The International Order in Trump's Second Term: The Legitimacy of Power, or a Leadership Vacuum?

(Translated)

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In a year that has witnessed the return of U.S. President Donald Trump to power, the international order is undergoing a profound transformation from a rules- and institutions-based order to a landscape governed by power deals and temporary alliances.

The current Trump administration is seeking to reduce the role of the United Nations and to redefine "international legitimacy" through the logic of power. This is being pursued by cutting funding, withdrawing from UN organizations, and establishing alternative frameworks such as a "Board of Peace" chaired by Trump himself.

At the same time, these shifts are facing growing resistance and concern among the United States' traditional allies in Europe and Canada. An unprecedented speech by the Prime Minister of Canada has openly criticized Washington's approach and declared the end of the old global order.

The Western alliance now stands at a crossroads, amid successive crises of confidence from transatlantic tensions to the Greenland crisis, which has become a sharp test of the cohesion of the Western camp.

This article examines the mechanisms of the current transformation: from the decline of the value of international law in the face of the hegemony of power to the rise of deal-making diplomacy and the use of tariffs and sanctions even against allies.

The prevailing thesis underlying this analysis is that Washington is improvising uncalculated steps within a short-term vision, rather than operating with a coherent strategic plan to build an alternative global order. This improvisation, combined with the erosion of American legitimacy both domestically and internationally, is accelerating the generation of a vacuum in global leadership, that other powers, such as China and Russia, may seek to partially fill.

The most dangerous potential outcomes of this trajectory are twofold. Firstly, a near-complete collapse of traditional Western alliances, and the emergence of lasting rifts across the Atlantic, leaving Europe and Canada facing difficult choices between submission, or building alternative defense and economic frameworks. Secondly, the emergence of a highly polarized global order based on competing spheres of influence and gaps in international legitimacy, increasing the risks of regional conflicts and military escalation, in the absence of a comprehensive and effective international framework, especially considering that the United Nations itself has never truly functioned as a comprehensive or effective framework.

In both cases, the cost of "hegemony of power" will be extremely high for global stability and perhaps for the United States itself, unless Washington reconsiders its approach, or other actors succeed in generating conditions that are more balanced and sustainable.

Introduction: From a Rules-Based Order to a Deal-Based Order?

Is the world witnessing the end of the "rules-based order" and the arrival of an era of the "legitimacy of power" without disguise? Since the return of Donald Trump to the White House in early 2025, a series of decisions and statements have suggested a fundamental re-engineering of the concept of international legitimacy, as the world has known, since the Second World War.

Washington has used its financial and political influence to pressure international organizations by reducing its contributions to the United Nations budget, withdrawing from the World Health Organization and other international bodies, and obstructing the work of UN institutions through funding gaps and vacant positions.

At the same time, the U.S. administration has signaled the creation of parallel frameworks outside the umbrella of the United Nations. Among the most notable is the “Board of Peace,” which was initially promoted as a mechanism to achieve stability after the 2023 Gaza war. However, it quickly took on a different trajectory, presenting itself as an alternative to the UN Security Council, one led solely by Washington.

The American president did not conceal his intentions. On January 20, 2026, he openly declared: “The U.N. just hasn't been very helpful.” “Might,” Trump said when asked by a reporter if he wanted the “Board of Peace to replace the U.N.” Experts note that Trump aims to transform this board into an alternative to the UN Security Council, but with a unilateral American veto.

Yet the structure of the body established by Trump has drawn widespread criticism. The newspaper *The Guardian* described it as “a Trump-dominated pay-to-play club,” serving his personal ambitions, more than the cause of peace. Several major European countries declined to join despite receiving invitations. The United Kingdom did not respond, its leadership describing the potential participation of Russia as a cause for concern. France, Norway, Sweden, and others also rejected the idea.

Paris explicitly expressed fears that Trump’s board could be an attempt to sideline the United Nations and undermine its legitimacy. Trump’s response was sharp, threatening to impose a 200% tariff on French wine and champagne imports as punishment for Paris’s stance.

This situation raises fundamental questions about the future of international legitimacy: Are we witnessing a deliberate reshaping of the rules of the international game according to the sway of major powers, away from multilateralism and institutions? Or are these merely improvised steps that lack a coherent vision, and may ultimately lead to a leadership vacuum and instability that rival powers could exploit?

The question is no longer theoretical. Its contours are already visible in the shifting behavior of America’s traditional allies, and in the growing eagerness of its rivals to fill any space left by Washington’s retreat.

To understand the dimensions of the transition from one system to another, the following sections address nine key aspects: beginning with the future of the United Nations, moving through the crisis of Western alliances, and culminating in the debate over whether this represents a decline, or a strategic repositioning of American power.

A comparison will be made between the competing arguments surrounding each issue between those who see what is happening as a “realist” shift toward a new power-based order, and those who fear it is an improvised dismantling of the old order, without a clear alternative. The analysis will then weigh the most likely scenario, based on available evidence.

The aim is to provide a strategic reading of the possible trajectories over the next few years, while identifying early indicators for each path, in order to help decision-makers anticipate developments and adapt accordingly.

The United Nations and the Redefinition of International Legitimacy

Since the beginning of his current term, Donald Trump has adopted a confrontational approach toward the United Nations, raising the slogan of “reforming the international order” but employing tools of reduction and displacement. In practice, Washington has translated this approach into concrete steps: it reduced its mandatory contributions to the United

Nations budget to the minimum, and failed to pay arrears exceeding $1.5 billion, worsening the organization's financial deficit.

The United States has also withdrawn from key UN bodies, citing bias or ineffectiveness. On his first day in office, Trump issued an executive order withdrawing the United States from the World Health Organization and freezing its funding entirely. This was followed by the termination of U.S. participation in the UN Human Rights Council, from which it had also withdrawn in 2018, claiming that the body was biased against America and the Jewish entity. In addition, Washington permanently cut funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), which is the largest provider of health and education services in Gaza.

In another symbolic move, the administration announced its withdrawal once again from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), accusing it of promoting "woke" and "divisive" values that do not align with American policies.

On the level of international agreements, Washington also withdrew again from the Paris Climate Agreement at the beginning of 2025, sending a clear signal that previous collective commitments had become little more than words on paper.

What are the Limits of what Washington can Actually Implement within Legal and Political Constraints?

Legally speaking, the United States cannot dissolve the United Nations, or formally end its role. However, it possesses considerable influence that allows it to obstruct the organization in practice. By reducing funding and occupying a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, Washington can effectively paralyze the organization's ability to implement resolutions, or launch new peacekeeping operations.

Indeed, we have already witnessed deliberate obstruction of certain mechanisms: delays in appointing UN officials due to Washington's objections, frequent use of the veto in Middle Eastern affairs, and pressure for administrative "reforms" that would reduce the powers of the UN Secretariat under the banner of efficiency.

At the same time, political constraints limit how far the U.S. administration can go. Domestically, Congress albeit cautiously has expressed concern about a complete American withdrawal from the UN system, warning that such a move could create greater opportunities for China and Russia to expand their influence in international forums.

Externally, negotiation diplomacy still plays a role. Many of Trump's escalatory positions have been used as leverage to extract concessions, and were later softened or partially reversed in the final stages of negotiations. For example, in 2025 Washington threatened to fundamentally restructure the World Trade Organization, or withdraw from it unless its dispute settlement system was changed. Ultimately, however, it settled for temporarily paralyzing the body's operations, and pushing other states to negotiate reforms.

In this sense, some of the rhetoric about "ending the role" of international institutions serves as a negotiating tactic to secure advantages, rather than a literal plan for immediate implementation.

Nevertheless, the broader trend cannot be denied: an unprecedented erosion in the legitimacy of international law and multilateral institutions, when the historically dominant power withdraws its protection from them.

Writing for "The Atlantic," John Yoo, who served as a deputy assistant attorney general in the Office of Legal Counsel in the George W. Bush administration stated in his essay "International Law Is Holding Democracies Back," that "The United States should use this moment to argue for a different approach to the rules of war." This statement summarizes the logic of the current administration: a transition from a system of rules and institutions to one based on deals and balances of power.

Accordingly, an important question arises: can the world maintain a minimum level of "agreed legitimacy" if the United States withdraws from this role? Or are we about to witness a full return to the legitimacy of fait accompli, where "the strong impose and the weak submit"?

The answers lie partly in the behavior of other international actors, particularly America's traditional allies.

Western Alliances at Stake: Allies between Doubt and Strategic Repositioning

The first year of Trump's second term has been marked by growing fractures in the wall of transatlantic trust. As Washington seeks to redefine its relations with allies through the logic of purely transactional dealings, with "security in exchange for money" and "alliance in exchange for absolute loyalty", European countries and Canada have found themselves facing an existential dilemma: either adapt to Washington's new approach and endure the accompanying pressure and humiliation, or attempt to build strategic autonomy that would prevent them from becoming "pawns on the American chessboard."

In this context, two pivotal developments have emerged as mirrors reflecting the current state of the Western alliance: the speech of Canada's Prime Minister at Davos 2026, and the Greenland crisis between Washington and its allies.

A Mirror of the Allies: The Canadian Davos Speech

In a striking diplomatic precedent, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney stood on the stage of the World Economic Forum in Davos, on 21 January 2026, and delivered sharp both implicit and explicit criticisms of American conduct. Carney stated clearly "Today, I'll talk about the rupture in the world order, the end of a nice story and the beginning of a brutal reality where geopolitics among the major powers is not subject to any constraints." He called on what he described as "middle powers," which are countries of medium influence such as Canada, the Scandinavian states, and perhaps some Asian nations, to unite in order to protect themselves from the overreach of major powers. In Carney's words, "the middle powers must act together, because if we're not at the table, we're on the menu." This bold statement was met with prolonged applause and a standing ovation, something rare at the Davos forum, reflecting a growing appetite among many participants for alternative leadership or at least for allied voices capable of balancing the American one.

Carney's position was not merely theoretical. He had already begun taking steps to reduce Canada's economic dependence on the United States by pursuing trade agreements with China and partnerships with Middle Eastern countries during his tour. He indicated that "as a result, many countries are drawing the same conclusions — that they must develop greater strategic autonomy: in energy, food, critical minerals, in finance and supply chains," in anticipation of fluctuations in American policy.

This public stance provoked an angry reaction from Donald Trump. The U.S. president quickly responded in his own speech at Davos, by saying that "Canada lives because of the United States. Remember that, Mark, the next time you make your statements," addressing Carney directly in public. Trump went even further in provoking his northern ally: the day before the speech, he posted an AI-generated image showing Canada and Greenland wrapped in the American flag; an astonishing hint at the idea of "annexing" Canadian territory.

Such unprecedented behavior from an American president toward a neighboring ally shook Canadian society. Opinion polls showed rising levels of anxiety and resentment: the percentage of Canadians who view the United States as a reliable partner declined, and many began boycotting certain American goods and reducing travel to the United States in response to the threatening rhetoric.

Nevertheless, Ottawa maintained a thin diplomatic thread with Washington. Despite his firm tone, Carney later softened some measures such as withdrawing a proposed digital services tax that had angered Washington and issuing an apology for a Canadian advertisement perceived as insulting to Trump in order to resume trade negotiations.

This illustrates the limits of allied maneuvering. They find themselves caught between two pressures: either full submission to the logic of American power which Carney warned “will not buy them security but will make them vulnerable to exploitation” or the risk of an economic and security confrontation with Washington that few of them are fully prepared to withstand.

Carney’s speech at Davos was not an isolated event; it reflects the growing tendency toward calculated defiance among some allies. On the European side, despite differences in style, many European leaders share Canada’s sense that blind reliance on Washington has become a risk. Carney stated, “A country that cannot feed itself, fuel itself or defend itself has few options. When the rules no longer protect you, you must protect yourself.” As one European diplomat remarked, “This is no longer a minor disagreement with Washington; we are facing a divergence of values and interests. We must secure our regional future with our own hands.”

This stance has been translated into concrete European actions, which we will discuss shortly. However, first, it is important to highlight the straw that may have broken the camel’s back in the Western camp: the Greenland crisis.

Greenland: A Critical Test of Alliance Fractures

The roots of the crisis trace back to 2019, when Donald Trump expressed his desire to purchase Greenland due to its strategic significance and Arctic resources. At the time, Denmark dismissed the idea sarcastically, but what seemed like a “heavy joke” turned into a severe geopolitical crisis within the Western camp in 2025–2026.

Upon his return, Trump reopened the issue with an escalatory tone: he demanded negotiations for the sale or transfer of the island and hinted that there are other ways if a deal could not be reached. By early 2026, he escalated further by announcing progressive tariffs on Denmark and other European countries to pressure them into accepting the deal tariffs starting at 10% and rising to 25% over a few months. He also made statements on Social Truth that implied a condition of full ownership of the island.

Faced with an unprecedented situation a U.S. president pressuring a smaller NATO ally over sovereignty responses emerged along three main tracks:

Diplomatic Track: An American–Danish–Greenlandic working group met in Washington on January 14, 2026, to discuss Arctic security concerns without affecting sovereignty. However, discrepancies in public messaging deepened doubts: Copenhagen spoke of protecting the “integrity of the kingdom,” while Washington presented the group as a forum to discuss America’s acquisition of the island, signaling that the dispute was political and sovereign, not merely technical.

U.S. Domestic Track: Congress acted swiftly to block any potential military adventurism by introducing measures that would prevent funding for military action against a NATO ally, including against Danish or European forces defending Greenland. This track highlights divisions within the U.S. elite, with some viewing Trump’s approach as a gamble that could cause long-term damage to America’s reputation and alliances.

European–Atlantic Deterrence Track: Denmark reinforced its military presence on the island and announced exercises, while European countries sent symbolic units to Greenland as a form of proactive deterrence. Though limited in scale, their presence increases the cost of any American action and transforms the crisis from pressure on Denmark into a potential political and symbolic confrontation with NATO. The Atlantic Council noted that the notion of cost-free occupation has become far more difficult. Even as Europeans avoided overtly provocative rhetoric, framing their actions simply as enhancing Arctic security, the very suggestion of deterrence toward Washington reflects an unprecedented drop in trust levels.

This crisis placed the Western alliance under a final test: even the mere prospect of a NATO confrontation to defend the territory of a member state is an extremely serious indicator. Stephen Wertheim, Deputy Director of Research and Policy at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, observed that the attempt to annex Greenland threatens not only the transatlantic link but could also create rifts within Europe itself. Countries more reliant on American protection may be tempted to appease Trump through concessions, while others view the issue as a sovereign red line signaling a potential European divide between “alignment with Washington at any cost” and “European sovereignty regardless of the price.”

Another cost faced by Europeans has been the accumulation of insults and disputes: from humiliating trade pressures to the public embarrassment of Volodymyr Zelensky at the White House to the reduction of security coordination on major issues.

At the same time, Europeans have shown a degree of cohesion and learned lessons: resisting “divide and rule” attempts, fostering clearer British–European rapprochement, and establishing new security agreements. This suggests that, so far, the crisis has united them, more than it has fragmented them.

Yet the warning remains: if the American umbrella continues to recede or turns hostile, underlying European divisions could surface, as John Mearsheimer, American political scientist and international relations scholar, cautions. Accordingly, a pragmatic European approach is taking shape, combining diplomatic time-buying with the construction of autonomous capabilities: increasing defense spending, strengthening military and technological industries, reducing dependence on critical supply chains, and expanding the strategic autonomy agenda, within energy, semiconductors, critical minerals, and payment systems.

Scene Summary: The Western alliance enters 2026 exhausted but not yet broken. Europe is attempting to turn humiliation into a catalyst for rebuilding its capabilities. The critical strategic question remains: can Europe, Canada, and Japan fill the leadership vacuum if the United States continues on this path, or will the technological and military gap no matter how strained the relationship keep them tethered to Washington?

Moscow–Beijing–Ukraine: Confrontation Priorities and the Reordering of Axes

Amid the United States’ preoccupation with reshaping alliances and raising the cost of dependence on it, a central question has emerged: how will the Donald Trump administration deal with the two closely positioned adversaries, Russia and China? Will it keep the confrontation open with both, or will it prioritize one over the other?

Estimates branch into two main perspectives. The first assumes an attempt to disrupt the Russian–Chinese rapprochement by courting Moscow or offering it concessions. The second sees Washington seeking to reduce the burden in Ukraine in order to redirect focus toward China, considered the heavier long-term adversary.

Since the Ukraine file is the theater where the threads of Moscow, Beijing, and Washington intersect, following the course of the war there illustrates the logic behind this reordering of priorities.

Ukraine Between a Quick Settlement and Realistic Positioning

Trump entered the White House in January 2025, promising a rapid end to the war, raising concerns in Kyiv and European capitals. In the first weeks, pressure signals appeared: reductions in direct military support and an unpublicized push toward a preliminary ceasefire.

Tensions peaked during a White House meeting on February 28, 2025, with Volodymyr Zelensky, where, according to leaks, a peace formula was presented that would have required Ukraine to cede roughly 20% of its territory in exchange for a halt to fighting. Kyiv and Europe read this as a “surrender peace,” especially as talk of a possible deal grew following the Trump–Vladimir Putin summit in Anchorage, in August 2025.

However, the attempt at a “quick settlement” faltered for several decisive reasons:

Moscow’s Hardline Stance: Putin insisted on maximal demands, the demilitarization of Ukraine, regime change, recognition of annexed territories, lifting of sanctions, making any deal difficult to market even within the Trump administration.

Pressure from Allies and Ukrainians: Europe intensified efforts to prevent Washington from abandoning Kyiv. Discussions were proposed for alternative NATO security guarantees in exchange for any ceasefire, warning that a peace without justice would sow a larger future conflict.

U.S. Domestic Calculations: The American political mood even within the broader Republican base was not prepared to accept a complete swing in favor of Russia, which constrained the White House’s maneuvering space.

From Moscow’s Disappointment to a “Balanced Middle”:

By late 2025, Trump faced a dilemma: no rapid peace had materialized, nor was ignoring the war an option. More critically, Moscow had not distanced itself from Beijing; rather, the rapprochement was reinforced through successive summits with Xi Jinping, reaffirming a partnership without limits. This undermined the first hypothesis courting Moscow with a Ukraine gift and forced a shift in tone.

Signs of repositioning emerged: tougher rhetoric toward Russia in September 2025, increased intelligence support, and leaks indicating consideration of providing Kyiv with qualitative capabilities, albeit more cautiously than expected at the start of the term. This was less out of support for Ukraine than a desire to avoid the image of gratuitous American retreat and to prevent pushing Russia deeper into China’s embrace.

By early 2026, U.S. policy had settled on a middle-ground approach: support continues but is capped; Kyiv receives ammunition and air defense at a slower pace, with aid tied to strict conditions, while NATO membership is effectively excluded from discussions. The objective is to prevent Ukraine’s collapse without slipping into escalation that could expand the war.

Overriding Priority: Containing the Moscow–Beijing Axis without Major Concessions

The operational takeaway appears as follows: Washington seeks to contain the Russian–Chinese rapprochement, without offering Russia any significant strategic concessions. This requires a delicate balance — providing enough support to prevent a decisive Russian victory and keep Kyiv standing, while exercising calculated restraint from actions that could radically shift the war’s balance, strike inside Russia, or expand the conflict.

The implicit message to Moscow: we are not trying to overthrow you, but you will not get everything by force. Meanwhile, China benefits tactically from prolonging the crisis, as it drains Western resources and diverts attention, while the Russian–Chinese alignment simultaneously serves as a dual leverage point against Washington.

Consequently, U.S. strategy tends to keep the Russian front quiet and frozen, whenever possible, allowing focus on China as the long-term priority. In practical terms, this shifts a larger portion of the Ukraine burden onto Europe: increased European armament and funding, complemented by American support in dribs and drabs sufficient to prevent collapse, without taking full leadership of the issue.

Ukraine Scenarios Over the Next Two Years and Early Indicators:

Settlement Cementing Russian Gains: A deal that formalizes Russian control over large areas, in exchange for a ceasefire and multilateral security guarantees for Ukraine, in place of NATO, possibly followed by negotiations on the final status.

Early Indicators:

Intense U.S.–Russia negotiations at the national security level

Strong Western pressure on Kyiv to accept a ceasefire

Signals of partial sanction relief

Impact:

A gain for Moscow and Beijing, reinforcing the narrative of Western retrenchment

A loss for Ukraine and Europe

A dangerous precedent for international law

Low-intensity Conflict (LiC) and Prolonged Attrition: No decisive agreement, but no collapse either: intermittent fighting with continued Western support, preventing a Russian breakthrough, leading to sustained attrition for both sides.

Early Indicators:

Continued aid, without ultimate pressure for concessions

Moscow unwilling to compromise

Tough U.S. rhetoric, without direct confrontation

Impact:

China emerges as the relative winner, by deepening Russian dependence and keeping the West distracted.

All parties bear the costs of prolonged attrition

Shift in Balance and Major Escalation: A sudden development, either a significant Ukrainian success using qualitative capabilities, or a strategic Russian escalation to break the stalemate, potentially involving high-risk options.

Early Indicators:

Large-scale provision of game-changing weaponry

Unusual Russian threats or mobilizations involving high-impact weaponry

Impact:

Least likely, but highest-risk scenario

Could force a decisive U.S. response, and expand the conflict into a broader confrontation.

Concise Summary: Washington aims to reorder its priorities without falling into two traps: a major war in Europe on one hand, and a clear Russian victory strengthening the Moscow–Beijing axis on the other. Consequently, a “cold balancing” policy is favored: a managed conflict, limited support sufficient to prevent collapse, but not to decide the outcome, and a sustained strategic focus on containing China — until a radical change alters the calculations.

Final Expansion or Imperial Retrenchment? Debate on the Future of U.S. Hegemony

The current policies of the Trump administration have sparked intense debate among experts regarding the implications for the United States’ place in imperial history. Are we witnessing a “last power surge,” an excessive display of force before decline suggesting an imperial contraction, akin to past empires, strained by overreach and burdened by excessive coercion? Or is this a rational repositioning of a major power, adjusting its course by reducing burdens and focusing interests, potentially extending its hegemony under new conditions?

Here, we present the two competing arguments, and attempt to outweigh the more plausible scenario, while proposing a clear, real-world test for each hypothesis.

Imperial Decline Thesis: Eroding Legitimacy and Strained Alliances

Proponents of this thesis argue that Trump's foreign policy embodies "bare-bones imperialism," without embellishment, accelerating the global decline of U.S. influence. Stephen Wertheim, a Carnegie historian, contends that Trump has abandoned even the ideological pretexts his predecessors used to justify hegemony — such as democracy and human rights — and now openly acts on motives of "securing oil," or purely material interests.

This tactical gain candor is a strategic loss: the United States has effectively forfeited its moral legitimacy in the eyes of the world. China, for instance, can now present itself as a responsible power in comparison to America, framing its soft power hegemony as more respectful of international law than Washington's actions. Meanwhile, Trump has lowered the standards, so that Moscow and Beijing need only do very little, to appear less bad than the U.S. to many observers.

This erosion of image and legitimacy is a classic feature of imperial decline, when the dominant power loses the voluntary consent of others, and relies almost entirely on coercion.

Another Dimension: Strained Alliances and Alienated Partners

Another critical aspect is the exhaustion of U.S. alliances and the alienation of its partners. Events over the past two years reveal cracks in trust across Washington's global alliances: in Europe, where some officials now describe dealings with the U.S. as a humiliating dependency; in Canada, feeling existentially threatened by its powerful neighbor; and in Asia, where states are perplexed by Trump's overtures to Kim Jong Un followed by sudden neglect.

This situation signals an erosion of the alliance network long considered America's primary force multiplier. At the height of the Cold War, a prominent strategist wrote that America's alliances are its empires, meaning that the U.S. imperial system relied on the voluntary consent of states to accept Washington's protection, rather than direct occupation. If these alliances lose faith in American leadership and are forced to rely on themselves or seek alternative partners, it is a clear sign of decline.

Gradually, this is occurring: Japan and Australia, for instance, are pursuing broader security cooperation with India and the Britain, as alternative alliances, out of concern over U.S. unpredictability. Saudi Arabia and the UAE — traditionally aligned — have opened unprecedented defense and energy deals with China and Russia, sensing that the U.S. umbrella is no longer guaranteed. All this suggests that the "Pax Americana" that prevailed after 1945 is fragmenting, and we may face a period of leadership vacuum, and disorder before a new order emerges.

The Cost of Leadership and Domestic Strain

Another critical factor is the domestic toll of leadership. Some analysts argue that Trump is draining his country's strength rather than reinforcing it. Despite slogans like "America First," the reality under his administration is that neither the fiscal deficit nor national debt has decreased; on the contrary, public debt surged to historic levels. By the end of 2024, federal debt is estimated to exceed $36 trillion, about 140% of GDP, with a $1.8 trillion annual deficit figures historically unsustainable.

Trump's push for tax cuts alongside increased spending on security and immigration further exacerbates the deficit. While the U.S. technically can print dollars to finance itself, unchecked issuance, without structural reforms, risks undermining investor confidence and weakening the dollar globally over the long term.

Domestic polarization has also intensified: political crises, such as election skepticism, cultural and racial divides erode America's soft power and its model's credibility, while limiting policymakers' ability to focus on foreign challenges. Historically, empires often collapsed from within when financial and social crises intensified. Observers fear that the

U.S. may have entered a “Late Republic” phase, drawing a parallel to Rome, appearing militarily strong externally, while its institutions domestically erode under compounded conflicts.

In Brief: The Logic of Imperial Decline

The logic of decline holds that the current American puff-up, a display of muscle and imposition of dictates, is a sign of weakness, not strength. It is an attempt to extract gains through coercion, after the ability to achieve them through persuasion and consensus has diminished.

As a result, this accelerates the drift of countries away from U.S. leadership, generating a leadership vacuum that other powers or chaos are likely to fill. Proponents of this view predict that if the current approach continues, within a decade, we may witness the emergence of a new multipolar world order, with regional balances led by China in Asia, Russia regionally, and potentially European and other blocs, while the U.S. retracts toward its immediate neighborhood.

As a poignant expression, “The new Rome burns from within, losing the loyalty of its provinces.”

Thesis of Strategic Repositioning: Reducing Burdens and New Conditions for Hegemony

In contrast, another school of thought argues that what Trump is doing, despite its apparent chaos, may represent a long-overdue strategic correction of America’s international role. This thesis holds that the U.S. has shouldered the burden of the global system for decades, such as defending allies, funding institutions, securing maritime routes. This is at the expense of its economy and citizens’ welfare, and it is time to distribute costs more fairly.

From this perspective, Trump’s approach is rough and undiplomatic, but it has achieved results others could not. A prime example is the significant increase in NATO defense contributions. Europe had stalled for decades on raising military spending, and Trump explicitly threatened withdrawal from NATO unless they contributed more. The outcome: at the 2025 summit, allies committed to raise spending to 5% of GDP, a historic achievement acknowledged by analysts, accomplished precisely because of Trump’s unconventional style.

Similarly, in trade, Trump confronted China with strict tariffs, signaling to Asian partners that America was serious about curbing harmful Chinese practices. In Latin America, Trump’s 2025 military operation in Venezuela to remove the Maduro regime, despite contradicting some of his earlier rhetoric, was seen by some strategists as reaffirming the Monroe principle and U.S. control in the Western Hemisphere.

Proponents refer to the Donroe Doctrine, alternatively styled as the Trump Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, emphasizing concentration of U.S. power regionally, pushing out foreign influence there, while withdrawing selectively from distant, low-return commitments.

Strategic Repositioning, Continued: Alliances, Burden-Sharing, and Regional Stability

Proponents of this approach argue that withdrawal from certain fronts is not retreat but redistribution. For instance, reducing focus on the Middle East, practically Syria and Afghanistan, and abandoning “nation-building” allowed resources to be redirected toward rebuilding American strength, or focusing on major power competition. Similarly, “taming” allies though painful has led to more mature partnerships, where each party pays its share. In other words, the Trump administration is redefining the alliance contract. Instead of providing security for free, the U.S. now expects a reciprocal “service for compensation” relationship.

While this approach may seem cold, it is arguably the only sustainable option domestically, as the American public no longer tolerates the role of a “global policeman” without substantial returns. If wealthy allies, such as Germany or Japan, bear a greater share of their defense, the burden on the U.S. economy is reduced, yet alliances remain intact in new forms: more flexible frameworks and higher financial contributions from partners.

From a historical perspective, some liken Trump to Caesar Augustus in late-stage Rome, who recognized the need to consolidate and organize internally, rather than pursue reckless imperial overreach. Time, they argue, is not on America's side under the old model, given China's rise and its long-term economic pressure. Pragmatism, therefore, requires repositioning: focus on the primary threat, China, even if this entails suboptimal settlements elsewhere, such as Ukraine, while securing strategic depth, particularly in the Western Hemisphere, reflected in Trump's firm stance against any Chinese or Russian presence there.

This approach effectively creates a regional spheres of influence system. America leads the Americas, Russia controls nearby Eurasia, China dominates East Asia, and Europe manages itself as a close U.S. partner. While rough and transactional, this arrangement may achieve a type of stability, as each power focuses on maintaining order within its sphere, rather than engaging in global confrontation everywhere.

Scholars cite Carl Schmitt, the legal philosopher, who argued that a natural order emerges when each major power governs its sphere and balances other powers. In practice, Trump appears to fragment the global order into regional blocs, potentially a more sustainable and stable order, than attempting to enforce globalization and universal values across all regions.

Trump's Behavior Reflects Pragmatic Realism

It is true that Trump does not explain this reasoning theoretically, but his behavior reflects it. For example, his publicly stated admiration for former U.S. President James Polk, who waged war with Mexico and massively expanded U.S. territory in the 19th century, and even hanging Polk's portrait in the Oval Office, serves as a symbolic signal. It shows that Trump sees himself as expanding influence in the backyard, Latin America, rather than building a perfect global order.

Conversely, he appears uninterested in distant wars or "ideal lessons" – as seen in his cold stance toward Taiwan. In other words, he applies a 100% realist approach: focus on areas where the U.S. can exercise dominance, the Western Hemisphere, avoid exhaustion in zones of others' power, Eastern Europe and Taiwan, and negotiate where necessary, with possible secret deals with North Korea and Iran.

This Vision: Short-Term Losses for Long-Term U.S. Advantage

This perspective holds that current policies – despite short-term reputational losses – could prolong America's supremacy. By freeing the U.S. from carrying the world on its shoulders, it becomes lighter and more flexible. More importantly, it forces adversaries to recognize clear American red lines. For example, when Trump targeted Chinese influence in the Americas, banning Chinese companies from projects there and threatening Cuba and Venezuela with force, he made it clear to Beijing, "This is my backyard; do not cross." Conversely, he effectively avoided direct confrontation with China in the South China Sea, with much noise but no decisive action, signaling that "your backyard is acknowledged." This implicit trade-off, if sustained, could reduce the likelihood of a global clash, by establishing mutual recognition of spheres of influence, even without formal agreements.

In short, the logic of repositioning indicates that Trump is not isolationist in the traditional sense – he does not withdraw entirely from the world – but rather redefines vital interests. He aims for a structurally strong America, economically strong and self-reliant, even if it loses some rhetorical cosmetic commitments to universal values. This, according to proponents, makes the U.S. better prepared for long-term competition.

After all, America remains the largest military power and will remain present in Eurasia, through Asian alliances and NATO, albeit under new conditions. With technological and financial advantages, the dollar hegemony in particular, intact, this period could serve as a strategic pause and reorganization, enabling resilience against China's rise for years to come. They point out that, despite all the noise, there has been no actual withdrawal from vital regions: U.S. forces have not left Europe or East Asia and have even increased in some cases, deploying more bombers in Guam, repositioning in Poland, amongst other moves. Consequently, the deep state in Washington may be balancing Trump, preserving the foundations of traditional U.S. dominance, while adapting to some of his personal strategies.

Assessment and Reality Test

It is difficult to definitively say which thesis is more accurate today; perhaps both contain elements of truth. However, looking at the complete picture, the balance of probability leans toward Trump's current approach being more a short-term improvisation, than a carefully planned grand strategy which, in the end, may harm America's imperial position, more than it helps.

While Trump has achieved tactical gains, such as increased contributions from allies and trade pressure on China, these gains are fragile and reversible. They were obtained through coercion and fear, not by convincing partners to embrace a new, sustainable order. For instance, if Trump were to leave the scene, most of these commitments could evaporate, since allies increased their defense spending out of fear or flattery, not from a deep sense of shared interest. Meanwhile, China is likely to wait for any easing of pressure to resume its expansion.

In short, what has been achieved lacks sustainability, as it is not built on institutional agreements or a shared long-term vision.

Also, we have not yet seen a real reduction in America's foreign burdens: the U.S. military remains deployed in dozens of countries, and its legal defense commitments have not changed. The U.S. is still obligated to defend dozens of nations under formal treaties. Yes, Trump reduced some involvement, within the Ukraine the Middle East, but he kept the forces and infrastructure largely intact, perhaps to retain leverage until he sees what he can gain in return.

This reinforces the idea of improvisation. Trump oscillates between withdrawal and engagement based on the moment or the deal he wants. We have seen contradictions: sudden military intervention in Venezuela, even though he criticized his predecessors for such actions, last-minute retreats from planned strikes in Iran, and a rapid withdrawal from northern Syria followed by redeployment to the east, for oil interests.

These wild swings undermine America's credibility as a statesman, turning it into an impulsive actor. Consequently, they miss the opportunity to craft a long-term plan for a new global order, as Trump's supporters claim.

In light of this, a future test can be proposed for each hypothesis:

1. Decline Test: If the imperial decline thesis is correct; we will witness a pivotal event symbolizing a collapse of influence—such as a sudden, chaotic withdrawal of the U.S. from an alliance or region, similar to Britain's withdrawal from East of Suez in 1971, or a war or economic crisis that weakens it domestically.

For example: if Japan and South Korea were to sign an independent security agreement with China in the future, because they no longer trust the U.S., that would be a major sign of decline. Or if the dollar suddenly collapsed, and lost its position to the yuan or euro due to debt policies, this would strike at the foundations of American power.

2. Repositioning Test: If the thesis of power enhancement is correct, we should witness stability in conflict theaters, so for example the Ukraine war ends on relatively acceptable terms and no conflict erupts over Taiwan, alliances remain intact but under new financial terms, and the U.S. avoids costly interventions.

For example: if by 2028 the U.S. has not been drawn into a major war, NATO remains functional with higher European funding, and China has not invaded Taiwan due to calm American deterrence, then Trump's strategy can be considered successful in preserving power and avoiding exhaustion.

Another success indicator would be relative improvement in U.S. economic indicators, such as lower trade deficit, increased domestic industrial investment from reshored supply chains, showing that the focus on domestic strength has paid off.

So far, early indicators show a worrying mix: alliances have not completely collapsed, deterrence in Greenland, for example, prevented the worst case, yet trust has fallen to unprecedented levels. Adversaries like China and Russia have not achieved outright victories, but their alignment has deepened. The U.S. domestic front has not crumbled, but polarization, inflation, and debt are intensifying. In short, we may be in a turbulent transitional phase, whose outcome will determine whether history will tilt toward the fall of the "New Rome" into chaos, or whether it will find an innovative way to sustain its hegemony in a new form.

Improvisation in the Absence of Vision: Implementation Gaps and Risks of Uncertainty

Despite grandiose slogans, observers note that the Trump administration often takes major steps without a clear plan for the next move, resulting in an implementation gap between decision and outcome. This improvisational pattern generates a persistent state of uncertainty, leaving even the U.S.'s economic strengths unable to fully leverage political decisions to its advantage.

For example, when Trump announced in 2025 comprehensive tariffs on imports from eight European countries as punishment, there was no clear plan for the next day: How would the Europeans respond? What about the impact on American companies? Indeed, market confusion ensued, and many investments were delayed for months, awaiting clarity on policy direction. Trump later rolled back some of those tariffs after partial concessions, but the damage had been done: European companies began diversifying away from the U.S. market and investing in Asia, while American firms complained of lost market share due to European retaliation. In other words, the political decision did not yield sustainable economic gains, but instead created a shock, after which conditions nearly returned to their previous state, with added confidence losses.

Similarly, in the Venezuela issue: Yes, Trump succeeded militarily in quickly removing Maduro, but what came next? There was no agreed-upon plan to manage the post-regime phase. The result: Venezuela descended into chaos and power struggles among armed factions, and the U.S. later had to send a long-term stabilization mission, effectively returning to the engagement it sought to avoid. Strangely, despite promises of gains, Venezuelan oil particularly, the expected benefits did not materialize: ongoing instability prevented a significant increase in oil production, or profits for American companies. This is a clear example of how military power does not automatically translate into economic or strategic returns, without a comprehensive vision.

Even his major trade deals — like the harsh Turnberry agreement imposed on Europe on 27 July 2025 — appeared as short-term victories, American companies gained some immediate commercial advantage, but within what long-term framework? The deal was described as unsustainable, built on impositions that Europe would not accept for long. Indeed, European countries began circumventing it legally, exploiting loopholes or appealing to the WTO, even if partially dysfunctional, and its effects would likely fade once Trump leaves office. In other words, Trump caught the fish but drained the lake — he benefited momentarily, but damaged the long-term relationship and the trust businesses need.

From a political economy perspective, experts note the hesitation of the U.S. and international private sector under Trump's volatile approach. Investment inherently hates uncertainty, and Trump creates plenty of it: today he threatens an allied country with sanctions, tomorrow he flirts with a strategic competitor with a deal. For example, the U.S. energy sector did not surge as expected, after sanctions on Russia, due to fear of sudden decisions reflecting policy changes or involvement in a new conflict. Wall Street is wary of the growing government debt but doesn't know when the situation will explode. A senior banker described the situation saying that the US has a rising market thanks to tax cuts, but behind it grows a mountain of debt; the White House is busy with geopolitical battles that disrupt supply chains, and no one is planning for ten years now.

This gap between political decisions and economic action is one of the main risks of the current approach, as it erodes America's trust and stability — once the core of its global economic appeal.

Additionally, there is Trump's personal improvisation factor: his fascination with surprises, rapid firing of officials, and skepticism toward experts. He changed four secretaries of defense in a single year, and the state department experienced a bleeding of veteran diplomats. This lack of experienced personnel sometimes led to decisions made without sufficient study of the consequences. At times, government agencies had to scramble to mop up the effects of an uncalculated move.

This pattern cannot establish a sustainable vision. U.S. foreign policy is usually crafted through multi-year planning, as with the strategy toward the Soviet Union, for example. Today, everything is daily and immediate. Thus, even if Trump's intention is to focus on China, the absence of long-term planning can drag him into an incident in Europe, or the Middle East, diverting him from his strategic goal.

Examples often cited here include Trump's policies toward Iran and Venezuela: he tightened the screws, but did not know how to capitalize on the moment when popular protests erupted. In Iran, Trump verbally supported protests but offered no concrete plan or engagement with the opposition, allowing the regime to survive. In Venezuela, after Maduro fell, he failed to plan for reconstruction, worsening the situation. The result: neither Iran changed nor Venezuela recovered, while Russia and China quietly gained influence, as America remained preoccupied with empty victory speeches.

Venezuela provides a particularly clear case study: Trump aimed to focus resources against China and assumed that a quick removal of Maduro would free the continent from an annoying influence. Yet, the lack of post-operation planning turned Venezuela into a new hotspot of instability requiring ongoing resources, with humanitarian aid, and security presence. It is the exact opposite of the intended outcome. Worse, this created uncertainty in global oil markets: instead of increasing supply, production temporarily dropped due to the chaos, driving prices up worldwide and hurting the U.S. economy, with higher fuel costs. Here, we see how political improvisation led to results contrary to both economic and strategic goals.

In summary, the absence of a post-action vision turns many of Washington's moves into reactive gestures, rather than elements of a coherent grand strategy. This gap can be exploited by other powers: China, for example, bets on the long term, building infrastructure initiatives across Asia and Africa, including the Belt and Road Initiative, for the next twenty years, while the U.S. remains preoccupied with volatile statements. Chinese companies plan decades ahead, with patient government support, whereas American firms are caught between Washington and Beijing. If this approach continues, U.S. economic influence will quietly bleed to more stable competitors.

In short, power without vision is first and foremost dangerous to its holder. As Canadian Prime Minister Carney remarked, "The powerful have their power. But we have something too — the capacity to stop pretending, to name reality, to build our strength at home and to act together." Signs are already emerging: medium-power alliances forming, increasing use of local currencies to bypass the dollar's dominance, and trade agreements bypassing the U.S. — all indicators of a world that does not wait for America to wake up and draw the plan, but prepares for the worst and acts proactively.

Constraints from within the U.S.: a structural dilemma for a strategic sustainable American foreign policy cannot be analyzed apart from domestic constraints, which structurally limit any long-term strategy. Today, the U.S. faces rising public debt and fiscal deficits, deep partisan and societal polarization, eroding institutional trust, and persistent cultural and social tensions not seen since the peak of the 2020 protests. These factors make the sustainability of foreign ventures — or even strategic patience — extremely difficult.

Debt and Deficit Burden: The federal debt has reached historic levels relative to the economy, exceeding 130% of GDP. In 2025 alone, policies added roughly $1.5 trillion in new future debt. This means debt servicing, of interest payments, has become one of the largest federal expenditures, and any further rise in interest rates, or decline in investor confidence, could trigger a financial crisis forcing the government to cut defense and foreign spending involuntarily.

Congress raised the debt ceiling to $41 trillion in 2025 through the so-called “One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA),” but this merely delays the problem without addressing it fundamentally. Continuing massive military spending, around $900 billion annually, alongside tax cuts is unsustainable over the next decade. Historically, debt crises have compelled major powers to shrink their foreign presence quietly; after World War II, Britain found the cost of maintaining its empire exceeded its financial capacity, and thus relinquished it. If Washington continues accumulating debt at this pace, it may eventually be forced to reduce its military footprint and overseas bases, simply because it cannot afford them — regardless of any administration’s desires.

Political Polarization: The United States has experienced sharp divisions between the Republican and Democratic camps on core issues, including foreign policy. Topics such as relations with Europe, the stance on NATO, trade with China, and military interventions have become sources of domestic conflict rather than national consensus.

This polarization limits the ability to adopt a consistent long-term strategy; every election could bring a 180-degree shift. Other countries closely observe this pattern: they have seen policies swing from Obama to Trump, to Biden and then back with Trump. Many allies now question the value of U.S. commitments, if they change every four years.

Even within Trump’s own team, divisions exist — between traditionalists and the hardline “America First” faction. This environment makes long-term planning in Washington nearly impossible, as any strategy is vulnerable to being overturned by political change. A European official warned that foreign policy has become a stage for domestic conflict in America; where Europeans cannot know if their signature today will be honored tomorrow.

As a result, countries are seeking alternative safeguards: Europe is approaching India and Brazil for future ties, the Middle East is looking eastward, and so on. This, in itself, weakens America’s ability to lead enduring alliances.

Declining Trust in Institutions: A defining feature of the U.S. domestic scene today is the falling public confidence in governance institutions — Congress, the judiciary, the media, and even the military and intelligence agencies are affected by internal divisions. This situation limits the leadership’s ability to mobilize the nation behind difficult policies.

For example, if an economic sacrifice or military mobilization were required to counter China, would the American public be willing? Several polls indicate that Americans prioritize domestic issues, such as inflation, immigration and crime, over protecting Taiwan or supporting Ukraine, except within narrow limits. Trump initially won on a wave of this fatigued mood against endless wars. Consequently, any attempt to return to a traditional global leadership role will collide with a wall of public indifference or outright rejection.

Even when experts warn about China’s expansion, the average citizen cares more about gas prices. This democratic constraint will only increase over time unless domestic conditions improve. In such a context, policymakers — regardless of their intentions —may find themselves politically constrained: for instance, they may recognize the importance of a permanent U.S. naval presence near the South China Sea, but if losses occur or an incident arises, they face immediate domestic backlash. This scenario echoes the 1970s post-Vietnam U.S. experience: a public mood pushing for withdrawal and a reduced global role.

Social and Cultural Tensions: The U.S. is experiencing profound demographic and cultural shifts — growing minority populations, the rise of identity movements, and divisions over issues like abortion and gun rights, among others. These issues consume a huge amount of political attention and energy, often overshadowing foreign policy. They also create vulnerability to domestic unrest; we have already witnessed mass protests and political violence, such as the January 6, 2021 Capitol attack. Any major domestic crisis could force the government to focus all efforts inward for years, creating a leadership vacuum on the global stage.

Allies have expressed concern observing political clashes in Washington; one remarked, about how allies can rely on a nation whose leaders don't even recognize the legitimacy of its elections? This perceptual weakness undermines U.S. soft power and credibility, and powers like China and Russia can exploit it by presenting their systems as more stable and efficient compared to American democratic chaos.

The strategic implications of these constraints are clear: they shorten the horizon of any U.S. foreign initiative. Washington can no longer afford to commit to decades-long projects like a new Marshall Plan or a protracted Cold War; it needs quick results to satisfy domestic audiences. This partly explains Trump's push for rapid wins for example, 24 hours for Ukraine and days for Iran. Trump understood that the domestic audience would not be patient. Yet, contemporary challenges are complex and stubborn, so impatience can lead to failure or incomplete solutions that make things worse.

These domestic constraints also affect long-term alliance management. Maintaining alliances requires compromises and mutual understanding, which is difficult in a populist environment. For example, sustaining broad American support for NATO requires convincing the public it serves U.S. interests. Trump convinced many that NATO was a burden. Reversing that perception may be difficult even with a new president, meaning domestic pressures create a lasting shift in foreign policy: a tendency toward isolationism, or at least nationalist self-interest that will remain influential regardless of who is in power.

In light of all this, the sustainability of U.S. strategic power is in question. Yes, America is strong enough to endure a short-term crisis or war and emerge victorious. However, can the US continue to guarantee the global order for another decade or two? Political and economic endurance is required for that, and it is eroding.

Washington may need a new leadership model — more participatory with allies and less costly for itself — to overcome domestic constraints and maintain its position. There is also an opportunity here: if the U.S. succeeds in redistributing the responsibilities of the global system among its allies in an acceptable way (for example, Europe securing its neighborhood, the Gulf financing its own stability, Japan and Australia participating in deterrence against China), it could compensate for internal weaknesses through stronger alliances.

On the other hand, if it continues the current approach — oscillating between intervention and retreat according to political moods — its power will dissipate through ineffectiveness, and others will benefit. This is precisely what is happening under the Trump administration.

Ultimately, domestic constraints — debts and divisions — are like the fuel tank for any imperial journey. The red warning light is approaching. If America does not begin repairing leaks and refueling, through investment in infrastructure, education, and political consensus, the journey will have to stop, no matter the intended destination.

Potential Scenarios through to 2030

In light of the above data, we can envision three or four main scenarios for the fate of the international order over the next five years, roughly until 2030, specifying the drivers of each scenario, its early indicators, and its impact on various actors.

Based on the same data, we can outline three main trajectories for the international order through to 2030. These scenarios are not predictions but rather probability maps, each fueled by specific drivers, with early indicators revealing its direction, and resulting in different outcomes for Europe, Russia, China, the Middle East, and the global economy, with a varied distribution of winners and losers.

First: "Legitimacy of American Power" Scenario – A Modified Unipolarity under Harsh Conditions

This scenario assumes that Washington succeeds in recalibrating the international order in its favor through direct pressure: tariffs, sanctions, and defensive and financial requirements imposed on allies, while no global alternative is capable of effectively challenging it.

The main driver here is the continuation of the Trumpian approach throughout a full political cycle, 2025–2029, with sufficient domestic support, disciplined allies under pressure, and the absence of an effective counter-front uniting China and Russia into a cohesive opposition alliance.

Early indicators of this scenario emerge when allies publicly commit to increased spending or agreements that solidify new American arrangements, even if done in a face-saving way, and when Beijing and Moscow fail to convert their rapprochement into a deterrent bloc capable of breaking U.S. rules — perhaps even showing friction or functional divergence that limits their ability to act as a unified front.

Expected outcomes are as follows:

Europe remains under the U.S. umbrella, but with stricter conditions affecting defense and financial autonomy, and reduced political maneuvering space.

Russia is contained through a mix of deterrence and partial deals; its influence may be frozen at certain limits, as in Ukraine, in exchange for limited sanction relief or pragmatic recognition of the status quo without full legitimacy.

China faces a prolonged commercial and technological confrontation but may **prefer to reduce military risks**, accepting some U.S.-imposed rules of the game to avoid a wider conflict.

The Middle East experiences more direct security arrangements, led either by Washington itself or via regional allies, namely the Jewish entity and the Gulf states, with rapid and pressing solutions to major issues.

The global economy continues to revolve around the dollar, but in a more constrained form; sanctions tools and financial systems, for example transfer and financing networks, become **more powerful instruments**.

In this scenario, the **biggest winners** are the United States, consolidating its hegemony under new terms, pro-U.S. elites within allied states, and sectors like the American defense industry. The **losers** are middle powers with diminished maneuverability, certain aspects of EU sovereignty, and states classified by Washington as defiant, which may face increased coercive pressure.

Second: "Multipolarity and Legitimacy Gap" Scenario – Leadership Vacuum and Competing Regional Blocs

This scenario assumes **Washington fails to maintain the post–Cold War order**, leading to a vacuum that is not filled by a single alternative pole, but by **competing regional blocs and alliances**, alongside weakening international institutions and declining legitimacy norms.

The **main driver** is the collapse of parts of traditional alliances, potentially triggered by a major NATO crisis over sovereignty and security, coupled with domestic economic or political pressures in the U.S. limiting its foreign engagement, and simultaneous growth of the Beijing–Moscow axis along with alternative frameworks, such as BRICS+.

Early indicators are clearer and more alarming: unilateral U.S. withdrawal from major treaties or emptying them of content, European announcements of fully independent defense policies outside NATO, or formal security agreements among U.S. adversaries, such as a China–Russia defense pact or expanded regional security arrangements.

Potential outcomes include:

Europe may split internally between states seeking accommodation with Russia and those pursuing an independent arms race; the absence of a U.S. security umbrella increases the costs of unity and exposes underlying contradictions.

Russia benefits regionally from reduced Western deterrence, and may expand influence in its near abroad, without fear of effective collective response.

China emerges as a **security–economic guarantor in Asia**, with greater capacity to shape regional dynamics and influence sensitive issues, while expanding initiatives as an alternative umbrella to the Western order.

The Middle East becomes a **zone of power-sharing among regional actors**, which are Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the Jewish entity, with China and Russia entering as larger economic and security players, and U.S. influence declining.

The global economy trends toward **relative fragmentation**: parallel trade and currency blocs, competition over technology, and diminished effectiveness of traditional globalization institutions.

In this scenario:

Winners: China, primarily, as it is best positioned to fill much of the emerging vacuum; Russia regionally, though smaller compared to China; and nationalist and regional powers in multiple countries taking advantage of the absence of a global policeman.

Losers: The United States, as a loss of status, Western Europe, as a loss of a guarantor and unity, and smaller states, which become more vulnerable to power struggles without an effective international legal framework.

Third: “New Balance of Power” Scenario: Big-Power Deal and Division of Influence

This scenario assumes that the major powers — the U.S., Russia, and China in particular — reach an unspoken understanding to avoid a major war, by dividing spheres of influence and managing competition within controlled limits. Its main driver is mutual recognition of the impossibility of excluding the other, coupled with the emergence of more pragmatic, or at least realistic, leadership pushing for behind-the-scenes negotiation, alongside global economic pressures that make an open arms race unsustainable.

Early indicators include trilateral summits, or a series of successive bilateral meetings among major power leaders, statements or documents implicitly acknowledging each party’s interests and spheres of influence, and deliberate rhetorical de-escalation: Washington easing ideological attacks on China, Beijing avoiding overt confrontation with U.S. alliances, and possibly unwritten understandings of red lines.

Outcomes are more complex:

Europe may benefit from globally reduced tensions, relative economic and security stability, but becomes a secondary actor, informed of arrangements after they are finalized — **with a loss of political autonomy**, though in a less turbulent environment.

Russia gains recognition of its position in its neighborhood, but remains the smaller partner relative to China and the U.S., with its influence dependent on major-power agreements.

China gains greater space to lead in Asia within frameworks that prevent military escalation, in exchange for commitments to limit global expansion or respect certain boundaries.

The Middle East could be managed through understandings that prevent clashes among major-power proxies: U.S. influence in the Gulf, Russian influence in specific zones, and broad Chinese economic engagement, accompanied by political deconfliction rules.

The global economy continues globalization but with new constraints: updated trade rules, and perhaps formal reforms in international institutions to reflect the new balance of power, with new standards in technology, cyber, and armaments.

Winners: the three major powers, through avoiding costly war and sharing influence, and some neutral or medium-sized states benefiting from stability without full alignment. **Losers**: ideological actors, as politics becomes a power deal rather than a struggle of ideology, and countries that previously sought to leverage competition between major powers, as opportunities for bargaining between poles, diminish under their agreement.

Transitional Summary (Short):

The first scenario implies that Washington succeeds in tightening unipolarity. The second implies a fracturing of the U.S. umbrella and a vacuum of rules and order. The third implies a rationalization of competition through a big-power deal, reducing the risk of war but weakening secondary actors.

While these scenarios appear distinct, reality may start with one, and then shift to another due to pivotal events: a sovereignty crisis within alliances, a U.S. economic shock, or a flashpoint in Asia. These scenarios are not entirely separate; we may witness a mix of elements or a temporal sequence of more than one scenario.

For example, scenario two, that of vacuum, might occur temporarily, then push the order toward scenario three, that of a deal between major powers, as a solution to restore stability. The key is early indicators**:** policymakers must monitor developments — does the Beijing-Moscow alliance deepen without cracks? Do Western allies continue greater autonomy? Or do they return to the U.S. fold in 2027, if the administration changes? These are signals of which path is unfolding.

Naturally, regional players, medium powers and Global South blocs, will also influence the balance of any given direction. They can fill part of the vacuum, or align with one of the camps. For example, if India, Brazil, and South Africa form a bloc leaning toward a multipolar approach, it could accelerate the scenario of a multi-polar world.

Conversely, if they align differently, such as India with the U.S. and Brazil being neutral, they could reinforce the balance among the major powers. The above scenarios focus on the medium term, within 5–10 years. On the longer term, post-2030, other factors — radical technological changes, major environment shifts, or potential domestic collapse of a major power — could reshape the order in a fundamentally different way. However, within our current scope, these remain the most plausible paths.

Conclusion: Between Improvisation and Vision… Who Fills the Vacuum?

In conclusion, Washington under Trump lacks a comprehensive vision for building an alternative global order; it acts more on immediate displays of power than on future-oriented planning. It has undermined parts of the old order, the legitimacy of international institutions and traditional alliances without providing a coherent replacement model.

The result is a world awash with questions: Will “Board of Peaces” and similar initiatives become pillars of a new order, or merely fleeting bubbles? Will the transatlantic deal-based system become a sustainable foundation or remain in a chaotic transitional phase?

So far, the balance of probabilities leans toward the latter: many of the current administration's initiatives resemble temporary, personal projects more than long-lasting institutional structures.

Conversely, the potential vacuum is expanding across multiple domains.

Vacuum in legitimacy and rules: If the United Nations no longer serves as an effective reference, there will be a need for actors to fill this gap in legitimizing international solutions. Here, middle powers coordinating together — as advocated by Canada's Prime Minister Karney in his call for a "middle powers bloc" — or alternative regional organizations, like the European Union attempting a greater role in trade and environmental standards to compensate for global paralysis, may step in.

Vacuum in security leadership: The decline of trust in the U.S. guarantee means that countries like Germany, Japan, and possibly Gulf states may pursue independent military buildups to fill part of the vacuum themselves. This is a double-edged sword: it could deter aggression, but it might also ignite a new regional arms race.

Vacuum in intellectual values: The post-World War order established principles such as the inadmissibility of acquiring territory by force and the respect for human rights. These principles have been undermined, for instance, with the occupation of Ukrainian territories without decisive accountability, and the return of punitive measures and collective sanctions as political tools. If no actor steps up to uphold these global values, they may remain neglected — potentially until an emerging, non-democratic power imposes its own alternative norms. This represents the most dangerous intellectual vacuum.

Who is best positioned to fill the vacuum? The likely answer: China is a strong candidate, but in its own way — gradual and economically driven. Russia tries regionally, but its weak economic foundations, and isolation, limit its global reach. The European Union has the material and normative capacity, but lacks the political and military unity to play a leading role. Other regional powers, like India and Brazil, will play larger roles in their respective regions and as balancing weights in a multipolar order, but they are not yet ready to take the reins of the global order.

One scenario remains: Washington could catch itself — through a change in leadership or approach — and take the initiative to fill the vacuums it has created before it's too late. For instance, in the coming years we might witness an American initiative to reform the United Nations rather than ignore it, or a revival of multilateral trade or climate agreements under fairer conditions instead of withdrawing from them. This requires a strategic vision that sets boundaries for power and uses it wisely in cooperation with others — a vision currently absent.

When asked about the difference between American leadership today and in his time, Henry Kissinger, the seasoned strategist, was rueful. He also famously said, "If you don't know where you are going, every road will get you nowhere." The world is living in an interregnum: an old order is breaking apart, and a new one has yet to be born. In such a period, improvisation can be more dangerous than inaction, because it shuffles the pieces without offering an alternative. Those who navigate this transitional chaos — minimizing losses while seizing opportunities — will define their place in the next order.

In conclusion, international legitimacy is now being reshaped on the basis of tests of power and deal-making. If the leading global powers fail to establish new, mutually acceptable rules, we may find ourselves facing a legitimacy vacuum temporarily filled by raw power — which cannot endure without a proper foundation. History offers a lesson: power can open gaps, but it alone cannot build a sustainable order. Washington, if it wishes to avoid the fate of declining empires, must craft a vision that reconciles its own interests with those of others within a new legitimate framework. Otherwise, other actors will inevitably fill the vacuum on their terms, leaving America estranged from the very order it once sought to shape.

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