



## **Cause and Effect**

It is difficult to think of any recent historical period in which a single individual has dominated the international stage as clearly as Donald Trump dominates the present one. One would have to go back to the lead-up to the Second World War to find another moment so heavily shaped by one person. The feeling that someone with a first and last name is the greatest disruptive element of our reality is widespread.

Added to the decisions of the American president is his personality. The character eclipses the office. The idea of rupture comes not only from the substance, but also from the excessive and bewildering manner in which things are done. The impression that we are living through an unprecedented moment has as much to do with what is happening as with the way in which it is happening.

However, and paradoxically, this unquestionable domination of the global stage coexists with the assertion that his presidency is nothing more than a symptom of the problems of our time, the direct consequence of the evolution of the world over recent decades: Trump would merely have made visible what was already taking place.

Along those lines, a high percentage of the analyses that point to a true turning point in the world order and dissect its causes and consequences seem to regard this change as unstoppable, a foregone conclusion. Faced with it, there would supposedly be no alternative other than acceptance and adaptation.

The purpose of this article is twofold: to affirm that neither Donald Trump's presidency nor his decisions were inevitable, and to point out the extent to which they are having—and will continue to have—tremendously harmful consequences for the international political situation and for the place that the United States itself occupies in the world.

## **Was Trump Inevitable?**

Are Trump and his administration merely the visible face of a much deeper and more gradual change that in reality depends very little on them? Is this presidency the direct consequence of circumstances that could only have led us here, making it irrelevant who occupies the Oval Office? Or, on the contrary, has his arrival at the White House been the unexpected explosion that has blown apart the entire international structure and brought an era to an end?

At every historical moment, circumstances create certain conditions that provoke or facilitate some changes while preventing or hindering others. But that does not turn History into a mathematical succession of causes and consequences, into a sort of chemical process with exact and predictable results<sup>1</sup>. On the contrary, it has always been subject not only to major structural transformations and the slow movement of tectonic plates, but also to the intervention of entities, organizations, and even isolated individuals when they have carried enough weight.

There are many factors that explain and made possible Donald Trump's rise to power: the discontent of a segment of the American population that has been losing purchasing power for years; the emergence of social media as a tool of influence and manipulation; the simplification of political discourse; the polarization of public debate; the lack of trust in democracy and the rule of law, whose guarantees and complexities push many people toward messianic solutions; the speed at which the world is changing and shrinking, and the fear this can provoke; and so on. These factors have shaped a scenario that, while not unprecedented, is certainly novel, one in which the presence of certain actors becomes understandable. Surely, under different economic, social, and cultural conditions, any attempt by someone with his profile to burst into politics would have amounted to little more than an anecdote. And yet, despite the condescension with which his candidacy was initially received, he has won two elections. Therefore, Trump's presidency is not inexplicable.

But neither was it inevitable. Trump might not exist and, despite the undeniable underlying crisis, another president with a different profile and different ideas could occupy his place, without conveying this sense of the end of an era. The historical moment explains Trump, but he was not the only alternative made possible by our present.

However, as already noted, there is no shortage of analyses that see his administration as the inexorable result of the internal situation in the United States and of the current international environment. They assume that the events he is unleashing were the only possible outcome under the circumstances. Consequently, they limit themselves to describing what is happening and why: the Realist school of international relations is invoked; in light of the recent National Security Strategy, the retrenchment of the United

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<sup>1</sup> That was invented almost eighty years ago by Isaac Asimov, for his masterpiece *Foundation*, and he called it Psychohistory, but it did not work even in the book..

States from its hegemonic position and its renunciation of the role of global policeman are explained; and we witness the official declaration, by the political, economic, and academic worlds, of a paradigm shift in international relations<sup>2</sup>. It is difficult to find voices that even qualify the categorical assertion that the previous international order—supposedly based on rules and the principle of multilateralism—is dead. To the point that this sudden unanimity<sup>3</sup> sometimes seems to reveal a certain haste to draw definitive conclusions, recalling Fukuyama’s famous and mistaken announcement of the end of History.

And yet many of these accurate analyses still feel insufficient<sup>4</sup>. Understanding reality is an essential first step, but not enough. It is necessary to go further and try to determine not only where we are, but where we would like to be. Then, we must attempt to trace the path that leads from one point to the other. Otherwise, we risk falling into deterministic positions, treating as a given what should instead be regarded as the problem to solve.

Returning to the case at hand, and despite the many facets of Trump’s presidency that make it difficult to focus on a specific aspect of his administration, it seems both appropriate and relevant to assess the impact of his policies on the position of the United States in the world and on the international order as a whole.

To do so, we will begin from a twofold hypothesis: the United States is precipitating its own decline as a world power—to the point that one can now truly imagine it losing its

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<sup>2</sup> These are some of the numerous references on which this statement can be found:

- SENDAGORTA, F. (2025), Un orden internacional sin líder (y sin orden). *Política Exterior*, 39 (227), 60-71.
- DRAGHI, M. (2026). Discurso sobre el futuro de Europa y el orden internacional basado en reglas [Conferencia]. Universidad de Lovaina. Huffington Post. <https://www.huffingtonpost.es/global/la-apocaliptica-advertencia-draghi-sobre-futuro-europa-el-orden-mundial-muerto-f202602.html>
- BARBÉ, E. (2025). La muerte anunciada del orden internacional liberal. *Política Exterior*, 39(227), 72–83.
- VON DER LEYEN, U. (2026, marzo 9). Europa ya no puede ser la guardiana del viejo orden mundial, de un mundo que ha desaparecido [Discurso en la conferencia de embajadores de la UE]. *El País*. <https://elpais.com/internacional/2026-03-09/von-der-leyen-europa-ya-no-puede-ser-la-guardiana-del-viejo-orden-mundial-de-un-mundo-que-ha-desaparecido.html>

<sup>3</sup> Of course, there had already been analyses for some time that had been predicting this turning point. Among many others: IKENBERRY, G. J. (2018). *The end of liberal international order?* *International Affairs*, 94(1), 7–23. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix241>

<sup>4</sup> What’s more, we are very close to the point where AI will be able to provide us, based on information available online, with a comprehensive and rigorous analysis of the background, developments, and cause-and-effect relationships in international politics; in other words, to tell us where we stand and explain, in a reasonably satisfactory manner, why. Anyone who merely offers that, without contributing anything else, may soon become obsolete.

leading position—and, at the same time, it is causing a deterioration in the framework of international relations that need not occur, or at least not to the degree we are witnessing. It is important to stress that these are not inevitable processes that would have taken place regardless, but are, to a large extent, the direct consequences of decisions made freely and voluntarily.

### **Trump's Domestic Policy**

Although the risk of relying on incomplete or biased data is real, and when judging from afar it is easy to mistake the part for the whole, in the present case the information is abundant and continuous, coming from all kinds of sources. Enough, at least, to identify striking elements and detect in them a certain drift in the political and social life of today's United States, regardless of how one evaluates such changes.

Among the effects that Trump's return to power has produced domestically, one stands out even more clearly than during his first term: the sharpening of American political polarization. His presidency, simultaneously the result and the catalyst of the rise of extreme positions, has accelerated a process that undoubtedly already existed, but which has now worsened to the point of provoking several ideologically motivated murders<sup>5</sup>.

The attacks of the current administration on several of the mechanisms and institutions characteristic of a democracy and the rule of law are difficult to dispute. Some may justify them or consider them the great remedies demanded by our great evils, but they cannot be denied. The threatening attitude toward the press, legal overreach, pressure exerted on the chairman of the Federal Reserve, or anti-immigration tactics so excessive that they have caused inconceivable deaths are measures that undermine democracy and are more typical of authoritarian regimes than of the country that until recently presented itself as the beacon of the free world.

There is no shortage of authoritative voices pointing out that behind these policies lies a weakening of the administration itself as a machinery for decision-making and governance, sidelined by an executive branch that places greater trust in its personal abilities than in the professional structure behind it. Among European diplomats there is

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<sup>5</sup> Issue No. 48 (February 2026) of the journal \*Tribuna Norteamericana\* (Franklin Institute – University of Alcalá de Henares) is particularly interesting. In it, Professor Josep M. Colomer and Dr. Sigrid Vázquez Tirado analyze this issue in American politics from their respective perspectives.

a shared perception of a lack of interlocutors, of silence in the usual channels, as information and control have become concentrated in Trump himself and a very small group of advisers who surprise even their own apparatus almost daily<sup>6</sup>.

Special attention should be paid to the government's attitude toward culture and science, and toward universities in particular. The cause-and-effect relationship between education, science, and progress that has led the United States to dominate scientific and technological advances for nearly a century is so obvious that it is difficult to believe it is now being questioned. And yet it is.

A particularly shocking example of this is the restrictive measures on the entry of foreign students. Not only has university funding been reduced and institutional independence attacked, but obstacles are also being placed in the way of foreign students, no matter how brilliant they may be<sup>7</sup>. The United States, which has based much of its dominance on the ability of its academic institutions and companies to attract the best minds in the world, now doubts the benefits of this model and voluntarily weakens one of the greatest assets of its society, comparable to its natural resources, geographical position, or demography.

These are measures that strike at the foundation of what was said to be the American model. Needless to say, life in the United States has never truly embodied the American dream, but what we are seeing is the abandonment of distant yet worthy aspirations, a regression that is barely disguised with weak, anachronistic, and shortsighted arguments.

This deterioration of liberal democratic values, the attack on the institutions of the rule of law, and the attempt to control scientific and journalistic activity only undermine the country's prestige abroad. And this drift in domestic policy, beyond the internal damage it causes, also harms its foreign interests in a decisive way.

## Foreign Policy

If the news reaching us from American political life has been bewildering for months, even more bewildering are the steps taken by the Trump administration on the international

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<sup>6</sup> OTERO IGLESIAS, M. (02.02.2026), Washington ha perdido el norte, *Real Instituto Elcano*.

<https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/comentarios/washington-ha-perdido-el-norte/>

<sup>7</sup> KEOHANE, R. y NYE, J. (Jr.) (2025), El fin del largo siglo americano. *Política Exterior*, núm. 227, págs. 84-98.

stage during this second term.

The unilaterally decided and poorly justified military operations, the implicit and explicit contempt for international organizations, and the economic and diplomatic treatment given to what until now were its allies are among the hardest facts to digest. These actions have immediate consequences and also amount to a declaration of intent: no justification beyond self-interest is required in order to act.

The closure of USAID, which despite its many limitations was the world's largest provider of development aid<sup>8</sup>; the withdrawal from efforts to combat climate change; the cancellation of bilateral security treaties that helped maintain delicate balances for decades; and the rejection of international institutions and organizations that do not adapt to its plans all reveal a radical shift in approach, one now oriented toward what is directly and rapidly profitable for the country—although the very concept of profitability is highly debatable. Make America Great Again seems to mean that America should think only of itself.

And this novelty becomes a shock when it becomes clear that no one is exempt from this reasoning, because in this power game there are no longer allies in the traditional sense, unless they are willing to accept conditions that are demanding, shifting, arbitrary, and even capricious<sup>9</sup>.

Through both its rhetoric and its actions, the United States is taking a step back in its international position. This step back does not amount to a retreat behind its borders—far from it—but rather to a renunciation of the theoretical responsibility attached to its status as a superpower. It is behavior consistent with what essayist Giuliano da Empoli<sup>10</sup> identifies as the age of predators, characterized by a return to hard power and coercive policies. Any hint of generosity is abandoned, any unrewarded concession rejected, and commitments and initiatives that do not align exactly with immediate and obvious priorities

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<sup>8</sup> Professor Atul Gawande of the Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health estimated a few months ago that the withdrawal of USAID had already caused hundreds of thousands of deaths and would lead to many more as a direct result of the cessation of its programs. The NGO Intermon Oxfam cites the loss of access to education for 23 million children and to healthcare for some 95 million people, which will result in approximately three million preventable deaths per year.

<sup>9</sup> For example, President Trump's demand that European countries shoulder their share of the responsibility for resolving a conflict—the Iran conflict—in which they had no say at the outset.

<sup>10</sup> DA EMPOLI, G. (2025), *La hora de los depredadores*, editorial Seix Barral.

are discarded.

This includes the loss of interest in its international network of alliances, including the most important one: the transatlantic structure. Its members are accused of not contributing enough and are required to make greater sacrifices, while at the same time discovering that belonging to the Alliance no longer guarantees their territorial security, not even against the principal partner itself.

In this regard, it is important to challenge the narrative, originating on the other side of the Atlantic and echoed in Europe, that justifies this withdrawal by pointing to the chronic imbalance in burden-sharing, according to which one party—the only truly committed one—has been carrying the security of its complacent partners. It must be clarified that U.S. cooperation policy has never been altruistic. From the Marshall Plan to the latest multilateral or bilateral agreement signed by the United States, its assistance has almost always been necessary, useful, and at times indispensable, but never disinterested. It is true that we have lived for decades under NATO's protective umbrella, but it is not true that this resulted from an exercise in American responsibility and solidarity. There has always been compensation, such as Europe's technological and economic dependence in defense matters<sup>11</sup>. This is something Europe should now remedy, not because it owes America anything, but because it needs to.

We are therefore witnessing a reversal in international relations. The symptoms include the return to the harshest form of Realpolitik, the renunciation of multilateralism, the disappearance of diplomacy, the disengagement from global problems such as environmental and humanitarian crises, the traumatic abandonment of alliance policies, and of course a series of unilateral military initiatives behind which it is difficult to discern a coherent strategy. The diagnosis: the death of the liberal international order based on rules.

At the same time, the United States is experiencing internal upheaval that the world is watching closely: extreme political polarization, weakening of the administrative apparatus, distrust toward checks and balances, pressure on institutions—economic,

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<sup>11</sup> Given the current climate of distrust and near-contempt toward NATO on the part of the U.S. president, it is hard not to see his call for an increase in defense spending to 5% of our GDP as a move driven primarily by economic interests.

political, and cultural—that are not aligned with the government, and practices that do not fit what is expected of an established democracy.

Many of these changes, both domestic and external, are rooted in dynamics and inertias that had been building for decades. But even where this is the case, concrete decisions by this administration have accelerated them. In other cases, they have directly caused them.

### **The United States: A Self-Inflicted Wound**

The scenario described necessarily affects the position of the United States in the world. And everything suggests that, far from what the MAGA movement sought and Trump himself proclaims, we are witnessing a clear weakening of its position, a process that has already begun.

Two factors above all may lead to this outcome: the aforementioned destruction of its network of alliances and the near-total loss of its soft power.

Even the most powerful nation cannot always stand alone, and the United States, despite its undeniable military supremacy and, for the moment, economic and technological dominance, does not possess sufficient strength to confront the rest of the world single-handedly, especially with its principal strategic adversaries at the forefront. It benefits from having support, assistance—in short, allies.

Over the decades from the First World War until today, the United States built the largest network of alliances the world has ever known. Whether bilaterally or through tailor-made international structures, it enjoyed a privileged and unparalleled relationship with the vast majority of members of the international community. Or rather, it did. Now, however, the world watches in astonishment—and with satisfaction, in the case of China, Russia, and other emerging regional powers—the rapid reversal of that process, an apparently voluntary renunciation of the advantages those friendships provided.

This is a particularly painful chapter for old Europe. Not only is it losing its status as the principal ally, but it is also becoming the target of American ideological attacks and disparagement. Accused of passivity and opportunism, Europe sees its priorities and principles criticized and is required to assume greater defensive commitments, while simultaneously being threatened with abandonment, as Ukraine has already discovered.

NATO, the most powerful security structure in history, seems to be losing both relevance and utility. It is labeled parasitic, while the lives lost in Iraq and Afghanistan in fulfillment of shared commitments are forgotten.

The reasons are difficult to understand. Apparently, Donald Trump believes he needs no one, convinced that his strength frees him from seeking agreements, much less favors, because he can simply demand and compel. To quote—who else?—Machiavelli, for the Prince it is preferable to be feared<sup>12</sup> than loved, but far better to base one's rule on both at once. Perhaps neither Trump nor his closest associates understand this. The consequence is the accelerated dismantling of his network of connections, including the greatest defensive organization ever known, which had enabled him to establish a security architecture with unparalleled geographic reach<sup>13</sup> and economic capital. An architecture, let us not forget, designed according to America's own needs.

Instead of this successful model, the choice is to act alone or resort to temporary collaborations limited to a specific purpose, place, and moment. Collaborations that do not even display coherence and that open the door to generalized uncertainty and instability.

Only from a worldview based on direct competition and marked by distrust can this choice be explained. Only a mentality that sees no interaction beyond a zero-sum game can consider it preferable to act alone rather than surrounded by partners, by a multidisciplinary framework that merely added layers of security. A framework that, once dismantled, leaves exposed those it once supported, including the United States itself.

The consequences have not been long in coming: in an unprecedented development, Donald Trump saw his call for assistance amid complications in the Strait of Hormuz ignored by countries that not long ago would never have conceived of such a response. It is likely to be only the first such case, and when it happens again, the United States will once more accuse others of disloyalty, despite the president's claims that he does not care<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Feared, not hated, the play clarifies.

<sup>13</sup> The U.S. armed forces remain the only ones in the world with true global reach; and their network of bases scattered across half the globe—including those located on the national territory of other NATO member states—contributes significantly to this.

<sup>14</sup> Regardless of what one may think of these approaches, it should come as no surprise that this distancing from the U.S. is prompting some Western countries to move closer to Beijing—and not just in a tentative way. After all, for

This is indeed a foreign policy of retreat, understandable in certain underlying respects, but one that does not justify these moves. As so often happens, we may be facing a self-fulfilling prophecy: the American executive, without being forced to do so, is relinquishing part of its strengths and thereby accelerating its own decline.

But through this behavior, the United States loses more than allies and capabilities: it loses legitimacy. Legitimacy in the eyes of its supposed partners and of the rest of the world, many of whom already had little reason to trust American power and now have none at all.

Which brings us to the pressing issue of the loss of soft power.

### **But... Does Soft Power Matter?**

Joseph Nye, who died less than a year ago, former Deputy Secretary of Defense under Clinton and one of the most influential recent thinkers in geopolitics, developed the concept of soft power, defined as the sum of all the non-coercive tools available to a country in order to influence others. Unlike hard power—essentially represented by military force and economic and technological dominance, and aimed at compelling others—soft power seeks to convince, persuade, and attract, so that others want to do what benefits us.

In recent months the concept has almost become a cliché, and yet it is not always properly understood. It is labeled naïve and unrealistic, unsuitable for these times, and tossed into the drawer of all those ideas that would supposedly work wonderfully if the world were perfect.

I used to tell my students at the Naval Military Academy that there are three levels of power, each more subtle than the last. Using the analogy of a game, I explained that the most obvious level consists in being the best player: you are the one who plays best and therefore win more often. The next level is reached when one is in a position to establish the rules of the game and thereby ensure that they favor us, rewarding our strengths and penalizing those of others. Finally, there is a third level of power: making others want to play our game and convincing them that winning it is the objective. In other words, true

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loyalty to work, it must be mutual.

power ultimately consists in defining success.

Applied to geopolitics, the United States has spent a century being the best player and has also established the rules of the global game, precisely through the military, economic-financial, and diplomatic structure it built. But beyond that, it defined success itself; it established what it means to be a great country. And not only because of basic characteristics such as liberal democracy, the rule of law, the free market, and material progress, but because of all the qualities that made others want to imitate it.

The ideological debates over the Western and Socialist blocs lasted only until one looked to see on which side of the wall the barbed wire stood. Against that, it was very difficult to argue. Likewise, the comparison between the United States and its rivals—first the USSR, now China—has for decades been unbalanced by one decisive fact: nobody in the world wanted to be Soviet or Chinese, but many wanted to be American. Did that matter? Of course it did. Because beneath economic statistics and material achievements there was a solidity that provided resilience, guaranteed continuity, and made one model sustainable and not the other. By contrast, a situation based on rejection, lacking conviction, identification, and voluntary adherence, replaces that stable balance built from below with an unstable one hanging from above<sup>15</sup>.

That capacity for attraction is soft power. And that is what the United States has been rapidly losing since Trump took office<sup>16</sup>. The American dream, the first democracy, its supposed moral standing, its role in the Second World War—placed in the popular imagination far above the Soviet role, unfairly so given the respective achievements and sacrifices—its visible standard of living, and of course its art, literature, fashion, rock and roll, and Hollywood all created a uniquely desirable image. It mattered little whether it corresponded to reality; what mattered was that people believed in it. And that attractiveness constituted its soft power, which translated into concrete and practical advantages and now, for the first time, seems to be fading. If we have lived through the American century, the reason is not only economic and military dominance, but also the ability to use its potential to dominate the world culturally. Because although the United

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<sup>15</sup> It is this lack of support that makes any threat to an authoritarian regime an existential one. This is not the case in a well-established democracy, where it is society as a whole that sustains the system and ensures its continuity.

<sup>16</sup> For further discussion of this idea, see MANFREDI, J.L. (2025), "Soft Power After the Trump Presidency of 2024," TRIBUNA NORTEAMERICANA, no. 48, pp. 16–21.

States has always had detractors, the balance was clearly in its favor and reinforced its leadership. Now, however, studies measuring approval and sympathy produce negative conclusions for the first time. Even China is beginning to appear as a less ominous alternative. America is less liked than ever, even among those who have always admired it.

The president's style, the image projected by his domestic policy, and his decisions on the international stage have radically transformed in record time the image of the United States in the world. And that is a weakness as real as low growth rates or an obsolete army, with equally tangible effects.

A country cannot rely solely on soft power; it also needs hard power capable of imposing itself. But "only the intelligent combination of both produces legitimate stability"<sup>17</sup>. And only someone who fails to understand this would squander such an asset.

### **Is This the End of the Liberal International Order?**

The accumulation of the changes described, both internal and external, has led many to speak of a systemic crisis, of the end of international law and multilateralism, and with them the disappearance of the liberal international order.

Is this really the case? Are we witnessing the end of an era and entering a new stage governed by different principles? And if so, how much does it matter?

Perhaps the first and most pertinent question is whether an international legality, a rules-based order, ever truly existed, or whether what we have always known is simply the imposition of the will of the strongest, with the only difference now being that the pretense has been abandoned.

Many authors at least qualify the original assumption: while the West held power, it made too many mistakes, cared too little, and never overcame the double standards characteristic of international relations<sup>18</sup>; the structures that were created were designed

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<sup>17</sup> BALLEÑILLA, M. (2026), Remarks at the book launch for \*Geopolitics of Spanish\* at the RAE. Along the same lines, the Clinton and Obama administrations spoke of "smart power," which would be precisely the result of that combination.

<sup>18</sup> RIZZI, A. (2025), *La era de la revancha*, editorial Anagrama.

by and for too small a group of countries<sup>19</sup>; peace was squandered after the Cold War by failing to seize the opportunity to build a better order equipped with globally supported institutions and mechanisms<sup>20</sup>. Faced with this, it is reasonable to ask what portion of the planet will truly miss this dying liberal order, which was not always so liberal—or not for everyone. If the rules of international law were invoked only when they benefited the powerful, and multilateralism was used selectively, is there really anything to mourn? Anything to miss?

Yes, there is.

In politics, in norms and morality, the first step toward making something real is to establish it as an objective. The first step toward changing practices within a society<sup>21</sup> is believing that change is necessary and then working toward its implementation. Convictions gradually shape behavior. That is why it is preferable to have good principles than to have none at all. Even if they are not always respected, even if they are manipulated and used opportunistically, it is still better. Renouncing them in the name of a supposed realism merely erases all limits and opens the door to abuse. Which is exactly what happens when this rules-based order is discarded, when the value of international law is denied. In yet another self-fulfilling prophecy, rejecting it directly destroys it. And that represents a regression in our evolution toward a more orderly and just world.

The same can be said of multilateralism, which is simply the logical instrument of that body of law intended to tame international relations: nothing forces its abandonment except the will to abandon it.

The world has never ceased to witness examples of injustice. There is no golden age whose disappearance we should lament. But even so, despite the long road still ahead, the path of the internationalization of law, of multilateral decisions and actions, despite all its shadows, was the correct one. Abandoning it is nothing more than an exercise in cynicism. It means renouncing progress. It is true that norms and mechanisms adapted themselves to the power of the actors involved; but once again, it is always preferable to

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<sup>19</sup> BARBÉ, E. (2025), *op. cit.*

<sup>20</sup> Judt, T., cited in BARBÉ, E., *op. cit.*

<sup>21</sup> An egalitarian society. In a dictatorship, nothing works that way. But the international community is supposed to be made up of equals—or nearly so.

have a fair system that can be manipulated than to have no system at all. It is always preferable that those who act wrongly feel compelled to disguise their behavior. The world will miss Western hypocrisy<sup>22</sup>.

And the conscious and voluntary abandonment of these principles by the world's leading power has catastrophic effects. The United States is not only declaring itself free to act as it pleases, without needing pretexts, but by doing so it grants everyone else *carte blanche* to behave the same way.

The significance of this change should not be measured against an ideal situation that we know never existed. Its gravity lies in the renunciation of the very intention itself, and with it any aspiration toward legitimacy. It is a return to the law of the strongest: it should not be necessary to explain why this is a worse situation.

### **What Now?**

International politics, like every other sphere in which History unfolds, depends on a great number and variety of factors. Some develop slowly but inexorably; others, by contrast, are more circumstantial and may depend on isolated stimuli.

We are living through a turbulent moment in which changes follow one another rapidly and the sense of crisis is widespread. Undoubtedly, many of the transformations we are witnessing are the product of dynamics whose origins go back decades: shifts in the relative weight of countries, the global financial crisis of twenty years ago, the darker side of globalization, the erosion of the liberal ideal, and the crisis of confidence in democracy, among others. But other decisions, not forced by circumstances, are being made in real time. Many of the dilemmas facing the international community were probably inevitable. And so were their consequences. But we are also witnessing the implementation of policies that are accelerating these processes or directly causing them.

There is a scenario with highly recognizable characteristics, a backdrop that conditions the play being performed, but the actors still possess the capacity to shape their roles one way or another. The historical moment we inhabit limits our options and makes certain moves unviable. But not all of them. There is always room for choice, and that choice determines how problems will be addressed. The Trump administration, according

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<sup>22</sup> SPEKTOR, M. (29.01.26), The World will come to miss Western hypocrisy. FOREIGN AFFAIRS.

to its principles and worldview, has opted for certain responses and not others among all those available. Responses that, under another government, one may assume would have been different<sup>23</sup>.

It is true that the world is undergoing an accelerated process of change and that the United States was destined to measure its strength against new rivals, and that such competition would make it difficult to preserve mechanisms and rules that reflected outdated balances of power. But this does not justify almost any of the lines of action pursued by the current administration, which, far from helping the country withstand newly emerging threats, are precipitating its decline and turning a real but limited crisis into an existential one.

Trump's United States is behaving like someone in a fire who, as the smoke grows thicker and more threatening, decides to remove his breathing apparatus and push others aside in order to run faster: he may appreciate it for the first few steps, but he will not get far.

On the one hand, its policies are attacking the very foundations of American society and weakening it both internally and externally. In what appears to be a reaction driven by fear, the United States is turning against the very elements that made it strong, retreating in a way that could prove suicidal. On the other hand, and closely connected to the previous point, these policies are accelerating the degradation of the international order, endangering the system as a whole and pushing worthy objectives so far away that they begin to seem like science fiction.

Faced with this, another way of acting, different approaches, and different goals would be possible. Domestically, the United States should once again cultivate the qualities that made it great, the foundations of its superiority. And that begins at the base, which is nothing other than a genuine democracy supported by a convinced citizenry that believes in the system and thereby strengthens it. From there, rather than despising it, the country should understand that soft power has always been a major advantage, the arena in which its rivals could never truly compete: America as the mecca of science, music, cinema, and business; the land of opportunity; the model to follow or envy. It is irrelevant

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<sup>23</sup> As Andrea Rizzi notes in the aforementioned work, Alexandr Dugin himself—one of the most influential theorists in Putin's Russia—celebrated Donald Trump's election victory in the following terms: "We have won. This is decisive. The world will never be the same again. The globalists have lost their battle." (RIZZI, A. (2025), op. cit.)

how much reality failed to correspond to that image: what mattered was the picture the world saw. And now that picture is losing color, losing attractiveness, and even becoming gloomy.

Externally, the alternative is the same: the United States should strengthen its alliances, not drive its allies away; and it should insist on playing its own game. It had convinced the world what game should be played, had established the rules, and was the best at playing it. The fact of facing increasingly skilled rivals cannot lead the team captain to abandon the field; among other reasons because everyone else will remain there, only now playing according to the rules set by new leaders.

It would not be realistic to pretend that the structures that have shaped international relations over the past century can remain unchanged. The United States would do well to show itself open to revising them, initiating a process aimed at correcting the mistakes of the past and behaving like a leader equal to the circumstances. And not out of altruism, but out of self-interest. Clearly, this is not the case.

International law and multilateralism, as approaches to international relations and their conflicts, represent the only path toward progress. Their weaknesses should not lead the international community to turn its back on them, but rather to strengthen them; just as a weak, superficial, and imperfect democracy should not tempt us to renounce democracy itself, but instead inspire us to improve it.

The world will never again be what it once was. Not even a complete reversal in American policy would return us to the starting point. Too many things have already been broken. But the lost course can still be recovered. The purpose of politics is to decide where one wishes to go and then attempt to get there.

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