

Introduction

This document analyses the challenge that President Trump's actions pose to the continuity of the global liberal order as we currently know it. The Trump administration is questioning the international system, of which Washington has acted as guarantor, arguing that it has harmed US national interests, while European allies have benefited at its expense. Trump's decisions, which are largely perceived as erratic, have generated significant distrust among allies and weaken America's position in the global order, eroding Washington's credibility as leader of the liberal system and consequently favouring the rebirth of an order based on power relations. For years, Washington has perceived that it must concentrate its resources on the strategic competition it already maintains with China for primacy in maritime Asia. This rationale inspires the shift of American military resources in Europe to the Indo-Pacific, pressing European allies to assume responsibility for their own defence. Now, European nations face the challenge of reestablishing credible defence capabilities and doing so in a coordinated manner within the European framework. This is essential to ensuring European security in a context in which American military resources will be focused on South and East Asia.

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The date of President Trump's inauguration signals a turning point in U.S. geostrategy, with far-reaching effects on an already changing international order. Donald Trump during his first term, from January 2017 to January 2021, continued the general lines of the American grand strategy, which since the end of World War II has been oriented towards maintaining the international hegemony of the US. A power that is sustained by the liberal order and by the American international commitment, which requires Washington to maintain a global military predominance, which is supported by an extensive network of allies, the main ones in Europe and Japan. However, President Trump's viewpoints to the fact that this liberal global order has hurt the US, mainly because of the economic consequences of globalisation and America's allies, mainly the Europeans, have taken advantage of the US, holding a particularly negative view of the EU.¹ This is not a fully

1. - "EU was born to 'screw' US, Trump says", France 24, 26/02/2025, available in <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20250226-eu-was-born-to-screw-us-trump-says> (accessed 24/04/2025)

right perspective, although it has some truth particularly in the field of defence and in relation to most European nations.

Trump in his first term had an inner circle of the so-called "grown-ups", Mattis, Bolton, McMaster, etc., however, for his current circle of first-level collaborators he has chosen people by personal and ideological affinity, some without any prior experience of government. The appointment of Peter Hegseth as Secretary of Defence has been especially controversial.² An approach that eliminates counterweights to presidential action and allows Trump to apply without restrictions the diffuse government program "Make America Great Again" (MAGA), implemented quite erratically in his first hundred days in office. The MAGA would be a consequence of a perception of weakness, of the decline in American global power, attributed to the presidencies of Obama and Biden, which Trump intends to restore in the first place by reducing American global commitments. A movement to correct the overextension of US resources and thus confront the unstoppable growth of Chinese power and sustain American global primacy.³ Thus, the US would need to decouple from its commitments in other regions, starting with Europe. In short, the Trump administration would seek to rebalance costs and benefits, in favour of the American national interest, in a new international reality.

MAGA also has its part in the economy, and perhaps the main one as Trump understands international relations as business, in which there is someone who wins and another who loses. Thus, the president would perceive that his country has been consistently harmed in its agreements with nations around the world.⁴ Hence the widespread imposition of tariffs on imports to the US, which is intended for the US to regain the industrial capacities it lost due to globalisation⁵ and whose lack results in a strategic weakness for Washington, shipbuilding is a clear example of this.⁶ However, the annoyance with

2. - Levison Jake, "Who is Pete Hegseth? The Trump official in the firing line", Sky News, 22/04/2025, available in <https://news.sky.com/story/who-is-pete-hegseth-trumps-defence-secretary-and-former-fox-news-host-who-accused-europe-of-pathetic-free-loading-13343819> (accessed 26/04/2025)

3. - Remnick David, "Can Ukraine—and America—Survive Donald Trump?" Interview to Stephen Kotkin, New Yorker, 09/03/2025, available in <https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-new-yorker-interview/can-ukraine-and-america-survive-donald-trump> (accessed 15/03/2025)

4.- Suanzes Pablo R., "Trump declares the <<Economic Independence Day>> of the United States with tariffs of 20% on Europe or 54% on China", El Mundo, 03/04/2025, available in <https://www.elmundo.es/economia/2025/04/02/67eda007e85ecee26f8b45bc.html> (accessed 03/04/2025)

5.- Rechenberg Andrew, "Why the U.S. Needs President Trump's Tariff", Coalition for a Prosperous America (CPA) 03/04/2025, available in <https://prosperousamerica.org/why-the-u-s-needs-president-trumps-tariffs/> (accessed 12/04/2025)

6.- Congressional Budget Office, "An Analysis of the Navy's 2025 Shipbuilding Plan", 01/2025, available in <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/60732> (accessed 03/02/2025)

European allies is broader, it also extends to the ideological field. Trump supports traditional American values, attacked and vilified by the liberal intelligentsia over the past few decades. An attitude that is also rooted in the political and cultural spheres of EU, opening an ideological gulf with the political thoughts of the American ally, fundamentally in the interpretation of the concept of individual freedom. Vice President Vance's speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2025 bears irrefutable witness to this.⁷

President Trump a challenge to the endurance of the “West”

The point is that a gap has opened in the shared vision of the world order between the two sides of the North Atlantic, certainly between the elites in power, yet Canada remains on the European side. Europe clings to a world vision in which the liberal order must prevail, an order in which American leadership is irreplaceable. Meanwhile, the U.S. perceives that the liberal order and its product, globalization, have undermined its national interests and would veer toward an international system of power relations. A large part of American opinion, and certainly the Trump administration, see Europe as a collection of wealthy nations that take advantage of American military power to avoid bearing the cost of their own defence, a situation considered to be unacceptable.⁸ Now, the U.S. needs to concentrate its finite resources in Asia, including those military capabilities currently deployed in Europe, to confront China, which to gain hegemony over East Asia needs to expel its American competitor from the coasts and seas around it⁹.

It is currently perceived that the American government would be acting erratically, distancing itself from the permanent lines of action of the US, actions that would not support Washington national interest, which requires coherent and sustained strategies, the opposite of what is being currently done. The vital American interest is to prevent the emergence of a hegemonic power in Eurasia, capable of threatening the security of the United States, and maintaining control of maritime access to North America, in the Atlantic and Pacific. An interest that has been sustained by a system of alliances and military

7.- Lu Christina, "The Speech That Stunned Europe", Foreign Policy, 18/02/2025, available in <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/02/18/vance-speech-munich-full-text-read-transcript-europe/> (accessed 03/04/2025)

8.- Ibid. 1.

9.- Latham Andrew & Moeini, Arta, "Unraveling China's Grand Strategy", The Institute for Peace and Diplomacy, 26/02/2025, available in <https://peacediplomacy.org/2025/02/26/unraveling-chinas-grand-strategy-its-aim-is-to-erode-u-s-global-hegemony-not-see-world-domination/> (accessed 24/03/2025)

agreements with countless nations, and a network of almost 750 military installations in 80 different countries,¹⁰ allowing the projection of American military force around the world and the global deployment of its navy. An essential context for the continuity of the Western liberal order, as we know it, which requires the preservation of the American global preponderance based on the technological advantage, the primacy of the dollar in international transactions, an incomparable military capacity with global access, and a very extensive network of alliances.¹¹

The problem is that the US would be moving away from the leadership of the West, its current presidency seems to be going along that line, a situation in which the global liberal order would quickly vanish. Something that would result in a return to a regime of power relations, to an imperial system, with China, the US and battered Russia, resurrected in its capacity as a great power thanks to President Trump himself, competing for power and influence on a global scale. A chaotic end to the liberal order in international relations, with the risk of uncontrolled chaos, the consequence of which could be a generalization of conflicts, the result of competition between the great and not so great powers.¹² A power politics that apparently is being already applied by the American administration itself, the offer to buy Greenland, the intention to retake control of the Panama Canal, or Trump's proposal to incorporate Canada as the 51st state of the Union, and the ways in which tariffs are being imposed suggest that path.¹³

The international strength of the United States

Beyond the immediate actions of the Trump administration, it would be necessary to know whether the trend of leaving by the US of world leadership and particularly of the Western world will be consolidated as rather permanent. Washington would be reducing its commitment to European allies and NATO, something to which the US administration's

10.- Stevenson Jonathan, "Overseas Bases and US Strategy: Optimising America's Military Footprint", IISS, 28/09/2022, available in <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2022/09/overseas-bases-and-us-strategic-posture/> (accessed 02/05/2025)

11.- Ferguson Niall, Cochrane John H., Kotkin Stephen, The Good Fellows Interview (video), The Hoover Institution, 13/02/25, available in <https://www.hoover.org/research/age-empire-strikes-back-stephen-kotkin-trump-wrestling-and-use-american-power> (accessed 20/02/2025)

12. - Mearsheimer John J., "Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order", International Security 2019; available in 43 (4): 7–50. doi: https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00342 (accessed 23/01/2025)

13.- Kuo Mercy A., Trump 2.0: Great Power Politics and the New World Order, an Interview to Tiberio Graziani, The Diplomat, 19/02/2025, available in <https://thediplomat.com/2025/02/trump-2-0-great-power-politics-and-the-new-world-order/> (accessed 23/04/2025)

statements would be signalling to. This would be a consequence of the perception by the Republican elite that the US is in decline and that it needs to re-establish its power to continue being a global superpower.¹⁴ Added to this is a widespread feeling that alliances with European nations have been greatly onerous for Washington. This is partly true, as American security guarantees have resulted in a deep contraction of European military power and therefore in weak allies, which in turn also has a negative impact on American power. However, Washington has also benefited from its alliance with European nations, as these have been the main basis that has sustained American leadership in the international system.

An ally must always be reliable, if he changes his position with respect to his partners and allies, that essential trust crumbles and with it his ability to influence. Launching a senseless tariff war against its global partners and despising the closest allies who have also supported American military adventures in Asia, with resources and blood is not exactly the most appropriate recipe for strengthening American global power.¹⁵ A power that has eroded since the beginning of this century, due to an overextension of its military resources after 9/11, resulting in enormous costs, a gigantic budget deficit and the neglect of its most important geopolitical theater, the seas surrounding maritime Asia, a situation compounded by a brutal loss of industrial capacities.¹⁶ A window of opportunity that was quietly seized by its main opponents, China, above all, but also Russia, which interpreted itself as having a free hand in its European periphery, the attacks on Georgia in 2008, Ukraine in 2014 and the invasion of that country in 2022 are a tangible proof.

In short, Washington's foreign policy has not been adjusted to the resources it would need for years, the interest on the gigantic American debt already exceeds the value of the defence budget, a situation that would place the US in decline.¹⁷ Moreover, the continued use of military power as an instrument of foreign policy has been a significant fiasco, as the painful withdrawal from Afghanistan is evidence of. This suggests a misalignment

14.- 2024 Republican Party Platform, "2024 GOP Platform Make America Great Again!", 08/072024, available in <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/2024-republican-party-platform> (accessed 18/03/2025)

15Ibid. 6

16.- Doan Laura, Ingram Julia, "Trump overstates the number of U.S. factories lost since NAFTA while defending tariff hikes", CBS News, 08/04/2025, available in <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-us-factories-lost-nafta-tariffs-fact-check/> (accessed 21/04/2025)

17.- The "Ferguson Law", which states that any great power that spends more on debt service than on defence runs the risk of ceasing to be a great power. See, Niall Ferguson, Ferguson's Law: "Debt Service, Military Spending, and the Fiscal Limits of Power," Hoover Institution: History Working Papers, 21/02/2025, available in <https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/HAHWGWorkingPaper-202502-Ferguson's%20Law-Final.pdf> (accessed 02/05/2025)

between ends, means and strategies in the foreign action, leading to a perception of American weakness and distrust of Washington's real power.¹⁸ Now, President Trump would be trying to restore American global power, the problem is that he seems to be doing so in a chaotic and unpredictable way, resulting in the loss of credibility of his policies. The desertion of Ukraine and its statements supporting the Russian position has sown distrust in Europe, especially because of how naïve it is to reinforce a Russia that is threatening to Europe. While the global imposition of tariffs fails due to their negative effects on the American economy, in fact, on the same day at the tariffs took effect, the Trump administration established a 90-day delay for their entry into force.

Europe in its own web

Trump has woken up Europe, with a shock, he has put in black and white that it is precisely the American commitment that has been the backbone of the defence bulk of European nations and now that commitment could disappear. A situation that displays Europe's reduced ability to influence internationally, in a world in which power relations are undermining the liberal international order, European soft power is losing relevance.¹⁹ Thus, the quite apparent reduced military capability of the Europeans and, above all, a distrust about the decision to use them, if necessary, not only greatly limit the international influence of the European nations but also unbalance the alliance with the United States. Washington would consider the European nations as a problem in achieving its objectives, in addition, his main interest is in Asia, far from Europe. This requires for European nations to restore the credibility of their own defence capabilities, which requires not only spending more, and not just 2%, but also to restore those lost and necessary defence industrial capabilities, which will take years to achieve. In addition to conveying the perception that they are willing to use the military instrument if their security is threatened.

It is suggested that the solution to the problem of the credibility of European defence lies in the creation of the so-called "European Army", although it would be more appropriate

18.- Preble, Christofer, Rethink US Grand Strategy, Stimson, 19/11/2024, available in <https://www.stimson.org/research/security-strategy/grand-strategy/> (accessed 21/02/2025)

19.- Lowings Ben y Aguilar Fernando, "European Pretense, Democratic Backsliding and a Decline in Soft Power", Brussels International Center, 07/02/2023, available in https://www.bic-rhr.com/sites/default/files/inline-files/BIC%20February%202023%20Commentary%20-%20Ben%20Lowings%20_0.pdf (accessed 03/03/2025)

to say European Armed Forces, and this only if it were something feasible and effective. The Armed Forces in a democratic European society respond to the political power they serve, and that final political power is in the hands of the nations, not in the Union, the EU Treaty defines national security and defence of the territory as an exclusive responsibility of the Member States.²⁰ A European Armed Forces consisting of units from different nations or formed by nationals of different countries. When would they operate? When all national governments would agree. If one of those nations disagrees with the operation, would its citizens, or its units, abstain? The precondition for the existence of a European Armed Forces would be that they are under control and subordinated to a single political power, which would be accountable to the citizens in democratic and direct elections.²¹ In short, a European central government that controls and decides on one sole Armed Forces, it is something very difficult to imagine nowadays. In the meantime, or better assuming that this is not going to happen, European nations need to strengthen themselves militarily, which they will do individually according to their interests, in addition to doing so in the industrial field, partly competitively and partly collaboratively.

So, military planning will continue to be a national issue in Europe, although it can and must be coordinated, which has already been done for decades within the framework of NATO and far less within the scope of the EU. The question is how to improve military coordination between European nations, now that Europe would no longer be a priority for the U.S. The Alliance continues to be the main organisation that supports shared defence in Europe, with greater or lesser American participation, a foundation that should not be abandoned, as it establishes the framework for interoperability between the allies' Armed Forces. The EU has made great efforts in coordinating the development of military capabilities, the projects of the European Defence Fund (EDF) are a great initiative for this. Coordination within the European framework is also necessary for the recovery of industrial defence capabilities, seeking the creation of a solid industrial base that provides the necessary and sufficient weapons and ammunition, something that will not be exempt from competition. All this is aimed at deterring potential military adventures in any geographical direction and guaranteeing the defence of the national interests where necessary. Of course, the decision to respond to a military threat, in Europe or elsewhere

20. - Article 4.2 of the TEU.

21. - Zandee Dick, "Audience question: What is needed for a European army?", Clingendael, 06/05/2024, available in en <https://www.clingendael.org/news/audience-question-what-needed-european-army> (accessed 06/02/2025)

and how to do so, will continue to be a national responsibility.

Conclusions

Over the last few decades, the liberal world order had gone into retreat, mainly due to the growth of the relative power of nations that are not content within it, now that international order has received an assault from within, from its own center, the presidency of the United States. An institution that should have the greatest interest in maintaining it, since it sustains the enormous power and international influence of US. President Trump's erratic decisions and frequent changes of heart result in the erosion of American global power and along it of the liberal international order too. The US would not only need to strengthen its military posture in maritime Asia, but also to recover its industrial capacity, essential to sustain the former, shipbuilding would be a priority area. For its part, Europe perceived as militarily weak is forced to mend its defence capabilities, something that in the current situation is the responsibility of each one of the nations, which does require significant coordination, supported by a common interest. An unavoidable strengthening of European nations military power that must respond to defence policies that provide with actual military capabilities, measurable in terms of personnel, vehicles, ships, aircraft, etc. Which requires a sufficient and trained human component and the necessary means to respond in all environments of war, traditional and new, with technological superiority and determination to use the force when necessary. Only in this way will national and European security be guaranteed, exercising sufficient deterrence to lead potential threats to the conviction that launching a military adventure against Spain, or another allied nation, would have an unbearable cost.

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