anti-democratic ▸ Support European nationalist politicians ahead of elections or facing trial ▸ Empower like-minded nationalist and populist parties in transforming Europe
Subjugation	At home	▸ Seek retribution ▸ Intimidate dissenters ▸ Force opposition into compromise or submission ▸ Create a governance system based on loyalty, punishment and factional control	▸ Deliver retribution on opponents (eg, former officials) ▸ Pardon or lift charges on loyalists (eg, January 6thers) ▸ Use federal funding as leverage (eg, against universities) ▸ Target visa holders and legal permanent residents ▸ Harden immigration policies as a “deterrent” ▸ Restrict legal access to federal agencies, and federal access to legal representation ▸ Weaken Department of Justice independence
	Abroad	▸ Extract concessions from allies and adversaries ▸ Intimidate dissenters ▸ Reorientate global order around transactional relationships	▸ Use anchoring technique to suggest ambitions of territorial expansion ▸ Use tariffs coercion to force partners to negotiate trade deals ▸ Condition economic and military support on compliance and/or material favours (eg, Ukraine minerals deal)

Adversarial strategies for America's allies

Past is present. Home is abroad. Allies are adversaries. Faced with Trump's doublethink, Europeans have no choice but to accept that nothing works like it did before. The president will conduct foreign policy like he conducts domestic politics; he will eliminate, transform or subjugate anything or anyone in his way.

As if this new reality of transatlantic opposition were not enough, Europeans face the additional difficulty of still never knowing exactly what they are up against. The Trump fog has settled, and it is impenetrable. Is Trump really conducting a revolution, or is he just raising stakes for negotiations? Is this a permanent rupture in the transatlantic relationship, or is there a chance of future recalibration? Is there a possibility of repairing some of the destruction? Are there limits to what Trump can and will do? Should you adapt and move on, or wait it out and hope?

To survive Trump's first presidency, European leaders resorted to appeasing him, delaying his decisions and distracting him. That will not work this time around. Europeans cannot just count down the days to the next election. Instead, they must acknowledge that neither America nor the transatlantic relationship will ever be quite the same. Whether they like it or not, Europeans need to play the hand they have been dealt. Under Trump's adversarial leadership, the US will only align with Europe when it suits the former's immediate interests. Otherwise, the continent will be subject to his big transformational plan and ordered to change. This implies Europeans need to stand their ground and adopt a much more confrontational strategy.

Europe's big response

Trump's big plan for America offers insight into how to counter what he is doing abroad. He is eliminating national and international institutions; Europeans need to contribute to the construction of a new world order. He is launching an all-out attack on liberalism; Europe must become a haven of liberal democracy and for its champions. He seeks to intimidate and crush dissenters and opponents; Europeans must lock arms and diversify their options. In short, Europeans need to respond in kind to the risks of elimination, transformation and subjugation.

Reinvent

Europeans need to reinvent multilateralism. Europe relies on a functioning system based on

cooperation for its own prosperity and security. And European countries have long enjoyed the role of junior partners in building a rules-based order that has been crumbling rapidly for the past decade. Now, as Trump eliminates constraints to his action, the US is actively complicit in the demise of the order that it too has relied on for the past 80 years. Europe will have to take a more active role in reshaping it.

Europeans should work with other states to do so—whether they are traditional allies, leaders from the global south or even China. This coalition should aim to build institutions that do not concentrate power in the hands of a few and that are resilient to populism. International organisations cannot revolve around the post-second world war power structure any longer. Europeans need to help multilateral organisations become places for citizens’ deliberations on the (by definition) global challenges of public health, climate action, trade, technology and international finance. These new (or reinvented) international organisations should serve the interests of the many, to ensure that the many contribute—including financially—to their viability. European countries have spent 80 years building multiple formats for horizontal cooperation on their continent; it is time to apply this institutional creativity to global affairs.

Europeans will have to help NATO evolve, given the overarching goal of the Trump administration to renegotiate its terms in the alliance (and despite the magnitude of the task). As the US diverts resources back to America or to Asia, Europeans should offer to “buy off” some US critical conventional capabilities. They should also seek to develop autonomous strategic enablers. This could help the alliance’s European members show they are carrying a greater weight of their own conventional deterrence. That, in turn, could help strengthen their claim that collective defence across the Atlantic remains beneficial to all parties in the long run.

Fight back

Europeans have no choice but to fight back (hard) against MAGA America’s efforts to transform their democracies. Foreign interference is not acceptable, wherever it comes from. Europeans therefore need to align more strongly to defend liberal democratic values and principles, ideas that are rooted in their democracies and that sustain the West. In negotiating with the US—over tariffs, Ukraine or anything else—Europeans cannot lose sight of their own commitments under international law. They should push back on potential human rights violations and threats to their values. For example, Trumpists are pressing the EU to relax its digital standards to fit the demands of the US tech industry. In response, the bloc should double down on the regulations its members decided on together and fight back using its enforcement mechanisms.

The EU should also open its doors to US and international researchers, activists, NGOs, and businesses seeking a place of freedom to pursue their work. As the US government cuts funding for science, the EU should increase its investment in innovation, academic research and supporting public and private R&D and patenting. This could help strengthen the European single market, European norms and standards and the rule of law, thereby offering an attractive alternative to these great American strengths of the “before times”. Welcoming international researchers and innovators could constitute the start of an escape for the EU from its cycle of populist-influenced immigration strife over the past few years.

Diversify

Europeans should refuse to engage on the terms that Trump imposes on them via his efforts at subjugation. Under pressure and blinded by Trump’s anchoring technique, some Europeans may be tempted to push for a transactional relationship with the new administration. But transactions with Trump are rarely fair and only temporary. Accepting degrading transactions will not offer Europeans any guarantees that the transatlantic relationship will be preserved.

Instead, the EU and its member states should continue to prepare retaliatory moves and keep them ready in their back pockets. Not all of these will turn out to be useful: the April tariff-reversal episode shows that certain excesses from the administration will backfire without Europeans even needing to retaliate.

In the long run, however, Europe needs to de-risk from the US to be able to resist potential coercive attempts. In line with the EU’s Versailles declaration, the bloc should reduce its reliance on critical US suppliers (such as energy and technology companies). It should seek to diversify sources for critical material in Africa, Asia and South America, but also foster a stronger technological base at home. European de-risking from the US should not amount to re-risking with China. Rather, it should involve pursuing the ambition of European sovereignty.

Europeans should diversify their partners and build resilience by rallying countries that belong to the community of liberal democracies. Canada does not want to become the 51st state; the EU should invite it to join the European Political Community instead. Europeans should also seek out other like-minded countries that have a vested interest in building a functioning, rules-based order. Indeed, Europe’s diversification efforts may be only just starting.

Big plan, big battles

Trump's foreign policy resembles conquest more than chaos. His actions abroad mirror his domestic crusade: to eliminate constraints, to transform culture and to subjugate dissenters. Far from being collateral damage in this battle, Europe has become a target. This has huge implications for European policymakers. Without a big response, Europe risks not just marginalisation but irreversible transformation. Europeans need to come to terms with the enormity of a radically changing America, and fight to find their footing in a radically changed world.

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American free press which remain an incredible source of quality information. Things may have changed by the time you read this. But any error in this text will remain solely the fault of its author.

[1] ECFR workshop with US policymakers, held under the Chatham House Rule, Berlin, May 2025.

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