Commentary
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Priorities in Unpredictability: President Trump enters a new world

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Summary

Donald Trump, exactly as he promised, has embarked on his second presidential term with a flurry of activity. His decisions and statements continue to be unpredictable and provocative, but they no longer carry the same shock value as they did eight years ago. This shift is not only due to increased familiarity with his approach but also because the world has officially evolved. In this brave new world, the Republican administration will, at the very least, have two key foreign policy priorities.

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Donald Trump's inauguration took place just a week ago, yet the 47th occupant of the White House has already set in motion an intense wave of activity without any delay. In fact, one could argue that he began his presidency while still serving as president-elect, influencing global processes through statements from his private residence at Mar-a-Lago, the appointment of special envoys, and behind-the-scenes communication with world leaders.

Upon taking the official oath, Trump quickly began signing, as promised, numerous executive orders. Most of these represent a 180-degree shift in the country's political direction, reinstating many decisions made during his first term that were later reversed by Biden.

> This has led to a growing sentiment that Biden's four years in office may as well be considered a brief interruption—an "accident" in the larger arc of U.S. politics.

The starting point of a new world era?

Such sentiments stand in stark contrast to the mood following Donald Trump's initial rise to the presidency. At that time, after his unexpected victory over Hillary Clinton in November 2016 and his inauguration in January 2017, many believed he was a temporary deviation from the norm—a random manifestation of protest voting, and even a historical anomaly. This was the view held by the Democratic Party, whose leaders spent the last eight years convincing themselves, American society, and the international community of this narrative.

However, today, it can be confidently asserted that the opposite is true. To echo my recent argument: it was the Biden administration that found itself in the wrong place at the wrong time. It was a desperate attempt to reverse the course of history without any objective reason to do so. As a result, this attempt failed, only serving to highlight the inevitability of long-term political trends.

Undoubtedly, there is a sense of familiarity regarding Trump's return to the White House and a stylistic element at play. More precisely, it's the developed habit of his style. Eight years ago, his manner of public communication, negotiations, as well as decision-making and reconsideration, seemed quite unusual, almost otherworldly. Now, it's hard to imagine that new appointments or dismissals of top officials via social media, or a lexicon beyond diplomatic norms, would surprise anyone. Nor would Trump's and his team's criticisms of allies, or the unpredictable alternation of friendly and aggressive rhetoric towards the same individuals, whether they are insiders or outsiders.

All of this has truly become a typical Trump routine. Fully adapting to this style is, of course, impossible. In this regard, many European politicians are being disingenuous when, in recent months, they try to convince themselves that they are ready for Trump's second term. However, for most European states and the EU as their institutional expression, the issue is not the style. The issue lies in their own increasingly acute systemic irrelevance to the modern world. And here, we reach the crux of the matter.

> Donald Trump is no longer perceived as a blatant aberration or a political black sheep because the world has changed.

Global development had already started heading toward fundamental transformations eight years ago. Back then, only the early signs of this shift were visible, which few saw and even fewer wanted to acknowledge. Trump's first administration significantly accelerated the transformation process. His second term confirms its irreversible nature.

This is evident not only from the fact that the billionaire was re-elected to the top office. An even stronger indication of this brave new world is the mainstream political and media discourse we observe today. Take, for example, how Trump's claims to Greenland are discussed. In the previous world of absolute liberal dominance, the only thing that would have been said in this context would have been a solid statement about the impossibility and unacceptability of forcibly changing borders. Of course, that statement is still heard today, but it is overshadowed by more serious discussions among mainstream media and experts about the U.S. president's motives and the strategic competition with China and Russia.

This, dear friends, is the new world! This is the new and finally recognized without excessive cynicism or wordplay, normality of the accelerating global geopolitical confrontation. As they say, welcome! It is quite possible that 20 January 2025—the day Donald Trump took his second inaugural oath—will be marked in future history books as the starting point of a new era in international relations.

And this applies not only to the relations between states but also to the new phase of ideological development in the world. It is probably too early to claim that with Trump's assumption of office, right-wing conservatives have replaced centrists and liberals as the political mainstream, as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban recently stated. However, their conceptual ideas and overall legitimacy, to quote Orban again, have certainly "returned to history's main street."

One cannot go against nature

History is filled with countless examples of how powerful empires and great powers crumbled under the weight of unresolved problems they created for themselves, forgetting one of the key laws of international relations.

> This law is simple: do not try to lift the unliftable—you'll break!

In other words, no matter how noble someone's foreign policy goals may be, no matter how much they want to make the world a better place and entrench the right values, this can only be achieved to the extent that their policy is backed by resources. And the most important property of resources (whether financial, political, physical, or even natural) is that they are always and everywhere limited, even if it seems otherwise.

At the same time, it is clear that large and developed states, which are referred to as great powers, by definition have more resources and a larger margin of error than smaller ones. This is why they can afford much more in global politics. For example, as

we have mentioned before, they can make mistakes for a time without facing particularly painful consequences—mistakes that would be fatal for smaller nations.

> However, even great powers cannot infinitely ignore the law of resource limitations if they do not wish to face self-destruction.

In recent decades, the United States has grown accustomed to treating its resource base as if it were inexhaustible. This is perhaps unsurprising, given the degree of unipolar dominance the U.S. has enjoyed, as well as the role and influence of the American dollar in the global financial system. Against this backdrop, the U.S. made numerous mistakes that have started accelerating the erosion of the foundations of its global dominance. However, for Washington, nothing is fundamentally lost yet, provided that U.S. leadership is ready to once again live in harmony with the laws of nature.

The point is not that unipolar dominance can be restored—at least, not in the foreseeable future. It's about the fact that the U.S. is still in a better position than other contemporary great powers to succeed in the escalating geopolitical competition for relative (rather than absolute, as it was before) dominance. To put it somewhat simplistically, the U.S. can still aim to be first among a group of more or less equal powers.

Washington's priorities amid unpredictability

It seems that this strategic vision underpins the otherwise contradictory foreign policy approaches of Trump's team. At least, this is suggested by the first signals from the new Secretary of State, Marco Rubio. His main message to American diplomats was clear: Washington's strategy needs to be adjusted in light of the "realities of today's re-emerging great power rivalry."

He emphasized that both Democratic and Republican administrations of the past two decades had lost their strategic vision of both themselves and the world, and "began assuming an ever-expanding definition of the national interest prioritizing the wrong things and emphasizing ideology over common sense." He also believes that "far too much of America's diplomacy is focused on pushing political and cultural causes that are divisive at home and deeply unpopular abroad." He intends to change all of this.

From a more specific perspective, Trump's initial steps and appointments clearly indicate at least two key foreign policy priorities.

Firstly, the new administration clearly intends to remind the world of the legendary "Monroe Doctrine," which, articulated by President James Monroe in 1823, declared both halves of the American continent to be within Washington's sphere of exclusive interests. Essentially, all non-regional great powers were forbidden from meddling there if they did not want to risk direct military confrontation with the U.S. In the 19th century, the primary target of those warnings were European countries. Today, it is evident that the doctrine is aimed at Beijing.

Secondly, in his inaugural speech, Trump emphasized another clear and expected priority. This revolves around his determination to stop expending limited resources on issues and, especially, conflicts that Washington does not consider truly significant for its strategic interests. Hence, the 47th president's statement that the U.S. will grow stronger militarily by ending certain ongoing wars and refraining from involvement in new ones.

> Taken together, all of this does not point to a new era of isolationism in American foreign policy.

On the contrary, Washington is set to be even more active on many diplomatic and military-political fronts. However, the Republican administration has expressed its intention to frame this activity within a strategic framework that is theoretically known as realism in international relations. This approach is precisely what should help properly prioritize in an environment of resource limitations and escalating geopolitical competition.

We'll have to wait and see what ultimately comes of this.

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