



D. Trump or the Emperor Strikes Back

Power! Unlimited power!
Darth Sidious

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The accession of Donald Trump to the American presidency on January 20 is likely to upset the grand strategy put in place by the Biden administration. Despite a certain degree of continuity in many areas, there will be major ruptures.

1. "The Emperor Will Show You The True Nature Of The Force..."

The new administration will favor a single form of leadership, namely transactional leadership, through which the distinction between allies, partners and rivals, as in its first term, will be smoothed out. This leadership will also be limited to the use of power exclusively through coercion, sanctions, threats and rewards, thus ignoring all other forms of power, to the detriment of long-term American interests. For Trump, all international questions and issues deserve this one and only answer. Consequently, "If the only tool you have in your toolbox is a hammer, everything looks like a nail". Indeed, his declarations during his presidential campaign and since his election indicate that it will be a question above all of imposing rather than consulting. In Trump's mind, the international environment is a place of competition in which it is necessary to secure control over markets, technologies and resources (see his statements on Panama, Greenland and Canada). Under no circumstances will it be a matter of socializing other states in a logic of adequacy; the logic of consequences will predominate.

Just as during his first term, President Trump will see no use for regional and international institutions and organizations (he has announced he is leaving the WHO and wants to weaken UN agencies), nor for international treaties (he has announced he is again leaving the Paris Agreements). As a result, international institutions and agencies risk being ignored and

weakened, to the benefit of other players such as China, which will be able to set the agenda and establish new standards and norms.

In (geo)economic matters, there will be a certain continuity due to a desire on the part of the United States, since Trump's first term in office, to better defend American economic interests, following a logic of economic sovereignty and security in certain sectors. However, this policy will be conducted according to a logic of confrontation and intimidation, applying only sanctions/coercive measures (tariffs); it thus risks squandering the economic power of the United States, which was rebuilt under the Biden administration, thereby leading to a new economic war from which no one is likely to emerge a winner. The willingness to impose tariffs of between 10% and 60%, depending on the country, on imported products could have negative consequences for the US economy, by once again boosting inflation; this will be even more the case given the retaliatory measures taken by the targeted countries. Another potential danger lies in the fact that if China fails to sell its goods in the United States, it will turn to other markets, including Europe, weakening the latter, which is by no means in the interests of the United States. Trump and some of his advisors are also threatening to cancel the two flagship programs of the Biden administration - the *Chips Act* and the *Inflation Reduction Act* - which have enabled to create thousands of jobs and major investments in the US¹. Finally, the Trump administration's desire to deport more than 10 million illegal immigrants will have a significant budgetary cost (\$1,000 billion over ten years) and is also likely to have a negative impact on parts of the US economy (sectors of construction, healthcare, agriculture, restaurants and hotels). His immigration policy could also have adverse effects, not only on the image of the USA, but also on the recruitment of foreign students and the possibility of studying at universities in the USA or staying in the USA after studies (issue of the H1-B US visa program designed to attract skilled foreign labor, supported by Elon Musk, but not by MAGA). Trump's policy will convince students to study elsewhere in the world, as was the case during his first term. However, since the United States wants to maintain its leadership position in STEM (which is also one of Trump's objectives), it will necessarily have to rely on foreign students who come to train in the United States and make sure it keeps them to work in American companies.

In addition, the libertarian rationale, supported by many business leaders such as Musk and Thiel, will result in the deregulation of industries, ending environmental standards and a weakening of the central state. While the creation of the *Department of Government Efficiency* (DOGE) may appear at first sight to be an interesting initiative to reduce the burden of bureaucracy and regulation, and to encourage better use of public money, it runs the risk of being an instrument at the service of private interests, and thus of being highly politicized. Even partial implementation of Project 2025 could lead to major setbacks in terms of the separation of powers, women's abortion rights and LGBTQIA+ rights. Another development to watch will be the weight of the "tech czars" in American politics and the subsequent danger of sliding towards an oligarchic system. Finally, President Trump's willingness to pursue "enemies from

¹ Thanks in part to these laws, companies have pledged, according to the Biden administration, to invest more than \$1 trillion in sectors such as semiconductors and clean energy over the past 4 years ("Biden policies attract \$1 trillion in US economic investments, White House says", *Reuters*, November 25, 2024).

within" risks politicizing justice and intelligence², reducing press freedom, the independence of universities and the power of Congress, thereby shaping an authoritarian presidency.

In foreign policy, there will be a certain continuity with the Biden administration, i.e. avoiding unnecessary wars, prioritizing competition with China, pushing Europe to take on more responsibility. Despite criticism of NATO and Europe's lack of investment in defense, it does not appear that the Trump administration has the will to leave the organization. There is, however, a real risk that this administration will stigmatize America's allies and partners, which will repel some of them. Following on from the Biden administration, the focus will be on the Indo-Pacific, to the detriment of Europe. Given the impossibility of engaging in two major wars simultaneously, even more effort will be required from partners and allies than under the Biden administration. In this sense, it is possible that the Trump administration is expressing a desire to reduce the presence of American contingents on the European continent, in order to relocate them to American territory. The relationship with China is likely to lead to an economic war, threatening to affect the American agricultural sector as well as the *high-tech* sectors, due to China's superiority in rare-earth reserves and their refinement. China could also see opportunities in relation to Taiwan, given President Trump's statements on the island. Relations with Russia will depend on developments in the war in Ukraine and the outcome of the negotiations due to be launched at the beginning of the term.

If President Trump has promised to restore peace in Ukraine and the Middle East, it remains to be seen whether these negotiations will not take place on the backs of the protagonists directly involved, namely the Ukrainians and Palestinians. The Abraham Accords concerning the Middle East and the Doha Accords concerning Afghanistan, signed during Trump's first term in office, subsequently proved disastrous due to the absence of the Palestinians and the Afghan government, respectively, from the negotiations. The new team put in place by President Trump is also characterized by positions that are not only very pro-Israeli, but above all very favorable to Prime Minister Netanyahu and largely anti-Iranian (Mike Huckabee, Steve Witkoff, Marco Rubio, Pete Hegseth). Many of these advisors do not recognize a two-state solution and also want to put an end to the Iranian regime, which is at odds with President Trump's real desire to avoid new wars. That said, President Trump's transactional logic means that he will not hesitate to exert pressure on Israel if the country stands in the way of American interests: one of Washington's priorities is to reach an agreement between Israel and Saudi Arabia.

The Trump administration is thus demonstrating its desire to prevent the Iran-Russia-China-North Korea axis from growing stronger, hence the interest in weakening Iran and opening a dialogue with Russia; in the background, the aim is in fact to weaken China, as we shall see later in this article. As far as the *swing states*³ are concerned, given the number of non-democratic regimes among them, better relations with the United States could emerge, given that the US would place even less emphasis on good governance and human rights than it did under the Biden administration.

In terms of defense, the aim is to make the Pentagon more efficient, more accountable (justifying the money spent), to invest better and faster, particularly in new technologies

² The choice of Tulsi Gabbard as *Director of National Intelligence* risks creating mistrust among allies and partners in information sharing.

³ States that do not want to choose between China, the United States and Russia, and that adopt a policy of multi-alignment.

(potentially to the detriment of classic platforms such as tanks or fighter jets) and to produce faster. Trump's aim is to put the big conglomerates producing expensive platforms in competition with the new tech companies (OpenAI, Palantir, Space X) which could produce smaller, cheaper and autonomous weapons systems⁴, and thus return to a more quantitative approach to American defense. It's all about the balance between quality and quantity, between mass and technology, that's at stake here.

2) "... He Is Your Master Now"⁵

The grand strategy will be characterized more by a logic of *offshore* balancing. The role of the United States would then be to:

- (1) Maintaining dominance over the Western Hemisphere;
- (2) Contain the emergence of a challenger in Europe, the Persian Gulf and Northeast Asia;
- (3) Reduce military presence on land abroad;
- (4) Stop being the world's policeman;
- (5) Encourage other countries to assume their responsibilities (burden sharing);
- (6) Intervene only when necessary⁶.

The Trump administration is following a, first and foremost, "continental logic" based on geographical proximity, to secure raw materials (copper, lithium...) and production lines, and reduce Chinese and Russian influence in the "American backyard". A rapprochement with its neighbors would therefore appear to be in the interests of the United States in the face of its rivalry with China and Russia. It is doubtful, however, that this rapprochement will be successful if based on threats of territorial conquest towards Canada, Panama and Denmark. In some cases, it could even backfire on Washington. While the United States is still very powerful, it is not omnipotent, and certain countries, the so-called *swing states*, have for many years been playing the great powers off against each other. In other words, this policy could have the opposite effect, i.e. a rapprochement with China and/or closer collaboration between middle powers, but not necessarily in the interests of the Americans.

Still according to this logic of forming a regional ecosystem, the Eurasian continent could become secondary for the United States, the Trump administration banking on a balance of forces between Russia - China and the European Union, which would imply a schism between Moscow and Beijing... that is the whole point of the negotiations concerning Ukraine.

In the Indo-Pacific, this could mean giving China a sphere of influence in the South China Sea (including Taiwan?), in the hope that this would satisfy Chinese appetites, while ensuring that the countries of the region, first and foremost Japan, South Korea, Australia and India, contain Chinese power.

This grand strategy would not necessarily imply the abandonment of alliances, but they should be more balanced, more targeted and oriented on common tasks and interests and no longer on common values. We would move more towards a logic of ad hoc coalitions.

⁴ Tabby, Kinder and George, Hammond, "Palantir and Anduril join forces with tech groups to bid for Pentagon contracts", *The Financial Times*, December 22, 2024.

⁵ Quote from Darth Vader. (*Star Wars: Return of the Jedi*)

⁶ Christopher, Layne, « From Predominance to Offshore Balancing: America's Future Grand Strategy », *International Security*, 1997, vol. 22, n°1, pp. 86-124.

It is important to note that this *offshore-balancing* policy has much in common with the Biden administration's strategy of *selective engagement*: 1) desire not to intervene in regions secondary to American interests; 2) focus on China as a systemic rival; 3) importance of the Indo-Pacific; 4) Europe and the Middle East become secondary; 5) avoid being the world's policeman and 6) promote economic sovereignty and security⁷.

That said, the Biden administration took a network-centric view of the world and sought to adapt American power to the realities of the 21st century. To achieve these goals, it strengthened alliances, partnerships and relations with swing states, and made use of all the means of power. President Trump's implementation appears to follow a different logic: forcing others to follow the American agenda through intimidation alone. Trump is also returning to a vision of a more pyramidal world with the US at the top, where geoeconomic and geopolitical competition is the rule and cooperations are built solely on shared interests and objectives. Moreover, according to his transactional vision, international relations are reduced to a win-lose situation. What's more, everything can be bought and sold. History shows, however, that international relations cannot be reduced to an economic balance of power. History, rank, culture, identity, reputation and prestige all have an impact on relations between players on the international stage. What's more, the planning and execution of strategy are likely to be haphazard due to the personality of Trump and his advisors. Yet, planned precisely and coherently, and executed with the right instruments and considering the international environment and US strengths and weaknesses, it could bear fruit. Simple transactional leadership risks however alienating allies and partners, benefiting China and Russia and weakening the United States on the international stage.

Moreover, President Trump's erratic nature in the process of planning and execution cannot be ignored. Because of his impatient, impulsive and irascible temperament, there is likely to be a great deal of improvisation, inconsistency and unpredictability during his presidency. What's more, the first term showed that the Trump administration's communication was often incoherent and contradictory, with certain decisions made without any consultation and announced on Twitter (now X) taking everyone by surprise⁸. Establishing this strategy will be difficult because of these factors, but also because of a very inexperienced and heterogeneous team of advisors, some of whom are highly ideological and others more pragmatic.

Finally, while on paper this grand *offshore-balancing* strategy would push the world towards greater multipolarity, it contains many unknowns in its realization: How are spheres of influence delimited? What about *buffer zones*? The approach defended is that of the great powers, which will determine the international structure, but does it not neglect local and regional realities that will have an impact on the structural/systemic level? Won't the withdrawal of American military forces from certain regions weaken American power projection and leave a gap that others will fill? What impact would this policy have on nuclear proliferation, with allies and partners no longer necessarily benefiting from the American nuclear umbrella? If allies and partners are supposed to take the lead, is insulting them, going

⁷ See Tanguy, Struye de Swielande, *L'administration Biden : La grande stratégie par le leadership*, Presses Universitaires de Louvain, 2025. (March 2025 release).

⁸ The best-known example being the announcement of the withdrawal of US forces from Syria in 2018, without anyone knowing about it and endangering US forces on the ground.

to reinforce the US interests? Are tensions with allies and partners not going to backfire, and oblige the US to do more instead of less?

Ultimately, policy under the Trump administration is likely to be characterized by unilateralism, arrogance, nationalism, American superiority, an aggressive policy based on national interest in the strict sense, and not always weighing up the strategic and political fallout. What's more, the tactics of bluffing, bullying and intimidation are likely to fail to achieve the desired results, driving him to the brink to safeguard his reputation and ego, leading, for example, to war with Iran.

President Trump risks overestimating his own capabilities and American power, and underestimating the constraints of the international context, in particular national and regional dynamics. Foreign policy is built both with and in relation to the other, over which we have no control, whether the president likes it or not. The decision will therefore not be that of President Trump making an isolated choice in a game with predetermined rules, but that of a president acting in a complex environment. It remains to be seen to what extent America's adversaries will see in the Trump administration opportunities to advance their own interests, to the detriment of the United States.

3. A "Home Alone" Grand Strategy?

Trump's vision is not an exception. It is part of a trend observed in other major powers. President Trump's vision is to recreate large geopolitical spaces based on the logic of living space (*Lebensraum*) developed by Ratzel at the end of the 19th century. A logic also advocated by leaders such as Putin, Xi and Modi. Each great power would have its own sphere of influence. Trump's positions on Ukraine and Taiwan should be seen in this context.

Less interdependence and economic integration could therefore mean more tensions, due to closed ecosystems and a more disconnected world. Regional withdrawal risks reducing economic interdependence between countries, following a mercantilist logic of zero-sum game instead of a win-win approach. A fragmentation of the world into regional blocs would be characterized by different trade, technological and digital standards, payment systems and reserve currencies. In addition, there is a risk of falling back into center-periphery logics⁹ more pronounced than in the past. These peripheral countries, which are already poorly integrated into globalization, risk being completely excluded from it as economies regionalize. What's more, the need for resources, often located on the periphery, is likely to increase proxy wars.

This geo-economic regional retreat is accompanied by a retreat based on identity. Without falling into the simplism of Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* thesis, it is undeniable that identity and civilization play a major role in contemporary international relations. Part of American Big Tech follows moreover a eugenicist logic, considering the white race threatened. Relations between civilizations will become increasingly complex as the interests and aspirations of each clash. Consequently, competition between powers is also reflected in a desire for self-assertion on a civilizational scale, and thus in opposition to other civilizations¹⁰.

⁹ See for example, Immanuel, Wallerstein, *Le Système du monde*, vol. I : *Capitalisme et économie-monde: 1450-1640* and vol. II : *Le mercantilisme et la consolidation de l'économie monde européenne*, Paris, Flammarion, 1980.

¹⁰ See Tanguy, Struye de Swielande, "Régionalisme et gouvernance : une équation en devenir", in Hardy de Beaulieu et al, *La gouvernance à l'épreuve des turbulences contemporaines*, PUL, Louvain-la-Neuve, 2023.

There is a risk that, in the future, regional powers will have their own norms and standards that are not compatible with other regional blocs, resulting in a balkanization of norms, standards and the Internet.

Globalization, which was supposed to result in global socialization under the aegis of the United States, characterized by the adoption of common values and standards, has revealed its limits. So, under the Trump administration, we could be moving towards a more regionally-based socialization in which each major power tries to be the socializer of its region, thereby reinforcing its regional status and legitimacy. This status and legitimacy would come from the fact that members would recognize the values and norms on which the regional system would be based (either spontaneously or by force). And while regional blocs will continue to interact with each other, this will be on a more regular, transactional basis. As a result of the socialization process, they may be more stable internally but will be subject to destabilization attempts such as proxy wars and hybrid wars, especially as, according to the logic of *Lebensraum*, the great powers will compete for shared spheres of influence and *bufferzones*.

Because of this new reality, regional powers that have anticipated and adapted to these developments will increase their resilience to absorb shocks. This survival logic of their socio-political model will be complemented by the adoption on the international stage of policies based on *high politics* (vital national interests such as alliances, economic interests, defense and raw materials) rather than *low politics* (secondary national interests such as Human Rights or democracy). Due to a lack of proactivity, the European Union risks being the big loser in this reconfiguration of the world, having been unable, but above all unwilling, to anticipate it. As Thucydides put it: "The strong do what they can do, and the weak suffer what they must suffer".

4. Conclusion: Brussels has fallen

Faced with a President Trump who believes that intimidation and the threat of force will advance American interests, and that alliances are a burden, the European Union, as usual, is moving forward in disarray. This is a godsend for Trump. With its myriad standards, Taylorian bureaucracy, lack of a single voice, endless discussions and deliberations, and outdated Eurocentrism, the EU is no match for Trump. Obsessed with further enlargements, the EU has forgotten the importance of efficient functioning, clear and appropriate objectives, rigorous planning, and consistent and fair execution. Quite simply, the Union has forgotten to exist as a power. Whether in defense, geo-economics or foreign policy, objectives remain vague and discordantly determined by European capitals through the European Council. Everyone comes up with their own national priorities and sticks to them. Faced with this national(istic) hullabaloo, the EU hides behind a "placebo strategy", i.e. "the organizational tendency to follow the rituals of strategy-making without having the substance"¹¹.

The potential of power is not synonymous with its effective application. In other words, having capabilities is an essential but not sufficient condition; these capabilities need to be mobilized and combined in a common project, which continues to be lacking at European level. While the concept of strategic autonomy, i.e. "the ability to act autonomously when necessary and with

¹¹ Lt. Col. ML Cavanaugh, "On the Perils of Placebo Strategy", Modern War Institute, June 26, 2019.

partners whenever possible”¹² is divisive, it should nevertheless form the cement of grand strategy, since it is about defending European interests. This is even more the case given that, while the concept was originally limited to the defense sector in 2013¹³, it now increasingly includes the economic, technological and health (pandemics) fields¹⁴. The European Union will not be able to develop a mature grand strategy until the concept of strategic autonomy has been unanimously defined and accepted by both the European institutions and its member states. If the means of the grand strategy are to serve strategic autonomy (objective to be achieved in the long term), the latter must no longer be open to debate¹⁵.

To achieve this, shouldn't the European Union evolve towards a federal model, which would imply a greater transfer of powers to European institutions? This is what will enable the Union to exist in the face of powers such as Russia, China, the USA and India. Ultimately, as Toffler explains, “if you don't have a strategy, you'll be part of someone else's strategy”¹⁶. This is exactly what is likely to happen to the European Union, if it fails to overcome sovereignist reflexes and internal tensions.

¹² Council Conclusions on Implementing the EU Global Strategy in the Area of Security and Defense Foreign Affairs Council, 14149/16, Brussels, November 14, 2016.

¹³ European Council Conclusions, Brussels, EUCO 217/13, December 19-20, 2013, p. 7.

¹⁴ On this subject, read Josep Borrell, “Why Europe must be strategically autonomous”, *IFRI Editorials*, IFRI, December 11, 2020.

¹⁵ Unfortunately, it must be said that the current generation of leaders will not make this effort, many of them being in a weak position - think of Macron, Scholz, De Croo, Tusk, or Sanchez - or following a populist and nationalist logic, like Orban or Wilders for example.

¹⁶ Alvin, Toffler, *The Third Wave*, New York, William Morrow and Company, 1980.

