

Trump II: change or continuity?



Donald Trump is now officially the 47th President of the United States of America. During the days up to the

inauguration ceremony, there has been much media frenzy about what Trump's second mandate might look like. Part of this excitement and anxiety about Donald Trump is informed by the belief that there will be positive and negative changes to US foreign policy and crises around the world. To what extent is this justified?

If the previous presidential mandate of Trump is of any comparative value, one could infer that not much will change. There has been a remarkable continuity between Obama, Trump, and Biden, and above all between the last two presidents, with regard to some salient and emerging issues. These include the military containment of China, and the consequent institutionalisation – through Congress and executive orders – of protectionism of strategic sectors of the US economy; although with different styles, the attempt at bringing US allies closer to Washington; a foreign policy towards the Middle East where

Biden did not really challenge Trump's posture; but also a more nationalistic approach to the global economy, especially in light of the transition towards the green economy.

More in general, Trump's experience – like his predecessors – signalled a dissatisfaction of the United States' establishment with the Liberal International order (LIO) that was born after the end of the Second World War, and that it is now in a crisis. Due to a decentralisation of power in the international system, with the rise of China and many other members of the G20, the LIO has increasingly become less US-friendly, with Washington losing command of it.

Some commentators, however, suggest that this time it will be different, because less grown up people will be in the room refraining Trump. This is partly true. Domestically, Trump will have more freedom of implementing his Reaganite-on-steroids economic agenda, eroding the public control of the state in favour of the interests of conservative financial elites and friends, not least Elon Musk and many appointees to diplomatic posts who have no governmental or diplomatic experience. He will certainly have less constraints

coming from his secretaries.

At the same time, the institutional check and balances of the US remains, at least to date unchallenged, and it is unlikely that Trump will be able to escape scrutiny from Congress, judges, FBI, CIA, and more broadly the so-called “deep state”.

Furthermore, some of Trump’s picks for secretary during the transition, indicated a degree of continuity rather than discontinuity in foreign policy. He has selected Marco Rubio as secretary of state; Mike Waltz as national security advisor; Peter Hegseth as secretary of defense; and Elise Stefanik as United Nations ambassador. This is a team of China-hawks – and in this regard, it is not too different from that of the first Trump administration. Rubio not only helped secure NATO with a bill that will require two-thirds of the Senate to vote for the US exit from the pact; he also has been an advocate of AUKUS, the submarine pact between Australia, UK, and US. Meanwhile, Waltz has been vocal about a more robust approach to countering China in the Indo-Pacific, while strengthening the relationship with India. Stefanik, instead, called on the US Air Force to cut ties with about 130 suppliers of critical technology based in China, and backed the

Countering Chinese Drones Act, a piece of legislation aimed at limiting purchases of drones made in China. Meanwhile, Hegseth stated that Beijing was “building an army specifically dedicated to defeating the United States of America”.

Some of Trump’s statements about using force to take control of Greenland and the Panama Canal, and about annexing Canada, appear unrealistic from a military viewpoint, although these are certainly ways to exert pressure on those governments to pursue US’ interests, while containing a good dose of domestic propaganda.

All in all, the international community should prepare for another rocky ride, that is for sure. There will be leaders or countries gaining, and others facing troubles. Overall, however, grand strategic continuity in US foreign policy is likely to prevail.

Dr Zeno Leoni

Teaching Fellow in Challenges to the International Order at the Defence Studies Department of King’s College London and the Defence Academy of the UK

January 19th, 2025