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THE FOREIGN POLICY OF THE SECOND TRUMP ADMINISTRATION: INTENTIONS AND CAPABILITIES

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Abstract. This article challenges the prevailing view that the second Trump administration's foreign policies are merely provocative and unpredictable. Several key characteristics of its international approach were already evident during D. Trump's first term, others were shaped by enduring US interests, available resources, and the new geopolitical context after 2022. Understanding the shifts in Washington's international approach requires examining D. Trump's stated intentions and capabilities. By early 2025, at least four intentions had become apparent: expanding US-controlled territories, containing the influence of China, brokering a ceasefire in the Russia–Ukraine special military operation, and compelling allies to increase their financial and strategic contributions to Western defence. The administration deploys four primary capabilities to advance these goals: America's substantial technological advantages, extensive financial and economic resources, soft power through free-market ideology, and military strength encompassing conventional forces and nuclear deterrence. When viewed through this framework of intentions and capabilities, D. Trump's foreign policy appears considerably more coherent.

Keywords: US foreign policy; US; EU; China; collective West; political confrontation; consensus; global challenge; national economy; world economy; economic growth; containment policy; export; import; world markets; Taiwan; Russia; Ukraine; military operation; democracy; tariffs.

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ВНЕШНЯЯ ПОЛИТИКА ВТОРОЙ АДМИНИСТРАЦИИ ТРАМПА: НАМЕРЕНИЯ И ВОЗМОЖНОСТИ

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Аннотация. Предпринята попытка доказать гипотезу, что внешнеполитический курс второй администрации Трампа не так провокационен и непредсказуем, как считали многие журналисты и эксперты. Некоторые из основных черт внешнеполитического курса Д. Трампа уже проявлялись в годы его первого пребывания на посту президента. Часть из них детерминированы американскими интересами и возможностями. Чтобы понять особенности вашингтонского подхода к международным отношениям, необходимо взглянуть на них через призму трамповских намерений и возможностей. В начале 2025 г. по меньшей мере четыре таких намерения (расширение территории под американским контролем, сдерживание роста влияния Китая, прекращение огня в специальной военной операции России в Украине, убеждение союзников увеличить расходы на обеспечение безопасности Запада) были четко продемонстрированы. Для осуществления этих намерений администрация Трампа, прежде всего, использовала возможности огромного американского технологического потенциала, значительные финансовые и другие экономические ресурсы, идеологию свободного рынка и другие гибридные возможности своей «мягкой силы», а также военную мощь, основанную на современных обычных вооружениях и традиционной ядерной триаде. Если принять в расчет эти намерения и возможности, то непредсказуемость внешнеполитического курса администрации Трампа будет выглядеть менее угрожающей.

Ключевые слова: американская внешняя политика; США; ЕС; Китай; коллективный Запад; политическая конфронтация; консенсус; глобальный вызов; национальная экономика; мировая экономика; экономический рост; политика сдерживания; экспорт; импорт; мировые рынки; Тайвань; Россия; Украина; военная операция; демократия; тарифы.

Introduction

From its first days, the second Trump administration surprised international observers with a series of high-profile initiatives. These ranged from imposing tariffs on 185 countries to a promise to end the Russia – Ukraine conflict within the first hundred days in office. Additional pledges included building a border wall to deter illegal migration, reducing inflation, reshoring industrial production, adopting a more confrontational stance towards China, incorporating Canada and Greenland, constructing a sun-city in Gaza, and numerous other ambitious objectives. Global political actors responded with profound shock to these developments, struggling to make sense of their implications.

Comprehending this new direction held significance not only for major powers such as China and Russia, and leading transnational corporations, but also for smaller states like Belarus, which attempted to distinguish rhetorical posturing from genuine intentions.

Leading American analysts offered predictions for the incoming presidency immediately following election day. M. Kroenig, Vice President of the Atlantic Council, anticipated «a return of a “peace through strength” approach» entailing «big investments in US defence capabilities to strengthen deterrence and use force

decisively if deterrence fails»¹. Former US ambassador to Ukraine, J. E. Herbst, noted the difficulty of predicting policy towards the conflict in Ukraine, given that D. Trump’s team «contains personnel with very different views». He identified two competing camps: one advocating reduced aid to Ukraine, and another recognising «the threat to US interests in Europe and elsewhere if Washington were to abandon Ukraine»². M. Schuman, senior fellow at the Atlantic Council’s Global China Hub, warned of potential «withdrawal of US global leadership that allows Xi to promote Chinese power at Washington’s expense»³.

Prior to D. Trump’s inauguration, international experts sought to predict his approach towards specific countries and multilateral organisations⁴. Belarusian scholars, however, produced limited analysis on the subject, constrained by the short timeframe since D. Trump’s assumption of office. E. Preigerman, director of the council on international relations «Minsk dialogue», offers insights into D. Trump’s foreign policy priorities in his non-paper «Priorities in unpredictability: Trump entered new world». He identifies two key Washington priorities amid the perceived unpredictability of D. Trump’s foreign policy. First, he argues that

¹Donald Trump just won the presidency. Our experts answer the big questions about what that means for America’s role in the world [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/donald-trump-just-won-the-presidency-our-experts-answer-the-big-questions-about-what-that-means-for-americas-role-in-the-world/> (date of access: 24.04.2025).

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Sotolongo J. A. Return of Donald Trump: continuity or change with the DPRK? [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://worldnewworld.com/page/content.php?no=4082> (date of access: 24.04.2025) ; Ostheimer A. E. What a second Trump administration will mean for multilateralism [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://worldnewworld.com/page/content.php?no=4282> (date of access: 24.04.2025).

the new administration will revive the Monroe doctrine, which President J. Monroe established in 1823 to declare both American continents as Washington's exclusive sphere of interest. Second, E. Preigerman notes

that D. Trump's inaugural speech emphasised America's determination to stop expending limited resources on narratives and conflicts that Washington considers non-essential to its strategic interests⁵.

Intentions and capabilities

Decisive victory of D. Trump in the November 2024 presidential elections culminated in his inauguration as the 47th President of the US on 20 January 2025. This outcome was unexpected and, for many American and international experts and politicians, unwelcome. In the aftermath, commentators' attention turned to speculating about his stance on specific nations and international relations more broadly. Many scrutinised his first term (2017–2021) to anticipate likely trajectories. The theme of D. Trump's unpredictability featured prominently in these assessments and became apparent in the first four months of his second presidency. Within two weeks, D. Trump had announced territorial claims against Denmark (Greenland) and Panama, threatened Colombia, Canada, and Mexico with 25 % tariffs unless they strengthened their borders, and imposed 145 % tariffs on all Chinese exports to the US. These foreign policy decisions exceeded the forecasts of many analysts, even those who had anticipated a degree of erratic behaviour.

While D. Trump's unpredictability is difficult to dispute, his second administration must operate within a range of objective and subjective constraints that somewhat curtail this tendency. To understand these policies, we must consider, first, the administration's intentions, and, second, the capabilities at its disposal.

What intentions, then, became apparent during the initial months of D. Trump's second presidency? The first intention expanding the US territory or areas under American control, was not without historical precedent. The announced intention to incorporate Greenland and the Panama Canal zone into the US territory has deep roots in American politics. President H. Truman first advanced claims on Greenland, whilst President J. Carter's decision to transfer the Panama Canal zone to Panama met with opposition from a majority of republican politicians in the 1970s. D. Trump himself raised the Greenland question during his first presidential term. Consequently, analysts familiar with these historical precedents should not find D. Trump's territorial ambitions during his second presidency particularly surprising. A novel element introduced in early 2025 was the republican administration's emphasis on national security concerns to justify these territorial ambitions, extending this rationale to Canada and Mexico.

Second intention is to contain China's growth also originated during D. Trump's first presidency. The trade war he initiated included imposing new tariffs on Chinese goods. His second administration has cited secu-

rity concerns regarding Chinese companies' potential control over both entrances to the Panama Canal. Additionally, Washington invited Beijing to join nuclear arms control negotiations, an offer China had ignored as of March 2025.

Third intention (to broker a ceasefire in the Russia–Ukraine conflict) was a prominent pledge during D. Trump's election campaign. The Biden administration viewed this conflict through the lens of political liberalism: good versus evil, democracy versus autocracy, freedom versus tyranny. D. Trump and his foreign policy team approach it from a realist perspective: a struggle over spheres of influence, a confrontation between Russian and Ukrainian national interests, and a post-Soviet territorial and cultural dispute that should not greatly concern the US. Consequently, D. Trump immediately dismissed discussions about restoring all occupied Ukrainian territories to Kyiv's control, instead proposing a demarcation line along current front positions. The Trump administration's ceasefire initiative thus reflects less concern for humanitarian principles or defending democracy than a desire to reduce American expenditure on Ukrainian defence and prevent pushing Russia closer to China.

The fourth intention (compelling allies to increase their contributions to Western defence) had emerged during D. Trump's first presidential term. At that time, D. Trump demanded that NATO countries raise their military budgets to at least 2 % of GDP. During his second term, he increased this demand to 5 % of GDP, citing the three-year-old conflict in Europe. Some sources suggest that Washington might accept a rise to 3.6 %.

These objectives (among others not discussed here) draw upon strategic resources that equip D. Trump's foreign policy with several implementation capabilities. The first relates to substantial technological advantage of the US. The country leads in numerous advanced technologies, including artificial intelligence, big data analytics, semiconductor manufacturing, and quantum computing. Although this technological capacity remains poorly coordinated across disparate companies and research centres, it nevertheless enables the Trump administration to maintain sophisticated conventional forces and pursue an assertive foreign policy, particularly in security matters.

The second capability arises from economic supremacy of the US, which provides the government with extensive financial and material resources for domestic

⁵Preigerman E. Prioritising unpredictability: Trump has entered a new world [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://minskdialogue.by/research/opinions/priority-v-nepredskazuemosti-tramp-zashel-v-novyi-mir> (date of access: 24.04.2025).

and foreign policies. Consequently, the second Trump administration can commit enormous resources to even its most ambitious and risky initiatives, such as the proposed Golden dome missile defence initiative and sustain both productive and counterproductive efforts for extended periods. The sheer scale of the American economy permits Washington to pursue policies that may damage US national interests over considerable time spans.

The third capability derives from the US market ideology, which has repeatedly demonstrated the power of free markets to stimulate economic growth and improve living standards. Several developing countries continue to adopt American economic models, with Argentina in 2024–2025 serving as the most recent example. The emphasis on individual freedom, prominent in the US, remains a potent force for unlocking personal creativity and generating innovative products and expertise. The second Trump administration's anti-bureaucratic tendencies partly aim to advance this market ideology rooted in individual freedom in practice meaning the removal of societal constraints on corporate freedom, especially in the high-tech realm.

Finally, the US possesses significant military capabilities, relying on advanced conventional weaponry, such as the F-35 fighter jet, and the enduring credibility of its nuclear arsenal. The US remains among the few nations capable of projecting military power across oceans and continents. Washington's THAAD and Patriot air defence systems can neutralise aerial attacks from potential adversaries. When D. Trump signed an executive order one week after his inauguration requesting a new layered missile shield later designated Golden dome both Beijing and Moscow took notice. This initiative recalled R. Reagan's Strategic defense initiative⁶. Beyond urging allies to increase their military expenditure, D. Trump proposed substantially raising US defence spending to over 1 trln US dollars.

The second Trump administration's intentions and capabilities converged across various foreign policy initiatives, which took several distinct forms.

Economic sanctions appear a favoured instrument. Early in his second presidency, he imposed and occasionally postponed economic sanctions against Colombia, Canada, Mexico, and China, whilst threatening new tariffs and sanctions against Russia. These measures extended beyond direct targets to encompass third parties supporting conflicting sides. When threatening Russia with additional sanctions unless Moscow ceased its special military operation in Ukraine, D. Trump announced on the platform «Truth social» that he would apply new

tariffs not only to Russian exports to the US but also to Russian exports to third countries.

Contrary to claims that D. Trump weakened multilateral frameworks⁷, his administration instrumentalised alliances to advance US interests. By reducing US aid to Ukraine, he incentivises NATO to assume greater responsibility for resolving global crises, particularly the Russia – Ukraine conflict. Washington will likely utilise the AUKUS alliance and security arrangements with Japan and South Korea to deter China.

Nevertheless, the second Trump administration emphasises bilateral relations with strategically positioned countries. Military assistance features prominently in these partnerships. The administration considers military aid to Taiwan essential for deterring Chinese occupation of the island.

Israel and Egypt hold significant influence in mitigating military tensions across the Middle East. Not surprisingly, when D. Trump halted all US external assistance programmes in early February 2025, both countries received exemptions.

Washington possesses considerable capabilities to advance its objectives. However, all resources (financial, natural, political, and military) remain finite. Even substantial power of the US has boundaries. Should D. Trump persist with counterproductive policies, his available capabilities, regardless of their magnitude, may prove insufficient. As E. Preigerman observed, «even great powers cannot infinitely ignore the law of resources' limitation if they do not want to face self-destruction»⁸. Intentions, however noble, remain meaningless without the means to implement them.

During his presidential campaign, D. Trump lauded President W. McKinley (first elected in 1896) for advocating high tariffs. Subsequently, on 2 April 2025, his administration announced increased tariffs targeting nearly all countries, including those with which the US held a trade deficit. Although most tariffs were later postponed or reconsidered, their implementation revealed the administration's threefold strategy: generating revenue to offset the national debt, coercing policy concessions from trading partners, and penalising states for perceived transgressions. Washington attempted to penalise China with 145 % tariffs but retreated during Geneva trade talks in May 2025 when the negative domestic economic consequences became apparent. As international economists rightly cautioned, such protectionism risked depressing GDP, inflating consumer prices, and exacerbating trade imbalances⁹. Consequently, the second Trump administration increasingly recognised that W. McKinley's protectionist ideas, whilst

⁶Brown J. D. J. What will the US Golden dome missile defense mean for Russia? [Electronic resource]. URL: https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2025/05/golden-dome-missile-russia?lang=en&utm_source=carnegieemail&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=autoemail&mkt_tok=ODEzLVhZVS00MjIAAAGahxEZxduBSZjhflGRuoHj-kQf-9oi-63wzspZNkTaiEn5jKeilm-ph6nwQx2sKUeyX55RCySnsM5AE1vbW5V0Bp17qMP2dJdo1Z0vwY0Yc9w (date of access: 20.05.2025).

⁷Ostheimer A. E. What a second Trump administration will mean for multilateralism [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://worldnewworld.com/page/content.php?no=4282> (date of access: 24.04.2025).

⁸Preigerman E. Prioritising unpredictability...

⁹The economic effects of US – China trade wars [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://worldnewworld.com/page/content.php?no=4916> (date of access: 20.05.2025).

suitable for 19th-century America, prove ineffective in today's globalised economy. Viewed through the lens of a de-risking strategy, D. Trump's foreign policy may appear less unpredictable.

The Washington administration implemented this strategy across various sectors with varying degrees of success. In the security sphere, American political-military capabilities are severely strained by numerous concurrent global crises. The US must address the Russia – Ukraine conflict, Israeli-Arab tensions, North Korea's nuclear programme, threats to Taiwan from China, Beijing's policies in the South China Sea and East China Sea, Iran's missile and nuclear capabilities, and Indo-Pakistani disputes. American armed forces, despite their considerable strength, cannot simultaneously confront all these challenges, or even half of them. Consequently, from its outset, the Trump administration sought to persuade allies to increase their military expenditure and share Washington's security burden. This approach yielded results when NATO member states, along with Japan, South Korea, and Australia, substantially raised military budgets following American threats to reduce military and intelligence assistance to Ukraine.

No capability, however formidable, is without vulnerabilities. A significant US vulnerability is its reliance on the PRC for over 90 % of global rare earth element supplies. Modern technologies, including military systems, depend entirely on these resources. Consequently, the second Trump administration has prioritised supply chain diversification. The agreement on Ukrainian minerals signed in Washington on 30 April 2025 represents a significant step in implementing this strategy.

President D. Trump's first foreign visit in mid-May 2025 took him to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE. Whilst Arab policies towards Israel received considerable attention (Saudi Arabia was invited to join the Abraham accords (2020) at its discretion) economic interests dominated proceedings. During the visit, D. Trump announced the removal of restrictions on advanced semiconductor chip sales to Gulf states. He concluded a package of agreements with Saudi Arabia worth 600 bln US dollars, including an unprecedented 142 bln US dollars military equipment contract. Qatar and the UAE secured similarly substantial economic agreements. On the margins of the visit, D. Trump met Ahmed al-Sharaa, President of Syria, and announced the lifting of all sanctions against Syria.

Conclusions

The second Trump administration's foreign policy appeared both provocative and unpredictable. Several core features of its approach had already emerged during D. Trump's first presidential term, while others reflected evolving US interests, capabilities, and the shifting geopolitical landscape after 2022. By early 2025, D. Trump sought to expand territories under the US control, constrain China's rise, broker a ceasefire in the Russia – Ukraine conflict, and compel allies to increase their defence contributions.

To pursue these objectives, the US possessed considerable assets: significant technological potential, substantial financial and economic resources, the appeal of free-market ideology (a component of its soft power), and military strength derived from modern conventional weaponry alongside its established nuclear arsenal. When considering these stated intentions and available capabilities, the apparently erratic nature of this foreign policy looks less puzzling.

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