

THE INSISTENCE ON TRANSACTIONALISM AND DONALD TRUMP'S FOREIGN POLICY – SOME LONG-TERM RISKS AND DISCONNECTS

Philip Dandolov

University of National and World Economy, Bulgaria, philip.dandolov@unwe.bg

Abstract: Donald Trump's second term as president of the United States has widely been expected to usher in a number of novel political developments in the foreign policy realm and contribute to major geopolitical recalibrations and even crucial realignments, marking a clean break with many international policies associated with Joe Biden's administration, in part due to the non-traditional leadership style employed by the current commander-in-chief. This has largely turned out to be the case during Trump's first 100 days, with his foreign policy frequently characterized as ticking the boxes of a transactionalist approach to international relations, emphasizing win-lose negotiations, short-term gains, a skeptical attitude towards multilateralism, and a willingness to downplay the value of historical alliances. The paper employs a qualitative methodology, which includes integrated analysis and entails synthesis that weaves together content from a multitude of secondary sources within the social sciences. It fulfils three primary objectives. Firstly, by examining the likely transformations in the power dynamics within the international system, it suggests that transactionalism is unlikely to bring about long-term benefits from the standpoint of the United States' national interests because the country, in accordance with the prevailing trends, is by no means guaranteed to remain the undisputed hegemon in the conceivable future. Secondly, in terms of Trump's stated personal ambition to leave a lasting legacy as a peacemaker in international relations, especially with regard to the Russo-Ukrainian war, the paper advances the argument that a transactional *modus operandi* in international relations may turn out to be counter-productive in terms of a satisfactory resolution to the conflict, especially given that it may be at odds with more promising methods of applying pressure on Russia. Thirdly, subscribing to a transactionalist perspective may actually turn out to contradict some of the tenets of political conservatism and may to a degree result in alienating the president's own supporters, thus reducing his political capital among the members of some of his core constituencies.

Keywords: international relations, transactionalism, Donald Trump, United States, Ukraine

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the hallmarks of transactionalism in international relations is that it tends to prioritize bilateral relations between countries while being dismissive of multilateralism. Given that the focus is on short-term wins rather than on longer-term strategic foresight, there is also an adherence to a zero-sum worldview where one nation's gain is assumed to be equivalent to another nation's loss. (Bashirov & Yilmaz, 2020) The political actors display marked reluctance to diminish the gains they receive from any individual exchange even if an uncompromising approach increases the tensions between the parties. (Abramowicz, 2022) Thus, not surprisingly foreign policy transactionalists see a limited utility to alliances, international institutions and organizations, being skeptical of value-based policy-making and viewing historical bonds between countries as secondary. Because of transactional relations being interest-based, they neither presuppose the existence of common values nor incentivize the building of communities on the world stage. (Janning, 2018) In essence, countries are assumed to have competitors who pose greater or lesser dangers rather than trusted allies, as a result of which even partnerships that early on appear to be especially strong may crumble quickly and without notice. Due to the short-termism that is a core tenet of transactionalism, it is as a rule not interested in grand strategies, often veering into incoherent and inconsistent policies. With regard to the political figures who adopt them, transactionalist foreign policies are often personalist, reflect populist styles of politics and are presumed to serve the ends of populist leaders, which may be detrimental to the national interest. (Bashirov & Yilmaz, 2020) While all politicians include some elements of transactionalism in their foreign policy calculations, Donald Trump, guided by his "America first" agenda, as early as his first term in office as US president (Da-gyum, 2024) has been characterized as being quite unique in terms of the unbridled foreign policy opportunism (Erlanger, 2025) that he appears willing to subscribe to. In February 2024, Trump proclaimed that he would encourage the Russians to take any liberties they like, including the use of military force, against NATO members that do not reach the required targets of spending on defense. (Sullivan, 2024)

This paper argues that if Trump's transactionalism turns out to be anything more than a temporary phase, it would likely be reflective of a misreading of the tendencies pertaining to the distribution of power in the international system, thus potentially creating long-term vulnerabilities for the United States. Secondly, the argument is advanced that Trump, being motivated to leave behind a strong legacy in international relations in terms of conflict resolution, has some potential to move the needle in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict by relying on a madman strategy, which

would have to come at the expense of his transactionalist stance. Thirdly, Trump's transactionalism, manifesting itself in his administration's distancing from European allies and apparent cozying up to influential non-Western politicians with non-democratic credentials, may not play that well with the underlying values of many members of his own base.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The paper adopts a qualitative approach and prioritizes the unobtrusive research method. Thus, the article draws primarily on desk research and secondary qualitative data analysis, (Cheong et al., 2023) making use of interviews, opinion pieces, newspaper articles, and academic papers, many of which have a wide thematic scope. (Hine, 2011) The data that is gleaned from the various studies is synthesized and subjected to further analysis by the author, with the main aim being the teasing out of new meanings and the challenging of the conventional thinking when it comes to the issues in question. The article is in agreement with the philosophy of Strike and Posner with regard to the proper way to make sense of the process of synthesis. The latter constitutes an activity in which various parts are brought together for the purposes of forming a whole, with the result transcending the sum of the individual parts, which contributes to the development of novel and cutting-edge perspectives. (Mengshoel & Sim, 2023) The general propositions in the paper are as a rule developed on the basis of the specific pieces of data, which corresponds to notion of inductive reasoning and analysis. (Bingham, 2023)

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the case of zero-sum games in international relations that are a key staple of transactionalism, in order for a country to be in advantageous position vis-à-vis its peer competitors, it is of paramount importance that it possesses the necessary resources that allow it to establish a preponderance of power when it comes to the global constellation of states. However, from the standpoint of the United States, the underlying tendencies when it comes to the distribution of power within the international system are not exactly favorable. A pronounced trend towards multipolarity and international dispersions of power (Steinberg, 2022) has been attributable to three main factors: the end of US hegemony, the (so far) peaceful rise of China and the emergence of potential rivals in other regions. (Muzaffar et. al., 2017) For instance, in 1960 the US economy was estimated to be the size of 22 Chinese economies while in 2020 it was equivalent to only 1,3 Chinas. (Caballero, 2022) In particular, offensive realists such as John Mearsheimer have acknowledged that since around 2017 China has become an actual peer competitor of the United States (Chau & Wang, 2023) due to the available resources at its disposal as well as its economic durability. Some geopolitical forecasts even suggest that by 2040 the USA may lose the status of a global superpower altogether, facing reduced economic and political influence at the expense of China, India, the EU, ASEAN, and other political entities. (Fry, 2007) In a world, in which the United States can no longer confidently claim to represent the indisputable "top dog" within the international system, the reliance on allies, which is at odds with an unabashedly transactionalist foreign policy, becomes of even greater significance than in previous decades. This is because the relative decline in economic and productive weight of the USA ultimately results in a narrowing of the margins for political action as a result of the phenomenon of overstretching – the sum total of the United States' global interests and obligations becomes far larger than capability possessed to defend all of them simultaneously. (Hood, 2022) Essentially, in a world that is characterized by an increased level of interdependence between countries, the list of global issues that the US cannot resolve on its own will only continue to grow, making unilateralism by definition less advantageous than multilateralism. (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2005) Following from this change in power dynamics, multilateral institutions may start to be perceived as empowering rather than constraining from the perspective of the Americans. (Zaborowski & Longhurst, 2003) In particular, a transactionalist approach that eschews multilateralism may be poorly suited to handling security issues such as nuclear weapons proliferation (Flint, 2025) due to alliances increasingly being seen as conditional and states adopting policies with a focus on self-reliance. (Yi, 2025) The US by seemingly abandoning the principle of steadfast alliance, as exemplified by its recalibration of its policies pertaining to NATO countries during the first three months of the second Trump presidency, may be in the process of undermining the credibility of its security guarantees. This may negatively affect the prospects for the maintenance of its close political ties with sovereign states such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan (Transatlantic Task Force, 2025) as well as with European countries like Poland that are considered to be quite loyal US allies. (Zaborowski & Longhurst, 2003) If history is any indication, when a nation that is regarded as a guarantor of security recedes into the background or appears to shirk its commitments, geopolitical adversaries are emboldened to test certain limits, becoming better placed to destabilize entire regions, (Transatlantic Task Force, 2025) which in turn is likely to encourage allied countries to increase defense spending and even pursue independent deterrence capabilities. (Ibid, 2025) For instance, since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine South Korean attitudes (among the members of the general public as well as the political establishment) have become significantly

more favorable towards the acquisition of nuclear weapons. (Kim & Lee, 2023) Rather than assuage such concerns, shortly after taking office Trump referred to North Korea as a nuclear power, breaking decades of precedent and thus inviting criticism from Seoul (Kim & Aggarwal, 2025) due to a perception that his statements could be a signal of a reduced commitment to the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. (Rashid, 2025) In response to the Trump administration appearing to explicitly rule out an admission into NATO for Ukraine, Ukrainian politicians have also increasingly broached the subject of the country potentially working towards its own nuclear deterrent. Even though the political costs for Ukraine would likely be inordinate, the country also possesses at least a medium-term capability of producing nuclear weapons, (Bollfrass, 2025) in part due to its extensive civil nuclear facilities. (Davlikanova, 2024) Even if setting aside the increased risks of unstable balances and even accidental war as a result of widespread nuclear proliferation, (Sagan, 1994) nuclear weapons make every country potentially too strong to deal with, which could ironically complicate matters from the standpoint of a state that has become used to operating within a transactional framework. (Foley, 2007) Such a development might even eventually sound the death knell for the transactional logic in international relations. Lastly, an often understated risk of pursuing transactionalist policies is that they fail to take into account the reality that certain sovereign states may be fundamentally different than others with regard to their behavioral inclinations on the world stage. If we are to utilize Fukuyama's distinction between historical and post-historical countries, (Fukuyama, 1989) certain nation-states like Russia are part of a historical world (premised on power politics) while others like the United States naturally gravitate towards a post-historical one, in which the interactions between countries are dominated by economic considerations rather than traditional Realpolitik. (Niemiets, 2024) British diplomat Robert Cooper, who advocates for the maintenance of American strategic superiority, is supportive of the idea of "defensive imperialism" due to viewing quite a few countries as inherently dangerous and in need of being restrained by an equal or greater power. Accordingly, when dealing with what he calls modern (old-fashioned) states, the methods employed by the post-modern ones, which as a rule extol values consistent with liberal internationalism, should every so often be harsher, e.g. include pre-emptive strikes, and go far beyond the typical transactionalist toolkit. (Foley, 2007) While values and ideologies may seemingly not matter that much for some of the transactional countries from the "axis of upheaval", such as Russia and Iran, they are nonetheless united by a strong suspicion of and even disdain for liberal democracy, a form of government that they in the conceivable future are likely to continue to associate with the US-led world order. Thus, no matter how conciliatory in their rhetoric and forgiving of human rights transgressions the US politicians strive to be, it is highly doubtful that if the USA finds itself in an economically and politically vulnerable situation vis-à-vis this group of countries, they will have any scruples to eagerly negotiate from a position of strength at the expense of the Americans. (Rogers & Rowlands, 2025) Furthermore, the USA may have to contend with increased isolation in international affairs if the relationship with the European Union (EU) becomes permanently fractured. The EU has so far clearly chosen to behave as a "soft" rather than a "hard" power. However, the EU could adapt to any perceived abandonment by the USA due to the latter's emphasis on transactionalism by becoming a non-cooperative rather than a cooperative empire in relation to the Americans. (Vernet, 2003) In this regard, if we are to take a long-term view, there are many perils associated with contumacious transactionalism. The US' unwillingness to make a strong differentiation between allies and adversaries may lead the country down the primrose path towards a type of international isolation that is neither intended nor particularly beneficial.

Turning from the macro- to the microlevel of analysis, in terms of Trump's personal ambitions, one of the most coveted accolades from the perspective of the incumbent US president is the Nobel Peace Prize, (Pager, 2025) with Trump frequently emphasizing how he wants to go down in history as a peacemaker. (Ibid) As part of the attainment of this goal, resolving the Russo-Ukrainian war occupies center stage, as the Russian attack on Ukraine in February 2022 has been characterized as marking the definitive end to the "geopolitical time-out" Europe had decided to take after the end of the Cold War (Onderco et. al., 2023), may be depicted as a "restart of history" (Niemiets, 2024) and has had a multitude of global ramifications in terms of geopolitical alignments, transformations across military domains as well as economic shocks. (Marahrens & Schröfl, 2024) Up to this point Trump's approach has not succeeded in exacting any meaningful concessions from the Putin administration, with Russia in practice unwilling to abide by any ceasefire agreements and continuing to target Ukrainian civilians with impunity, as evidenced by the Sumy airstrike on 13 April 2025, which constituted the deadliest attack on the Ukrainian civilian population since 2023. (Spivey, 2025) By appearing to operate within a transactionalist framework when it comes to Ukraine, (Spencer, 2025) as manifested by Trump's tendency to view the aid for Ukraine through an economic lens as well as his propensity to engage in false equivalences when assigning culpability for the war, (Pomeroy & Wright, 2025) the US president in his initial dealings with Russia has arguably not been able or willing to tap into a potential source of strength that could be more effective in forcing Russia to the negotiating table. Since his first term in office, Trump, treading in fellow Republican President Richard Nixon's footsteps, has been associated with the madman theory of coercive bargaining. The madman theory rests on the assumption that there are certain virtues to unpredictability as

a strategic doctrine. (Drezner, 2025) It posits that a leader who behaves in such a way as if he would be willing to take virtually any course of extreme action is better-positioned to persuade other global actors to make certain compromises that would otherwise fall within the non-negotiable realm. (Ibid) In particular, early nuclear strategists such as Daniel Ellsberg and Thomas Schelling saw perceived madness as a mechanism to make ostensibly credible threats more credible, even when the stakes could be as high as a nuclear catastrophe. (Schwartz, 2023) While there is a lot of scholarly scepticism regarding a leader's ability to play the role of a sufficiently convincing "madman", some recent scholarly shifts, reflected in the writings of Pennsylvania State University academic Roseanne McManus, are more sympathetic to the idea that gambits of such nature may actually work for people like Trump, especially if they are deemed to feel very strongly about a concrete issue or situation and the reputation for madness is only slight. (Drezner, 2025) In a speech during his 2016 presidential campaign Trump stated that the USA must be more unpredictable as a nation, as this could keep adversaries off balance. (Sechser & Fuhrmann, 2017) In August 2017 Trump notably threatened to destroy nuclear-armed North Korea, stating that he would "bring fire and fury like the world has never seen", which appeared to be in accord with crafting an image of an erratic and potentially reckless head of state. Anglo-Saxon media have continued to depict Trump as a unique political phenomenon due to his foreign policy volatility, (Plagemann & Destradi, 2024) which Putin and Zelenskyy have referred to as well, with the latter praising Trump in January 2025 due to viewing his combination of strength and unpredictability as conducive to ending the war in Ukraine. (Novikov, 2025) While public statements like that need to be taken with a grain of salt and in Zelenskyy's case were almost certainly intended to curry favour with a US president who was about to assume his duties, there may have been a degree of authenticity to them, with the Ukrainian president probably secretly hoping that at last there would be a more extreme politician in a position of power in the Western world, potentially capable of stealing Putin's thunder with regard to nuclear sabre-rattling and willing to call the Russian president's bluffs. (Barnes, 2024) However, "madman conduct" does not appear to mesh particularly well with a transactionalist reputation. Given that "madmen" are frequently assumed to operate beyond the realms of conventional cost-benefit analysis, (Schwartz, 2023) a Trump that appears to be pertinacious in his pursuit of transactional goals may be clipping his own wings in terms of his credibility of deploying a madman strategy. However, a rebranded US president that begins to dial down on his transactional statements, confirms that the defensive commitments to NATO allies will be fully honored and suddenly engages in a more bombastic rhetoric directed against Russia may be in a position to alter the parameters of the situation, i.e. find a recipe for solving the intractable problem by enlarging it and changing the context. (Goodby, 2005) Furthermore, given that Trump has frequently criticized his predecessor Joe Biden for not preventing (or even causing) Russia's all-out war against Ukraine, (Zadorozhnyy, 2025) engendering a shift from Biden's policies on Ukraine and touting the possibility of a type of escalation of the conflict that would not be in accordance with the Russians' preferences would allow him to credibly claim that he is willing to truly go into uncharted territory. While highly sympathetic to Ukraine and playing a crucial role in the provision of vast amounts of security assistance to the Eastern European country, Biden has also been criticized for not doing enough to deter the invasion, (Tisdall, 2024) being overly cautious with regard to Putin's supposed redlines, (Ibrahim, 2025) and prioritizing a containment of the conflict (Tisdall, 2024) rather than attempting to wrest the initiative away from Russia. In this regard, Robert Cooper has alluded to this reality by emphasizing how the Western European allies of Ukraine have never encouraged it to attack Russia, stating how in order to win a war, you occasionally need to bring the action to the homeland of the aggressor. (Folk och Försvar, 2022) *Thus, if Trump modifies his rushed-deal diplomacy, (Rishko, 2025) which has so far appeared to mostly embolden Russian aggression, (Pazzanese, 2025) and switches to an approach that is more in line with his bread and butter politics - a propensity towards erratic and unconstrained actions, this could conceivably give the Russian political establishment a bit of a pause. In comparison to his first term, Trump could actually be more convincing in donning the mantle of a "madman" due to the more comprehensive nature of the victory he secured in November 2024 - in addition to attaining a governing trifecta (with Trump's party controlling both chambers of Congress – the House of Representatives and the Senate), six of the nine members of the US Supreme Court are also Republican appointees, (Gargan, 2025), as well as the lack of a need to worry about reelection. One development that could conceivably change the Russians' calculations and cause them to start seriously considering peace negotiations would be Trump, in addition to imposing secondary sanctions on Russia, (Murray, 2025) publicly mulling over the possibility of backing a European military mission to reinforce Ukraine's air defense and deploy European troops in Ukrainian territories that are away from the battlefields. While there would be no mention of actual engagement on the frontlines, it would be a sign of further commitment towards the Ukrainian war effort on the part of the West (Rishko, 2025) and truly put the ball in Putin's court, forcing him to seriously consider peace terms that do not correspond to Russia's maximalist demands.*

Lastly, it needs to be taken into account that a transactionalist approach to foreign affairs that appears to include elements of appeasement when it comes to dictatorial regimes and is seen to forsake certain traditional American

values pertaining to the defense of freedom may not sit that well with Trump's conservative base. Given that ideological rigidity is in the US context often associated with social conservatism, (Costello et al., 2023) it is difficult to envision how overly transactional foreign policies that largely gloss over the ideological differences between countries will be particularly appealing from the standpoint many Trump voters. For instance, support for the US alliance system, which generally includes countries exhibiting ideological similarities with the USA, has been broadly bipartisan over the course of the country's history, with Americans on both sides of the political divide likely to credit it for strengthening their military and diplomatic efforts around the world. (Friedhoff, 2024) In February 2025, there were reports of rifts within the Republican party due to Trump's rhetoric, which was perceived to be assigning blame to Ukraine for starting the conflict, (Nicholas, 2025) with some prominent conservative commentators such as Mark Levin, Ben Shapiro, and Brian Kilmeade publicly breaking ranks with the president (Ibid, 2025) over his views on the root causes of the war. (Marquez, 2025) Even though Republican voters are significantly more likely than their counterparts from the Democratic party to express the view that the USA is providing too much military aid to Ukraine, most of them still believe that Russia is the clear aggressor in the conflict and they are not considered to be a constituency that is likely to reward American politicians who are perceived to empower the Putin administration. (Balson, 2025)

4. CONCLUSION

Of course it is still too early to tell whether the transactional thinking will continue to inform Trump's foreign policy over the course of the more than three years that remain of his presidency. There are actually some recent encouraging signs, such as the Ukraine-United States Mineral Resources Agreement, which was signed on 30 April 2025, (Kottasová & Butenko, 2025) that Trump may be taking a tentative step back from transactionalism in his dealings with the war-torn country. The new terms of the deal do not call for the Ukrainians to reimburse the USA for the aid already received, which has been regarded as an important concession on the part of Trump. The language used in the deal when assigning blame for the start of the war is also markedly more anti-Russian in comparison to some of Trump's previous pronouncements. (Ibid) In the opinion of Shelby Mahid, the deputy director of the Atlantic Council's Eurasia Center, the natural resources agreement puts the Ukrainians "in their strongest position yet with Washington since Trump took office" and there have also been signs of concern in Moscow regarding a possible US tilt in the direction of Ukraine. (Belton, 2025) The US president will have ample opportunities to prove his critics wrong and demonstrate that some initial setbacks notwithstanding, he is fully committed to a fully sovereign and resilient Ukraine, but he has to be careful not to overdo his dabbling with pure transactionalism, especially in the eyes of historical US allies, as the effects on the USA and the liberal international order that has undergirded the global leadership of America may turn out to be profoundly negative and not so easily reversible. (Stokols, 2025)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my parents, friends, and colleagues for providing me with the necessary support, especially in terms of being able to enjoy a relatively flexible schedule, which has allowed me to remain active doing research work.

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