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TRUMP'S DIPLOMACY AND FOREIGN POLICY: PERSONAL CONDUCT AND ITS IMPACT ON MIDDLE EAST PEACE AND SECURITY



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Research Report

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DISCLAIMER

Drafting and production of this paper involved a combination of conventional research methods and large language model (LLM)-based tools for editing, translation, formatting, and preliminary literature review. The author reviewed and verified all outputs against original sources and takes sole responsibility for the content, findings, and conclusions presented.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines how the personal and psychological conduct of Donald Trump shapes United States foreign policy, and what that means for peace and security in the Middle East. It works within Leader-Centric (Actor-Specific) Theory, which holds that a leader's personality and beliefs can shape state behavior, particularly where power is concentrated in one person. The report does not diagnose Trump clinically. It analyses observable public conduct, together with the upbringing, advisers and environment that help to explain it.

The report builds a profile across ten dimensions: childhood and early life, personality and psychological tendencies, personal conduct, physical and mental health, communication style, decision-making, populism, economic worldview, the inner circle, and domestic politics. It adds an original interview with Prof. Dustin J. Byrd. The profile finds a leader with a strong need for validation, an episodic way of thinking in which earlier commitments do not bind him, and a transactional view of every relationship. His foreign policy depends heavily on personal envoys and personal rapport. The report then tests this profile against American relations with allies (the European Union, Canada and Türkiye), with adversaries (North Korea, Russia and China), and with Latin America as a declared sphere of influence. It then turns to the Middle East, where it examines the US–Israel relationship, US–Iran relations and the Gulf states. Across all of them, one pattern recurs. Relationships last while they yield a return and are devalued or dropped when they do not. Threats are followed by reversals, and agreements prove temporary. In the Middle East, this has produced instability. Iran's repeated return to negotiation was met by agreements that were set aside, the 2026 war began without consulting the Gulf states that faced its consequences, and no formal ceasefire existed at the time of writing.

The paper then asks how other states can respond. It draws on the work of the clinical psychologist Dr Ramani Durvasula on managing relationships with narcissistic people, and applies it, by analogy, to state relations. It finds that the most useful elements are radical acceptance of the leader's behavior, recognition of the recurring cycle of warmth and reversal, and disentanglement through diversification. States are already doing versions of these. Canada, the European states and the Gulf states are reducing their exposure, and China manages Trump through ceremony while keeping its commitments vague.

At the end, the paper makes four recommendations: to reconsider the Goldwater Rule in light of international security, to institutionalise transparent and continuous profiling of state leaders, to integrate psychology into international relations scholarship and teaching, and to apply narcissism-management principles at the state level. It concludes that the United States is accelerating the shift toward a multipolar world, mainly through its own inconsistency and not through the planned advance of rivals. Since the approach is new, the report also states its limits.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional foreign policy analysis treats the state as a single rational actor, whose conduct is explained by interests, institutional constraints and ideology. This report takes a different starting point. It argues that state-level factors alone cannot explain current American foreign policy. Where decision-making is concentrated in one person, it is necessary to examine that person, and to ask how his psychology affects signalling, alliance management and behavior in crisis.

The report works within Leader-Centric (Actor-Specific) Theory. This approach asks that a leader be profiled in the round, beyond psychological tendencies, so that physical condition, upbringing, environment, advisers and domestic pressures are all considered. The case of Trump invites this approach. His personal conduct sets the agenda for much of American foreign policy, his decisions are announced through personal channels, and his envoys and family members often carry more weight than formal institutions.

The report does not attempt to diagnose Trump. A clinical diagnosis requires direct examination, which is neither possible nor intended here, and the ethical rules of the American Psychiatric Association discourage opinions on public figures who have not been examined. The report instead treats narcissism and related traits as patterns of behavior that can be observed in the public record, and asks what these patterns mean for the states, alliances and adversaries that must deal with them.

The report is guided by three research questions:

- Who is Donald Trump, in terms of the personal, psychological and political factors that shape his conduct?
- What is the impact of that conduct on peace and security in the Middle East?

The first two questions structure the empirical part of the report. The third follows from them and leads to the report's policy recommendations. The report covers both of Trump's terms (2017–2021 and 2025 to the present) and extends to October 2026. It traces how his behavior toward allies, adversaries and a declared sphere of influence has changed and continued across the two periods, so that the Middle East can be understood against a wider pattern.

The evidence base is mixed. It includes a family memoir by Mary L. Trump, literature from clinical and political psychology on narcissism and leader-centric analysis, an original interview conducted for this research, and an analysis of public conduct, such as statements, social media posts and decisions in both terms. One idea from this evidence guides the whole report: Trump's relationship to history is episodic and not cumulative. Past commitments, agreements and even his own earlier statements carry little binding force for him, so he is best understood through what he does in the present, and not through his consistency with earlier positions.

The report proceeds in the following order. It first sets out the theoretical framework. It then builds the profile of Trump across ten dimensions. It applies this profile to American relations with the European Union, Canada and Türkiye, then with North Korea, Russia and China, and then with Latin America. The analysis next turns to the Middle East, covering Israel, Iran and the Persian Gulf states. After that, it asks how states can respond. It uses frameworks developed to manage narcissistic individuals in personal relationships and applies them, by analogy, to diplomacy and international relations. The report ends with policy recommendations, a statement of its limitations, and a conclusion.

Note: 'Transactionalism' describes an approach in which every relationship is judged by its tangible return and is adjusted or ended when that return falls. 'State narcissism' is a concept proposed by the author to describe a state whose external conduct is driven by one leader's need for admiration, loyalty and visible wins. The concept is offered as a way of thinking about the problem and has not yet been tested. Because the approach is new, the report is best read as an initial contribution to a field that needs further development.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: LEADER-CENTRIC FOREIGN POLICY ANALYSIS AND CONVENTIONAL EMOTIONAL DIPLOMACY

This report rests on two bodies of theory. The first, leader-centric foreign policy analysis, explains why the personality of one leader can be a legitimate object of study. The second, which this report calls conventional emotional diplomacy, describes the assumptions about emotion, trust and conduct on which ordinary diplomatic practice depends. Read together, they show where the two come apart. The conventions of diplomacy assume a counterpart who responds to emotional signals in predictable ways, and the leader-centric view asks what happens when the counterpart does not. 'Conventional emotional diplomacy' is the author's label for this set of assumptions, drawn from the literature below. It is not an established term.

Leader-Centric (Actor-Specific) Foreign Policy Analysis

Foreign policy analysis opens the 'black box' of the state and looks at the people who decide. Hudson and Day survey the field at several levels, including the personality and psychology of decision-makers, small groups, organisations, bureaucracies, domestic politics, culture and the international system.[1] Within international relations more broadly, Byman and Pollack argue that scholars have neglected individual leaders and should 'bring the statesman back in'. They use five case studies to challenge the standard reasons given for ignoring individuals.[2]

The method is to study the leader from a distance, through public conduct. Margaret Hermann's Leadership Trait Analysis codes a leader's public interviews, speeches and writings for traits such as the need for power and distrust of others, and her group has profiled more than 700 world leaders since 1999. She argues that a leader's style helps predict the advisers he will use, the structure of his government and the effect of his policies.[3] This report follows the same logic qualitatively. It reads public statements, social media posts and decisions across both terms, together with the biographical and psychological literature.

Narcissism and political leadership

Jerrold Post argues that politics attracts people with strong narcissistic traits. He describes the core features as entitlement, grandiosity that masks insecurity, sensitivity to criticism, and a need

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[1] Valerie M. Hudson and Benjamin Day, *Foreign Policy Analysis: Classic and Contemporary Theory*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).
[2] Daniel Byman and Kenneth M. Pollack, 'Let Us Now Praise Great Men: Bringing the Statesman Back In', *International Security* 25, no. 4 (Spring 2001): 107–46, https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/let-us-now-praise-great-men-bringing-statesman-back.
[3] 'What Makes Them Tick?', Maxwell School, Syracuse University, 1 June 2013, https://www.maxwell.syr.edu/news/article/what-makes-them-tick; Margaret G. Hermann, 'Explaining Foreign Policy Behavior Using the Personal Characteristics of Political Leaders', *International Studies Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (1980): 7–46.

for admiration.[4] Section 1.B applies this literature to Trump. It identifies three traits: entitlement, exploitation and impaired empathy. Dan McAdams adds a structural point, which is that Trump lacks a 'narrative identity', an inner story that links past, present and future. McAdams calls him the 'episodic man' and describes a life of separate battles that 'don't add up or form a narrative arc'.[5] The practical result is that earlier commitments do not bind him, and each negotiation is treated as a new contest. As the Introduction explains, this report uses these accounts to identify behavioral patterns. It does not diagnose.

Conventional emotional diplomacy

Diplomacy has always been a practice of managing emotion. Harold Nicolson, in his classic account, listed the qualities of the ideal diplomatist as truth, accuracy, calm, patience, good temper, modesty and loyalty.[6] Scholars of international relations have since treated emotion more systematically. Neta Crawford argues that emotions shape the practices of diplomacy, negotiation and postconflict peacebuilding, and deserve systematic analysis.[7] Todd Hall shows that states display emotion deliberately. He defines emotional diplomacy as coordinated, official behavior that projects a particular emotional response, such as anger, sympathy or guilt, to shape how others read a state's intentions and resolve.[8] Marcus Holmes argues that face-to-face meetings are a real channel of diplomacy, because they let leaders read each other's intentions and either reassure or detect hostility, as at Camp David and in the meetings of Reagan and Gorbachev.[9]

One difference of levels should be noted. Hall studies official emotion, which is deliberate and coordinated at state level. The leader's own affect is a different matter, because it may be neither deliberate nor coordinated.

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[4] Jerrold M. Post, *Narcissism and Politics: Dreams of Glory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
[5] Dan P. McAdams, *The Strange Case of Donald J. Trump: A Psychological Reckoning* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); 'The Strange Case of Donald J. Trump: A Psychological Reckoning', Northwestern Now, March 2020, https://news.northwestern.edu/stories/2020/03/the-strange-case-of-donald-j-trump-a-psychological-reckoning.
[6] Harold Nicolson, *Diplomacy* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1939).
[7] Neta C. Crawford, 'The Passion of World Politics: Propositions on Emotion and Emotional Relationships', *International Security* 24, no. 4 (Spring 2000): 116–56, https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/passion-world-politics-propositions-emotion-and-emotional-relationships.
[8] Todd H. Hall, *Emotional Diplomacy: Official Emotion on the International Stage* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).
[9] Marcus Holmes, *Face-to-Face Diplomacy: Social Neuroscience and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

Scope and limits

The leader-centric view complements structural explanations and does not replace them. Congress, the bureaucracy, the economy and the international system all shape American policy, and this report cannot fully separate their effect from the leader's. The literature on emotional diplomacy has mostly been developed from cases with conventional counterparts. It does not address narcissistic leaders, so applying it to this case is an extension. These limits are discussed further in the closing sections of the report. The next sections apply the framework, beginning with the profile of Trump.

COMPREHENSIVE POLITICAL PROFILE OF DONALD TRUMP

Childhood and Early Life

Utilizing Mary L. Trump's memoir, "Too Much and Never Enough: How My Family Created the World's Most Dangerous Man"[10], who is the niece of Donald Trump. She is also a psychologist, author, and political commentator[11], we can glimpse into Trump's childhood by first hand witness evidence.

The influence of Trump's childhood as the main authority figure marks the core of his early life values and behavior. His father, Fred Trump, had complete control over his discipline but his mother was largely absent.[12] Trump's mother, Mary Trump, dealing with prolonged illness after childbirth (hemorrhage and complications during labor), was unavailable to influence Trump.[13]

In such circumstances, behavioral frameworks had been solidified (children's long term behavior set by age seven), weakness and emotional expression (of which that do not project strength, such as vulnerability) was deemed a failure.[14] Fred Trump Jr. (referred to in the book as Freddy Trump), Donald Trump's oldest brother's role was central in this dynamic.[15] Freddy was not interested in the business and ventures domain, lacked the subjective masculine toughness and

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[10] Mary L. Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough: How My Family Created the World's Most Dangerous Man* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020).
[11] Mary L. Trump, "A Characterological Evaluation of the Victims of Stalking" (PhD diss., Adelphi University, 2009); Mary L. Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), author's note. Her doctorate in clinical psychology is from the Derner Institute of Advanced Psychological Studies, Adelphi University.
[12] Shane Harris and Michael Kranish, "Trump's Worldview Forged by Neglect and Trauma at Home, His Niece Says in New Book," *Washington Post*, July 7, 2020, republished by Boston.com, https://www.boston.com/news/politics/2020/07/07/trumps-worldview-forged-by-neglect-and-trauma-at-home-his-niece-says-in-new-book/; Mary L. Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020).
[13] Michael Kruse, "The Mystery of Mary Trump," *Politico Magazine*, November 4, 2017 (on the emergency surgery Mary Anne MacLeod Trump barely survived after the birth of Robert Trump in 1948); Mary L. Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020).
[14] Mary L. Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020); Shane Harris and Michael Kranish, "Trump's Worldview Forged by Neglect and Trauma at Home, His Niece Says in New Book," *Washington Post*, July 7, 2020, republished by Boston.com, https://www.boston.com/news/politics/2020/07/07/trumps-worldview-forged-by-neglect-and-trauma-at-home-his-niece-says-in-new-book/
[15] Mary L. Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), 41, 62, 64; Gwenda Blair, *The Trumps: Three Generations of Builders and a Presidential Candidate* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015).

was considered a first-rate example of weakness in the family.[16] He was humiliated for apologizing, doubting himself and having emotional responses.[17]

As one of the many factors, this created a dominance seeking and rule-breaking pattern for Donald Trump.[18] In the book, the author describes Trump as unwilling to abide by authority outside of home and disruptive.[19] This pushed his father to enroll him in New York Military Academy at age 13, hoping it would correct his behavior.[20]

The New York Military Academy's culture was centered around competition, respect of hierarchy and so called masculine toughness.[21] Such an environment, due to its familiar pattern in Trump's home, instead of correcting behavior, reinforced them.[22] He used the survival skills he learnt at home to dominate lower rankings at the academy, practice aggression and gain status in the cadet system.[23]

Fred Trump Jr.'s struggle with alcoholism caused career decline and an early death, which further solidified the family's stance on weakness, now with a concrete example.[24]

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[16] Mary L. Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), 41, 62, 64.
[17] Mary L. Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020); Shane Harris and Michael Kranish, "Trump's Worldview Forged by Neglect and Trauma at Home, His Niece Says in New Book," *Washington Post*, July 7, 2020, republished by Boston.com, https://www.boston.com/news/politics/2020/07/07/trumps-worldview-forged-by-neglect-and-trauma-at-home-his-niece-says-in-new-book/.
[18] Mary L. Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020)
[19] Mary L. Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020).
[20] "Even at Military Academy, Trump Marched to a Different Drum," *Washington Post*, republished in the *Santa Fe New Mexican*, c. 2016, https://www.santafenewmexican.com/news/even-at-military-academy-trump-marched-to-a-different-drum/article_8c2396ad-7b6b-5d93-9f4e-56e3bedb5ff4.html; Mary L. Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020).
[21] "Even at Military Academy, Trump Marched to a Different Drum," *Washington Post*, republished in the *Santa Fe New Mexican*, c. 2016, https://www.santafenewmexican.com/news/even-at-military-academy-trump-marched-to-a-different-drum/article_8c2396ad-7b6b-5d93-9f4e-56e3bedb5ff4.html.
[22] Mary L. Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020).
[23] Mary L. Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020); "Even at Military Academy, Trump Marched to a Different Drum," *Washington Post*, republished in the *Santa Fe New Mexican*, c. 2016, https://www.santafenewmexican.com/news/even-at-military-academy-trump-marched-to-a-different-drum/article_8c2396ad-7b6b-5d93-9f4e-56e3bedb5ff4.html.
[24] Gwenda Blair, *The Trumps: Three Generations of Builders and a Presidential Candidate* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 320; Mary L. Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), 85, 93; Shane Harris and Michael Kranish, "Trump's Worldview Forged by Neglect and Trauma at Home, His Niece Says in New Book," *Washington Post*, July 7, 2020, republished by Boston.com, https://www.boston.com/news/politics/2020/07/07/trumps-worldview-forged-by-neglect-and-trauma-at-home-his-niece-says-in-new-book/.

With his death, the idea of "deviating from strength leads to collapse" marked Trump's further rigidity and hardened the earlier behavior formed in his childhood such as lack of empathy.[25]

Trump's exposure to his father's business practices, such as transactional nature of relationship, opportunism, manipulating media and using external networks, influenced his further business ventures and political behavior.[26]

Fred Trump

Trump's father, Frederick Christ Trump (Fred Trump), born in 1905, in the Bronx[27] (one of the poorest regions of New York city) originally wanted to be a carpenter but following his father's death at age 13, he had to work in a grocery store.[28] At age 15, he entered the real estate business through construction and built his first house at age 18.[29] His first breakthrough was during the Great Depression when U.S president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, following the collapse of the housing market, wanted to revive it.[30] Loan rearrangements, easier terms for housing purchases and investing in construction, which was the focus area of Fred Trump, helped him create his early real estate portfolio.[31]

Fred Trump's biggest business practice that led to his profiteering was using government backed loans Housing Administration (FHA) mortgage insurance programs to finance large-scale housing developments, so that even if his own investment into the project would fail, government policies would bear the losses.[32] For example in 1954, he purchased a lang for 200,000 USD, and paid a low amount of gift tax by putting the land under children's ownership, and took a loan of 16 million USD to build apartments on the land by overstating construction costs, which by the sale of those property, he profited 4 million.[33] Later on, the investigations into his activities (such as racist practices and fraud schemes) were brought out which lead to lawsuits against him.[34]

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[25] Mary L. Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough: How My Family Created the World's Most Dangerous Man* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), chap. 4, "Expecting to Fly," and chap. 2, "The First Son."
[26] Gwenda Blair, *The Trumps: Three Generations of Builders and a Presidential Candidate* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015); Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, chap. 1, "The House."
[27] Blair, *The Trumps*, 110.
[28] Blair, *The Trumps*, 116–19.
[29] Blair, *The Trumps*, 120–22.
[30] National Housing Act, Pub. L. No. 73-479, 48 Stat. 1246 (1934); Blair, *The Trumps*, 146.
[31] Blair, *The Trumps*, 146, 156–61.
[32] David Barstow, Susanne Craig, and Russ Buettner, "Trump Engaged in Suspect Tax Schemes as He Reaped Riches from His Father," *New York Times*, October 2, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/10/02/us/politics/donald-trump-tax-schemes-fred-trump.html; Blair, *The Trumps*, 156–61.
[33] Blair, *The Trumps*, 171–72; Barstow, Craig, and Buettner, "Trump Engaged in Suspect Tax Schemes."
[34] Michael Kranish and Robert O'Harrow Jr., "Inside the Government's Racial Bias Case against Donald Trump's Company, and How He Fought It," *Washington Post*, January 23, 2016,

Fred Trump's approach to business also involved using political connections, media visibility, and government resources[35] This approach prioritized efficiency, scale, and profitability within a transactional relationship framework. For example, according to Gwenda Blair (author of "The Trumps: Three Generations of Builders and a Presidential Candidate"), Fred hired Howard Rubenstein, public relations expert, to land him on a list of the best-dressed men in America in 1950 and to send out press releases about his life story.[36] ""He saw that the media generated respect, which generated financial success, which in turn generated media,".[37] These early exposures contributed to the development of a transactional worldview in which interactions are primarily evaluated in terms of personal advantage, so for Donald Trump, watching his father use local press and media networks, visibility and narrative control became tools of influence.[38]

All of these influences together resulted in a very limited development of empathy. Because of emotional detachment and the strong belief that vulnerability means failure, the importance of recognizing other people's issues was reduced.[39]

Here are the crucial excerpts from Mary L. Trump's memoir, "Too Much and Never Enough: How My Family Created the World's Most Dangerous Man":

Identification:

- Fred Trump, father of Donald Trump
- Freddy (Fred Trump, Jr.), the oldest brother of Donald Trump

Childhood:

- "Weakness was perhaps the greatest sin of all, and Fred (the father) worried that Freddy (Trump's brother) was more like his own brother, John, the MIT professor: soft and, though not unambitious, interested in the wrong things, such as engineering and physics, which Fred found esoteric and unimportant."[40]
- "Fred wanted his oldest son to be a 'killer' in his parlance … Being a killer was really code for being invulnerable."[41]

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https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/inside-the-governments-racial-bias-case-against-donald-trumps-company-and-how-he-fought-it/2016/01/23/fb90163e-bfbe-11e5-bcda-62a36b394160_story.html

[35] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, chap. 1, "The House"; Blair, *The Trumps*.

[36] Gwenda Blair, *The Trumps: Three Generations of Builders and a Presidential Candidate* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015); Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, chap. 1, "The House."

[37] Blair, *The Trumps*.

[38] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, chap. 1, "The House"; Blair, *The Trumps*.

[39] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, Epilogue, "The Tenth Circle."

[40] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, chap. 2.

[41] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, chap. 2.

- "Fred hated it when his oldest son screwed up… but he hated it even more when, after being taken to task, Freddy apologized. 'Sorry, Dad,' Fred would mock him."[42]
- "The lesson he learned, at its simplest, was that it was wrong to be like Freddy: Fred didn't respect his oldest son. Fred thought Freddy was weak, and therefore so did Donald".[43]

Behavior at School:

- "Donald was a bully. As a kid, he was loud, aggressive, and prone to getting into trouble. He had difficulty following rules and often acted out in ways that disturbed teachers and other students."[44]
- "By the time Donald was thirteen, Fred had lost patience with his son's behavior. Donald had become increasingly aggressive and difficult to control, and Fred believed that only a strict environment could discipline him."[45]
- "Fred made the decision to send Donald to the New York Military Academy, hoping that the school's rigid discipline would curb his son's aggressive tendencies."[46]

Military Academy:

- "By the time Donald was thirteen, Fred had had enough. Donald's behavior had become increasingly difficult to control, and Fred decided that the best solution was to send him away to New York Military Academy, a private boarding school about sixty miles north of the city."[47]
- "The academy emphasized strict discipline, hierarchy, and competition. Cadets were expected to follow orders without question and to demonstrate toughness and resilience in everything they did."[48]
- "Donald adapted quickly to the environment. The academy rewarded aggression, dominance, and competitiveness, traits he had already begun to cultivate at home."[49]

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[42] Mary L. Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough: How My Family Created the World's Most Dangerous Man* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), chap. 2.
[43] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, chap. 2.
[44] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, chap. 3, "The Great I-Am."
[45] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, chap. 3.
[46] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, chap. 3; "Trump the 'Bully': How Childhood & Military School Shaped the Future President," *FRONTLINE*, PBS, September 22, 2020, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/trump-the-bully-how-childhood-military-school-shaped-the-future-president/.
[47] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, chap. 3.
[48] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, chap. 3; "Trump the 'Bully.'"
[49] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, chap. 3; "Trump the 'Bully.'"

- "Success at the academy meant gaining status within the cadet hierarchy, something Donald pursued with enthusiasm."[50]

Freddy's Death Influence:

- "His (Freddy's) drinking was out of control, and he knew that he could no longer hack it as a pilot. The only self-made man in the family, Freddy, was being slowly, inexorably dismantled."[51]
- "Less than a year after it had begun, Freddy's flying career was over. With no other options, he found himself standing in front of his father… asking for a job that he didn't want and Fred didn't think he could do."[52]
- "The lesson he (Donald) learned… was that it was wrong to be like Freddy."[53]

Business Style:

- "Through his growing experience with building many houses simultaneously and his inherent skill at using local media to his own ends, Fred was introduced to well-connected politicians and learned through them how to call in favors at the right time, and, most important, chase government money."[54]
- "Building larger-scale projects as quickly, efficiently, and cheaply as possible while still managing to make them attractive to renters."[55]
- "If he can in any way profit from your death, he'll facilitate it, and then he'll ignore the fact that you died."
- "Everything is transactional for this poor, broken human being. Everything." - David Corn (David Corn is a prominent Washington journalist and author who acts as a vocal critic and investigator of Donald Trump).
- "Managing the crisis in every moment doesn't help him promote his preferred narrative that no one has ever done a better job than he has."[56]

Media Strategy:

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[50] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, chap. 3; "Even at Military Academy, Trump Marched to a Different Drum," *Washington Post*, republished in the *Santa Fe New Mexican*, c. 2016, https://www.santafenewmexican.com/news/even-at-military-academy-trump-marched-to-a-different-drum/article_8c2396ad-7b6b-5d93-9f4e-56e3bedb5ff4.html.
[51] Mary L. Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough: How My Family Created the World's Most Dangerous Man* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), chap. 4, "Expecting to Fly," and chap. 4.
[52] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, chap. 4.
[53] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, chap. 2.
[54] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, chap. 1.
[55] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, chap. 1.
[56] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, Epilogue.

- "Through his growing experience with building many houses simultaneously and his inherent skill at using local media to his own ends, Fred was introduced to well-connected politicians and learned through them how to call in favors at the right time…"[57]
- "Instead, Donald withdraws to his comfort zones—Twitter, Fox News—casting blame from afar, protected by a figurative or literal bunker."[58]
- "Managing the crisis in every moment doesn't help him promote his preferred narrative that no one has ever done a better job than he has."[59]
- "For him, there has never been any option but to project strength, no matter how illusory, because doing anything else carries a death sentence."[60]

Lack of Empathy:

- "The simple fact is that Donald is fundamentally incapable of acknowledging the suffering of others. Telling the stories of those we've lost would bore him."[61]
- "Acknowledging the victims of COVID-19 would be to associate himself with their weakness, a trait his father taught him to despise."[62]
- "Perhaps most crucially, for Donald, there is no value in empathy, no tangible upside to caring for other people."[63]
- "In Donald's mind, even acknowledging an inevitable threat would indicate weakness. Taking responsibility would open him up to blame."[64]
- "But he can never escape the fact that he is and always will be a terrified little boy."[65]

Approach to Politics and Foreign Affairs:

- "Donald's initial response to COVID-19 underscores his need to minimize negativity at all costs. Fear—the equivalent of weakness in our family—is as unacceptable to him now as it was when he was three years old. When Donald is in the most trouble, superlatives are no longer enough: both the situation and his reactions to it must be unique, even if absurd or nonsensical.[66]

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[57] Mary L. Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough: How My Family Created the World's Most Dangerous Man* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), chap. 1.
[58] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, Epilogue.
[59] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, Epilogue.
[60] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, Epilogue.
[61] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, Epilogue.
[62] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, Epilogue.
[63] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, Epilogue.
[64] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, Epilogue.
[65] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, Epilogue.
[66] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, Epilogue.

- "The lives of potentially hundreds of thousands of people will be lost, and the economy of the richest country in history may well be destroyed. Donald will acknowledge none of this, moving the goalposts to hide the evidence and convincing himself in the process that he's done a better job than anybody else could have if only a few hundred thousand die instead of 2 million."[67]
- "Get even with people who have screwed you," Donald has said.[68]
- "What Donald can do in order to offset the powerlessness and rage he feels is to punish the rest of us. He'll withhold ventilators or steal supplies from states that have not groveled sufficiently."[69]
- "In Donald's mind, even acknowledging an inevitable threat would indicate weakness. Taking responsibility would open him up to blame. Being a hero—being 130 good—is impossible for him".[70]
- "Donald requires division. It is the only way he knows how to survive—my grandfather ensured that decades ago when he turned his children against each other."[71]
- "We must dispense with the idea of Donald's 'strategic brilliance' in understanding the intersection of media and politics. He doesn't have a strategy; he never has."[72]
- "He is as incapable of adjusting to changing circumstances as he is of becoming 'presidential."[73]
- "After the election, Vladimir Putin, Kim Jong-un, and Mitch McConnell, all of whom bear more than a passing psychological resemblance to Fred, recognized in a way others should have but did not that Donald's checkered personal history and his unique personality flaws make him extremely vulnerable to manipulation by smarter, more powerful men. His pathologies have rendered him so simple-minded that it takes nothing more than repeating to him the things he says to and about himself dozens of times a day—he's the smartest, the greatest, the best—to get him to do whatever they want, whether it's imprisoning children in concentration camps, betraying allies, implementing economy-crushing tax cuts, or degrading every institution that's contributed to the United States' rise and the flourishing of liberal democracy."[74]
- "Donald's problems are accumulating because the maneuvering required to solve them, or to pretend they don't exist, has become more complicated, requiring many more people to execute the cover-ups. Donald is completely unprepared to solve his own

[67] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, Epilogue.
[68] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, Epilogue.
[69] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, Epilogue.
[70] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, Epilogue.
[71] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, Epilogue.
[72] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, chap. 14, "A Civil Servant in Public Housing."
[73] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, chap. 14.
[74] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, chap. 14.

problems or adequately cover his tracks. After all, the systems were set up in the first place to protect him from his own weaknesses, not help him negotiate the wider world."[75]

- "The people with access to him are weaker than Donald is, more craven, but just as desperate. Their futures are directly dependent on his success and favor. They either fail to see or refuse to believe that their fate will be the same as that of anyone who pledged loyalty to him in the past. There seems to be an endless number of people willing to join the claque that protects Donald from his own inadequacies while perpetuating his unfounded belief in himself. Although more powerful people put Donald into the institutions that have shielded him since the very beginning, it's people weaker than he is who are keeping him there."[76]
- "His cruelty is also an exercise of his power, such as it is. He has always wielded it against people who are weaker than he is or who are constrained by their duty or dependence from fighting back. Employees and political appointees can't fight back when he attacks them in his Twitter feed because to do so would risk their jobs or their reputations."[77]

Mary L. Trump's Personal Conclusion on Donald Trump's Psychology:

- "Donald takes any rebuke as a challenge and doubles down on the behavior that drew fire in the first place, as if the criticism is permission to do worse."[78]
- "The lies may become true in his mind as soon as he utters them, but they're still lies."[79]
- "...his struggle for legitimacy, which could never be won, turned into a scheme to make sure nobody found out that he's never been legitimate at all."[80]
- "His cruelty serves, in part, as a means to distract both himself and us from the true extent of his failures. The more egregious his failures become, the more egregious his cruelty becomes."[81]

[75] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, chap. 14.
[76] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, chap. 14.
[77] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, chap. 14.
[78] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, chap. 14.
[79] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, chap. 14.
[80] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, chap. 14.
[81] Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough*, chap. 14.

Personality Traits And Psychological Tendencies

Narcissism

According to Malkin (2017), as discussed in the book "The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump", Trump's behavioral profile shows strong similarities with pathological narcissism.[82] The most important feature is an excessive need to be seen as exceptional, which results in a constant search for validation. This need for validation shapes his interactions, decision-making, and reactions to perceived threats. The pattern is mainly based on three traits: entitlement, exploitation, and lack of empathy.[83] Entitlement leads to expecting loyalty and obedience from others. Exploitation means using relationships mainly for personal benefit. Impaired empathy means there is little attention to the effects of actions on others, including allies. When these traits are combined, the result is a higher chance of aggressive reactions if ego or status is questioned, and a repeated habit of refusing responsibility and blaming others.[84] As these tendencies intensify, they may overlap with psychopathic features such as manipulation, lack of remorse, and calculated dishonesty are also present.[85] When these features are combined, the result is often called malignant narcissism.[86] In this situation, other people are not seen as partners but as tools or obstacles in a zero-sum competition.[87] This approach has direct consequences for diplomacy, where trust, reciprocity, and clear communication are necessary. Another risk is the development of increasing paranoia. The refusal to admit vulnerability leads to black-and-white thinking, dividing actors into allies or enemies. Instead of looking at insecurity as an internal issue, it is projected onto others, and threats are blamed on outside actors.[88] This makes it more likely to misunderstand situations and to react too strongly. This pattern leads to poor judgment. When the main goal is to protect a sense of superiority, people ignore objective analysis. Decisions are often made to show strength, without careful consideration of the results, especially in serious military or diplomatic situations.[89] In these cases, decision-making becomes unpredictable, and positions can shift quickly because of immediate personal pressures rather than a consistent strategy. This undermines policy

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[82] Craig Malkin, "Pathological Narcissism and Politics: A Lethal Mix," in *The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump: 27 Psychiatrists and Mental Health Experts Assess a President*, ed. Bandy X. Lee (New York: Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin's Press, 2017).
[83] Malkin, "Pathological Narcissism and Politics."
[84] Malkin, "Pathological Narcissism and Politics."
[85] Lance Dodes, "Sociopathy," in *The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump: 27 Psychiatrists and Mental Health Experts Assess a President*, ed. Bandy X. Lee (New York: Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin's Press, 2017).
[86] Otto F. Kernberg, *Severe Personality Disorders: Psychotherapeutic Strategies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).
[87] Dodes, "Sociopathy."
[88] Robert S. Robins and Jerrold M. Post, *Political Paranoia: The Psychopolitics of Hatred* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).
[89] Malkin, "Pathological Narcissism and Politics."

consistency and makes it harder to communicate clearly with allies and adversaries, increasing uncertainty in international relations. Another important behavior is gaslighting, which means actively changing reality to control the narrative.[90] This erodes trust within institutions and in communication, as different versions of reality emerge.[91] Over time, this weakens coordination, lowers credibility, and increases errors. In summary, this psychological profile creates a structural risk for foreign policy because decisions become more reactive, personal, and focused on defending status, rather than based on stable evaluation.[92]

Episodic Behavior

Psychologist Dan. P McAdams (2021) terms the "episodic" personality structure in defining Trump's psychological architecture.[93]

Most people develop what psychologists call a "narrative identity", which is an internal story that connects their past experiences to their current actions and future plans.[94] This personal narrative provides consistency, accountability for past promises, and awareness of legacy. According to McAdams's detailed biographical analysis, Trump lacks this structure entirely.[95]

Instead, Trump acts in an episodic way, treating every interaction, negotiation, or public appearance as a separate event, with no real connection to what happened before or what will happen after.[96] His personal history does not influence his current decisions, and thinking about future legacy does not affect his behavior. Each situation is seen as a new contest that must be won for its own sake.

Key Psychological Characteristics According to McAdams:

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[90] "MTP: 'Our Press Sec Gave Alternative Facts' on Inaugural Crowd Size, Says Kellyanne Conway to Chuck Todd," NBC News, January 22, 2017, https://nbcuniversalnewsgroup.com/nbcnews/2017/01/22/mtp-our-press-sec-gave-alternative-facts-on-inaugural-crowd-size-says-kellyanne-conway-to-chuck-todd/.

[91] Robert Jay Lifton, "Foreword: Our Witness to Malignant Normality," in *The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump: 27 Psychiatrists and Mental Health Experts Assess a President*, ed. Bandy X. Lee (New York: Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin's Press, 2017).

[92] Malkin, "Pathological Narcissism and Politics."

[93] Dan P. McAdams, *The Strange Case of Donald J. Trump: A Psychological Reckoning* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); Dan P. McAdams, "The Mind of Donald Trump," *The Atlantic*, June 2016.

[94] Dan P. McAdams, "The Psychology of Life Stories," *Review of General Psychology* 5, no. 2 (2001): 100–122.

[95] McAdams, *The Strange Case of Donald J. Trump*; Hilary Hurd Anyaso, "The Strange Case of Donald J. Trump: A Psychological Reckoning," *Northwestern Now*, March 9, 2020, https://news.northwestern.edu/stories/2020/03/the-strange-case-of-donald-j-trump-a-psychological-reckoning.

[96] Anyaso, "The Strange Case of Donald J. Trump."

Several traits follow directly from this episodic orientation and carry direct implications for diplomatic and political engagement:

Momentary Truths: Trump does not evaluate statements by their consistency with past positions. What is "true" is what serves the current moment. Counterparts should not expect prior agreements or stated positions to function as stable anchors in subsequent interactions.[97]

Present-moment dominance: Trump's attention and decision-making are overwhelmingly driven by the immediate situation. Appeals to historical relationships, long-standing alliances, or future consequences carry limited persuasive weight unless directly tied to winning the current exchange.[98]

Static self-concept: Trump consistently describes himself in fixed, superlative terms such as strength, dominance, intelligence, rather than through a narrative of growth or development. He does not frame himself as someone who has learned, changed, or been shaped by experience.[99]

Absence of introspection: Journalists, biographers, and close associates have consistently noted Trump's inability or unwillingness to engage in self-reflection. He does not discuss personal struggles, formative failures, or internal conflict. There is no "private Trump" to appeal to through personal rapport of the conventional kind.[100]

Combat as default mode: Trump views each day as a discrete battle to be won. This is not merely rhetorical posturing, it reflects a genuine cognitive orientation. Negotiations are experienced as contests, and concessions or compromise are processed as defeat rather than as components of a longer strategic relationship.[101]

The episodic structure of Trump's behavior provides an explanation for what many analysts and observers have described as inconsistency or even deception in his actions.[102] In his

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[97] Anyaso, "The Strange Case of Donald J. Trump." McAdams is quoted there: "Truth for Donald Trump is whatever works to win in the moment."
[98] Anyaso, "The Strange Case of Donald J. Trump." McAdams is quoted there describing Trump as "always on the surface, always right now."
[99] Anyaso, "The Strange Case of Donald J. Trump." McAdams is quoted there: Trump "can't show any kind of growth or learning, because to grow you have to have once been small."
[100] Anyaso, "The Strange Case of Donald J. Trump." McAdams is quoted there: Trump is "not introspective, retrospective or prospective."
[101] Anyaso, "The Strange Case of Donald J. Trump." McAdams is quoted there: Trump "moves through life episode by episode, from one battle to the next."
[102] Glenn Kessler, Salvador Rizzo, and Meg Kelly, "Trump's False or Misleading Claims Total 30,573 over 4 Years," *Washington Post*, January 24, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/how-fact-checker-tracked-trump-claims/2021/01/23/ad04b69a-5c1d-11eb-a976-bad6431e03e2_story.html.

psychological worldview, there is not necessarily a contradiction in maintaining opposite positions at different times, because each situation is treated as a separate and complete reality. Therefore, for diplomatic actors who expect previous commitments to be binding, it is necessary to formalize agreements in written and official documents, instead of relying on the expectation of a stable relationship.

Personal Conduct and Behavioral Habits

Since Trump came to power in 2017, state relations have been conducted to a large degree through his personal behavior and habits. When personal relationships are the main tool of diplomacy, his daily routines, where he gets his information from and how he wants to be treated become the link between his temperament and his foreign policy decisions. This subchapter examines the documented patterns of his personal conduct across both terms (2017-2021 and 2025-present), based on official records, first-hand accounts and media reporting from the time.

1. Trump's penthouse in Trump Tower in New York is built over three floors and is said to be modeled on the Palace of Versailles, hence the 24-karat gold leaf, the gold-rimmed plates, the crystal chandeliers and the gilded crown moldings running along the ceilings as an example of chrysophilia.[103]
2. Trump was reportedly displeased at not being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.[104] When FIFA subsequently presented him with its newly created peace prize, he eagerly took the medal and placed it around his own neck.[105]
3. Trump has named Citizen Kane as his favorite film and has also cited several crime and Western classics, among them The Godfather, Goodfellas and The Good, the Bad and the Ugly, as well as Bloodsport and Gone with the Wind.[106] [107]
4. At a White House Hanukkah reception in December 2025, the commentator Mark Levin recalled having called Trump the first Jewish president six years earlier, and Trump

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[103] Jennifer Fernandez, "Donald Trump's 1985 Apartment Looks Exactly How You'd Imagine It," Architectural Digest, July 27, 2016, https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/donald-trump-1985-apartment-looks-exactly-how-youd-imagine-i

[104] James Fitzgerald, "Trump downplays talk of Nobel Peace Prize," BBC News, September 4, 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c0r0wjl2gweo

[105] Heather Digby Parton, "FIFA's Phony 'Peace Prize' Can't Redeem Donald Trump," Salon, December 8, 2025, https://www.salon.com/2025/12/08/fifas-phony-peace-prize-cant-redeem-donald-trump/

[106] Julia Lechner, "Donald Trump's Favorite Movies," CBS News, December 6, 2016, https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/donald-trumps-favorite-movies/

[107] John Lynch, "Donald Trump's surprising list of favorite movies, TV shows, and music," Business Insider, August 17, 2016, https://www.businessinsider.com/donald-trumps-favorite-pop-culture-movies-tv-books-music-2016-8

replied, "It's true."[108] The remark appears to allude to Trump's family connection to Judaism, as his daughter Ivanka converted in 2009, before her marriage to Jared Kushner.[109] Trump himself identifies as a nondenominational Christian. In October 2020, he stated that, although confirmed in a Presbyterian church as a child, he no longer considered himself a Presbyterian.[110]

5. He uses “executive time” blocks for TV, calls, and social media instead of formal work routines.[111]
6. He routinely tears up documents after use, sometimes into very small pieces.[112]
7. Staff are forced to tape documents back together to comply with the Presidential Records Act.[113]
8. He regularly consumes large, repetitive fast food meals, often multiple items in one sitting.[114]
9. He prefers chain food due to fear of poisoning and reliance on predictable preparation.[115]
10. He installed a button in the Oval Office to request Diet Coke on demand.[116]
11. He uses heavy tanning (likely spray/booth), producing a consistent orange tone.[117] Tanning also peaked in the 1980s and 1990s and signaled health, beauty and high social status[118]

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[108] Mark Levin and Donald Trump, "[Clip title]," C-SPAN, video, https://www.c-span.org/clip/white-house-event/user-clip-mark-levin-calls-trump-the-first-jewish-president/5185307

[109] "In Israel, Ivanka Trump May Not Be Considered Jewish," Times of Israel, June 23, 2016, https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-israel-ivanka-trump-may-not-be-considered-jewish/

[110] Jack Jenkins and Maina Mwaura, "Trump, Confirmed a Presbyterian, Now Identifies as 'Non-Denominational Christian,'" Religion News Service, October 26, 2020, republished by National Catholic Reporter, https://www.ncronline.org/print/pdf/node/193570

[111] Alexi McCammond and Jonathan Swan, "Scoop: Insider Leaks Trump's 'Executive Time'-Filled Private Schedules," *Axios*, February 3, 2019, https://www.axios.com/2019/02/03/donald-trump-private-schedules-leak-executive-time

[112] Melissa Quinn, "Some Trump White House Records Were Torn Up and Taped Back Together, National Archives Says," *CBS News*, February 1, 2022, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-white-house-records-torn-up-taped-together-national-archives/

[113] Alana Abramson, "Richard Nixon Is the Reason President Trump's Aides Have to Repair Documents He Rips Up," *TIME*, June 11, 2018, https://time.com/5308542/trump-presidential-records-nixon/

[114] Roey Hadar and Tessa Weinberg, "Fast Food Fan President Donald Trump Chows Down on Burgers with Clemson Football Team," *ABC News*, January 14, 2019, https://abcnews.com/Politics/fast-food-fan-president-donald-trump-chows-fast/story?id=60375831

[115] Tim Marcin, "Trump Eats McDonald's Because He's Afraid of Being Poisoned Elsewhere," *Newsweek*, January 3, 2018, https://www.newsweek.com/trump-eats-mcdonalds-because-afraid-poison-donald-fast-food-obsession-769796

[116] Dan Evon, "Did Trump Have a 'Diet Coke' Button in the Oval Office?," *Snopes*, January 21, 2021, https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/trump-diet-coke-button-oval/.

[117] Peter Wade, "How Does Trump Maintain His Orange Glow?" *Rolling Stone*, February 2, 2019, https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/trump-tan-789157/

[118] The SunShine Co., "History of Tanning," The SunShine Co., accessed October 5, 2026, https://www.thesunshineco.co.uk/blog/tips/history-of-tanning/

12. He speaks continuously in conversations, often without allowing others to respond.[119]
13. His preferred format of communication is phone calls.[120]
14. He sleeps very little, especially during traveling. [121]
15. He operates continuously without clear rest periods.[122]
16. He wakes staff or calls officials at irregular hours. In a televised interview, JD Vance said the president will call him at 12:30 or 2:00 in the morning and then again at 6:00 about a different topic.[123]
17. He frequently posts in bursts on Truth Social late at night, sometimes nearly 160 times in one evening.[124]
18. He prints out emails and responds to them by hand.[125]
19. He has avoided email and has minimal computer use.[126]
20. His tariff strategies reflect older economic frameworks rather than modern systems.[127]
21. He struggles to stay engaged in long or complex tasks.[128]

- *The Art of the Deal*, Tony Schwartz, noted that Trump explicitly admitted to him that he has a very short attention span and dislikes sitting still for deep focus, creating a direct contradiction in how he describes his own mind.

22. He prefers short oral briefings to dense written material, which has reportedly led him to skip the written President's Daily Brief. [129]

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[119] Chrissy Bobic, "Trump Tells Reporter to Never Talk Again during Press Briefing," *LittleThings*, August 5, 2026, https://littlethings.com/entertainment/trump-reporter-never-talk-again-ms-now
[120] Donald J. Trump with Tony Schwartz, *Trump: The Art of the Deal* (New York: Random House, 1987).
[121] Wiktoria Gucia, "Trump, 79, Gives Bonkers Reason He Doesn't Sleep on Planes," *Daily Beast*, February 5, 2026.
https://www.thedailybeast.com/trump-79-gives-bonkers-reason-he-doesnt-sleep-on-planes/
[122] Cameron Adams, "JD Vance Spills on Trump's Unhealthy Sleep Schedule," *Daily Beast*, November 14, 2025, https://www.thedailybeast.com/jd-vance-spills-on-trumps-wild-sleep-schedule/
[123] JD Vance, interview by Lara Trump, *My View with Lara Trump*, Fox News Channel, September 6, 2025.
[124] Anthony DeBarros, Annie Linskey, "The Late-Night Truth Social Storms That Offer a Window into the President's Mind," *Wall Street Journal*, May 12, 2026,
https://www.wsj.com/politics/trump-truth-social-late-night-posts-167cb47a.
[125] "Trump Responds to Emails with Handwritten Notes," *MediaPost*, January 24, 2017,
https://www.mediapost.com/publications/article/293557/trump-responds-to-emails-with-handwritten-notes.html
[126] Victor Tangermann, "Donald Trump Doesn't Use a Computer or Have an Email Address, Former Aide Reveals in Court," *Futurism*, May 10, 2024,
https://futurism.com/the-byte/donald-trump-computer-email-address
[127] Ryan Mulholland, "Why Is Trump Pursuing a 19th Century Trade and Economic Agenda in the 21st Century?," Center for American Progress, February 18, 2025,
https://www.americanprogress.org/article/why-is-trump-pursuing-a-19th-century-trade-and-economic-agenda-in-the-21st-century/
[128] Donald J. Trump with Tony Schwartz, *Trump: The Art of the Deal* (New York: Random House, 1987).
[129] Carol D. Leonnig, Shane Harris, and Greg Jaffe, "Breaking with Tradition, Trump Skips President's Written Intelligence Report and Relies on Oral Briefings," *Washington Post*, February 9, 2018,
https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/breaking-with-tradition-trump-skips-presidents-written-intelligence-report-for-oral-briefings/2018/02/09/b7ba569e-0c52-11e8-95a5-c396801049ef_story.html

23. John Bolton describes Trump's thinking as "an archipelago of dots," meaning separate deals with no overall strategy, and also recounts him jumping between topics in meetings and calls. [130]
24. He rejects written intelligence briefings and prefers verbal updates. [131]
25. He is reported to prefer condensed material and impatient with exhaustive classified documents, and does not read the full written intelligence brief. [132]
26. Intelligence analysts were reportedly told to keep his daily brief short, with typically three topics of no more than a page each, [133] and his oral briefings were adapted to include photos, videos and graphics. [134]
27. Although the President's Daily Brief was produced every day, he received an oral briefing only two to three times a week, and the sessions became less frequent over his first term. [135]
28. Intelligence officials condense his briefings and add maps, charts, pictures and videos before presenting them. [136]
29. His briefers shortened the daily brief to three one-page items and later added a storytelling approach with graphics, after his first briefer reportedly said he barely reads anything. [137]

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[130] John Bolton, The Room Where It Happened: A White House Memoir (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020)
[131] Carol D. Leonnig, Shane Harris, and Greg Jaffe, "Breaking with Tradition, Trump Skips President's Written Intelligence Report and Relies on Oral Briefings," Washington Post, February 9, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/breaking-with-tradition-trump-skips-presidents-written-intelligence-report-for-oral-briefings/2018/02/09/b7ba569e-0c52-11e8-95a5-c396801049ef_story.html
[132] Leonnig, Harris, and Jaffe, "Breaking with Tradition." Leonnig, Carol D., Shane Harris, and Greg Jaffe. "Breaking with Tradition, Trump Skips President's Written Intelligence Report and Relies on Oral Briefings." Washington Post, February 9, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/breaking-with-tradition-trump-skips-presidents-written-intelligence-report-for-oral-briefings/2018/02/09/b7ba569e-0c52-11e8-95a5-c396801049ef_story.html
[133] Ashley Dejean, "Exclusive: Classified Memo Tells Intelligence Analysts to Keep Trump's Daily Brief Short," Mother Jones, February 16, 2017, https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2017/02/classified-memo-tells-intelligence-analysts-keep-trumps-daily-brief-short/
[134] Leonnig, Harris, and Jaffe, "Breaking with Tradition.". Dejean, Ashley. "Exclusive: Classified Memo Tells Intelligence Analysts to Keep Trump's Daily Brief Short." Mother Jones, February 16, 2017. https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2017/02/classified-memo-tells-intelligence-analysts-keep-trumps-daily-brief-short/
[135] Olivia Gazis, "CIA Publishes New Account Describing 'Challenges' of Briefing Trump," CBS News, December 1, 2021, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-cia-briefings-challenge/
[136] Alexandra Wilts, Donald Trump 'likes his intelligence briefings filled with pictures', says new report, Independent, May 30 2017, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/trump-latest-pictures-intelligence-briefings-new-report-a7763831.html
[137] Gazis, Olivia. "CIA Publishes New Account Describing 'Challenges' of Briefing Trump." CBS News, December 1, 2021. https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-cia-briefings-challenge/

30. Trump gives nicknames to people he sees as rivals, and he has done so throughout both terms (2017–2021 and 2025–present). This is for humiliation and ease to remember purposes, identified in Section 2, A and B (Childhood and Early Life, Personality Traits and Psychological Tendencies). Examples include “Cheatin’ Obama”: nickname for former President Barack Obama, implying dishonesty without specifying context [138], “Little Marco”: A nickname for Marco Rubio, implying both physical smallness and political insignificance[139] or “Little Rocket Man”: A nickname for North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, combining ridicule with reference to missile development.[140]

[138] Chris Cillizza, “The definitive rankings of Donald Trump’s nicknames for his political enemies”, CNN, April 3, 2018, https://www.cnn.com/2018/04/03/politics/trump-nicknames-cheatin-obama/
[139] Zulekha Pitts, “10 Times Donald Trump Has Roasted Florida’s Marco Rubio,” Miami New Times, November 2024, https://www.miaminewtimes.com/news/10-times-donald-trump-has-roasted-floridas-marco-rubio-21694259
[140] Chris Cillizza, “The definitive rankings of Donald Trump’s nicknames for his political enemies”, CNN, January 5, 2018, https://www.cnn.com/2018/01/05/politics/trump-nickname-rankings/index.html

Physical Health and Mental Health

Cognitive decline

According to Harry Segal, there have been observed cases of phonemic paraphasia, which is a phenomenon where parts of words are replaced with other similar-sounding elements. In addition to this, episodes of confusion, interruptions in the flow of speech, and mistakes in identifying public figures have also been noted. These types of patterns, especially when they occur during long public appearances, are often interpreted as possible early signs of cognitive decline, and are sometimes seen as indicators of the initial stages of dementia.[141] However, it is important to note that these symptoms are not constant and have not been officially diagnosed. The combination of ongoing behavioral characteristics that are linked to sociopathy, together with the new concerns about cognitive stability, has led to a wider debate in both clinical and academic circles about how personality structure and neurological health are connected in the context of political leadership at the highest level.

Donald Trump's recent public appearances have once again brought attention to his communication style and possible neurological health. At a press conference in Doral, Florida on March 11, 2026, several observers pointed out that his speech was sometimes slurred[142], with repeated phrases and difficulty in keeping his arguments consistent and logical. This repeated return to the same topics, without clear development or progression, has been seen by critics as a sign of possible decline in cognitive flexibility and executive functioning.[143] Although these observations are not enough for a medical diagnosis, they fit into a larger pattern where irregularities in speech and organization of thoughts raise concerns about the effects of aging on cognitive abilities. These concerns have grown stronger due to reactions from political figures and even some of Trump's former allies, such as Marjorie Taylor Greene, who has openly questioned his mental health and ability to make decisions.[144] In areas like foreign policy, where

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[141] Cornell University Media Relations, "Cornell Expert Says Trump's Frequent Phonemic Paraphasia 'Are Signs of Early Dementia,'" Tip Sheets, Cornell University, [date], https://news.cornell.edu/node/328225
[142] Crisnel Longino, "'Brain Is Broken': Critics Mock Trump after Slurred Speech during Iran Press Conference," IBTimes UK, March 11, 2026, https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/brain-broken-critics-mock-trump-after-slurred-speech-during-iran-press-conference-1784707
[143] Sarah Ewall-Wice, "Doctor Sounds Alarm on Trump, 79, Continually Repeating Himself," Daily Beast, May 15, 2026, https://www.thedailybeast.com/doctor-sounds-alarm-on-trump-79-continually-repeating-himself
[144] Alex Griffing, "MTG Questions Trump's 'Mental State' on Iran: 'Who Is Making These Decisions?'" Mediaite, March 2, 2026, https://www.mediaite.com/media/podcasts/mtg-questions-trumps-mental-state-on-iran-who-is-making-these-decisions/

leaders are expected to be clear, precise, and able to think quickly, any decline in communication control can affect not only personal health but also the trust in leadership. While public discussions often mix political interests with real worries, the combination of visible speech problems and criticism from within Trump's own political circle has made the debate more intense about how much aging might be influencing his ability to perform in the difficult environment of politics.[145]

Dementia and Frontotemporal Dementia

In the context of cognitive decline, there has been a focus on the potential presence of neurodegenerative disorders, for example frontotemporal dementia (FTD), when evaluating Donald Trump's public behavior. FTD is a group of disorders that affect the frontal and temporal lobes of the brain, which are the areas responsible for personality, social behavior, and language abilities. In contrast to more widely known types of dementia, FTD usually appears first as changes in behavior, such as lack of inhibition, lower empathy, poor judgment, and increasing problems with language, instead of memory loss. As the disease progresses, it can also cause problems with movement, which shows a general decline in both cognitive and physical abilities.[146] Concerns about this condition have been expressed by clinicians, for example Harry Segal and John Gartner, who have stated that certain patterns in Trump's speech, behavior, and motor abilities may be similar to features seen in frontotemporal dementia (FTD).[147] These features include problems with fluent speech, difficulties in maintaining coherent communication, and visible signs of decline in motor skills. There have also been reports of physical symptoms, such as changes in the way he walks, which have increased the speculation about possible neurodegenerative conditions, since such symptoms are sometimes found in the later stages of FTD.[148] However, it is important to note that these interpretations are still speculative and there is no official medical diagnosis. This situation shows that irregularities in behavior and communication in prominent political leaders can become central topics in wider discussions about cognitive health, the ability to lead, and the difficulty of separating medical evaluation from political arguments.

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[145] Vinay Patel, "Trump Age Concerns Explode as Record 22 Doctors Examine Him While Allies Break Silence on Memory Lapses," IBTimes UK, June 15, 2026, https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/trump-80th-birthday-fitness-concerns-1802706

[146] Mayo Clinic Staff, "Frontotemporal Dementia," Mayo Clinic, accessed October 9, 2026, https://www.mayoclinic.org/symptoms-causes/syc-20354737

[147] Cornell University Media Relations, "Trump's Abrupt Decision to Play DJ, a Sign of 'Accelerating Cognitive Decline,' Says Cornell Expert," Tip Sheets, Cornell University, October 2024, https://news.cornell.edu/node/329583

[148] Alex Bollinger, "Medical Professor Sounds Alarm on Trump's Deterioration 'Almost Week over Week,'" LGBTQ Nation, February 6, 2026 https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2026/02/medical-professor-sounds-alarm-on-trumps-deterioration-almost-week-over-week/

Frontotemporal Dementia

Since frontotemporal dementia (FTD) is the speculated condition about Trump's health, we'll be looking into clinical features of it in more details below. The symptoms fall into three groups (behavioral, language-related and movement-related):

Behavioural symptoms include:

- Socially inappropriate behavior;
- Loss of empathy and sensitivity to others;
- Poor judgment and impulsivity;
- Apathy, which can be mistaken for depression;
- Compulsive habits, such as tapping, clapping or repetitive lip-smacking;
- Decline in personal hygiene;
- Unusual eating habits, ranging from sudden sugar cravings to chewing on non-food items.[149]
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Language-related symptoms include:

- Trouble understanding and producing speech.
- Difficulty finding the right words.
- Using vague terms like "it" instead of specific words.
- Simplified, telegraphic speech.
- Errors in building sentences.[150]

Movement-related symptoms (less common but significant) include:

- Tremors, stiffness, or muscle spasms.
- Difficulty swallowing or weakness.
- Poor balance leading to falls.
- Inappropriate emotional outbursts like laughing or crying.[151]

The "wide-based gait" noted by Dr. Gartner falls into this movement-related cluster, aligning with the suspicion of FTD.[152]

FTD is a progressive condition, meaning that its symptoms gradually worsen over time. Life expectancy varies considerably, as some patients live more than ten years after diagnosis while

[149] Mayo Clinic Staff, "Frontotemporal Dementia."
[150] Mayo Clinic, "Frontotemporal Dementia."
[151] Mayo Clinic, "Frontotemporal Dementia."
[152] Alex Bollinger, "Medical professor sounds alarm on Trump's "deterioration almost week over week", LGBTQ Nation, 6 February, 2026, https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2026/02/medical-professor-sounds-alarm-on-trumps-deterioration-almost-week-over-week

others survive less than two. As the illness advances, many patients require full-time care, including round-the-clock care.[153]

7 Stages of Dementia

Frontotemporal dementia does not develop the same for all, but clinicians and researchers like to break it down into seven stages to assist families and caregivers in knowing what lies ahead. Each stage points out how thinking, memory, behavior, and physical health might change over time.[154]

Stage 1: Mild Cognitive Changes

- Small memory slips and less concentration
- Early indication of trouble concentrating on tasks
- Little interference with daily living

Stage 2: Behavioral and Decision-Making Changes

- Notable impulsivity, apathy, or disinhibition
- Difficulty with judgment and problem-solving
- Increased difficulties in work or social environments

Stage 3: Language Difficulty

- Difficulty in retrieving words and expressing self
- Effort to follow conversations or complicated directions
- Greater communication difficulty

Stage 4: Daily Function Decline

- Finding difficulty in managing home tasks and routines
- Difficulty with planning and flexibility
- Decreased independence in daily functioning

Stage 5: Personality Changes and Mood Instability

- Marked changes in personality and social behavior
- Frequent and pronounced mood swings, irritability, or emotional withdrawal
- Increased strain in relationships

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[153] "Frontotemporal Dementia," BrainFacts.org, accessed October 11, 2026, https://brainfacts.org/diseases-and-disorders/neurological-disorders-az/diseases-a-to-z-from-ninds/frontotemporal-dementia

[154] "What Are the 7 Stages of Frontotemporal Dementia?" Dementech, November 10, 2022, https://dementech.com/2022/11/10/what-are-the-7-stages-of-frontotemporal-dementia/

Phase 6: Severe Memory Loss

- Difficulty in recognizing familiar individuals or locations
- Restricted recollection of past events
- High dependence on cues, reminders, or caregiver assistance

Phase 7: Advanced Cognitive and Physical Decline

- Extreme impairment in cognitive functioning and loss of verbal communication
- Reduced mobility and physical frailty
- Increased susceptibility to infections and other health issues

Stage 7 of frontotemporal dementia is the most severe and advanced stage of the disease, where mental, behavioral, and physical capacities degenerate significantly. Cognitive impairment is severe at this stage, with minimal or no capacity for verbal communication. Language functioning that had already been impaired in previous stages is nearly completely lost, with the individual unable to make statements or comprehend discourse. Memory loss becomes extreme, usually to the point that they might not be able to identify close relatives. Physical health also declines considerably, with mobility problems becoming more severe, causing a higher risk of falls, immobility, and infections like pneumonia or urinary tract infections. Due to this decline, individuals in Stage 7 usually need to be in full-time care for even the most fundamental daily tasks, such as eating, bathing, and toileting. This stage is usually marred by increased susceptibility to other health issues, necessitating medical and caregiving intervention in order to ensure comfort and quality of life.[155]

Historical Precedent: Ronald Reagan

David M. Reiss, in "Cognitive Impairment, Dementia, and POTUS," chapter of The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump draws a comparison with Reagan's cognitive decline:
"The case of Ronald Reagan is introduced as an illustrative precedent. During his presidency, instances of confusion and cognitive lapses were noted but not systematically addressed. Subsequent disclosure of a degenerative neurological condition suggests that early indicators were present but insufficiently acted upon.".[156]

The relevance of this example lies not in direct comparison, but in demonstrating a recurring pattern:

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[155] J. Diehl-Schmid et al., "Behavioral Variant Frontotemporal Dementia: Advanced Disease Stages and Death. A Step to Palliative Care," International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry 32, no. 8 (2017): 876–81, https://epub.ub.uni-muenchen.de/52353

[156] David M. Reiss, "Cognitive Impairment, Dementia, and POTUS," in Bandy X. Lee (ed.), The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump: 37 Psychiatrists and Mental Health Experts Assess a President (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2017).

political systems exhibit resistance to confronting cognitive decline in leadership, even when evidence accumulates.[157]

Pathological Narcissism and Political Leadership

Pathological narcissism has three main traits: entitlement (the belief that one deserves special treatment), exploitation (using others for personal benefit), and lack of empathy (ignoring the needs and feelings of others).[158] When such an individual feels threatened, it could trigger aggressive behavior in them, showing up in forms of passive aggression or attempts to manipulate their counterpart. In harsher cases, they could react with a complete lack of guilt and behave without concern for the consequences of their actions.[159] Contemporary politics gives us more visible examples of narcissistic tendencies. In the case of Donald Trump, constant self-praise, a focus on image and status, public attacks on critics, and strong reactions to opposition show elevated levels of narcissism.[160] These behaviors may not stop someone from becoming a leader, but they make instability under pressure more likely, because criticism is treated as a personal threat. The most serious danger of pathological narcissism is losing touch with reality step by step. When leaders cannot accept criticism or limits, they may reject facts that threaten their self-image (such as bad news or disagreement) and change reality to fit what they already believe. This leads to poor judgment, growing conflict, and decisions that ignore real consequences.[161] As pathological narcissism intensifies, it can develop into what some commentators describe as a "psychotic spiral", a pattern in which the leader's thinking drifts further and further from reality.

Increasing Paranoia

Leaders with extreme narcissistic traits struggle to admit weakness or insecurity, hence instead of facing their own doubt they project it outward and start to see threats everywhere.[162]The world gets split into simple categories of allies and enemies (those who are loyal and those who are not). This way of thinking lets them avoid self-reflection, but it also feeds hostility. At the

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[157] Matthew Wills, "History's Biggest Presidential Health Cover-Up," JSTOR Daily, September 20, 2016, https://daily.jstor.org/historys-biggest-presidential-health-cover-up
[158] American Psychiatric Association, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th ed. (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013), [pages 669–72]
[159] Michael Maccoby, "Narcissistic Leaders: The Incredible Pros, the Inevitable Cons," Harvard Business Review 78, no. 1 (January–February 2000): 68–77
[160] Sara Ahmadian, Sara Azarshahi, and Delroy L. Paulhus, "Explaining Donald Trump via Communication Style: Grandiosity, Informality, and Dynamism," Personality and Individual Differences 107 (2017): 49–53.
[161] Maccoby, "Narcissistic Leaders."
[162] Robert S. Robins and Jerrold M. Post, Political Paranoia: The Psychopolitics of Hatred (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997)

national level, it can lead a leader to name whole groups as enemies and to justify conflicts that were never necessary.[163]

Impaired Judgment

As the need to feel superior grows, the leader's ability to assess reality gets weaker. Decisions are no longer based on facts or careful evaluation, but on what protects the leader's self-image, hence displays of power can replace rational strategy. Historians who compare Nixon and Trump suggest that this can lead to reckless actions, poor planning and disregard for consequences (the mishandling of sensitive information is one example).[164]

Gaslighting

A common strategy at this stage is the deliberate distortion of reality. Leaders and their supporters may deny clear facts, contradict what they said before, or present false claims as truth. In Trump's case this has been described through the use of "alternative facts" (a phrase used by his counselor Kellyanne Conway in January 2017) and repeated public denial of verifiable statements. Over time this confuses the public, makes it hard to tell reality from narrative, and deepens political division.[165]

Volatile Decision-Making

This impaired judgment makes decisions unstable and inconsistent. Policies and statements can change quickly, based on personal reactions and not on the national interest. In Trump's case, contradictions in public statements and impulsive actions (such as abrupt personnel decisions) show this pattern.[166] Such behavior creates confusion inside the government and weakens institutional stability.

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[163] Otto F. Kernberg, Severe Personality Disorders: Psychotherapeutic Strategies (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992)
[164] Calvin Woodward and Nancy Benac, "How Trump's Recent Troubles Parallel the Watergate Era: Analysis," Associated Press, September 8, 2018, https://www.nbclosangeles.com/news/national-international/trump-adminstration-watergate-john-dean-analysis/2043781/
[165] "MTP: 'Our Press Sec Gave Alternative Facts' on Inaugural Crowd Size, Says Kellyanne Conway to Chuck Todd," NBC News, January 22, 2017, https://nbcuniversalnewsgroup.com/nbcnews/2017/01/22/mtp-our-press-sec-gave-alternative-facts-on-inaugural-crowd-size-says-kellyanne-conway-to-chuck-todd/
[166] Kathryn Dunn Tenpas, "Tracking Turnover in the Trump Administration," Brookings Institution, accessed October 13, 2026, https://www.brookings.edu/interactives/tracking-turnover-in-the-trump-administration

The presence of these patterns in leadership raises concerns about wider political stability. A central problem is that formal diagnosis is usually avoided in political contexts (psychiatrists are discouraged from giving opinions on public figures they have not examined), hence assessment has to rely on observable behavior and how it affects decision-making and governance.[167]

Experts trained in behavioral analysis can identify risk patterns from observation, and their role matters when judging whether a leader's behavior is a threat to how institutions function or to public safety.[168] However, political and ethical limits often keep such assessments out of official decision-making.[169]

The broader question is whether systems are equipped to respond when a leader's behavior becomes destabilizing. When leaders reshape reality to protect their self-image, they can pull whole institutions and populations into that distorted picture.[170] This creates a collective risk, because decisions are no longer grounded in shared facts.[171]

Paranoia and Constant Suspicion

Trump's lack of trust is closely tied to constant suspicion. He often assumes that others are acting against him.[172] This affects who he listens to and who he rejects, hence people who agree with him are kept close and those who question him are pushed away. Even when there are serious concerns or investigations, his response has often been to block, deny or redirect attention.[173] Instead of dealing with the issue directly, the focus shifts to protecting his position, and this pattern can grow stronger under pressure. Inside his administration, this creates a tense environment (people are unsure where they stand). They may avoid speaking openly because they fear being removed or blamed.[174]As a result, decisions are made with less honest input and more uncertainty.

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[167] Craig Malkin, "Pathological Narcissism and Politics: A Lethal Mix," in The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump: 27 Psychiatrists and Mental Health Experts Assess a President, ed. Bandy X. Lee (New York: Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin's Press, 2017)
[168] Bandy X. Lee, "Introduction: Our Duty to Warn," in The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump, ed. Lee.
[169] American Psychiatric Association, Principles of Medical Ethics, sec. 7.3.
[170] Robert Jay Lifton, "Foreword: Our Witness to Malignant Normality," in The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump, ed. Lee.
[171] Malkin, "Pathological Narcissism and Politics."
[172] Gail Sheehy, "Trump's Trust Deficit Is the Core Problem," in *The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump: 27 Psychiatrists and Mental Health Experts Assess a President*, ed. Bandy X. Lee (New York: Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin's Press, 2017)
[173] Gail Sheehy, "Trump's Trust Deficit Is the Core Problem," in The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump: 27 Psychiatrists and Mental Health Experts Assess a President, ed. Bandy X. Lee (New York: Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin's Press, 2017)
[174] Gail Sheehy, "What We've Learned 100 Days In: The Trust Deficit Is the Core Problem," Daily Beast, April 28, 2017, https://www.thedailybeast.com/what-weve-learned-100-days-in-the-trust-deficit-is-the-core-problem

Losing Grip on Reality

Another effect of this distrust is a weaker connection to shared facts. Trump has shown a pattern of making claims that are not supported by evidence, while dismissing information that challenges him.[175]

Over time this creates two versions of reality (one group follows what the leader says, another follows outside evidence). The result is division, where people no longer agree on basic facts.[176]

The idea of "alternative facts" reflects this shift.[177] Statements are defended even when they are clearly false, hence it gets harder to correct mistakes and harder for the public to understand what is actually happening.

Turning Problems into Enemies

When a leader sees the world through distrust, problems are often turned into enemies. Instead of looking inward or fixing mistakes, blame is placed on outside groups (political opponents, other countries or social groups).[178] This approach can build support, but it also increases conflict. It creates a simple story, that there are enemies and they must be stopped.[179] On a global level, this can lead to unnecessary tension or escalation.[180]

There are parallels with earlier leaders, such as Nixon, who also focused heavily on perceived enemies.[181] In both cases, suspicion shaped major decisions.

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[175] Glenn Kessler, Salvador Rizzo, and Meg Kelly, "Trump's False or Misleading Claims Total 30,573 over 4 Years," Washington Post, January 24, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/how-fact-checker-tracked-trump-claims/2021/01/23/ad04b69a-5c1d-11eb-a976-bad6431e03e2_story.html

[176] [Elisa Shearer, "Most Americans Say Republican and Democratic Voters Cannot Agree on Basic Facts," Pew Research Center, July 30, 2025, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/07/30/most-americans-say-republican-and-democratic-voters-cannot-agree-on-basic-facts

[177] "MTP: 'Our Press Sec Gave Alternative Facts.'"

[178] Sheehy, "Trump's Trust Deficit."

[179] Robert S. Robins and Jerrold M. Post, Political Paranoia: The Psychopolitics of Hatred (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997)

[180] Gail Sheehy, "What We've Learned 100 Days In: The Trust Deficit Is the Core Problem," Daily Beast, April 28, 2017, https://www.thedailybeast.com/what-weve-learned-100-days-in-the-trust-deficit-is-the-core-problem

[181] Gail Sheehy, "How Trump's Recent Troubles Parallel the Watergate Era: Analysis," Associated Press, [2018], https://www.nbclosangeles.com/news/national-international/trump-adminstration-watergate-john-dean-analysis/2043781

In Trump's case, there have been reports of quick moves toward strong actions, including military ones, sometimes across several areas at once.[182] While these actions may have strategic reasons, the pattern suggests that personal reactions can play a role.[183]

Sociopathy and Political Leadership

The question raised in assessing Donald Trump's behavior is whether repeated patterns (lying, cheating, manipulating and harming others without concern) should be seen as strategy or as signs of a deeper problem.[184] The argument presented is that these behaviors are not simply calculated tactics, but reflect a serious psychological condition: sociopathy.

There are different paths for people with strong sociopathic traits. Some fail early and end up in crime or conflict because of poor control and lack of skill. Others are more controlled and socially skilled, hence they can appear charming, capable and even trustworthy while hiding harmful behavior.[185] They may rise in institutions by managing appearances and using others effectively.

DSM Framework and Observable Traits

In clinical terms, sociopathy is closely related to what the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) defines as antisocial personality disorder. Rather than focusing only on labels, the DSM identifies clear patterns of behavior that can be observed. These include:

- repeated disregard for laws and social rules;
- ongoing lying or manipulation for personal gain;
- impulsive behavior and lack of planning;
- aggression or repeated hostile actions;
- reckless disregard for safety;
- consistent irresponsibility at work or in obligations;
- lack of remorse after harming others;
- evidence of similar behavior patterns beginning early in life.[186]

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[182] "A Guide to Trump's Second-Term Military Strikes and Actions," Council on Foreign Relations, accessed October 13, 2026, https://www.cfr.org/articles/guide-trumps-second-term-military-strikes-and-actions
[183] Ewan Gleadow, "Trump 'Having Second Thoughts' on One Action That MAGA Voters Would 'Balk' At: Analysis," Raw Story, [January 2026], https://www.rawstory.com/trump-iran-2674896928
[184] Lance Dodes, "Sociopathy," in The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump, ed. Lee
[185] Dodes, "Sociopathy."
[186] American Psychiatric Association, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, [pp. 659–63]

Other descriptions of sociopathy highlight similar qualities (cruelty, lack of empathy, manipulation, and a tendency to treat others as objects rather than people). These patterns often begin early in development, before emotional control and understanding of others are fully formed.[187]

Early Development and Loss of Reality

Sociopathic traits are often linked to early emotional development. Most people learn to manage their emotions, understand others and separate reality from fear or desire, but people with sociopathic traits struggle with this process.[188]

When faced with stress or criticism, they may reject reality instead of adjusting to it. They create a version of events that protects their self-image, which can involve denial, distortion or outright fabrication.[189] Even those who appear successful may show this pattern under pressure (their connection to reality weakens, especially when their status or image is challenged).

Manipulation and "Predatory Empathy"

Although sociopathy involves a lack of true empathy, some individuals develop a different ability: reading others' emotions for the purpose of manipulation.[190] They can recognize fear, insecurity or desire in others and use it to influence behavior. This creates a form of false trust (people may feel understood or valued, while in reality they are being used).[191] The relationship is one-sided and serves only the sociopath's goals.

Thinking Patterns and Behavior

Sociopathy shapes how individuals interpret the world. People are often seen in extreme terms, either as useful allies or as dangerous enemies.[192] This view can change quickly, depending on what serves the individual at the moment. Loyalty is valued only when it benefits the individual, hence relationships are not stable or genuine. Under stress this pattern becomes more intense, and reactions may include anger, impulsive decisions and aggressive behavior. Over time, this can lead to repeated conflict and instability.[193]

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[187] Lance Dodes, "Sociopathy," in The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump, ed. Lee
[188] Dodes, "Sociopathy."
[189] Michael Maccoby, "Narcissistic Leaders: The Incredible Pros, the Inevitable Cons," Harvard Business Review 78, no. 1 (January–February 2000): 68–77.
[190] Dodes, "Sociopathy."
[191] 4. Lance Dodes, Sociopathy, in The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump.
[192] Dodes, "Sociopathy."
[193] Dodes, "Sociopathy."

Application to Donald Trump

Donald Trump's public behavior provides a large amount of observable material. His speech and actions show repeated patterns that align with sociopathic traits. Examples include mocking vulnerable individuals, showing little concern for harm caused to others and using aggressive and degrading language,[194] and engaging in repeated dishonest or misleading statements. There are also patterns of not honoring obligations,[195] attacking critics[196] and targeting groups in ways that create fear or division.[197]Another key feature is the loss of connection to shared reality. Trump has repeatedly insisted on claims that are clearly false, even when evidence is widely available. This includes statements about events, outcomes and actions that can be directly verified.

Impulsive reactions are also evident. Sudden decisions, rapid changes of position and aggressive responses to criticism suggest limited control and a focus on immediate emotional response (and not on careful planning).[198] These behaviors are not isolated. They form a consistent pattern over time, which is central to identifying sociopathic traits.[199]

Urgency of Cognitive Assessment in Response to War on Iran

On April 10, 2026, Representative Jamie Raskin, the top Democrat on the House Judiciary Committee, wrote to the White House physician, Captain Sean Barbabella, and asked him to carry out a comprehensive cognitive assessment of President Trump and to report the results to Congress.[200] He pointed to the president's recent public statements about the war on Iran, which

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[194] Dodes, "Sociopathy."
[195] Steve Reilly, "Hundreds Allege Donald Trump Doesn't Pay His Bills," USA Today, June 9, 2016, https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2016/06/09/donald-trump-unpaid-bills-republican-president-laswuits/85297274
[196] "Trump Mocks Reporter with Disability."
[197] Warren Fiske, "Tim Kaine Falsely Says Trump Said 'All Mexicans Are Rapists,'" PolitiFact, August 8, 2016, https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2016/aug/08/tim-kaine/tim-kaine-falsely-says-trump-said-all-mexicans-are
[198] Kathryn Dunn Tenpas, "Tracking Turnover in the Trump Administration," Brookings Institution, accessed October 13, 2026, https://www.brookings.edu/interactives/tracking-turnover-in-the-trump-administration
[199] 4. Lance Dodes, Sociopathy, in The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump.
[200] "Ranking Member Raskin Demands White House Physician Immediately Evaluate Donald Trump's Cognitive Fitness Amid Bipartisan Alarm, Calls to Invoke 25th Amendment," House Committee on the Judiciary, Democrats, April 10, 2026, https://democrats-judiciary.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/ranking-member-raskin-demands-white-house-physician-immediately-evaluate-donald-trump-s-cognitive-fitness-amid-bipartisan-alarm-calls-to-invoke-25th-amendment

he described as increasingly incoherent, volatile and threatening. He also asked for a list of the medications Trump takes and their possible cognitive side effects.[201]

The letter came after a week of escalating rhetoric. Trump set a Tuesday deadline for negotiations with Iran and threatened to widen the U.S. campaign to civilian infrastructure (bridges and power plants), and on Easter Sunday he demanded that Tehran lift its blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, a vital route for Middle East oil and gas. Hours before the deadline expired he wrote on social media that "a whole civilization will die tonight" if Iran refused to negotiate. He later backed away and agreed to a two-week ceasefire, but the remarks drew criticism from Democrats and from some conservatives, who questioned his fitness for office.[202]

Goldwater Rule and Duty to Warn

The Goldwater Rule is an ethical guideline set by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) that bars psychiatrists from giving a professional opinion on the mental health of a public figure unless they have examined the person and have proper authorization.[203] It comes from the 1964 presidential election, when Fact magazine surveyed psychiatrists on whether Barry Goldwater was psychologically fit to be president. 1,189 respondents said he was not, and many speculated about his personality without ever evaluating him.[204] The backlash was strong, and Goldwater won a libel suit against the magazine (a jury awarded him $1 in compensatory and $75,000 in punitive damages, and the verdict was upheld on appeal).[205] The episode showed the danger of using psychiatric authority in politics without a sound method, hence in 1973 the APA formalized its position as Section 7.3 of its Principles of Medical Ethics.[206]

The APA included the rule to protect both the integrity of the profession and public trust. It holds that psychiatric diagnosis requires direct examination, consent and clinical standards, not remote speculation based on public behavior, and it was meant to stop mental health labels from being used to discredit political figures.[207] The debate has not stopped, particularly over whether mental

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[201] Andrew Solender, "Raskin Demands Trump Cognitive Test in 25th Amendment Push," Axios, April 10, 2026, https://www.axios.com/2026/04/10/raskin-demands-trump-cognitive-test-in-25th-amendment-push
[202] WSBTV.com News Staff, "Marjorie Taylor Greene Calls for Removal of President Trump over 'Serious Instability,'" Yahoo News, April 9, 2026, https://www.yahoo.com/news/articles/marjorie-taylor-greene-calls-removal-172304421.html
[203] American Psychiatric Association, Principles of Medical Ethics, sec. 7.3.
[204] Jerome Kroll and Claire Pouncey, "The Ethics of APA's Goldwater Rule," Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law 44, no. 2 (2016): 226–35, https://jaapl.org/content/44/2/226
[205] Kroll and Pouncey, "Ethics of APA's Goldwater Rule."
[206] Jerome Kroll and Claire Pouncey, "The Ethics of APA's Goldwater Rule," Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law 44, no. 2 (2016): 226–35, https://jaapl.org/content/44/2/226
[207] Kroll and Pouncey, "Ethics of APA's Goldwater Rule."

health professionals have a duty to warn when a public figure may pose a danger to the public, but the rule remains the main ethical limit on psychiatric commentary in public.[208]

Reconsidering the Rule as a Public Duty to Warn

The earlier chapters of this paper show why the rule is hard to defend in the case of a head of state. Assessment has to rely on observable behavior, because a clinical examination of a sitting president is not realistic. When Representative Raskin asked the White House physician for a cognitive assessment in April 2026, the White House dismissed the request, and by June he said it had still not responded.[209] The only doctor with access is the one employed by the White House, hence the examination requirement turns the rule into a blanket silence exactly where the stakes are highest.

The rule was written to stop a campaign-season magazine stunt, but today the questions concern decisions on war and nuclear authority (a psychiatrist who signed a statement to Congress warned that this is a man with access to nuclear weapons, and the president's threat that "a whole civilization will die tonight" came with a deadline).[210] A leader's judgment is a public safety matter and not only an electoral one.

The rule also rests on weaker ground than it first appears. Kroll and Pouncey argue that a personal interview is not the only valid basis for professional opinions (insurance reviewers, malpractice experts and psychobiographers all work from records), and that the consent requirement repeats the patient confidentiality already covered in Section 4 of the APA's own code. That same code allows disclosure when the risk of danger is significant and encourages psychiatrists to educate the public, so they conclude that the rule is itself unethical if it suppresses discussion of potentially dangerous public figures.[211] This is where the duty to warn comes in. The Tarasoff ruling established that therapists may have to act to protect third parties from a patient's danger.[212]

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[208] American Psychiatric Association, Ethics Committee, Opinions of the Ethics Committee on the Principles of Medical Ethics (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association, 2017)
[209] "Ranking Member Raskin Demands White House Physician Immediately Evaluate Donald Trump's Cognitive Fitness Amid Bipartisan Alarm, Calls to Invoke 25th Amendment," House Committee on the Judiciary, Democrats, April 10, 2026, https://democrats-judiciary.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/ranking-member-raskin-demands-white-house-physician-immediately-evaluate-donald-trump-s-cognitive-fitness-amid-bipartisan-alarm-calls-to-invoke-25th-amendment
[210] "Raskin Demands Trump Cognitive Test."
[211] Jerome Kroll and Claire Pouncey, "The Ethics of APA's Goldwater Rule," Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law 44, no. 2 (2016): 226–35, https://jaapl.org/content/44/2/226
[212] Tarasoff v. Regents of the University of California, 17 Cal. 3d 425 (1976).

In terms of reconsideration of Goldwater Rule, an argument could be presented that we move from a diagnosis framework to analyzing the danger. As James Gilligan puts it, the issue is dangerousness, not mental illness.[213] Experts would not need to say "dementia" or "sociopathy." They would describe documented patterns (impulsive threats, loss of contact with checkable facts, aggression under criticism) and what those patterns mean for institutions and public safety, state clearly that no examination took place, and apply the same standard to every leader regardless of party. That last point matters, because Republican committee chairs themselves established that presidential cognitive fitness is a legitimate matter of national security when they subpoenaed Biden's physician.[214] A rule built on that principle would protect against the weaponization of mental health labels while still allowing the profession to speak when a leader's behavior threatens the public.

[213] James Gilligan, "The Issue Is Dangerousness, Not Mental Illness," in The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump, ed. Lee, [pages].

[214] "Ranking Member Raskin Demands White House Physician Immediately Evaluate Donald Trump's Cognitive Fitness Amid Bipartisan Alarm, Calls to Invoke 25th Amendment," House Committee on the Judiciary, Democrats, April 10, 2026, https://democrats-judiciary.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/ranking-member-raskin-demands-white-house-physician-immediately-evaluate-donald-trump-s-cognitive-fitness-amid-bipartisan-alarm-calls-to-invoke-25th-amendment

Communication Style and Public Diplomacy

Trump's communication style is a central part of how he conducts public diplomacy, because much of his foreign policy is announced, threatened and reversed in public statements and social media posts before it reaches formal channels. This subchapter looks at how he speaks and what that means for how other governments, allies and domestic audiences read his messages, and it asks where style helps him achieve his goals and where it creates confusion or risk.

Social media behavior

1. Trump often writes whole posts in capital letters or capitalizes words at random (a Washington Post count found 760 all-uppercase posts in the 487 days between November 2022 and March 2024), which communication scholars read as a way of signaling intensity and an aggressive tone.[215]
2. Trump also uses handwritten notes in public appearances. Photographers captured the notes he held at a February 2018 listening session with school shooting survivors, which included prompts such as "I hear you," and critics saw this as a sign that even his expressions of empathy are scripted.[216]
3. Trump often writes his notes and signs official documents with a black Sharpie instead of the White House stationery and the traditional signing pens.[217]
4. Before the presidency, Trump used handwritten notes to reach reporters directly. In 2011 he sent letters and marked-up printouts to media figures such as the New York Times columnist Gail Collins and Vanity Fair's editor Graydon Carter, an early form of the unfiltered messaging that later moved to social media.[218]
5. Experts read his capital letters as a way to signal "language intensity" (that something is important or linked to strong emotion), and to many readers all caps feel like shouting, so the capitalization can also come across as aggressive.[219]

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[215] BBC News, "Trump's former aide tells how he dictated tweets," BBC News, May 9, 2024, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-68987594

[216] Kate Samuelson, "'I Hear You': Photographs Reveal President Trump's Handwritten Notes for Meeting with School Shooting Survivors," TIME, February 22, 2018, https://time.com/5170311/donald-trump-notes-school-shooting-survivors/

[217] Rebecca Morin, "Here are all the times Trump's notes and letters have been photographed," *USA Today*, May 23, 2019, https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2019/05/23/all-times-trumps-notes-have-been-photographed/1211349001/

[218] Chris Good, "Donald Trump's Handwritten Notes to Reporters," Atlantic, April 22, 2011, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2011/04/donald-trumps-handwritten-notes-to-reporters/237754/

[219] Brittany Wong. "Why Does Trump Do That Weird Capitalization Thing? Experts Dissect His Language Patterns." HuffPost, September 24, 2024. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/trump-weird-capitalization-language_l_66f1a9fae4b03a18c4a2602c

6. Trump also posts AI-generated images of himself that critics read as projections of power and status, such as a picture of himself as Pope in May 2025,[220] and one of him as a Jesus-like healer in April 2026.[221] These posts draw on the symbols of the highest authority, but they often backfire. In April 2026 he deleted the Jesus image after criticism from his own religious supporters and said he thought it showed him as a doctor.

Public Diplomacy

1. Reframing the situation as "unfair": When he is in a weak position, he does not admit it and instead frames the situation as unfair. Negotiation experts describe him as a hard bargainer who believes that those who contribute more should receive more, hence when others do not give what he sees as fair value in return, he presents the deal as unfair to the United States and uses that to justify drastic action.[222]
2. Credibility and repeated bluffs: His credibility also erodes when the same bluff is repeated. With China, he moved from tough talk (even calling Xi an "enemy") to praising him as a "great leader," and these inconsistent messages meant that no one, China included, knew which of his statements to believe.[223] Over time some countries stopped taking his threats seriously, which made the tactic harder to use.[224]
3. Targeting the weaker party: He also tends to pressure the weaker party in the room more than the strongest one. Hard bargainers use their power advantage, and Trump is more likely to negotiate collaboratively with someone like Putin, who has the power to answer back, than with a party that lacks that power.[225] His business record shows the same pattern, for example the many subcontractors who said he underpaid or did not pay them.[226]

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[220] Andrea Shalal, "Trump Posts AI-Generated Photo of Himself as Pope, Drawing Internet Outrage," Reuters, May 3, 2025, https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/world/944886/trump-posts-ai-generated-photo-of-himself-as-pope-drawing-internet-outrage/story/

[221] Elizabeth Melimopoulos, "Trump Deletes Image of Himself as Jesus-Like Saviour after Backlash," Al Jazeera, April 13, 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/4/13/trump-draws-backlash-over-posting-image-depicting-him-as-jesus-like-saviour

[222] Rodrigo Gouveia-Oliveira and Horacio Falcao, "How to Negotiate with Someone Like Trump – and Win," INSEAD Knowledge, July 17, 2025, https://knowledge.insead.edu/strategy/how-negotiate-someone-trump-and-win

[223] Marty Latz, "Trump's Presidential Negotiation Moves: An Expert's Assessment," Expert Negotiator, September 6, 2019, https://www.expertnegotiator.com/tip/trumps-presidential-negotiation-moves-an-experts-assessment

[224] Jim Schleckser, "Mastering Negotiation the Trump Way: Strength, Tactics, Uncertainty," The CEO Project, March 5, 2025, https://theceoproject.com/mastering-negotiation-the-trump-waystrengthtacticsuncertainty/

[225] Gouveia-Oliveira and Falcao, "How to Negotiate."

[226] Latz, "Trump's Presidential Negotiation Moves."

4. Extreme threats and coercion for settling deals: In The Art of the Deal, Trump tells how he dealt with a bank about to foreclose on a Georgia farm: he warned a bank vice president that he would sue the bank for murder, and he concludes that "it pays to be a little wild."[227] The story is presented as a success, but the threat did not settle it alone, since the farm was saved with money from Trump and other donors. It shows a pattern that returns in his foreign policy, where the outrageous threat comes first and the real bargaining follows

Leadership and Decision Making

Trump's foreign policy is centralized and personal. He presents himself as the main decision-maker, negotiator and judge of foreign leaders. In a bureaucratic model, decisions pass through the State Department, the National Security Council, intelligence agencies, military planners and legal advisers before they become policy. In his approach, many of these steps are skipped. Personal trust matters more to him than formal expertise. He prefers envoys, loyalists, family members and business associates who understand his instincts and can act quickly.[228] Institutions remain, but they have less influence, and decisions depend more on the president's own judgment. This can be fast. It allows sudden diplomatic openings and direct contact between leaders. In his first term, Jared Kushner played a central role in the Abraham Accords, which the White House presented as the result of direct negotiation and not of the traditional peace process.[229] It also carries risks. When decisions depend on one person's instinct, policy becomes inconsistent. Advisers compete for influence, and foreign governments try to win over Trump personally and not to deal with the U.S. government as a whole.[230] Reuters has reported that in his second term normal diplomatic channels have weakened, many ambassador posts are vacant, and special envoys and informal actors handle sensitive negotiations.[231]

Overlapping envoys and ambassadors have also created confusion. After the 2024 election Trump named at least ten special envoys or deputies, apart from his ambassador nominees, and

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[227] Donald J. Trump with Tony Schwartz, Trump: The Art of the Deal (New York: Random House, 1987)
[228] Matthew Lee, "Trump Is Leaning on Son-in-Law Jared Kushner for Difficult Diplomacy," Associated Press, December 21, 2025, https://www.clickondetroit.com/news/politics/2025/12/21/trump-is-leaning-on-son-in-law-jared-kushner-for-difficult-diplomacy/
[229] The New Arab Staff, "Kushner to Reveal Details on Israel-Arab Normalisation Agreements in New Book," New Arab, March 11, 2021, https://newarab.com/news/kushner-detail-israel-arab-normalisation-agreements-new-book
[230] The New York Times, "With Witkoff and Kushner, Trump Bets on Diplomacy Without Diplomats", The New York Times, February 19, 2026, https://gvwire.com/2026/02/19/with-witkoff-and-kushner-trump-bets-on-diplomacy-without-diplomats
[231] Andrew R.C. Marshall, Humeyra Pamuk, John Shiffman, Gram Slattery, John Irish, Tim Kelly and Andrea Shalal, "Inside the Unraveling of U.S. Diplomacy under Trump," Reuters, May 21, 2026, https://reut.rs/42OgCAD

critics warned that this would create a "mess of overlapping responsibilities.[232] This appeared soon after in the Ukraine talks, where Keith Kellogg's role was reported to be in question next to Steve Witkoff's, and one administration official said it added to the confusion about who does what.[233]

Former CIA director Bill Burns, who spent 32 years in the foreign service, told the Financial Times that the damage to U.S. diplomacy is greater than the fallout of the McCarthy era, when many China experts left the government. He said that episode affected one set of issues, while the present damage cuts across the board.[234] It also shows in the appointments: as of June 2026 more than half of ambassador posts were vacant (107 of 195), and of 101 second-term ambassador nominations only nine were career diplomats.[235]

[232] Peter Nicholas, "'A Diplomatic Mess': Trump's Special Envoys Set to Cause Confusion," NBC News, January 17, 2025, https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/trump-special-envoys-confusion-rcna186448
[233] Khrystyna Bondarieva , Alona Mazurenko, "Politico: Trump's Special Envoy Kellogg Could Be Removed from Ukraine War Talks," Ukrainska Pravda, March 12, 2025, https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2025/03/12/7502498
[234] Almina Khatoon, "US Diplomacy Has Been Hollowed Out by Trump. More than Half of Ambassador Posts Empty," ThePrint, July 17, 2026, https://theprint.in/feature/us-diplomacy-has-been-hollowed-out-by-trump-more-than-half-of-ambassador-posts-empty/2989035/
[235] Khatoon, "US Diplomacy Has Been Hollowed Out."

Worldview: Populism

Populism is the main element in Trump's foreign policy, and it separates politics into two sides, black and white, which matches his way of seeing the world. On one side, there are the 'people', who are the hardworking and patriotic part of the society, and on the other side, the 'elite', who are seen as corrupt and incompetent politicians.[236] These elites are spreading fake news by using the media, together with international organizations and foreign policy specialists, who are all used as instruments for their own agenda, which is making America weaker.[237]

He sees the elites as the group who has betrayed the American people, and that the people must be saved from them.[238] Because of this, he looks at trade agreements, NATO spending, immigration and the wars in the Middle East only by how useful they are for Americans and if they help Americans to win.

So, in his worldview, international relations is a story where other countries have used the United States for their own benefit, and the elites have allowed this to happen.[239] In this story, he is the one who saves the people. He is the leader who talks directly to the population in their own simple language, mostly by using a platform like TruthSocial, which connects him to them without the problems of diplomatic rules,[240] and he is taking revenge by confronting both allies and enemies who have exploited America, in order to 'Make America Great Again'.[241]

Such populist outlook has several main characteristics:

1. Anti-elitism: Ignoring diplomats, international relation experts, international lawyers, journalists and former leaders such as Joe Biden or Barack Obama.[242] Trump believes these groups have collectively betrayed the ordinary Americans through their weaknesses and naivety.[243]

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[236] Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Populism: A Very Short Introduction (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), p.6
[237] Georg Löfflmann, "'America First' and the Populist Impact on US Foreign Policy," Survival 61, no. 6 (2019): 115–38.
[238] Donald J. Trump, "Inaugural Address," January 20, 2017, The American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/inaugural-address-14
[239] Trump, "Inaugural Address."
[240] Jim Schleckser, "Mastering Negotiation the Trump Way: Strength, Tactics, Uncertainty," The CEO Project, March 5, 2025, https://theceoproject.com/mastering-negotiation-the-trump-waystrengthtacticsuncertainty
[241] Donald J. Trump, "Remarks at 'Liberation Day' Event," April 2, 2025, transcript, The Singju Post, https://singjupost.com/transcript-of-president-trump-remarks-at-liberation-day-event-april-2-2025/
[242] Khatoon, "US Diplomacy Has Been Hollowed Out"; [Author], "Amid Epstein Questions, Trump Accuses Obama of 'Treason,' Declares, 'It's Time to Go After People,'" Boston.com, July 23, 2025, https://www.boston.com/news/national-news/2025/07/23/amid-epstein-questions-trump-accuses-obama-of-treason-declares-its-time-to-go-after-people/
[243] Trump, "Inaugural Address."

2. Anti-globalism: Trump has repeatedly attacked international institutions, such as The International Criminal Court, United Nations, NATO, dismantling The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and withdrawing from various agreements such as the Paris Climate Agreement.[244] He views international cooperation and multilateral agreements in opposition to establishing direct one-on-one informal connections on the international stage. If a deal does not benefit America, limits American freedom of operations or costs too much, it is a bad deal. International law hence is a barrier to reaching his broader annexation goals (like the case of Greenland) and arresting Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro with the aim to take over Venezuelan resources.[245]
3. Leader centricism: Populism is a leader centered, exclusive representation, which considers the state lead to be the only true face of the people, in line with Trump's policies inside and outside the United States, with the top-down approach. His administration and close associates are mere tools to execute his political objectives.[246]
4. Fourth: nationalist and transactional. Trump does not usually describe U.S. leadership as a moral duty to protect the liberal international order. Instead, he asks what the United States gets in return.[247] Allies are expected to pay more. Trade partners are expected to give better terms. Rivals are expected to respect U.S. power. Diplomacy becomes less about shared rules and more about visible benefit.[248]

And finally, Trump's populism works because it gives political emotion a clear target. Anger, humiliation, economic insecurity, distrust, and national decline are directed toward elites,

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[244] Özge Karsu, "Trump Signs Executive Order Sanctioning ICC," American Society of International Law, February 2025, https://asil.org/ilib/trump-signs-executive-order-sanctioning-icc/; Ingrid Burke Friedman, "Trump Orders US Withdrawal from 66 International Organizations, Including UN Climate Bodies," JURIST, January 2026, https://www.jurist.org/news/2026/01/trump-orders-us-withdrawal-from-66-international-organizations-including-un-climate-bodies; Andrew Gray, Sabine Siebold, Jeff Mason, "NATO Leaders Set to Back Trump Defence Spending Goal at Hague Summit," Reuters, June 25, 2025, https://dzrh.com.ph/post/nato-leaders-set-to-back-trump-defense-spending-goal-at-hague-summit; Leila Fadel and Fatma Tanis, "USAID Officially Shuts Down and Merges Remaining Operations with State Department," NPR, July 1, 2025, https://www.wwno.org/npr-news/2025-07-01/usaid-officially-shuts-down-and-merges-remaining-operations-with-state-department

[245] A Guide to Trump's Second-Term Military Strikes and Actions"; Qatar Tribune, "Maduro Captured, US to 'Run' Venezuela," Qatar Tribune, January 2026, https://www.qatar-tribune.com/article/212320/world/maduro-captured-us-to-run-venezuela; Donald Rothwell, "Trump's Intervention in Venezuela: The 3 Warnings for the World," The Conversation, January 8, 2026, https://interaksyon.philstar.com/?p=307360

[246] Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Populism: A Very Short Introduction (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), p, 6.

[247] Georg Löfflmann, "'America First' and the Populist Impact on US Foreign Policy," Survival 61, no. 6 (2019): 115–38.

[248] "NATO Leaders Set to Back Trump Defence Spending Goal"; Trump, "Remarks at 'Liberation Day' Event"; Gouveia-Oliveira and Falcao, "How to Negotiate."

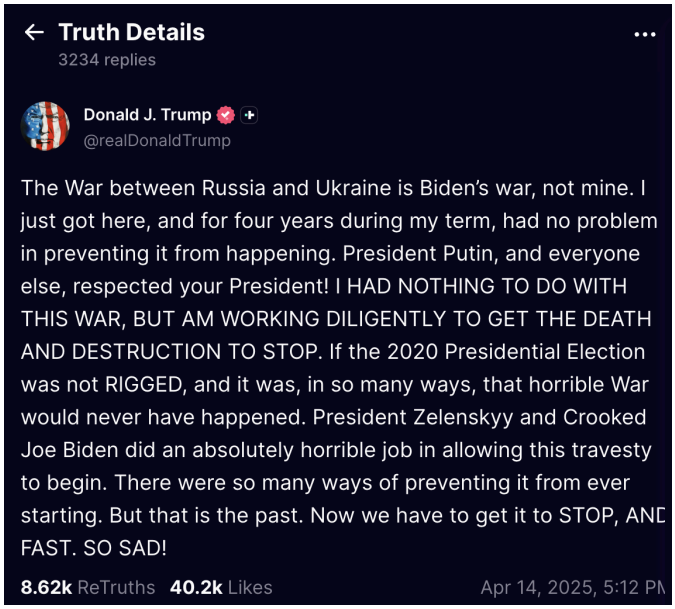
foreigners, migrants, global institutions, and previous leaders.[249][250] Foreign policy becomes emotionally satisfying when it appears to punish those who "disrespected" or "exploited" America. Populism creates pressure. This creates a clear political mandate to challenge old agreements, demand more from allies, threaten rivals, and act outside normal diplomatic habits.

Populism oversimplifies complex issues and in the case of Trump, all issues can be resolved through "deals" that should only benefit the United States and Americans.[251]

[249] Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin, National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy (London: Pelican Books, 2018), p. 47
[250] Georg Löfflmann, "'America First' and the Populist Impact on US Foreign Policy," Survival 61, no. 6 (2019): 115–38.
[251] Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Populism: A Very Short Introduction (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), p, 6.

Economic Worldview - Capitalism Culture

Capitalism as an economic system has extensive influence on various aspects of the human psyche. Accumulation of wealth, expanding the private ownership and profit seeking behavior leads to competition for increased productivity, pressure to perform at maximum speed and most specifically, zero-sum mindset.[252] In such circumstances, Donald Trump's influenced behavior by his father's classic capitalistic mindset, approaching all aspects of life from a transactional standpoint, makes sense on how he even views politics in terms of "benefits" and "losses".[253] Decades of his activity in real-estate business and media/image management has made him believe wars are preventable and pointless because the right deal needs to be struck, ignoring all historical, diplomatic and international complexities associated with them.[254]



Screenshot from Trump's TruthSocial post from 2025, mentioning he could have prevented the Ukraine war

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[252] Sahil Chinoy et al., "Zero-Sum Thinking and the Roots of US Political Differences," American Economic Review 116, no. 3 (2026): 1052–96; H. R. McMaster and Gary D. Cohn, "America First Doesn't Mean America Alone," Wall Street Journal, May 30, 2017, https://www.wsj.com/articles/america-first-doesnt-mean-america-alone-1496187426

[253] [205] Michael D'Antonio, The Truth About Trump (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2016); Mary L. Trump, Too Much and Never Enough: How My Family Created the World's Most Dangerous Man (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020)

[254] Louis Jacobson and Samantha Putterman, "At UN, Donald Trump Repeats That He Ended 7 Wars," PolitiFact, September 23, 2025, https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2025/sep/23/donald-trump/trump-ended-seven-wars-un-general-assembly; Thomas Watkins, "Has Trump Really Ended Eight Wars since Returning to Office?" The National, December 5, 2025, https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/us/2025/12/05/has-trump-really-ended-eight-wars.

For Trump, allies are those that benefit him in his transactions, and enemies are those that should be pressured to until they accept the best deal on his own terms.
In a capitalistic sense as well, regulations and laws are a hurdle to profit making and are meant to be studied to be engineered around it. International law in such circumstances for Trump is an unnecessary constraint that must be bypassed. More importantly, for him, in foreign policy, it's a weapon for economic warfare such as the tariffs implemented on various states that did not abide by his maximalist demands or sanctions on countries that oppose it.[255]

Capitalistic culture also prioritizes branding and optics over quality. Trump's decades of experience in the media, through public appearances or presenting himself as an unshakeable figure who embodies the American Dream, has benefited him. Exaggeration in public statements/TruthSocial posts/claims and dramatizing effects for maximum psychological influence through artificial crises, by using media platforms he has control over, has kept the audience on rollercoaster of emotional reaction hence attached to his unpredictable behavior rather than technical long term resolution of crises, which leads to public exhaustion, sufficient to not investigate/fact check his claims.[256][257]

Inner Circle, Aides, and Influence

Trump's foreign policy is shaped as much by the people around him as by institutions. He decides personally and trusts loyalty more than expertise, hence his advisers, envoys and family members have an influence that depends on his favor, and access to him matters more than an official title. This section looks at who are his close associates and how they influence his decisions. Vali Nasr, in an interview with Novara Media, describes how this differs from a normal policy process:

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[255] Al Jazeera Staff, "Trump Singles Out Brazil for 50 Percent Tariffs over Bolsonaro Trial," Al Jazeera, July 9, 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/7/9/trump-singles-out-brazil-for-fifty-percent-tariffs-citing-political-motives; Jim Schleckser, "Mastering Negotiation the Trump Way: Strength, Tactics, Uncertainty," The CEO Project, March 5, 2025, https://theceoproject.com/mastering-negotiation-the-trump-waystrengthtacticsuncertainty/

[256] Donald J. Trump with Tony Schwartz, Trump: The Art of the Deal (New York: Random House, 1987); Glenn Kessler, Salvador Rizzo, and Meg Kelly, "Trump's False or Misleading Claims Total 30,573 over 4 Years," Washington Post, January 24, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/how-fact-checker-tracked-trump-claims/2021/01/23/ad04b69a-5c1d-11eb-a976-bad6431e03e2_story.html

[257] Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, "The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It," RAND Corporation, 2016, https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html

"In the policy process, you first state what the problem is and then they [experts] give certain solutions to deal with the problem, military and otherwise, and then they walk you through all the costs and all the possible outcomes. In the United States, President Trump resolves on a decision then everyone else rushes to implement it without actually really going through all the scenarios that can happen.[258]

Lindsey Graham

Lindsey Graham represented the hawkish Republican voice around Trump. His influence was most visible on Iran, Israel and the use of military force. Graham often urged a harder line and argued that American credibility depends on strength, deterrence and the willingness to use force.[259] Reporting from 2025 and 2026 described him urging Trump toward a more aggressive policy on Iran, including strikes on its nuclear sites, and advised him to ignore aides who counsel restraint.[260] His role was important because he gave Trump political cover. He supported escalation while presenting it as Republican strength and not as the interventionism of the establishment.[261] This matters because Trump's base contains both anti-war instincts and nationalist anger.[262] Graham helped turn that anger into support for military pressure.[263]

John Bolton

John Bolton represents the hardline national security view inside Trump's circle, although his relationship with Trump became hostile after he left the administration.[264] Bolton served as National Security Adviser from April 2018 to September 2019 and was associated with a more

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[258] Vali Nasr, interview by Aaron Bastani and Kieran Andrieu, "Trump Administration in Chaos over Iran War Plans," Novara Media, March 10, 2026, YouTube video, 19:16, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ezq-fVXM0uI&t=1156s

[259] Barak Ravid, "Lindsey Graham Frets That Trump's Advisers Oppose Iran Strike," Axios, February 22, 2026, https://www.axios.com/2026/02/22/graham-trump-iran-strike-aides-oppose

[260] Argaam, "US Prepares for Possible Strike on Iran: Report," Argaam (citing Bloomberg), June 19, 2025, https://www.argaam.com/en/article/articledetail/id/1821901

[261] Franco Ordoñez, "MAGA Is Split on Whether the U.S. Should Join Israel in the Conflict with Iran," NPR, June 19, 2025, https://www.wfae.org/world/2025-06-19/maga-is-split-on-whether-the-u-s-should-join-israel-in-the-conflict-with-iran

[262] Meg Kinnard and Chris Megerian, "Trump Says Supporters 'More in Love' with Him than Ever, as MAGA World Splits over Iran," Associated Press, June 2025, https://digital-release.newsnationnow.com/?p=3419929

[263] Meg Kinnard and Farnoush Amiri, "Lindsey Graham Got a War with Iran. What Will It Cost the Country and His Party?" Associated Press, March 16, 2026, https://www.news4jax.com/news/politics/2026/03/16/lindsey-graham-got-a-war-with-iran-what-will-it-cost-the-country-and-his-party/

[264] NPR Washington Desk, "Ex-National Security Adviser John Bolton Indicted in Classified Documents Case," NPR, October 16, 2025, https://www.wlrn.org/national-politics/2025-10-16/ex-national-security-adviser-john-bolton-indicted-in-classified-documents-case

confrontational approach toward Iran, Venezuela, North Korea and arms control.[265] His time in the administration showed the tension between Trump's personal deal-making instincts and the more ideological hawkishness of some national security conservatives.[266]

Mike Pompeo

Mike Pompeo was one of the clearest institutional carriers of Trump's first-term "maximum pressure" approach, especially toward Iran. As Secretary of State, he helped shape Iran policy around sanctions, isolation and pressure after the U.S. withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal.[267] He described the administration's strategy as a "multi-pronged pressure campaign," with economic sanctions as a central part.[268]

Pompeo's influence matters because he turned Trump's instincts into a more organized ideological framework. He gave the administration's pressure policy a clearer national security language: Iran as a destabilizing actor in the region, sanctions as leverage, and diplomacy as something that should follow pressure and not come before it.[269]

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[265] Steve Holland, "Newsmaker: Bolton Was Odd Choice for Trump's Foreign Policy Team," Reuters, September 10, 2019, https://news.yahoo.com/newsmaker-bolton-odd-choice-trumps-200144386.html; Ryan R. Migeed, "Shrewd Operator and Controversial Adviser Takes the Reins at National Security Agency," Washington Diplomat

[266] Axios, "Trump Ousts John Bolton as National Security Adviser," Axios, September 10, 2019, https://www.axios.com/2019/09/10/john-bolton-fired-donald-trump-tweet

[267] [220] Michael R. Pompeo, "After the Deal: A New Iran Strategy," remarks at the Heritage Foundation, Washington, DC, May 21, 2018, U.S. Department of State, https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2018/05/282301.htm

[268] Michael R. Pompeo, "Confronting Iran: The Trump Administration's Strategy," Foreign Affairs 97, no. 6 (November/December 2018), quoted in Frederick Kempe, "Trump's Test on Iran: Turning Disruption to Progress," Atlantic Council, November 11, 2018, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/trump-s-test-on-iran-turning-disruption-to-progress

[269] Michele Kelemen, "Secretary of State Mike Pompeo Has 12 Demands for a New Deal to Counter Iran," NPR, May 21, 2018, https://www.publicradioeast.org/2018-05-21/secretary-of-state-mike-pompeo-has-12-demands-for-a-new-deal-to-counter-iran

Steve Witkoff

Steve Witkoff represents Trump's preference for trusted personal envoys from outside the traditional diplomatic class. A real estate developer and long-time friend of Trump, he became highly visible in Middle East diplomacy during Trump's second administration.[270] Reporting describes him as a key envoy in sensitive negotiations, including on Gaza, Iran and Ukraine, even though he had no previous government or diplomatic experience.[271][272] Witkoff's role shows the business-personal model of Trump diplomacy. Trust, access and deal-making style may matter more than traditional diplomatic training.[273] This can create direct channels and speed, but it also raises questions about technical expertise,[274] coordination between institutions, and whether complex security conflicts can be handled through personal negotiation alone.[275]

Tom Barrack

Tom Barrack is another example of Trump's use of personal allies in formal diplomatic roles. Barrack was nominated as U.S. Ambassador to Türkiye in 2025 and later appointed Special Envoy for Syria.[276] Reuters reported that this appointment came as the administration was lifting sanctions on Syria and adjusting to Turkey's influence after Bashar al-Assad's fall.[277]

Barrack's role is significant because he sits at the intersection of diplomacy, personal loyalty, business networks and the management of regional crises.[278] His work across Türkiye, Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Washington reflects Trump's preference for envoys who can move between

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[270] Pakistan Today News Desk, "US Diplomacy Reshaped by Vacancies and Back Channels," Pakistan Today (citing a Reuters report carried by Dawn), May 21, 2026, https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2026/05/21/vacancies-and-back-channels-reshape-us-diplomacy-under-trump

[271] Matthew Lee And Aamer Madhani, "Trump Is Leaning on Son-in-Law Jared Kushner for Difficult Diplomacy," Associated Press, December 21, 2025, https://www.clickondetroit.com/news/politics/2025/12/21/trump-is-leaning-on-son-in-law-jared-kushner-for-difficult-diplomacy/

[272] Andrew R.C. Marshall, Humeyra Pamuk, John Shiffman, Gram Slattery, John Irish, Tim Kelly and Andrea Shalal, "Inside the Unraveling of U.S. Diplomacy under Trump," Reuters, May 21, 2026, https://reut.rs/42OgCAD

[273] "Trump Is Leaning on Son-in-Law Jared Kushner."

[274] "Inside the Unraveling of U.S. Diplomacy."

[275] Harici.com.tr, "Trump Is Leaning on Son-in-Law Jared Kushner."

[276] Author], "Who Is Thomas Barrack, Trump's Diplomatic Point Man in Ankara and Damascus?" Harici, [2025], https://harici.com.tr/en/who-is-thomas-barrack-trumps-diplomatic-point-man-in-ankara-and-damascus/

[277] The New Arab Staff & Agencies, "US to Appoint Thomas Barrack as Special Envoy for Syria, Sources Say," Reuters, May 21, 2025, republished in The New Arab, https://www.newarab.com/news/us-appoint-thomas-barrack-special-envoy-syria-sources

[278] "US to Appoint Thomas Barrack as Special Envoy for Syria, Sources Say."

formal and informal spaces.[279] But it also shows the risk of personalized diplomacy in fragile regions: one envoy can become responsible for too many sensitive files at once.[280][281]

Marco Rubio

Marco Rubio is the key formal diplomatic figure in Trump's second administration. He became Secretary of State in January 2025. The State Department biography presents him as the 72nd Secretary of State and emphasizes his Cuban-American background and political career.[282] Rubio's role is important because he gives Trump's foreign policy a more traditional Republican foreign-policy voice. He is strongly anti-communist, hawkish towards Latin America, and supportive of a tough line toward China, Iran, Cuba and Venezuela.[283]At the same time, Rubio must operate inside Trump's highly personalized system. This means his influence depends not only on his title, but on his ability to align institutional diplomacy with Trump's instincts.[284]

J.D. Vance

J.D. Vance represents the nationalist-populist wing of Trump's foreign policy coalition, but he is also a clear example of how people around Trump treat loyalty as something to trade. In 2016 he strongly criticized Trump. Later he made support for Trump the centerpiece of his Senate campaign, and he is now Vice President, presented by the White House as Trump's governing partner in the "Make America Great Again" project.[285][286] His foreign policy language emphasizes restraint, but his positions have followed whatever helps his standing. The Iran war shows this. Politico reported that Vance was skeptical before the strikes, and CNN says he initially opposed the war.[287] Yet he was the first member of the administration to defend it on national television.[288]

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[279] Omer Onhon, "Tom Barrack: The Businessman with a Huge Middle East Remit," Majalla, [2025], https://en.majalla.com/node/326834
[280] Marc Rod," Lawmakers alarmed by Barrack's Turkey tilt in his Middle East diplomacy", Jewish Insider, February 17, 2026, https://jewishinsider.com/2026/02/u-s-ambassador-tom-barrack-turkey-syria-middle-east-diplomacy/
[281] Hussain Abdul-Hussain, "The Mess Tom Barrack Is Creating," Foundation for Defense of Democracies, August 19, 2025, https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2025/08/19/the-mess-tom-barrack-is-creating/
[282] "Marco Rubio," Biographies, U.S. Department of State, [2025], https://www.state.gov/biographies/marco-rubio/
[283] Joshua Goodman - Associated Press, "Trump's Pick of Rubio as America's Top Diplomat Jolts Latin America," Associated Press, [November 2024] https://cbs12.com/news/local/trumps-pick-of-rubio-as-americas-top-diplomat-jolts-latin-america
[284] Linda Feldmann, "How Marco Rubio Morphed His Way into Trump's Inner Circle," Christian Science Monitor, May 18, 2026, https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Politics/2026/0518/rubio-trump-foreign-policy
[285] "J. D. Vance," Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2025, https://britannica.com/biography/J-D-Vance
[286] "JD Vance," The White House, [2025], https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-administration/jd-vance/
[287] Kevin Liptak, "Vance Says Iran Conflict Isn't a 'War,' Even as He Refuses to Say When It Will End," CNN, September 3, 2026, https://www.cnn.com/2026/09/03/politics/jd-vance-iran-war
[288] Matt Dixon, "Iran War Elevates Marco Rubio in Trump's 2028 Succession Jockeying," NBC News, March 2026, https://www.yahoo.com/news/articles/iran-war-elevates-marco-rubio-153153361.html

In May 2026 he said that talks with Iran were making progress, but that the U.S. was "locked and loaded" to restart the military campaign.[289] In April, Trump sent him to lead the Islamabad talks, which failed. Witkoff and Kushner were at his side, Trump commented on the talks on Truth Social while they were still going on, and Pakistani officials told Majalla that the Iranians sensed his hands were tied.[290] In this reading, Trump used Vance as the public face of diplomacy for a war he reportedly did not want, and Vance used the role to show loyalty and keep his place as Trump's likely successor. The same transactional logic appears between the officials. Rubio, who was skeptical of reaching an acceptable deal with Iran, reportedly declined to lead the U.S. side, which left Vance to lead the talks that failed.[291] At the same time, Trump encourages the rivalry between the two by asking crowds of supporters who they would prefer as his successor.[292] Officials who lose his favor can be removed quickly, as Mike Waltz was in May 2025 after Signalgate.[293] In such a system, officials compete for visibility, avoid blame, and say what keeps them close to the president. Vance's restraint is therefore more a political position than a principle: it can change the tone of the policy, but it does not stop Trump's decisions.

Jared Kushner

Jared Kushner represents the family-linked, informal, deal-making side of Trump diplomacy.[294] During Trump's first administration, Kushner was central to Middle East diplomacy and the Abraham Accords.[295] The accords were presented by the Trump White House as a major normalization achievement between Israel and several Arab states. Kushner's influence shows how Trump's diplomacy often values personal trust and private negotiation. Kushner was not a

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[289] Agence France-Presse, "Iran Talks Making 'Good Progress': US VP Vance," Agence France-Presse, May 19, 2026, https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2026/05/iran-talks-making-good-progress-us-vp-vance

[290] Tyler Pager, "21 Hours in Pakistan: How JD Vance Tried and Failed to End a War He Opposed," New York Times, April 2026, republished by The Nightly, https://thenightly.com.au/world/usa/21-hours-in-pakistan-how-jd-vance-tried-and-failed-to-end-a-war-he-opposed-c-22131328

[291] Matthew Lee, "Vance and Rubio Take Different Approaches as Iran Tests Their 2028 Prospects," Associated Press, June 30, 2026, https://www.news4jax.com/news/politics/2026/06/30/vance-and-rubio-take-different-approaches-as-iran-tests-their-2028-prospects/

[292] Matthew Lee, "Vance and Rubio Take Different Approaches."

[293] Steve Holland, Gram Slattery, Erin Banco, "Trump Ousts White House National Security Adviser Waltz, Replaces Him with Rubio," Reuters, May 1, 2025, https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2025-05-02-trump-ousts-white-house-national-security-adviser-waltz-replaces-him-with-rubio/

[294] Fred Frommer, "Jared Kushner," Encyclopaedia Britannica, last updated October 14, 2026, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jared-Kushner

[295] Brigham Tomco, "Why Was Donald Trump Able to Secure the Peace Deal?" Deseret News, October 13, 2025, https://www.deseret.com/politics/2025/10/13/how-donald-trump-and-jared-kushner-negotiated-israel-hamas-peace-plan-for-ceasefire-in-gaza/

traditional diplomat, but he had direct access to Trump and relationships with regional leaders.[296] This made him powerful in a system where proximity to Trump can matter as much as bureaucratic rank. For this paper, Kushner is important because he demonstrates the fusion of family, business logic, and foreign policy. His diplomacy was built around elite access, investment logic, regional normalization, and personal channels.[297] This model can produce breakthroughs, but it can also narrow diplomacy to leaders and elites while ignoring deeper political conflicts.[298] His private business also raises questions. While he negotiated, his investment firm, Affinity Partners, was funded almost entirely by foreign investors, including sovereign wealth funds in Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar, according to an investigation opened by Rep. Jamie Raskin.[299] In June 2026, Kushner said that he and his partners were looking at investing in countries that join, or may join, the Abraham Accords, and at creating "economic packages" to encourage them.[300] Some officials in European capitals were also uneasy about his transactional outlook and his business interests in the region.[301] Critics say this mixes public diplomacy with private financial interest.

Roy Cohn

Roy Cohn is not a current foreign-policy adviser, but his influence is psychological and stylistic. Cohn was Trump's lawyer and mentor during Trump's early business career.[302] He was known as an aggressive legal and political operator, associated with attack, loyalty, intimidation, and never admitting defeat.[303] Biographical accounts describe him as a major figure in Trump's early

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[296] Andrew R.C. Marshall, Humeyra Pamuk, John Shiffman, Gram Slattery, John Irish, Tim Kelly, Andrea Shalal, "Inside the Unraveling of U.S. Diplomacy under Trump," Reuters, May 21, 2026, https://reut.rs/42OgCAD

[297] Kevin Liptak, Kristen Holmes, Alayna Treene, Kylie Atwood, "Jared Kushner returns to forefront of Trump's Middle East diplomacy with Gaza ceasefire deal", CNN, October 10, 2025, https://www.cnn.com/2025/10/10/politics/jared-kushner-trump-gaza-deal; Brigham Tomco, "Why Was Donald Trump Able to Secure the Peace Deal?" Deseret News, October 13, 2025, https://www.deseret.com/politics/2025/10/13/how-donald-trump-and-jared-kushner-negotiated-israel-hamas-peace-plan-for-ceasefire-in-gaza/

[298] Tomco, "Why Was Donald Trump Able to Secure the Peace Deal?"

[299] Middle East Monitor, "Kushner Floats Cash-for-Normalisation with Israel to Expand 'Abraham Accords,'" Middle East Monitor, June 4, 2026, https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20260604-kushner-floats-cash-for-normalisation-with-israel-to-expand-abraham-accords/

[300] Middle East Monitor, "Kushner Floats Cash-for-Normalisation.

[301] Matthew Lee And Aamer Madhani, "Trump Is Leaning on Son-in-Law Jared Kushner for Difficult Diplomacy," Associated Press, December 21, 2025, https://www.clickondetroit.com/news/politics/2025/12/21/trump-is-leaning-on-son-in-law-jared-kushner-for-difficult-diplomacy/

[302] Michael Kruse, "'He Brutalized for You,'" Politico Magazine, April 2016, https://portside.org/node/11683/printable/print

[303] Kelly McEvers, "'Village Voice' Reporter Recalls Roy Cohn's Early Influence on Trump," NPR, [2016], https://www.npr.org/transcripts/488722392

development as a public actor and political personality.[304] Cohn's relevance to foreign policy is indirect but important. Trump's diplomatic style often reflects a Cohn-like logic: attack first, never show weakness, turn accusation back on the opponent, use pressure as a weapon, and treat conflict as a loyalty test.[305][306][307] This does not mean Cohn "created" Trump's foreign policy.[308] But Cohn helps explain the deeper style behind it: diplomacy as combat, negotiation as domination, and public communication as pressure.

Religious Beliefs

After 2020, Trump used more religious language and imagery, which critics describe as Christian nationalism. He promoted a "God Bless the USA Bible," posted an image of himself as a Jesus-like figure, and in February 2025 created a federal task force to eradicate anti-Christian bias.[309] [310] [311] Supporters see this as alignment with evangelical causes, while critics argue that his faith works more as a political tool than a deeply held spiritual commitment. In 2025, he said more than once that he doubts he will go to Heaven, although he also said he was "being a little cute."[312]

Many people question how deep his faith is. A Pew survey in March 2020, during his first term, found that 63% of Americans described him as "not too" or "not at all" religious, and only 44% said he is a Christian, while 34% were unsure of his religious affiliation.[313] A Pew survey in

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[304] Maggie Haberman, Confidence Man: The Making of Donald Trump and the Breaking of America (New York: Penguin Press, 2022)
[305] Chris Vognar, "Trump's Mentor, Roy Cohn, Poisoned American Culture", Boston Globe, September 3, 2026, https://www.bostonglobe.com/2026/09/03/opinion/roy-cohn-biography-donald-trump/
[306] Ron Elving, "President Trump Called for Roy Cohn, but Roy Cohn Was Gone," WGBH News, January 7,2018, https://www.wgbh.org/news/2018-01-07/president-trump-called-for-roy-cohn-but-roy-cohn-was-gone
[307] Dr. James J. Zogby, "Donald Trump's Philosophy: Attack and Never Admit Defeat," Arab American Institute, February 2, 2026, https://www.aaiusa.org/library/donald-trumps-philosophy-attack-and-never-admit-defeat
[308] Trudy Ring, "Roy Cohn and Donald Trump: Mentor and Protégé," The Advocate, August 16, 2016, https://advocate.com/election/2016/8/16/roy-cohn-and-donald-trump-mentor-and-protege
[309] Sydney Jezik, "The Trump Administration Launched an Anti-Christian Bias Task Force. Here's What It Will Do," Deseret News, April 23, 2025, https://www.yahoo.com/news/trump-administration-launched-anti-christian-231743206.html
[310] Mallory Wilson, "Trump tackles anti-Christian bias with new task force", Washington Times, February 6, 2025, https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2025/feb/6/trump-signs-executive-order-creating-task-force-co/
[311] Jeff Brumley, "Most Americans See Trump as Not Religious," Baptist News Global, April 21, 2026, https://baptistnews.com/article/most-americans-see-trump-as-not-religious
[312] Amanda Alvarado, "Trump Says He Does Not Believe He Is 'Heaven-Bound,'" Gray News, October 14, 2025, https://www.live5news.com/2025/10/14/trump-says-he-does-not-believe-he-is-heaven-bound
[313] Dalia Fahmy, "Most Americans Don't See Trump as Religious; Fewer than Half Say They Think He's Christian," Pew Research Center, March 25, 2020, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2020/03/25/most-americans-dont-see-trump-as-religious

April 2026 found that 70% saw him as not too or not at all religious.[314] Some of his comments on the Bible have led critics to suggest that his knowledge of Christianity is superficial, as when he called Second Corinthians "Two Corinthians" in 2016.[315] Several biographers have not described him as deeply religious.[316] At the start of his first term, he also did not attend church regularly in Washington.[317]

Domestic Politics in the United States

Trump's foreign policy cannot be understood without the domestic politics that shape it, because his decisions are often made with voters, Congress and his own party in mind. This section analyzes the domestic politics of both of his terms, and looks at how his approval rating changed over time and what caused these changes. Hence it also asks how far public opinion limits his foreign policy, and how far he is able to ignore it.

Trump: First Term vs. Second Term

Approval trajectory

Trump began his second term with about 47% approval in Reuters/Ipsos polling, and his support has dropped substantially since.[318] As of September 2026, polling averages put him at around 37-38% approve and about 60% disapprove, a net rating of about -22, which is his lowest in the Silver Bulletin average across either term.[319] [320] Some single polls show even lower numbers:

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[314] Dalia Fahmy, "Most Americans Don't See Trump as Religious; Fewer than Half Say They Think He's Christian," Pew Research Center, March 25, 2020, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2020/03/25/most-americans-dont-see-trump-as-religious

[315] Jill Colvin, "Trump Attends Easter Service in Palm Beach," Associated Press, April 16, 2017, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/trump-attends-easter-service-palm-beach

[316] Ann Friedman, "Trump and God," Los Angeles Times, [April 2017], republished in Napa Valley Register, https://napavalleyregister.com/opinion/editorial/trump-and-god/article_5d399eb1-6fdf-5f5f-aabb-cee7e8338f96.html

[317] Jill Colvin, "Trump Attends Easter Service in Palm Beach," Associated Press, April 16, 2017, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/trump-attends-easter-service-palm-beach

[318] Jason Lange, Bo Erickson, "Exclusive: Trump's Approval Hits New 36% Low as Fuel Prices Surge amid Iran War, Reuters/Ipsos Poll Finds," Reuters, March 24, 2026, https://www.aol.com/articles/exclusive-trumps-approval-hits-36-171239716.html

[319] Sam Stevenson, "Donald Trump's Approval Rating Hits New All-Time Low in Nate Silver Tracker," *Newsweek*, September 24, 2026, https://newsweek.com/donald-trump-approval-rating-all-time-low-nate-silver-12482345.

[320] Kate McQuarrie, "Trump Saw Lowest Average Approval Rating of His Second Term in September," Ballotpedia News, October 1, 2026, https://news.ballotpedia.org/2026/10/01/trump-saw-lowest-average-approval-rating-of-his-second-term-in-september/

Reuters/Ipsos found 33% approval in August and 32% in its latest poll.[321] [322]NBC's September poll put him at 36%, a record low for his second term in NBC polling.[323] The decline is also happening inside his base. Strong approval among Republicans fell from 52% to 41% since spring, and strong approval among MAGA Republicans fell from 71% to 62%.[324] [325] Among Republicans, strong approval of his handling of the Iran war fell 18 points, to 30%.[326]

The main reasons are the economy, especially prices and inflation, and growing skepticism about the Iran war. The polls do not point to one single scandal as the cause.[327] [328]

Economic underperformance vs. term one

In the first year of his second term, Trump's economic record was weaker than in the first year of his first term on most measures. An economist writing for the American Institute for Economic Research compared January 2025 to January 2026 with January 2017 to January 2018, using official data from BLS, Census and BEA. Industrial output grew by 1.4% compared with 2.7%, real median household income grew by 1.4% compared with 1.9%, and real per-capita GDP grew by 2.3% compared with 2.7%.[329] Manufacturing employment fell by 0.7% in the first year of his second term, after rising by 1.6% in the first year of his first term, even though the tariffs were presented as a way to bring factory jobs back.[330] The comparison has limits. Manufacturing output grew more in the second term (2.0% compared with 0.7%), the first year of his first term had no new tariffs, and the author is a free-market critic of tariffs.[331]

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[321] Daniel Miller, "Trump's Approval Rating Falls to New Low in Latest Poll," FOX 6 Now (Reuters/Ipsos poll), August 18, 2026, https://www.fox6now.com/news/trumps-approval-rating-falls-poll
[322] Sara Dorn, "Trump's Approval Rating Stagnates at Record Low 32% in Latest Poll," Forbes, October 6, 2026, https://www.forbes.com/sites/saradorn/2026/10/06/trumps-approval-rating-stagnates-at-record-low-32-in-latest-poll/
[323] Erum Salam, "Republicans, MAGA Sour on Trump amid War and Rising Cost of Living," MS NOW (NBC News Decision Desk poll), September 6, 2026, https://www.ms.now/news/trump-job-approval-poll-low-nbc
[324] Erum Salam, "Republicans, MAGA Sour on Trump amid War and Rising Cost of Living," MS NOW (NBC News Decision Desk poll), September 6, 2026, https://www.ms.now/news/trump-job-approval-poll-low-nbc
[325] Dorn, "Trump's Approval Rating Stagnates at Record Low 32%."
[326] Dorn, "Trump's Approval Rating Stagnates at Record Low 32%."
[327] Ben Kamisar, Bridget Bowman, "Poll: Trump's Approval Rating Hits Second-Term Low as Americans Sour on the Economy and Iran War," NBC News, April 2026, https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/poll-trumps-approval-rating-hits-second-term-low-economy-iran-war-rcna331462
[328] Jason Lange, Bo Erickson, "Exclusive: Trump's Approval Hits New 36% Low."
[329] Donald J. Boudreaux, "Measuring Trump 2.0 Against Trump 1.0: Tariff Boasts Meet the Data," The Daily Economy (American Institute for Economic Research), June 12, 2026, https://thedailyeconomy.org/article/measuring-trump-2-0-against-trump-1-0-tariff-boasts-meet-the-data/
[330] Boudreaux, "Measuring Trump 2.0 Against Trump 1.0."
[331] Boudreaux, "Measuring Trump 2.0 Against Trump 1.0."

NBC reports that job growth slowed sharply in 2025, with 584,000 jobs added compared with more than 2 million in each of Biden's four years. Apart from three recession years, it was the slowest year for job creation since 2003. Manufacturing employment dropped by 72,000 jobs after the "Liberation Day" tariffs were announced on April 2, 2025, although NBC also names federal workforce cuts and mass deportations as factors that shaped employment.[302] The picture is mixed and not entirely negative, since GDP grew at 4.3% in the third quarter of 2025 and inflation fell to 2.7% by December.[332]

The Tax Foundation estimates that the tariffs now imposed and scheduled will raise $1.4 trillion from 2026 to 2035, but will reduce long-run GDP by 0.4%, the capital stock by 0.3%, and hours worked by the equivalent of 338,000 full-time jobs. These estimates were made after the Supreme Court struck down the emergency tariffs (IEEPA), which included the "Liberation Day" tariffs, on February 20, 2026, and the government had to refund duties collected under them.[333] The stock market explains the conflicting headlines. Major indices reached record highs, but their gains in the first year were smaller than in the first term, with the S&P 500 rising about 13% compared with about 24%.[334]

Populism/Institutional metrics:

The V-Dem Institute at the University of Gothenburg, which runs the largest academic dataset on democracy in the world, reports that democracy in the United States is deteriorating faster than in any other democracy in modern times.[335] Its 2026 report, which covers the first year of Trump's second term, says that in terms of the speed of autocratization, Trump's second term outpaces not only his first term but also the most prominent autocrats of the last 25 years, including Putin, Erdoğan and Orbán, and that the level of democracy in the United States has fallen back to its level in 1965.[336] In one year, the U.S. score on V-Dem's Liberal Democracy Index fell by 24

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[332] Kayla Steinberg and Christine Romans, "Trump touts 'extraordinarily high economic growth.' The numbers paint a mixed picture", NBC News, January 21, 2026, https://www.nbcnews.com/business/economy/trump-economic-growth-data-markets-rcna255143.
[333] Erica York and Alex Durante, "Tracking the Impact of the Trump Tariffs & Trade War," Tax Foundation, last updated September 10, 2026, https://taxfoundation.org/research/federal-tax/trump-tariffs-trade-war
[334] Donald J. Boudreaux, "Measuring Trump 2.0 Against Trump 1.0: Tariff Boasts Meet the Data," The Daily Economy (American Institute for Economic Research), June 12, 2026, https://thedailyeconomy.org/article/measuring-trump-2-0-against-trump-1-0-tariff-boasts-meet-the-data
[335] V-Dem Institute, "Press Release: Democratic Backsliding Reaches Western Democracies, with U.S. Decline 'Unprecedented,'" University of Gothenburg, March 17, 2026, https://www.v-dem.net/news/press-release-democratic-backsliding-reaches-western-democracies-with-us-decline-unprecedented
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percent, to 0.57, and its world rank dropped from 20th to 51st among 179 countries.[337] [338] As a result, V-Dem concluded that the United States has lost its status as a liberal democracy and is now classified as an electoral democracy.[339] The report links this decline to a rapid concentration of power in the presidency. According to its lead author, the administration has weakened checks and balances, politicized the civil service and oversight bodies, and intimidated the judiciary, alongside attacks on the press, academia, civil liberties, and dissenting voices.[340] This gives a measurable version of the populist and authoritarian elements discussed above, so the argument does not depend on labels alone. Freedom House points in the same direction, using a different method. Its score for the United States fell to 84 out of 100 in the 2025 edition and to 81 in the 2026 edition.[341] These measures rely on the judgments of country experts, so they are assessments and not direct counts.[312]

Jewish community appeal vs. evangelical Christian appeal

Trump's pro-Israel record, which includes recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital in December 2017 and moving the U.S. embassy there in May 2018, has not made Jewish voters a core part of his coalition.[342] A Council on Foreign Relations study found that Jewish voters were a minor part of the Trump coalition in 2024. Twenty-nine percent of them voted for him, a small improvement on the usual split of about 70 to 25 in favor of Democrats.[343] A Jewish Electorate Institute poll from April 2025 (800 Jewish registered voters) found that 72% disapproved of his job performance and 24% approved. His best result was on antisemitism, where 31% approved, although 56% disapproved.[344] His support is concentrated among Orthodox Jews, 71% of whom approved of his performance.[345] A later survey by the same institute, published in October 2026,

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[337] V-Dem Institute, "Press Release: Democratic Backsliding Reaches Western Democracies, with U.S. Decline 'Unprecedented,'" University of Gothenburg, March 17, 2026, https://www.v-dem.net/news/press-release-democratic-backsliding-reaches-western-democracies-with-us-decline-unprecedented/

[338] Christopher Ingraham, "They've Been Measuring the Health of Democracies for Years. Guess What Their New Report Says About America," *Slate*, March 17, 2026, https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2026/03/democracy-trump-russia-putin-dictator-report.html.

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[341] Streich, "Liberal Democracy in the United States."

[342] Jewish Ledger/Ledger Online, "Trump Says He Moved Embassy to Jerusalem 'for the Evangelicals,'" Jewish Telegraphic Agency, August 26, 2020, https://www.jewishledger.com/2020/08/trump-says-he-moved-embassy-to-jerusalem-for-the-evangelicals

[343] Elliott Abrams, "The Trump Coalition: What Do the President's Voters Think About Foreign Policy?" Council on Foreign Relations, September 2026, https://www.cfr.org/reports/the-trump-coalition

[344] Jewish Electorate Institute, "Poll: Jewish Americans Oppose Trump Executive Orders by Overwhelming Majorities," April 24, 2025 (poll by the Mellman Group, April 15–18, 2025), https://www.jewishelectorateinstitute.org/2025-poll

[345] Jewish Electorate Institute, "Poll: Jewish Americans Oppose Trump Executive Orders."

found Jewish voters preferring Democrats over Republicans on the congressional ballot by 71% to 23%.[346] Trump himself has placed the political payoff of his Israel policy with evangelicals. At a rally in August 2020, he said that moving the capital to Jerusalem was "for the evangelicals" and that evangelicals were "more excited about that than Jewish people."[347] In a 2021 interview with the Israeli journalist Barak Ravid, he said that "the evangelical Christians love Israel more than the Jews in this country."[348] This suggests that he sees evangelical voters, and not Jewish voters, as the audience for his Israel policy. Evangelicals are his most reliable group. According to the CFR study, Trump won about 90% of non-college white evangelical men and about 83% of the women in 2024, compared with about 52% and 38% among non-evangelical white voters of the same background. The study concludes that evangelical identity explains much of this vote more than economic or social status does. It adds that foreign policy was not central for them and that many believe immigration takes jobs from Americans.[349] Many evangelicals also support Israel for religious reasons, as a 2017 poll commissioned by pro-Israel evangelicals found that 80% of evangelicals believe the establishment of Israel fulfilled biblical prophecy.[350] Religious pressure from Christians has also reached immigration policy. In August 2026, Trump shared a report on Truth Social about a plan, pushed by Christian lawmakers, to create an expedited pathway to the United States for Jewish Canadians facing antisemitism, and Fox News described this as a sign of support.[351] The report does not say that a policy has been adopted.

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[346] Jewish Electorate Institute, "Newsweek: Political Smoke Alarm... Jewish Voter Identification Becoming More Complicated," October 1, 2026, https://www.jewishelectorateinstitute.org/newsweek-political-smoke-alarm-jewish-voter-identification-becoming-more-complicated

[347] Jewish Ledger/Ledger Online, "Trump Says He Moved Embassy to Jerusalem 'for the Evangelicals,'" Jewish Telegraphic Agency, August 26, 2020, https://www.jewishledger.com/2020/08/trump-says-he-moved-embassy-to-jerusalem-for-the-evangelicals

[348] Dan Mangan, "Trump Says American Jews 'Either Don't Like Israel or Don't Care About Israel' in New Interview," CNBC, December 17, 2021, https://www.cnbc.com/2021/12/17/trump-says-american-jews-dont-like-or-care-about-israel.html.

[349] Elliott Abrams, "The Trump Coalition: What Do the President's Voters Think About Foreign Policy?" Council on Foreign Relations, September 2026, https://www.cfr.org/reports/the-trump-coalition

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[351] Eric Mack, "Trump Indicates Support for Christian-Backed Plan to Help Canadian Jews Escape Antisemitism," Fox News, August 30, 2026, https://www.foxnews.com/politics/trump-indicates-support-christian-backed-plan-help-canadian-jews-escape-antisemitism.

INTERVIEW WITH PROF. DUSTIN J. BYRD

Dustin J. Byrd, Ph.D., serves as a professor of humanities. He is a specialist in social and political philosophy, with an emphasis on the Frankfurt School, Critical Theory of Religion, Psychoanalytic Political Theory, as well as German, Russian, and Islamic political thought. Due to his interest in the intersection of the political, religious, and psychosocial in contemporary thought and praxis, he recently published a book in which he explores the charismatic leadership of Donald J. Trump, 45th President of the United States, titled “The Dark Charisma of Donald Trump: Political Psychology and the MAGA Movement”. He does so through the use of Max Weber's concept of "charisma," combined with the Dark Triad: Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and Psychopathy. The book also examines Trump's life of morally questionable actions; his "dark presidency"; his "gaslight gospel"; the form of group psychology he practiced, as well as the question of Trump's supposed fascism. The author of this paper have had the honor to interview Prof. Byrd and ask the most critical questions at the intersection of this research paper and Prof. Byrd’s understanding of Trump’s conduct. His expertise also adds something that the news reports and clinical opinions cited above cannot give, namely an explanation of why these behaviors matter politically and why his supporters respond to them the way they do. Together with the earlier chapters, the interview helps to create a fuller picture of current American political psychology, in which the personality of one leader and the movement around him are hard to separate. Below is the transcript of the most relevant parts of the interview in relation to this research paper:

Arina Sing: “In the case of Trump, much literature has already been published, warning the public against electing such a person, but it hasn't been widely discussed. Do you think, moving forward, in domestic politics and international relations, this aspect [as in political psychology] is going to become more prominent?

Prof. Byrd: “Donald's first term was a stress test on the American Republic, and it barely survived. This time around is much worse, because he's not guarded by people who won't allow him to indulge in his worst instincts. So this time around, you're seeing much more of Donald as who Donald is. He's actually more Donald Trump than he's been before. Populism is a persona for him — that's what he needs to do to get elected. He couldn't care less about the population; what he cares about is himself — self-augmentation, self-interest, enriching himself. When people don't have a basic understanding of psychology, it's easy to believe this guy — that he's this very successful billionaire who's going to put that aside and work for us, because it looks altruistic. People want to believe in his promises — that since he came from nothing, quote unquote (this is the myth of Donald, that he came from nothing and built himself into a billionaire), he can do that for the country, and the country needs that kind of businessman. This is what you hear people say. Of course, why would you elect a businessman to do a statesman's

job? It's like electing a NASCAR mechanic to do a heart surgeon's job — it's just a bad idea. But people, because they don't have that basic understanding of psychology and of why someone like Donald Trump would make such a bad president — precisely because he doesn't have people's interests in mind, he has himself in mind — that allows them to believe this kind of emotional sophistry he puts forward. He's a good Machiavellian — he can identify people's grievances, people's angst. Change is happening in America because of globalization, because of immigration — other people in the world are coming up in America, and that gives white males, especially my age and older, status anxiety, and he recognizes that, and manipulates it. He speaks to it, gives them an answer to it — "it's because of A, B, and C" — and so they invest themselves in him as the answer. He's the great Messiah, or what Erich Fromm calls it — magically, if we elect him, all of that will go away. But to know him psychologically is to know that none of that matters to him. What matters to him is what he can get out of it for himself. And slowly people are waking up to that, but it's taken years for them to wake up to it. Why is it happening now? Partly because in this second administration, he's not being held in check — the more authentic Donald is able to be authentic Donald, the more people realize that authentic Donald does not care. Those of us with a psychoanalytic background have been saying this for years, but the vast majority of people think of Donald as a statesman — statesmen have ideologies, meaning certain principles, values, and ideals by which they build policies that help the American working class and bring prestige and wealth back to America. But he has no ideology — all he has is his psychology. So I think it's very important, when it comes to leadership in the world today, that we're able to psychoanalyze them and understand what's going on with them — not follow the Goldwater rule and say "no, you can't do that from afar." The Goldwater rule was there to protect the integrity of the discipline of psychology and psychoanalysis, but there's also the duty to warn, and that came into conflict with Donald Trump. I talk about that in the introduction of my book, "The Duty to Warn" — for many people, it overrodes this idea that one can't psychoanalyze someone from afar. Because you clearly can. Any clinical psychoanalyst will tell you: when you get people on the couch, they'll lie to you, they'll cover themselves — they'll put a persona out there and hide behind it. Donald just gets out there, and in many ways is himself. The persona is that he cares about anyone else, which he doesn't — maybe just a few people, like his daughter, at best. But otherwise, Donald is Donald. You don't have to listen to the words — you have to understand why he would say those words.

Arina Sing: History repeats itself — do you think those who voted for him would ever go with such a persona again? Or are they able to see the reality of what he's doing, the consequences of it?

Prof. Byrd: They're with him as long as he's being racist, misogynistic, xenophobic. But the cracks start where he went from "America First, we're not getting involved in foreign entanglements, foreign wars" to suddenly being in a foreign war and putting tariffs on, so the

economy starts hitting working-class people hard. It was already difficult — that's one of the reasons they wanted him, because he said he'd fix it, that America's not affordable for working-class people anymore. And he made it worse. So some have peeled off and said, clearly either his policies failed or he was lying. But then you have the real devotees, who've invested their identity into Donald Trump, so whatever he says, they go with. He said no foreign wars, and today he's in a foreign war — so they say, well, he knows better, so now we go with a foreign war. It simply does not matter. You get people following Donald who realize they were conned, but there are millions who believe it is otherwise — because they will not admit they were conned, so they keep saying, "look at this, this is the greatest movie ever," and there's nothing there.

Arina Sing: On Erdoğan. I've been curious about who has had a stable relationship with Trump, or how they navigate it, so his name came to my mind. Do you think there's a special relationship there, or how is he navigating it? Has anyone stood out to you as someone who's been okay navigating Trump?

Prof. Byrd: I think, for a lot of people, Donald experiences his relationships with others as transactional — everything is transactional, you do something for me, I do something for you. You get leaders who are willing to be transactional with him in a mature way. You might have that with President Erdoğan — he's not going to kowtow to Donald, but he's not going to accept being belittled by him either. He's transactional: Donald, what do you need? I'll give you this, and you sell me F-35s. He comes at it as a mature transaction, but knows precisely that's how you have to deal with him. Then you have the Europeans — Macron, Merz, Meloni. They all know Donald is supposed to be a statesman, but they also know he doesn't want to be treated like a statesman — he wants to be treated like a king or a child. A statesman is an adult, has responsibilities, needs a certain mental aptitude for that kind of work — he doesn't have any of that, never has. So he wants to be treated like a king — you get that with the Gulf states, big parades, palaces, and they give him things, like Qatar's massive airplane — that's how you treat a sovereign, not someone hired to do a job in the U.S. government. And the child — they know they have to placate him or he'll throw a tantrum, and it'll be horrible and embarrassing, like a kid throwing a tantrum at a restaurant — you want to run out of there. So they know if they don't treat him with some genuflecting, that's coming, and so they have to manipulate him a little, assuage him. Merz does it in a strange way — he always gives him something from Germany, like a historical document about his grandfather, and Donald really liked that, because he thinks of Germans as superior human beings, and since he's half German, he's superior. Then Merz gave him a German soccer jersey with his name on it, and Trump looked at it and said, yeah, great, then didn't know what to do with it, clipped it off to the side — what does a soccer jersey have to do with anything? If it was gold, a plane, a car, a palace — but a soccer jersey. Merz plays the game of "I have to give you something, but I'm not going to do it like the Gulf countries, the

Emiratis, the Saudis do it." So his leadership style is very strange. There are people who try to treat him like a statesman — he doesn't like that. Macron does his best [to approach him in a non-statesman way], while also saying we're going to do some statesman work together. Meloni was someone who could talk to him because she comes from that more conservative side, could talk to his ideological tendencies — not that he has an ideology, but tendencies you'd see in right-wing ideology overlap with his psychological tendencies. They were in the same house, could talk to each other — but when he criticized the Pope, that was it for Meloni, and when he said Meloni was begging to take a picture with him, she was done with him. The relationship with Putin was always sadomasochistic — the sadism, he likes to impose pain and suffering on people he hates, he's been open about that. The masochistic side stems from before his presidency, seeing people like Putin as masters of their country with total authority, anything they wanted. But now in his second term, with near-total power — at least he thinks he has it — even Putin is a mere peon to him, especially as Putin loses the war in Ukraine. You'll see Trump shift from the winner, Putin, to the winner, Zelensky, because he doesn't want to be associated with losers, and it's pretty clear Putin's going to lose this, as he should. And with Xi, he's very appreciative of the near-absolute power Xi has — he's envious of it, would like to have that here. That's one reason he has nothing but contempt for the judicial branch, the judges, the legislative branch — especially when it's not under his control — because they limit his power and his will to do what he wants to the country and the world. He sees people like Xi not having that countervailing force, and he's envious of it.

Arina Sing: I read somewhere it is because he wanted the respect of his father and never fully received it.

Prof. Byrd: He always admires figures who have even a slight similarity to his father in a power-dynamic sense.

Arina Sing: There is usually a dedicated team to ensure diplomatic code of conduct is followed in summits and meetings, but they don't have a specific team navigating what to do with Trump, as far as I have seen. I can’t verify it but there was a headline I read that an official who was involved in the negotiations process, claimed that during the ceasefire negotiations between the U.S. and Iran, there was always a senior psychologist as an advisor to help navigate Trump. Naturally there should be one during the meetings between the European leaders and Trump too, but there is no information on it. What do you think about that?

Prof. Byrd: There's no doubt. If you're a smart leader dealing with Donald, you need to consult psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, psychologists, political psychologists — no doubt about it. Going into those talks without doing that is political malfeasance, because he is completely driven by his psychology, not by ideology, not by a worldview outside himself — completely driven by self-interest. Putin knows how to deal with that — has psychologists on staff to deal with Donald

Trump, knows what makes him happy. It's really not that hard — say nice things about him, promise him something, and he'll say wonderful things about you. But there are countries that refuse — Iran is one. After [Iranian leadership] was quiet, all of a sudden people wanted to negotiate with Donald, and Iran was willing to talk to him — and what did he say about them? They're so much smarter than the other rounds of leaders — the third round, they're real geniuses, they know exactly what they're doing — because he can't negotiate with people he thinks are less intellectually capable than him, so they have to be geniuses like him. They probably said something nice, "Mr. Trump, we're willing to talk to you, we see you have power" — that's all it takes. He'll talk to you, say nice things — but when that contractual relationship breaks down, you're horrible, a nobody, a worthless loser again. In his first term, everyone in his cabinet was "the best people" — and all the best people ended up leaving and saying he was an idiot, a moron, and had no business being in power. And what did he say? They were soft, horrible, stupid. So you went from being the best people, when they supported him, to unqualified, when they criticized him. It's just a matter of knowing how to manipulate him, because he's only manipulatable because he wants to be manipulated — he wants to be treated like a child or a king, and you have to manipulate those two categories to get what you want. So, like I said, it would be political malfeasance not to consult psychologists when dealing with Donald Trump.

Arina Sing: That's very true. However, I also notice he does not like to be complimented too much — I think he loses respect for the person who does it. Like Machado, or Reza Pahlavi.

Prof. Byrd: That's right — if you're a supplicant, it doesn't work. He wants praise from people he sees as his equals. If you're beneath him praising him, he doesn't care — in many cases it annoys him. Think of the millions of working-class people who think he's God's gift to the world — he cares less about them, because you're sitting here praising me and you haven't even realized I've conned you, you're not smart enough to realize it, so your praise means nothing. But they'll continue to say he gave up everything for us, he's working for us.

Arina Sing: What do you think are the indicators that psychological profiling of a leader would be necessary? Say we want to argue the Goldwater rule has to be dismantled — what arguments could we present, that this leader has such indicators that mandates profiling or warning the public before we allow him to run for an election? Do they need to come from a specific background, or is there already a pre-existing condition before we get to the psychoanalytical part?

Prof. Byrd: This is relatively new, at least in America. One thing to think about — if you're in the U.S. military working with highly sensitive material like nuclear weapons, you have to go through a battery of tests to make sure you're psychologically stable, that your motivations and commitments aren't hidden — an extensive review of your background and psychological profile

to make sure you're prepared to bear that responsibility. To be President of the United States, you have zero psychological tests. The people are supposed to vet you, but the people aren't capable of that — they don't have the expertise. So that responsibility of vetting leaders who will have their hand on the nuclear button has to fall to people who are capable — psychologists, psychoanalysts, psychiatrists, mental health professionals — who can say, this person displays characteristics associated with this personality type, or a mix of types, whether antisocial or malignant narcissist, pull out the DSM and say here's the possibility this person is of this type. It's also important — though a lot of people reject this, I don't — to look at historical figures and psychoanalyze them too, because then you can see where characteristics of those personalities fit with a new politician coming onto the scene. Most people don't have the capacity for that kind of analysis, and a few people do, and those voices are important. It's the same as the duty to warn — that comes from a story where a young man was dating a young student, and he told his analyst the relationship wasn't going well and he felt he needed to kill her, and the analyst didn't break confidentiality, and that guy ended up killing his girlfriend. So they had to review that and say: when someone clearly poses a threat — in that case to an individual, in the case of Donald Trump or others, to an entire nation, or in the case of the United States, the world — the qualified people who see the writing on the wall have the absolute duty to make it known. When you get Donald Trump — a malignant narcissist, a pathological liar, very strong sadism, incestuous tendencies, tendencies toward authoritarianism on top of racism, misogyny, xenophobia — it's all there, on display. The problem is, for millions of Americans, that's precisely what attracted them to him — the worse he gets, the more they like it. Think about evangelical Christians, supposed followers of Jesus, feeding the poor, healing the sick — all the things the gospel calls for. From a psychoanalytic perspective, if they consider themselves Christians, and those are the ideals and principles they're supposed to live by, that means they're repressing a lot — their aggression, their hatreds, their disdain for people who aren't like them, the "others." Christianity says no, you have to love them, they're your neighbors, love even your enemies — so cognitively, because of their religious beliefs, they have to repress all that. And here comes Donald and says, you don't have to — I'll be the avenue for you to release all that, release the aggression, you don't have to attack the immigrants, I'll do it for you. So all of that repressed material gets sublimated into Donald Trump — he becomes the avatar for their hatred and disdain, and they can still say, I'm a good Christian, I believe in Jesus and all these wonderful values, and he'll do the dirty work for me. That's the performative contradiction. But you see someone willing to become the instrument of destruction, the instrument of hate — yeah, you need a psychoanalyst there, you need psychiatry there.

Arina Sing: It is often believed that dark-triad individuals can achieve short-term success, like securing leadership roles, due to their initial charm or boldness. Do you think it's feasible to prevent such leaders, due to their destructive nature, from becoming state leaders — or is that too undemocratic?

Prof. Byrd: It is definitely a problem. Democracies have to learn how to protect themselves from anti-democrats. We see that a lot — it's a big problem in the U.S. Democracy means a certain amount of openness and autonomy for individuals, for corporations, and there's very little means of stopping anti-democrats from gaining power democratically and then trying to undo democracy. The most poignant example is Adolf Hitler — he came to power democratically with the intent of ending democracy, but he'd never say "we're going to end democracy" — he'd say he's protecting democracy, that it's the nefarious left, doing a communism scare, communists, liberals, immigrants trying to take away your freedoms, so therefore he's going to make this anti-democratic move to protect democracy. Right now in the U.S., they're pushing voter suppression laws under the guise that because the system is relatively open, there's "a lot" of voter fraud, "millions and millions" of it, changing election outcomes and causing "illegitimate elections." Every time he loses, it's illegitimate and fraudulent; every time he wins, it's wonderful. He's giving a speech on how he actually won the 2020 election because of voter fraud, that it was "given" to Joe Biden — another bizarre rant with no evidence. Sixty times he brought this to court, sixty times he lost, because there is no evidence — voter fraud doesn't happen at any meaningful scale, and the few cases that did happen were overwhelmingly committed by people in his own party. So the danger of these types of people is very clear. I think Hitler was pretty honest that he wanted to destroy democracy — he went in with that intent. Donald is happy to get into power via democracy and then destroy it as much as he can to keep himself in power, to protect himself from prison, to protect his ability to keep monetizing the presidency — he'll do whatever he can to stay in power, and if that means undermining democracy and keeping people from voting, that's what he'll do. He cares about himself. So a good way to understand the second term: number one, staying out of prison — he was charged with 93 or 94 criminal counts, convicted of 30-some in the four years between his terms, so he was looking at the possibility of jail. Number two, monetization of the presidency — a report on how much he's made since coming back: $2.2 billion. It's illegal for a president to make money while serving — the emoluments clause of the Constitution — but $2.2 billion is what he's made, most of it through crypto: foreign governments and billionaires buy his crypto, and every time they buy, sell, or trade, he gets a cut. Number three, legacy — he wants to turn the country, especially Washington, D.C., into his narcissistic mirror. Anyone around a malignant narcissist, any project they're involved with, has to mirror their greatness. Ivanka mirrors his greatness — beautiful, smart, basically a female version of him. All the buildings he's had something to do with, in Istanbul, New York, Chicago, are "the greatest buildings anyone's ever seen," because they mirror his greatness. Now he's doing that to D.C. — a ballroom to mirror his greatness, a new Trump arch, cleaning the reflecting pool that had turned to algae, putting his name on the Kennedy Center — transforming his environment in D.C. to mirror his greatness, so when he's gone, he remains, like the old pharaohs who put their names on everything, like the popes in Rome. That's his legacy — a form of self-deification, the apotheosis of Donald Trump into an American god. In America we think of God, Jesus, the founding fathers, the good presidents —

Mount Rushmore, Lincoln — and now he wants his face there too. There's a new one-dollar gold coin with Donald's face on it now in production — money with his face on it, his signature on our dollar bills, they wanted a $250 bill with his face on it too. It's the malignant narcissist who needs the world around him to mirror his greatness. There are even laws saying no president, while alive, can have their image on such objects — afterward, when we look back and say Lincoln was the greatest president, we put his image on things to honor him. Donald is honoring himself and forcing us to do it with him — that's very different.

Arina Sing: For those of us who aren't American and who don't live in the U.S. — such unfortunate headlines and events sound like laws in the United States are just a social contract. At the highest level nothing happens but at the lower level I'd imagine there would be an instant raid. Such headlines also just keep piling up without accountability. Is that really so? What's going on?

Prof. Byrd: We're supposed to be a country of the rule of law, and law schools for centuries have taught that no one is above the law. Then just a few years ago, the Supreme Court basically said there is one person above the law — the president — as long as he's doing something pertaining to the presidency. If he does something illegal like attack Iran, you can't charge him, because he's doing it as president. If he does something in his personal capacity, you could charge him. Suddenly law schools don't know what to teach, because we have one person above the law. So when the threat of prison was real for Donald, there was one job that could keep him out of jail — the presidency; you can't charge a sitting president. We've also had traditions not codified in law — every modern president has released their tax returns before assuming office, except Donald Trump, because he doesn't want you to see where and how much he's getting paid. A lot of that, prior to his second term, was because he wasn't actually a billionaire — he always said he was, but it was just marketing. For people like Donald, law just doesn't mean much. Think of the Nazis — there was a rule of law and a rule of the will, and the will overcame law. As long as Donald controls the presidency — commander-in-chief, his party controlling Congress without acting as a check on his power — the judiciary is the only branch actually holding him accountable, and most of the time he doesn't care — even if they say he can't do something, if he wants to, he'll do it, because it's his will that's in control — what in German you'd call the Führerprinzip, the leader's will is law, positive law means nothing, it can be dissolved just by doing it, because behind law is always a threat of violence. We follow the law because we know violating it means prison, getting roughed up by police — there's always a threat of violence behind the law. He has increasing control of the threat of violence too — he has his own Gestapo now, essentially, in ICE. They went from legitimate law enforcement to roaming the country — they killed two more people this week, people they weren't even looking for. They're putting people into what are essentially concentration camps in the U.S. now, mainly for undocumented people. He has the military too, purged of generals and admirals who made

clear they'd maintain the UCMJ, the Uniform Code of Military Justice, because following that means they can't follow illegal orders from Trump — those generals and admirals have all been purged, and what's left are mostly yes-men. So he has control of the military. If he brings about a disaster, that control could collapse — but I think even if he makes things bad, he'll keep control, because people won't risk their lives and careers if they think things will get better on their own once he's gone — they'll put their heads down, deal with what he dishes out, and things go back to normal once he's gone. They're not going to stand up and confront him. It's when people start to think he's creating an absolute disaster that they start standing up. So, yeah, law has taken a beating, and has for some time.

Arina Sing: Regarding the legacy, Trump has mentioned several times that he has prevented a World War, India-Pakistan conflict and several other wars, which were ceasefires or conflicts that even he may have triggered them himself and de-escalated himself. He seems to be fixated on world peace as a form of legacy.

Prof. Byrd: When he was going through that in his first year — that he "resolved" eight conflicts, then ten, then twelve — he was just making up numbers. "He brought peace." What he's ultimately trying to do is set up the argument for the Nobel Peace Prize — and that's why FIFA had to give him a FIFA peace prize, because he didn't get the Nobel. Why does he want the Nobel so badly? It has very little to do with actually making peace, and everything to do with the fact that Obama got the Nobel Peace Prize. Obama is his absolute nemesis — not Joe Biden. Trump became the leader of the birther movement, claiming Obama was born in Kenya, wasn't a real American, that his presidency was a fraud. In 2013, at the [White House] Correspondents' Dinner, Obama humiliated Trump in front of thousands of people, televised to millions, and Trump stormed out and vowed that if he ever ran for president, he'd erase Obama's legacy like he never existed. So he ran, got in, and tried to dismantle the Affordable Care Act, Obama's signature achievement, which gave upwards of 40 million Americans healthcare for the first time. But Obama won the Nobel Peace Prize. So he's setting up to say, I've destroyed you, I've done everything you've done, where you succeeded I've done it too. Regarding the conflicts, if there was a conflict brewing between two states and he called one of them, and the war didn't happen, he was "responsible" — that's how his mind works. It doesn't matter if he had any real substantive connection to it — if he even made a phone call, he was responsible for it, because he's magic, "the great negotiator," despite not being able to negotiate himself out of anything, let alone the Iran war.

Arina Sing: I think there is a chain of people who want such events to happen. Based on what I read in "Art of the Deal," he's constantly on phone calls, people asking for his opinion, and he wants to get things done through phone calls, but he doesn't have real oversight over how things are executed. Almost like it is based on trust. So unless close associates, in a chain of command,

decide to follow up, they make it happen and just attribute it to him — "this is Trump's peace" — when actually there was a chain of transactional events, or maybe they may just come up with a non-existent conflict and claim "he prevented it, look at his achievement!"

Prof. Byrd: A lot of people around him are using him for their own pet projects, and as long as they make him look good, he's happy to say he did it, and they get what they want. Stephen Miller is probably the most obvious one — essentially a political consultant for Trump, completely against immigration, he's the one who came up with the idea of separating families at the border — arrest them, send the mother one place, the child another; a lot of kids have gotten lost and adopted out, essentially kidnapped from their parents. He wants a more homogeneous white European population, and as long as that project — which Donald doesn't really care about, he's in it for the money more than anything — binds those xenophobic masses to Donald, he's happy to let Stephen Miller do his thing. So, if a White House staffer called the Prime Minister of Pakistan and said, "Donald doesn't want you to do this," then Donald "solved" the potential war with India, and let's Trump take credit for it.

The reporting is that after Venezuela — when he kidnapped Nicolás Maduro and his wife — the Venezuelans were like, "you can't take our president," but now that he has them... And he thought the same thing would happen with Iran. The reporting is that Benjamin Netanyahu convinced him it would be that way — two or three days, bomb Iran, "you're going to do this thing that's driven American presidents crazy for 47 years, no American president could do this, only you could, you're going to liberate Iran from the mad mullahs." That was Netanyahu's pitch. The reporting now is that the next day, CIA director John Ratcliffe told Donald that everything Netanyahu said was complete nonsense — fanciful. Even J.D. Vance reportedly said, "Donald, this is dumb — presidents have never done this, for real reasons, because the blowback will be horrendous to the economy, hurt your own people, and cost Congress." There was a lot of backlash within his own administration, and he said, "I'm going to go with my gut, and my gut tells me Netanyahu's right." But Donald — an 79- or 80-year-old man who doesn't even know the words to the national anthem — what would make anyone think he understands the character, spirit, and history of the Iranian people? He has no clue. Anyone who understands the Iranian people knows they are not going to back down, and they'll continue fighting asymmetrically until Donald backs down — which is eventually what's going to happen. Even the Memorandum of Understanding was basically an American capitulation — he heard about it from the American people: "you accused Obama of giving Iran a billion dollars, and now you're about to give Iran $300 billion, and leaving the Strait of Hormuz in their control" — but he told everyone it was the greatest deal ever, "we're winning, the Iranians are going to lose in this deal" — hogwash. So, easily manipulated by Netanyahu into war with Iran, which is what Israel has wanted for a long time anyway. But Donald has to pay the price — he started a war he cannot get himself out of. You can't bomb yourself into a diplomatic win.

Arina Sing: Regarding Trump's language and the way he communicates. For us Iranians, his tweets fluctuate the prices, the U.S. dollar, gold value — and, unfortunately, decide where is going to be bombed and how the war is going to go. Do you have any tweet-deciphering method? I've noticed when he uses very diplomatic, no-capitalized language, either he was forcefully convinced of something, or he's very uncomfortable about the topic, in another word it is not truly his own expression. Some of this I have to say though, is speculative. Are there any patterns you have noticed in his tweets that help decipher what might come?

Prof. Byrd: During the day, someone tweets for him — he dictates it, and they write it down — so he's generally around other people who might push back, or just let him do it. But if you want to see when Trump is really Trump, it's the tirades at night — he's in the executive mansion alone, Melania isn't there, hasn't shared a bed with him in years, he doesn't sleep, and he's either sharing something or typing in all caps. That's a direct line into the man's consciousness, so you know what he's truly feeling. During the day he might try to be more diplomatic, because he's supposed to be in that context; at night, it's just him. The nighttime ones, especially when he's enraged, and the projections — a lot of the accusations against other people, he's generally projecting. He said, "the Iranians lie about everything, I've never seen anything like it" — and everyone read that as him projecting, since he's the one who lies constantly. Even with clear evidence something happened or didn't, he'll say the opposite, and when confronted with evidence, call it fake, fake news, propaganda. So interpreting them isn't hard, but knowing what's really him — it's the nighttime ones. But also, according to the Department of Education, over 50% of Americans read at a sixth-grade level or lower — elementary school level. So it's already a society that isn't basically literate — Donald has never had a good vocabulary — linguists describe him as speaking at a fourth-grade level, and with his decline, especially his dementia, his vocabulary keeps shrinking, down to basically one-syllable words. He's incapable of complex sentences or complex ideas — everything is basic, like something you'd hear from a five-, six-, seven-year-old. How do you communicate effectively when you only have the vocabulary of a child? You communicate in a childlike manner, and that's what he does. When he yells at you, it's like being yelled at by a child. When he tries to convince you of something, it's like listening to a child try to engage in complex logic — it's just not there. It's infuriating, but to most of the masses in America, "he sounds like us, talks like we do, reflects how we think, thinks our thoughts." Scholars of the cycles of history will tell you that when an empire or state is at its zenith, people at the bottom want to emulate people at the top — talk like them, dress like them, think like them. But when a state is in massive decline, those on top emulate those on the bottom — adopt their vocabulary. You see Donald doing that. It's not a critique of working-class people — that's just the condition they find themselves in for various reasons. But the fact that this guy, who's had every opportunity, sounds just like those with very little opportunity, tells you where he is mentally.

Arina Sing: Regarding upper hand in deals, I read that throughout his life he's just been making deals, in a transactional sense — and when he makes these extreme threats, like “annihilating a whole civilization”, it's his way of trying to gain the upper hand in the deal he's supposedly going to get. There was some analysis suggesting none of this should be taken literally — it could be serious in many ways, but not "annihilation of a whole civilization" seriously — that it's just a strategy to control the opponent.

Prof. Byrd: A lot of that robust language is just him expressing rage. It's "sane-washing" — when he's just being a child and people say "no, he's playing 3D chess" — he's not, he's just being a child. He's probably so angry that Iran made him look bad to the world that he goes straight to the most extreme — "I'm going to destroy the whole civilization" — but everyone knows he doesn't have the capacity. Even if he said "we're going to drop nukes all over Iran," I can guarantee the Joint Chiefs of Staff would step in and say no. The military brass are highly educated, well beyond Donald Trump — in fact, the last chapter of my book on Trump is nothing but quotes from generals and admirals denouncing him for the numerous things he's done. They would step in — if they're still there, because the ones who made clear they would are gone. That's the problem with power — authoritarians surround themselves with yes-men who can't think, who just bow their heads to the leader. So the leader gets bad information constantly, and Donald loves bad information if it looks good — which is why Netanyahu's bad information worked, because it made Donald look like a great emancipator. Ultimately, I think Donald's presidency is going to collapse on itself, because these wannabe dictators fall apart due to the internal logic of their own rule. You're starting to see that among MAGA people, Republicans — they know the Republican Party is going to be wiped out with the next generation because they've tied themselves so tightly to Trump. Evangelical Christianity has tied itself so tightly to Trump it's losing people — for the first time, under 50% of the U.S. population identifies with any religion, and a lot of that's tied to conservative Christianity's alignment with Trump and that xenophobic, racist, misogynist politics. So it'll fall apart — the question is whether the Republic will survive. Donald's going to do whatever he can to stay in power, even if that means destroying the Republic, like Julius Caesar, and turning it into "red Caesarism," as it's called now — an important term, worth looking up, a lot of people are calling for. It's possible. But the reaction to Trump among the American population is growing, to the point where people feel they have to step up, otherwise he's going to ruin the country — and that has ripple effects around the world.

Arina Sing: And to conclude this interview, as we know, aside from mental health conditions, Trump has health conditions and dementia and he might not have much time left. In that case, why do you think we spend more time studying him? Does such psychological profiling only apply to him, or is there a pattern we should be cautious of? And how such researches or books published on him would be useful after his time?

Prof. Byrd: It is not just him. As long as the conditions that created him remain — that made him the person people are so attracted to — another one's going to come. If someone tries to do "Trump 2.0," it's not going to work, because Trump is singular — the inauthenticity of copying him would be clear to everybody, not just conservatives. But that doesn't mean a different kind of right-wing, neo-authoritarian figure won't try for power. J.D. Vance represents that techno-fascist movement growing around Elon Musk, Peter Thiel — they fund him, he's their guy. That's a different kind. Ultimately, I think we have to do this kind of research, because what we do now is, in German, a "Flaschenpost" — a message in a bottle — it can inform later generations about what's on the verge of happening to them when they have their own kind of Trump. When Trump came to power, a lot of us went back to Hitler — not for the ideology, since Trump doesn't have one, but for the means of manipulating the masses, why propaganda was so important. I even went back to Julius Caesar, how he used the most powerful, wealthiest people in Rome to get to power — what is Donald doing with Elon Musk? Much the same thing. We have to establish the dynamics of this type of authoritarian, populist rise, so later generations can see it coming when it's on their horizon. We might not see the fruits of our work now, but later generations will thank us for it.

FOREIGN POLICY APPROACHES TOWARDS ALLIES, ADVERSARIES AND SPHERE OF CONTROL

Historical Allies - European Union

To understand how Trump's conduct affects peace and security in the Middle East, we must also look at how he treats his allies, sphere of influence (Latin America), in which states are under pressure to concede to Trump's policies, rivalries and adversaries alike. The behavioral patterns that shape his foreign policy are visible in his dealings with states outside the Middle East, so these relationships help explain what to expect in the region. This section therefore examines his conduct toward allies in general before it turns to the Middle East.

Trump's view of European allies has changed little since his first term. He treats them mainly as free riders on American military protection and as trade competitors, and he gives little weight to shared values.[352] The pattern was visible at the 2019 NATO summit in London. There he told reporters that allies had been 'delinquent for 25-30 years' on defense spending, and he said the 2% target was too low and should be 4%.[353] That same week the US Trade Representative proposed tariffs on $2.4 billion of French goods over France's tax on large technology firms.[354] Defense and trade were already linked in his first term. The argument returned in 2026. In July, before the Ankara summit, Trump called it 'ridiculous' for the United States to keep its current level of NATO support, and described the alliance as one-sided and not reciprocal.[355] He posted a chart that put American spending at $999 billion, slightly above the $980 billion NATO itself estimates for 2025.[356] In October 2025 he told Finland's president that Spain, the only member that refused the new spending target, should perhaps be thrown out, saying 'throw them out of NATO'.[357] Senior officials used similar language. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth called Europeans 'ungrateful' and said it was time they learned to fight on their own, and Secretary of

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[352] Max Bergmann, 'Transatlantic Relations Under Trump: An Uneasy Peace', Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 6, 2025, https://www.csis.org/analysis/transatlantic-relations-under-trump-uneasy-peace.
[353] 'Trump Lashes NATO Allies over Defense Spending', Associated Press, in the *Korea Times*, December 4, 2019, https://www.pressreader.com/korea-republic/the-korea-times/20191204/281818580697096.
[354] 'Trump Lashes NATO Allies'.
[355] Tiago Ventura, 'Trump Says It's "Ridiculous" for U.S. to Maintain Current NATO Support as Rift Widens Ahead of Summit', *TIME*, July 3, 2026, https://time.com/article/2026/07/03/trump-nato-defense-spending-row-alliance-summit/
[356] Ventura, 'Trump Says It's "Ridiculous"'.
[357] Malek Fouda, 'Trump Suggests Spain Should Be "Thrown Out" of NATO over Defence Expenditure Disagreements', Euronews, October 10, 2025, https://www.euronews.com/2025/10/10/trump-suggests-spain-should-be-thrown-out-of-nato-over-defense-expenditure-disagreements

State Marco Rubio said the United States would have to reassess the value of NATO.[358] This pressure produced results at first. At the 2025 Hague summit every European member except Spain agreed to spend 5% of GDP on defense by 2035, made up of 3.5% on core defense and 1.5% on related infrastructure.[359] In July 2026 Chancellor Friedrich Merz said Germany is doubling its defense budget within four years.[360] Analysts disagree on why Europe agreed. Max Bergmann of CSIS argues that European leaders did not act only to please Trump, because they also no longer believe they can rely on the United States. He notes that European spending was already up 83% since 2015.[361] Ziyi Wang adds that Europe is keeping much of the money inside its own defense industry, which reduces what it spends in the United States.[362] That point is disputed, because American officials objected to European plans to buy weapons locally.[363]

The Iran War as the Breaking Point

The Iran war in 2026 shows how Trump behaves when allies do not follow him. The United States and Israel attacked Iran without consulting Europe.[364] Trump then pressed allies for help, including warships to reopen the Strait of Hormuz, and no close ally came forward with immediate help.[365] Spain went furthest. In early March it refused to let the United States use the jointly run bases at Rota and Morón for operations against Iran, and Trump responded by saying the United States would cut off all trade with Spain.[366] Reuters reported that fifteen American aircraft, including refuelling tankers, were moved out of the two bases, and a legal expert

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[358] Sophia Besch, 'Europe Cannot Sit Out the Iran War', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 7, 2026, https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2026/04/europe-iran-war-diplomacy-united-states.
[359] Tiago Ventura, 'Trump Says It's "Ridiculous" for U.S. to Maintain Current NATO Support as Rift Widens Ahead of Summit', *TIME*, July 3, 2026, https://time.com/article/2026/07/03/trump-nato-defense-spending-row-alliance-summit/
[360] Ventura, 'Trump Says It's "Ridiculous"'.
[361] Max Bergmann, 'Transatlantic Relations Under Trump: An Uneasy Peace', Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 6, 2025, https://www.csis.org/analysis/transatlantic-relations-under-trump-uneasy-peace
[362] Ziyi Wang, 'The Price of Trump's Transactional Diplomacy', Engelsberg Ideas, August 27, 2026, https://engelsbergideas.com/notebook/the-price-of-trumps-transactional-diplomacy/
[363] Benjamin Friedman and Moritz Graefrath, 'Stop Bargaining with Europe, Start Leaving', Defense Priorities, May 27, 2026, https://www.defensepriorities.org/explainers/stop-bargaining-with-europe-start-leaving/. *(Advocacy source: Defense Priorities argues for US military retrenchment.)*
[364] Sophia Besch, 'Europe Cannot Sit Out the Iran War', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 7, 2026, https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2026/04/europe-iran-war-diplomacy-united-states
[365] John Leicester, Emma Burrows, 'Trump's Failed Strong-Arming of Allies on Iran Shows That Pressure Is Losing Its Effect', Associated Press, in PBS News, March 18, 2026, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/trumps-failed-strong-arming-of-allies-on-iran-shows-that-pressure-is-losing-its-effect.
[366] 'A Rift between Spain and Trump Widens over Spanish Opposition to the Iran War', NPR, March 5, 2026, https://www.npr.org/2026/03/05/nx-s1-5737285/iran-war-spain-trump

doubted that the refusal could count as a threat to American security.[367] Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez answered 'No to war' and said Spain would not be complicit out of fear of reprisals.[368] At the end of March Spain also closed its airspace to American aircraft on Iran missions.[369] Italy refused a request to land American bombers at the Sigonella base in Sicily before they flew on to the Middle East.[370] The government said it had only applied existing agreements, since the aircraft were already in the air and Italian military leaders had not been consulted, and it denied any tension with Washington.[371] The refusal came from the government of Giorgia Meloni, who had been one of Trump's biggest allies in Europe.[372] Trump later said he was 'shocked' by her stance.[373] At Ankara in July he said Italy had 'turned us down', and Meloni repeated that Italy would not take part in attacks on Iran.[374]

Troops as Leverage

Germany shows most clearly how Trump uses force posture as pressure. On April 27 Merz said Iran was 'humiliating' Washington at the negotiating table.[375] Two days later Trump said the United States was reviewing a reduction of its troops in Germany.[376] On April 30 he wrote that

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[367] Reuters, 'Spain's PM to Trump: You Cannot Play Russian Roulette with Destiny of Millions', March 4, 2026, republished by Chronicle.lu, https://chronicle.lu/category/international-news/59886-spains-pm-to-trump-you-cannot-play-russian-roulette-with-destiny-of-millions

[368] '"No to War": Spanish PM Responds to Trump's Trade Threats over Iran', Catalan News, March 4, 2026, https://www.catalannews.com/politics/item/iran-war-trump-spain-sanchez-trade-threat-march-4-2026

[369] Tom Kington, 'Italy Turns Away Middle East-Bound US Military Aircraft from Sicily Stopover', *Defense News*, March 31, 2026, https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2026/03/31/italy-turns-away-middle-east-bound-us-military-aircraft-from-sicily-stopover

[370] Kington, 'Italy Turns Away'.

[371] 'Italy Refuses to Let US Bombers Land in Sicily', ANSA English, March 31, 2026, https://www.ansa.it/amp/english/newswire/english_service/2026/03/31/ansaitaly-refuses-to-let-us-bombers-land-in-sicily_7b846f74-75b7-41d4-8355-ff7cd1ae943a.html

[372] 'Italy Denied Use of Base to Some US Aircraft Headed to Mideast', Agence France-Presse, in ARY News, March 31, 2026, https://arynews.tv/italy-denied-use-of-base-to-some-us-aircraft-headed-to-mideast/

[373] Benjamin Weinthal, 'Trump "Right to Be Outraged" by Europe's Betrayal on Iran, Says Former Thatcher Advisor', Fox News, May 6, 2026, https://www.foxnews.com/world/trump-right-outraged-europes-betrayal-iran-says-former-thatcher-advisor

[374] 'Defying Trump, Italy's Meloni "Maintaining" Hard Line against Iran War Help', Breaking Defense, July 2026, https://breakingdefense.com/2026/07/defying-trump-italys-meloni-maintaining-hard-line-against-iran-war-help/

[375] 'Merz Says Not "Giving up on Working with Trump"', Agence France-Presse, in *The News International*, May 4, 2026, https://www.thenews.pk/print/1413629-merz-says-not-giving-up-on-working-with-trump

[376] 'Trump Says That He's Weighing Reducing American Troop Presence in Germany after Iran Feud', Associated Press, in KTAR News, April 29, 2026,

Merz should spend more time on ending the war in Ukraine and less time interfering in Iran policy.[377] On May 1 the Pentagon ordered the withdrawal of about 5,000 troops, which cut the number of brigade combat teams in Europe from four to three, and it cancelled the planned deployment of a long-range fire battalion with Tomahawk and hypersonic missiles.[378] Trump said soon afterwards that the cuts would go 'a lot further than 5,000'.[379]

Conclusion

Earlier presidents also complained about European defense spending, but they kept security and trade separate and avoided signals that could be read as a break with the alliance.[380] Trump treats even allies as parties to a bargain in which the United States provides a service and expects payment, and he links defense to trade, base access and political loyalty.[381] When allies refuse, he answers with threats of tariffs, embargoes or troop cuts. This approach won concessions at first. Besch notes that tariff threats and hints of withdrawing security guarantees gained more from Europe in one year than years of consultation had.[382] It also costs trust, and Wang warns that allies may come to see Article 5 as a subscription that must be renewed every year.[383]

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https://ktar.com/national-news/trump-says-that-hes-is-weighing-reducing-american-troop-presence-in-germany-after-iran-fued/5854493/

[377] 'Trump Slams Germany's Merz Again as Rift over Iran War Widens', Al Jazeera, April 30, 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/4/30/trump-slams-germanys-merz-again-as-rift-over-iran-war-widens

[378] Giuseppe Spatafora, 'Small Changes, Big Impact: How Trump's Latest Decision Removes a Key Component of Europe's Deterrence', European Union Institute for Security Studies, May 7, 2026, https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/commentary/small-changes-big-impact-how-trumps-latest-decision-removes-key-component; Benjamin Friedman and Moritz Graefrath, 'Stop Bargaining with Europe, Start Leaving', Defense Priorities, May 27, 2026, https://www.defensepriorities.org/explainers/stop-bargaining-with-europe-start-leaving/

[379] Benjamin Weinthal, 'Trump "Right to Be Outraged" by Europe's Betrayal on Iran, Says Former Thatcher Advisor', Fox News, May 6, 2026, https://www.foxnews.com/world/trump-right-outraged-europes-betrayal-iran-says-former-thatcher-advisor

[380] Max Bergmann, 'Transatlantic Relations Under Trump: An Uneasy Peace', Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 6, 2025, https://www.csis.org/analysis/transatlantic-relations-under-trump-uneasy-peace

[381] Bergmann, 'Transatlantic Relations'.

[382] Sophia Besch, 'Europe Cannot Sit Out the Iran War', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 7, 2026, https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2026/04/europe-iran-war-diplomacy-united-states

[383] Ziyi Wang, 'The Price of Trump's Transactional Diplomacy', Engelsberg Ideas, August 27, 2026, https://engelsbergideas.com/notebook/the-price-of-trumps-transactional-diplomacy/

Historical Allies - Canada

Canada shows the same behavior in a relationship that the United States long treated as its closest. Canada and the United States are NORAD partners, and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau pointed this out when Trump's first administration called Canadian steel a national security threat.[384] Edward Alden of the Council on Foreign Relations says Canada built its economic future on trust in the United States, and that Trump has turned his back on that.[385]

First Term

The first term brought strain, but it stayed within a trade dispute. The renegotiation of NAFTA began 90 days after a May 2017 notice to Congress and concluded on September 30, 2018. The USMCA was signed on November 30, 2018 and entered into force on July 1, 2020.[386] Trump repeatedly threatened to withdraw from NAFTA in 2018 while the USMCA was under discussion, and either side could leave with six months' written notice.[387] In May 2018 he ended Canada's exemption from the steel and aluminum tariffs, which he justified with national security rules. Trudeau and Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland called that reasoning 'absurd'. Trudeau asked in what universe Canada, a NORAD partner whose soldiers had fought beside American ones, became a security threat.[388] The low point came at the G7 summit in June 2018. Trudeau told a press conference that Canada would not be pushed around on tariffs. Trump had already left the summit. He wrote that Trudeau had acted mildly in the meetings and was 'very dishonest & weak', and he told US representatives not to endorse the joint communiqué. He also claimed his tariffs answered a Canadian dairy tariff of 270%.[389] These episodes set a pattern: public insults, tariffs defended on national security grounds, and a trade deal reached under threat of withdrawal.

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[384] Amanda Connolly, 'Trump to Face "Very, Very Frank" Questions at G7 in First Direct Talks since Steel Tariffs: Trudeau', Global News, June 5, 2018, https://globalnews.ca/news/4255562/donald-trump-justin-trudeau-steel-tariffs-g7/.
[385] Callum Sutherland, 'Trump Revisits Idea to Annex Canada and Make It the 51st State, Days After Carney Calls for New Partnership With U.S.', TIME, June 2, 2026, https://time.com/article/2026/06/02/trump-annex-canada-51st-state-rhetoric-carney-us-partnership-message/.
[386] Congressional Research Service, *The United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA)*, R44981, July 27, 2020, https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/2020-07-27_R44981_f1b623f73541f33cca2ee0760c5f1f55a54496be.html.
[387] 'Could the USMCA Be Terminated?', ST&R Trade Report, https://www.strtrade.com/trade-news-resources/str-trade-report/trade-report/june/could-the-usmca-be-terminated.
[388] Connolly, 'Trump to Face "Very, Very Frank" Questions'.
[389] Amanda Connolly and Rahul Kalvapalle, '"Meek, Mild and Dishonest": Trump Lashes Out at Trudeau after PM Contradicts Him in Public', Global News, June 9, 2018, https://globalnews.ca/news/4265020/trump-tweets-about-trudeau-g7-trade/.

Second Term

The second term repeats this pattern and adds something new, which is open talk of ending Canadian sovereignty. Trump has floated making Canada the 51st state many times since returning to office.[390] On March 10, 2026 he called Mark Carney the 'future Governor of Canada' in a Truth Social post that was mainly about Asian carp in the Great Lakes.[391] On June 1, 2026 he shared an article reporting that Canada had entered a technical recession, after two straight quarters of falling GDP, and answered with a two-word post calling Canada the 51st state.[392] The US ambassador, Pete Hoekstra, shared the post. Carney was asked whether Canada should expel him and said no, because Ottawa had to keep working with the administration.[393] Canadian responses have changed over time. Carney has said that annexation will never happen, and Ontario Premier Doug Ford said that Canada will never be the 51st state and is not for sale.[394] Carney himself has become more restrained. In January he said he would not comment on every Trump post.[395] In June he called Trump a very active social media user and said Canada would not react to everything he posts.[396] Daniel Béland, a political scientist at McGill, links this to the review of the trade agreement due to start in July. He reads the annexation talk as an attempt to 'symbolically weaken Canada' by questioning its sovereignty, and he does not think an actual annexation is realistic.[397] A few days before the recession, Carney had proposed a new partnership that included American purchases of Canadian aluminum, cars and critical minerals.[398]

The Wildfire Smoke Demand

In July 2026 wildfires in western Ontario pushed smoke as far as Maine and New York City. Atmos reports at least 1.8 million acres burned in Canada. It also notes that nearly 41,000 fires

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[390] Callum Sutherland, 'Trump Revisits Idea to Annex Canada and Make It the 51st State, Days After Carney Calls for New Partnership With U.S.', TIME, June 2, 2026, https://time.com/article/2026/06/02/trump-annex-canada-51st-state-rhetoric-carney-us-partnership-message/.
[391] 'Trump Refers to PM Carney as Future "Governor of Canada" in Social Media Post', CP24, March 10, 2026, https://www.cp24.com/news/canada/2026/03/10/trump-refers-to-pm-carney-as-future-governor-of-canada-in-social-media-post/.
[392] Sutherland, 'Trump Revisits Idea to Annex Canada'.
[393] Corné van Hoepen, '"Focus Is on Getting Things Done": Expert Explains Why Carney Brushed Off Trump's Latest 51st State Comments', Yahoo News Canada, June 5, 2026, https://ca.news.yahoo.com/focus-is-on-getting-things-done-expert-explains-why-carney-brushed-off-trumps-latest-51st-state-comments-211643224.html.
[394] Sutherland, 'Trump Revisits Idea to Annex Canada'.
[395] 'Trump Refers to PM Carney as Future "Governor of Canada"'.
[396] Van Hoepen, '"Focus Is on Getting Things Done"'.
[397] Van Hoepen, '"Focus Is on Getting Things Done"'.
[398] Sutherland, 'Trump Revisits Idea to Annex Canada'.

had burned more than 3.9 million acres in the United States, and some of that smoke drifted north.[399] On July 17 Trump wrote that Canada was not maintaining its forests and that the United States was being invaded by 'filthy, polluted, and unhealthy air'. He said the cost should be added to the tariffs Canada already pays.[400] Four Republican House members wrote to Carney that their patience had run out and that sovereignty comes with responsibility.[401] On July 20 Senator Bernie Moreno introduced a bill that could bring sanctions and visa restrictions on Canada.[402] Ford replied that Ontario had sent hydro workers and water bombers to the United States after Hurricane Helene and the Los Angeles wildfires, and he asked why the United States was not sending help.[403] Legal experts see no basis for the demand. Michael Gerrard of Columbia's Sabin Center said there is 'no plausible theory' under international law for holding Canada liable.[404] Trade lawyer John Boscariol knew of no US tariff authority that covers smoke from another country.[405] The 1991 Canada-US Air Quality Agreement covers gases linked to acid rain, not wildfire particles.[406] Forest ecologist Lori Daniels says more than half of Canada's forests are not actively managed. She adds that lightning starts about 46% of Canadian fires but accounts for about 83% of the area burned.[407] The smoke demand did not become a smoke tariff. On July 20 the administration imposed new 50% tariffs on a wide range of Canadian goods, including wine, hockey sticks and cement, starting August 19. The White House said these were unrelated to the wildfires. It based them on the Tariff Act of 1930 and on Canada's treatment of American vehicles, alcohol and dairy.[408] Atmos notes that the tariff announced was not a tax on smoke.[409] The pattern is the same as in the first term: a grievance is stated, and trade pressure follows on separate legal grounds.

Carney's Response at Davos

Carney gave his most direct answer at Davos on January 20, 2026. He said the world was in 'rupture, not a transition'. He told middle powers that going along with great powers would not

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[399] Miranda Green, 'Trump Threatens to Tax Canada for Its Wildfires', Atmos, July 22, 2026, https://atmos.earth/political-landscapes/trump-threatens-to-tax-canada-for-its-wildfires/
[400] Adriana Fallico, 'Trump Says He'll Be "Holding Canada Responsible" for Wildfire Smoke', Global News, July 17, 2026, https://globalnews.ca/news/11970405/donald-trump-canada-wildfires/.
[401] Green, 'Trump Threatens to Tax Canada'.
[402] Sam Forster, 'Can Trump Make Canada Pay for Wildfire Smoke?', Canadian Affairs, July 29, 2026, https://www.canadianaffairs.news/2026/07/29/can-trump-make-canada-pay-for-wildfire-smoke/.
[403] Green, 'Trump Threatens to Tax Canada'.
[404] Forster, 'Can Trump Make Canada Pay'.
[405] Forster, 'Can Trump Make Canada Pay'.
[406] Forster, 'Can Trump Make Canada Pay'.
[407] Forster, 'Can Trump Make Canada Pay'.
[408] Forster, 'Can Trump Make Canada Pay'.
[409] Green, 'Trump Threatens to Tax Canada'.

buy them safety, and that great powers were using economic integration as coercion.[410] He did not name Trump or the United States, on a day when Trump shared an image of a map showing Canada and other countries as part of the United States.[411] He warned that a country negotiating alone with a hegemon negotiates from weakness, and that middle powers who do not act together will be 'on the menu'.[412] He also listed what Canada was doing in practice: doubling defense spending by the end of the decade, joining the EU's SAFE defense procurement program, and signing twelve trade and security deals in six months, along with new partnerships with China and Qatar.[413] Trump told Davos that Canada lives because of the United States. Carney replied in a filmed address that Canada 'thrives because we are Canadian'.[414]

Conclusion

Canada shows how fragile the upper hand is that Trump seeks in transactional relations. He had real leverage, because Canada's economy depends on trade with the United States.[415] That leverage produced caution in Ottawa as the review of the trade agreement approached.[416] But pressure also changed how Canada plans. Carney argued that hegemons cannot keep monetizing their relationships, because allies diversify to protect themselves.[417] Canada has begun to do this by signing deals abroad and raising defense spending. Each new demand also carries a cost to credibility. The wildfire demand had no legal basis, and the tariffs that followed rested on other grounds.[418] Béland argues that this treatment has turned the United States from an ally into an adversary in Canadian eyes.[419] A transactional approach gives short-term leverage only while the

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[410] 'Davos 2026: Special Address by Mark Carney, Prime Minister of Canada', World Economic Forum, January 2026, https://www.weforum.org/stories/2026/01/davos-2026-special-address-by-mark-carney-prime-minister-of-canada/
[411] Christopher Nardi, 'Carney Urges Countries to Call out "Hegemons" and Bullies in Striking WEF Speech', National Post, January 20, 2026, in Yahoo News Canada, https://ca.news.yahoo.com/carney-urges-countries-call-hegemons-161426342.html.
[412] Nardi, 'Carney Urges Countries to Call out "Hegemons"'.
[413] 'Davos 2026: Special Address by Mark Carney'.
[414] Callum Sutherland, 'Trump Revisits Idea to Annex Canada and Make It the 51st State, Days After Carney Calls for New Partnership With U.S.', TIME, June 2, 2026, https://time.com/article/2026/06/02/trump-annex-canada-51st-state-rhetoric-carney-us-partnership-message/
[415] Sutherland, 'Trump Revisits Idea to Annex Canada'.
[416] Corné van Hoepen, '"Focus Is on Getting Things Done": Expert Explains Why Carney Brushed Off Trump's Latest 51st State Comments', Yahoo News Canada, June 5, 2026, https://ca.news.yahoo.com/focus-is-on-getting-things-done-expert-explains-why-carney-brushed-off-trumps-latest-51st-state-comments-211643224.html.
[417] 'Davos 2026: Special Address by Mark Carney'.
[418] Sam Forster, 'Can Trump Make Canada Pay for Wildfire Smoke?', Canadian Affairs, July 29, 2026, https://www.canadianaffairs.news/2026/07/29/can-trump-make-canada-pay-for-wildfire-smoke/.
[419] Van Hoepen, '"Focus Is on Getting Things Done"'.

other side has nowhere else to go, and Canada's response suggests it is looking for somewhere else.

Current Allies - Türkiye

Türkiye offers a different case from Europe and Canada. It is a NATO member and a long-standing partner of the United States, but it does not behave like a junior ally. This section follows the relationship through four periods: the Obama years, Trump's first term, the Biden administration and Trump's second term. In each period it asks how President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan handled Washington. The main argument is that Erdoğan has kept Türkiye independent by balancing its ties with the West against its ties with the global South, and that a personal connection with the American president has helped him do it. Trump's leader-centered, transactional style makes this approach easier to use, and the section examines how well it has worked for Türkiye.

Fraying Alliance under Obama

By the mid-2010s the United States and Türkiye were formal allies, but the relationship was already under strain. The coup attempt of July 15, 2016 made it worse. More than 200 people died.[420] Erdoğan blamed the cleric Fethullah Gülen, who has lived in the United States since 1999, and demanded his extradition. Gülen denied any role.[421] Ankara had asked for his return before the coup as well, and in the weeks afterward Erdoğan said the United States had to choose between Türkiye and Gülen.[422] Obama told Erdoğan that Ankara had to present evidence, and said publicly that the case had to 'go through a legal process'.[423] Erdoğan saw this as a refusal to help a NATO ally. Syria was the second dispute. The United States backed the Syrian Kurdish YPG in the fight against ISIS, and Türkiye treats the YPG as part of the PKK.[424] In November 2016 Erdoğan told CBS News that he was 'disillusioned' with the Obama administration over both Gülen and the Kurds.[425] Vice President Biden visited Ankara in late August 2016. He was the highest-ranking American official to meet Turkish leaders since the coup, and the visit was

[420] Jack Moore, 'Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan "Disillusioned" with Barack Obama over Syria and Gulen', Newsweek, November 21, 2016 (updated November 26, 2016), https://www.newsweek.com/erdogan-says-he-disillusioned-obama-over-syria-and-gulen-523218.
[421] Moore, 'Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan "Disillusioned"'.
[422] 'US Delegation in Turkey to Discuss Evidence on Gulen', Al Jazeera, August 23, 2016, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/8/23/us-delegation-in-turkey-to-discuss-evidence-on-gulen.
[423] 'Obama Denies Any U.S. Involvement in Turkey Coup Bid', Asharq Al-Awsat, July 2016, https://eng-archive.aawsat.com/theaawsat/news-middle-east/obama-denies-u-s-involvement-turkey-coup-bid.
[424] Moore, 'Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan "Disillusioned"'.
[425] Moore, 'Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan "Disillusioned"'.

meant to repair what USA Today called a tenuous alliance.[426] He was also expected to raise concerns about the crackdown, in which tens of thousands of people were fired or imprisoned. Erdoğan visited Moscow that month and was reported to be planning a trip to Iran. Bulent Aliriza of CSIS read this as a message that Erdoğan was unhappy with the West.[427] Arms sales added to the friction. Türkiye finalized the S-400 deal with Russia in 2017, which was under Trump, not Obama.[428] Trump later said that the Obama administration had refused to sell Erdoğan Patriot missiles, and that this pushed him toward Russia.[429] Defense News gives a different account. It reports that Türkiye passed over the Patriot twice, in 2013 and in 2017, because it insisted on technology transfer.[430] Trump's version is therefore contested.

Trump's First Term (2017–2021): Personal Warmth, Institutional Collision

Trump's first term shows a relationship carried by personal rapport while the policy relationship underneath it weakened. The clearest early case was the detention of the American pastor Andrew Brunson. Türkiye arrested him in 2016 and accused him of ties to terrorist groups and of taking part in the coup attempt. He denied the charges.[431] In early August 2018 the United States sanctioned Justice Minister Abdulhamit Gül and Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu over his detention.[432] On August 10 Trump doubled the tariffs on Turkish metals, to 20% on aluminum and 50% on steel. The lira then fell more than 18% to a record low against the dollar.[433] Türkiye answered with higher tariffs on a list of American goods.[434] Brunson was freed in 2018, after the tariffs and sanctions.[435] Trump has since presented this as proof of his personal influence over

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[426] 'VP Visits Turkey Wednesday to Improve Tenuous Alliance', USA Today International Edition, August 25, 2016, https://www.pressreader.com/usa/usa-today-international-edition/20160825/281676844329380
[427] Bulent Aliriza, 'Trump-Erdogan Meeting at the G20: End of the S-400 Crisis?', Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 3, 2019, https://www.csis.org/analysis/trump-erdogan-meeting-g20-end-s-400-crisis
[428] 'Turkey Cleared by US for $3.5 Billion Patriot Missile Deal despite S-400 Row', Defense News, December 19, 2018, https://defensenews.com/global/europe/2018/12/19/turkey-cleared-by-us-for-35-billion-patriot-missile-deal-despite-s-400-row.
[429] Bulent Aliriza, 'Trump-Erdogan Meeting at the G20: End of the S-400 Crisis?'
[430] 'Turkey Cleared by US for $3.5 Billion Patriot Missile Deal'.
[431] Justin Sink, '"Don't Be a Tough Guy. Don't Be a Fool!" President Trump Wrote to Erdogan About Turkey's Advance into Syria', TIME, October 16, 2019, https://time.com/5702863/trump-erdogan-turkey-syria-letter/.
[432] 'Trump Hits Turkey with Big Tariffs', *The Commercial Appeal*, August 11, 2018, https://www.pressreader.com/usa/the-commercial-appeal/20180811/281603831296934.
[433] 'Trump Doubles Metals Tariffs on Turkey, Sending Lira into Freefall', NBC News, August 10, 2018, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/trump-doubles-metals-tariffs-turkey-sending-lira-freefall-n899606.
[434] 'Turkey Counterpunches by Raising Tariffs on U.S. Goods', NPR, August 2018, in WHYY, https://whyy.org/npr-story/turkey-counterpunches-by-raising-tariffs-on-u-s-goods.
[435] Sink, '"Don't Be a Tough Guy"'.

Erdoğan. In 2019 he said that Erdoğan 'gave me our pastor back'.[436] In his 2019 letter on Syria he pointed to the Brunson case as a glimpse of what he could do to the Turkish economy.[437] The same term also produced the low point. In June 2019 Trump called Erdoğan a friend and said he did not think he had been treated fairly over the S-400, blaming the Obama administration.[438] Türkiye finalized the S-400 deal with Russia in 2017.[439] After deliveries began in July 2019, the Trump administration announced Türkiye's removal from the F-35 program. CAATSA sanctions came only in December 2020, when the administration sanctioned the defense procurement agency, SSB, and blocked four of its officials.[440] The delay shows the gap between Trump and his own government. In late 2019 the Washington Post reported that the law required Trump to impose sanctions, but that he had delayed them and asked Republican senators for flexibility. He had also offered Erdoğan a $100 billion trade deal and a way around the sanctions.[441] Months after the S-400 deliveries, Trump's sudden decision to pull American forces out of northern Syria allowed Türkiye to launch an offensive. It exposed the Kurdish fighters who had fought ISIS beside the United States.[442] On October 9, 2019 Trump wrote Erdoğan a letter telling him to work out a good deal and ending with 'Don't be a tough guy. Don't be a fool!' He added that he did not want to destroy the Turkish economy, but would.[443] Trump said the letter proved he had given no green light, and Republican Michael McCaul called it very stern.[444] Trump's advisers did not share his approach. NBC News reported that six people at a private speech by former national security adviser John Bolton to Morgan Stanley hedge fund clients said he was most frustrated with Trump's handling of Türkiye.[445] Bolton reportedly said Trump's resistance to sanctions was unreasonable and that a personal or business relationship

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[436] Bulent Aliriza, 'Trump-Erdogan Meeting at the G20: End of the S-400 Crisis?'
[437] Sink, '"Don't Be a Tough Guy"'.
[438] Aliriza, 'Trump-Erdogan Meeting at the G20'.
[439] 'Turkey Cleared by US for $3.5 Billion Patriot Missile Deal despite S-400 Row', Defense News, December 19, 2018, https://defensenews.com/global/europe/2018/12/19/turkey-cleared-by-us-for-35-billion-patriot-missile-deal-despite-s-400-row.
[440] Congressional Research Service, *Turkey: U.S. Sanctions Under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA)*, IN11557, December 16, 2020, https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/IN11557.html.
[441] 'Daily 202: Trump's "Little Conflict of Interest" in Turkey Draws Scrutiny as He Offers Erdogan a Generous Deal', *Washington Post*, November 13, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/paloma/daily-202/2019/11/13/daily-202-trump-s-little-conflict-of-interest-in-turkey-draws-scrutiny-as-he-offers-erdogan-a-generous-deal/5dcb903288e0fa10ffd20dcb/
[442] Justin Sink, '"Don't Be a Tough Guy. Don't Be a Fool!" President Trump Wrote to Erdogan About Turkey's Advance into Syria', TIME, October 16, 2019, https://time.com/5702863/trump-erdogan-turkey-syria-letter/.
[443] Sink, '"Don't Be a Tough Guy"'.
[444] Sink, '"Don't Be a Tough Guy"'.
[445] Stephanie Ruhle, Carol E. Lee, "In private speech, Bolton suggests some of Trump's foreign policy decisions are guided by personal interest", November 2, 2019, https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/private-speech-bolton-suggests-some-trump-s-foreign-policy-decisions-n1080651

was driving it, because none of his advisers agreed with him.[446] This account is secondhand and comes from unnamed attendees. Trump himself said in 2015 that he had 'a little conflict of interest' in Türkiye because of his Trump Towers in Istanbul.[447] The New York Times, quoted by the Post, also reported that Erdoğan's son-in-law, Finance Minister Berat Albayrak, dealt with Jared Kushner and pressed Trump in the Oval Office to hold back sanctions.[448]

Biden era (2021–2025)

Biden never hosted Erdoğan at the White House. When Erdoğan finally visited in September 2025, it was his first visit in six years.[449] Erdoğan did come to Washington once under Biden, but only for the NATO summit in July 2024, where he said he would raise Gaza.[450] As of April 2024, Biden was the first American president in two decades not to receive Erdoğan in his first three years.[451] Reuters wrote in 2021 that Biden had made a deliberate show of keeping Erdoğan at arm's length.[452] Several problems explain this. Türkiye still held the Russian S-400, and Washington backed the Syrian Kurdish forces that Ankara treats as terrorists.[453] In April 2021 Biden became the first American president to recognize the Armenian genocide, and Erdoğan did not call him for months.[454] Congress also resisted arms sales to Türkiye because of its human rights record.[455] Contact was limited to summit sidelines and phone calls. By October 2021 the two men had met only once, at the NATO summit in Brussels in June. Biden did not meet

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[446] Stephanie Ruhle and Carol E. Lee, "In Private Speech, Bolton Suggests Some of Trump's Foreign Policy Decisions Are Guided by Personal Interest."

[447] 'Daily 202: Trump's "Little Conflict of Interest" in Turkey Draws Scrutiny as He Offers Erdogan a Generous Deal', *Washington Post*, November 13, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/paloma/daily-202/2019/11/13/daily-202-trump-s-little-conflict-of-interest-in-turkey-draws-scrutiny-as-he-offers-erdogan-a-generous-deal/5dcb903288e0fa10ffd20dcb/

[448] 'Daily 202: Trump's "Little Conflict of Interest" in Turkey'.

[449] Emel Akan and Ryan Morgan, 'Trump Says US Lifting Sanctions to Allow F-35 Sales to Turkey', The Epoch Times, July 7, 2026, https://www.theepochtimes.com/us/trump-says-us-to-decide-on-f-35-sales-to-turkey-6058444.

[450] 'Turkey's Erdogan to Use Historic NATO Summit to Discuss Gaza', The New Arab, July 9, 2024, https://www.newarab.com/news/turkeys-erdogan-use-historic-nato-summit-discuss-gaza.

[451] Amberin Zaman, 'Turkey Postpones Erdogan's White House Visit', Al-Monitor, April 26, 2024, https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/04/turkey-postpones-erdogans-white-house-visit.

[452] 'Turkey's Erdoğan to Meet Biden at G20 Summit: State Broadcaster', Duvar English (Reuters), September 28, 2021, https://duvarenglish.com/turkeys-erdogan-to-meet-biden-at-g20-summit-state-broadcaster-news-58993.

[453] Zaman, 'Turkey Postpones Erdogan's White House Visit'.

[454] 'US President Biden Meets with Turkey's Erdogan', Kurdistan24, October 31, 2021, https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/26092-US-President-Biden-meets-with-Turkey%27s-Erdogan.

[455] 'Washington Approves Sale of F-16 Warplanes to Turkey', Agence France-Presse, January 27, 2024, in Kurdish Institute of Paris, https://www.institutkurde.org/en/info/latest/washington-approves-sale-of-f-16-warplanes-to-turkey-12415/.

Erdoğan at the UN General Assembly in September. Erdoğan also threatened that autumn to stop recognizing the American ambassador, but he did not follow through.[456] They met in Rome on October 31, 2021, where the White House said Biden wanted to manage disagreements and raised American concerns about the S-400.[457] The mood improved at Vilnius in July 2023, after Erdoğan agreed to send Sweden's NATO bid to parliament. He said their earlier meetings had been 'mere warm ups' and wished Biden luck in the 2024 election.[458] They spoke by phone in December 2023 about Sweden and Gaza, and agreed to stay in contact before the NATO summit in Washington.[459] The cooperation was transactional. Türkiye delayed Sweden's accession for more than a year, and Secretary of State Antony Blinken told Erdoğan three times in February 2023 that there would be no planes if he blocked it.[460] Türkiye ratified in January 2024. Hours after it deposited its ratification, the State Department notified Congress of a $23 billion sale of 40 new F-16s and upgrades for 79 existing jets. A separate $8.6 billion sale of F-35s to Greece went through at the same time.[461] The thaw led to an invitation. A White House visit was planned for May 9, 2024, which would have been Erdoğan's first since 2019.[462] [463] In late April Türkiye postponed it.[464] The reasons are disputed. A US Embassy spokesperson said the two sides could not align their schedules, and sources told Al-Monitor that Ankara was irritated by how long the White House took to announce the visit. John Kirby, a White House spokesman, said nothing was on the schedule. Turkish media reported that Erdoğan would cancel after the US approved $26 billion in aid for Israel. Gaza also mattered at home, since Erdoğan's party lost votes to the

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[456] 'US President Biden Meets with Turkey's Erdogan'.

[457] 'US President Biden Meets with Turkey's Erdogan', Kurdistan24, October 31, 2021, https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/26092-US-President-Biden-meets-with-Turkey%27s-Erdogan.
[458] 'WATCH: Biden and Turkey's President Erdogan Meet at NATO Summit', Associated Press, in PBS NewsHour, July 11, 2023, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/watch-biden-and-turkeys-president-erdogan-meet-at-nato-summit.
[459] 'Readout of President Biden's Call with President Erdoğan of Türkiye', White House, December 14, 2023, https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/12/14/readout-of-president-bidens-call-with-president-erdogan-of-turkiye-3.
[460] 'Washington Approves Sale of F-16 Warplanes to Turkey', Agence France-Presse, January 27, 2024, in Kurdish Institute of Paris, https://www.institutkurde.org/en/info/latest/washington-approves-sale-of-f-16-warplanes-to-turkey-12415/.
[461] Matthew Lee, 'U.S. Approves Sale of Fighter Jets to Turkey and Greece after Turkey Ratifies Sweden's Entry to NATO', Associated Press, in PBS NewsHour, January 27, 2024, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/u-s-approves-sale-of-fighter-jets-to-turkey-and-greece-after-turkey-ratifies-swedens-entry-to-nato.
[462] Amberin Zaman, 'Turkey Postpones Erdogan's White House Visit', Al-Monitor, April 26, 2024, https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/04/turkey-postpones-erdogans-white-house-visit.
[463] Emel Akan, Ryan Morgan, 'Trump Says US Lifting Sanctions to Allow F-35 Sales to Turkey', The Epoch Times, July 7, 2026, https://www.theepochtimes.com/us/trump-says-us-to-decide-on-f-35-sales-to-turkey-6058444.
[464] 'Turkey's Erdogan Postpones US Visit to Meet Biden, Official Says', Bloomberg, April 26, 2024, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-04-26/turkey-s-erdogan-will-meet-with-biden-at-white-house-in-may.

pro-Gaza New Welfare Party in the March 31 local elections. On the day the postponement was reported, Erdoğan called Netanyahu 'the butcher of Gaza'.[465] The White House said the meeting had never been announced.[466] Sinan Ciddi of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a think tank critical of Erdoğan, argued that the White House may have avoided embarrassment, since Erdoğan had said in March that Türkiye 'stands firmly behind Hamas'. Ciddi also admitted that it is unclear which side canceled.[467]

Trump's Second Term: Strategic personalization

In Trump's second term the warmth between the two leaders has grown. They met at the NATO summit in The Hague in June 2025, which Al-Monitor headlined as a first NATO meeting as ties warmed.[468] Turkish accounts say Erdoğan praised Trump for the Israel-Iran ceasefire and raised a $100 billion trade target, and that both leaders stressed NATO deterrence.[469] Erdoğan visited the White House in September 2025, his first visit in six years. Trump then went to Ankara for the NATO summit on July 7, 2026, the first visit to Türkiye by a sitting American president since Obama in 2015.[470] Trump said openly that Erdoğan was the reason he went. In June 2026 he told reporters that he was attending out of respect for Erdoğan, and that without Erdoğan hosting 'I don't think I would have gone'.[471] Middle East Eye reported, citing several unnamed sources, that in a May phone call Trump told Erdoğan he was attending 'just for him'. Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan said European states credit Erdoğan's role as host for Trump's presence.[472] Trump has often called Erdoğan a 'hell of a leader'.[473] In Ankara he praised the chemistry between

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[465] Zaman, 'Turkey Postpones Erdogan's White House Visit'.

[466] 'Turkey's Erdogan Postpones US Visit to Meet Biden, Official Says', Bloomberg, April 26, 2024, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-04-26/turkey-s-erdogan-will-meet-with-biden-at-white-house-in-may.

[467] Sinan Ciddi, 'Why President Erdogan's DC Visit Was Canceled', Foundation for Defense of Democracies, May 13, 2024, https://www.fdd.org/analysis/op-eds/why-president-erdogans-dc-visit-was-canceled/

[468] 'Trump, Erdogan Hold First Meeting at NATO as Ties Warm: What to Know', Al-Monitor, June 2025, https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2025/06/trump-erdogan-hold-first-meeting-nato-ties-warm-what-know

[469] 'Erdogan, Trump Discuss Regional, Bilateral Issues at NATO Summit', WAM (citing Anadolu), June 25, 2025, https://www.wam.ae/en/article/15mwy7l-erdogan-trump-discuss-regional-bilateral-issues.

[470] Emel Akan and Ryan Morgan, 'Trump Says US Lifting Sanctions to Allow F-35 Sales to Turkey', The Epoch Times, July 7, 2026, https://www.theepochtimes.com/us/trump-says-us-to-decide-on-f-35-sales-to-turkey-6058444.

[471] Isabella Murray and Nicholas Kerr, 'US Taking Stock of NATO as Trump Heads to Turkey for Summit', ABC News, July 6, 2026, https://abcnews.com/Politics/us-taking-stock-nato-trump-heads-turkey-summit/story?id=134444596.

[472] Ragip Soylu, 'Trump Told Erdogan He Is Attending Nato's Ankara Summit "Just for Him"', Middle East Eye, June 18, 2026, https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/trump-told-erdogan-he-attending-nato-summit-just-him.

[473] 'Trump's Ties to Erdogan Sold Him on This Year's NATO Summit. Turkey May Win Big in Other Ways', Associated Press, in KTAR News,

them.[474] Türkiye also gained from the rapport. When a reporter asked whether Trump was bringing a big gift bag for Erdoğan, Trump said he thought so, and Ankara wants F-35 jets and F-110 jet engines.[475] The AP noted that Trump claimed he had asked Erdoğan to stay out of the Iran war and that Erdoğan complied, though there was no sign Türkiye had planned to join. It also reported that Trump praised Erdoğan and urged Netanyahu to be 'reasonable' when Netanyahu wanted help against Turkish influence in Syria.[476] Middle East Eye adds that Türkiye has so far been largely spared American anger over defense spending. Türkiye passed the NATO 2% target in 2024, reaching 2.3% of GDP, and the US and Germany sent a Patriot system to southern Türkiye in May 2026.[477] After meeting Erdoğan on July 7, Trump said the United States was 'taking the sanctions off' to allow F-35 sales. The law still requires certification that Türkiye no longer operates the S-400, and Trump said Rubio, Bessent and Hegseth were drawing up a plan.[478] The sanctions in question were Trump's own. His administration imposed them in December 2020, in the final weeks of his first term.[479]

How Erdoğan has managed Trump

Three things help explain why Erdoğan has personalized this relationship when other leaders have not.

First, he courts Trump personally. Soner Cagaptay of the Washington Institute says the two men 'clicked' during Trump's first term.[480] At the NATO summit in The Hague in 2025, Erdoğan

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https://ktar.com/national-news/trumps-ties-to-erdogan-sold-him-on-this-years-nato-summit-turkey-may-win-big-in-other-ways/5885620/.

[474] Akan and Morgan, 'Trump Says US Lifting Sanctions'.

[475] 'Trump's Ties to Erdogan Sold Him on This Year's NATO Summit. Turkey May Win Big in Other Ways', Associated Press, in KTAR News, https://ktar.com/national-news/trumps-ties-to-erdogan-sold-him-on-this-years-nato-summit-turkey-may-win-big-in-other-ways/5885620/.

[476] 'Trump's Ties to Erdogan Sold Him on This Year's NATO Summit'.

[477] Ragip Soylu, 'Trump Told Erdogan He Is Attending Nato's Ankara Summit "Just for Him"', Middle East Eye, June 18, 2026, https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/trump-told-erdogan-he-attending-nato-summit-just-him.

[478] Emel Akan and Ryan Morgan, 'Trump Says US Lifting Sanctions to Allow F-35 Sales to Turkey', The Epoch Times, July 7, 2026, https://www.theepochtimes.com/us/trump-says-us-to-decide-on-f-35-sales-to-turkey-6058444.

[479] Congressional Research Service, *Turkey: U.S. Sanctions Under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA)*, IN11557, December 16, 2020, https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/IN11557.html.

[480] 'Trump's Ties to Erdogan Sold Him on This Year's NATO Summit. Turkey May Win Big in Other Ways', Associated Press, in KTAR News, July 2, 2026, https://ktar.com/national-news/trumps-ties-to-erdogan-sold-him-on-this-years-nato-summit-turkey-may-win-big-in-other-ways/5885620/.

welcomed the Israel-Iran ceasefire as a result of Trump's efforts.[481] Afterward he told reporters that Trump returns his calls within 24 hours.[482] Cagaptay reads Erdoğan's decision in 2024 not to take up Biden's White House invitation as a signal to Trump that Erdoğan expected him to win the election. Cagaptay thinks Trump saw it as a big gesture.[483] Philip Gordon of the Brookings Institution says Trump gets on better with autocrats than with allies, and that Erdoğan is taking full advantage.[484]

Second, he uses direct channels. In 2026 Trump said that Erdoğan phoned him and asked him to come to the NATO summit in Ankara.[485] The Brunson case is less clear. Trump has said that he called Erdoğan and that the pastor was soon in the Oval Office.[486] TIME reports that Brunson was freed after Trump doubled metal tariffs on Türkiye and sanctioned Erdoğan's aides.[487] The personal channel also runs through Trump's friend Tom Barrack, who is ambassador to Türkiye. A Turkish professor calls him a facilitator in the relationship.[488]

Third, Trump has a financial stake in Türkiye. Erdoğan, then prime minister, cut the ribbon at the opening of Trump Towers Istanbul in 2012.[489] Ivanka Trump thanked him publicly for joining the launch.[490] Trump does not own the towers. In 2010 he let the Turkish owners use his name for a fee, and as president he refused to divest fully from his business.[491] In October 2019 four

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[481] 'Erdogan, Trump Discuss Regional, Bilateral Issues at NATO Summit', WAM (citing Anadolu), June 25, 2025, https://www.wam.ae/en/article/15mwy7l-erdogan-trump-discuss-regional-bilateral-issues.
[482] 'Trump's Ties to Erdogan Sold Him on This Year's NATO Summit'.

[483] 'Trump's Ties to Erdogan Sold Him on This Year's NATO Summit. Turkey May Win Big in Other Ways', Associated Press, in KTAR News, July 2, 2026, https://ktar.com/national-news/trumps-ties-to-erdogan-sold-him-on-this-years-nato-summit-turkey-may-win-big-in-other-ways/5885620/.
[484] 'Trump's Ties to Erdogan Sold Him on This Year's NATO Summit'.
[485] 'Trump's Ties to Erdogan Sold Him on This Year's NATO Summit'.
[486] Bulent Aliriza, 'Trump-Erdogan Meeting at the G20: End of the S-400 Crisis?', Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 3, 2019, https://www.csis.org/analysis/trump-erdogan-meeting-g20-end-s-400-crisis.
[487] Justin Sink, '"Don't Be a Tough Guy. Don't Be a Fool!" President Trump Wrote to Erdogan About Turkey's Advance into Syria', TIME, October 16, 2019, https://time.com/5702863/trump-erdogan-turkey-syria-letter/.
[488] 'Trump's Ties to Erdogan Sold Him on This Year's NATO Summit'.
[489] 'Daily 202: Trump's "Little Conflict of Interest" in Turkey Draws Scrutiny as He Offers Erdogan a Generous Deal', *Washington Post*, November 13, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/paloma/daily-202/2019/11/13/daily-202-trump-s-little-conflict-of-interest-in-turkey-draws-scrutiny-as-he-offers-erdogan-a-generous-deal/5dcb903288e0fa10ffd20dcb/.
[490] David Brennan, 'Ivanka Tweet Thanking Turkey's Erdogan for Attending Istanbul Trump Towers Launch Re-Emerges amid Syria Controversy', Newsweek, October 7, 2019, https://www.newsweek.com/ivanka-trump-tweet-thanking-turkey-erdogan-attending-istanbul-trump-towers-launch-syria-controversy-1463536.
[491] Brennan, 'Ivanka Tweet Thanking Turkey's Erdogan'.

Democratic senators wrote that Trump's financial disclosures showed he had personally earned between $1.2 million and $7 million in royalties from entities tied to the towers since taking office.[492] They also asked whether Erdoğan could use regulatory power over the licensing deal as leverage.[493] Trump himself said in 2015 that he had 'a little conflict of interest' in Türkiye.[494] Erdoğan once called for Trump's name to be taken off the towers after Trump proposed a ban on Muslim immigrants, and he stopped after Trump backed his crackdown following the coup attempt.[495] The Trump Organization did not answer the senators' main questions by their deadline.[496] John Bolton reportedly told a private audience that Trump's Türkiye policy seemed driven by a personal or business relationship, since none of his advisers agreed with him.[497] These are suspicions, and none of the sources shows that the towers decided any policy.

The rapport also has limits. Congress still opposes F-35 sales while Türkiye has the S-400, including Republican Senator Jim Risch. The State Department took steps to bypass congressional objections to a sale of F-110 jet engines worth more than $700 million.[498] The Justice Department dropped its case against Halkbank earlier in 2026.[499]

In conclusion, the evidence fits a view that American policy toward Türkiye follows how the president feels about Erdoğan. AP notes that Biden kept Erdoğan at arm's length over democratic backsliding and ties to Russia, while Trump has been warm and has moved toward easing

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[492] 'Duckworth, Colleagues Request Information on Trump Organization's Business in Turkey', Office of Senator Tammy Duckworth, October 25, 2019, https://www.duckworth.senate.gov/news/press-releases/10/25/2019/duckworth-colleagues-request-information-on-trump-organizations-business-in-turkey.
[493] 'Duckworth, Colleagues Request Information on Trump Organization's Business in Turkey', Office of Senator Tammy Duckworth, October 25, 2019, https://www.duckworth.senate.gov/news/press-releases/10/25/2019/duckworth-colleagues-request-information-on-trump-organizations-business-in-turkey.
[494] 'Daily 202: Trump's "Little Conflict of Interest" in Turkey Draws Scrutiny as He Offers Erdogan a Generous Deal', *Washington Post*, November 13, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/paloma/daily-202/2019/11/13/daily-202-trump-s-little-conflict-of-interest-in-turkey-draws-scrutiny-as-he-offers-erdogan-a-generous-deal/5dcb903288e0fa10ffd20dcb/.
[495] David Brennan, 'Ivanka Tweet Thanking Turkey's Erdogan for Attending Istanbul Trump Towers Launch Re-Emerges amid Syria Controversy', Newsweek, October 7, 2019, https://www.newsweek.com/ivanka-trump-tweet-thanking-turkey-erdogan-attending-istanbul-trump-towers-launch-syria-controversy-1463536.
[496] 'Udall: Trump Organization Fails to Answer Key Questions about Trump Business Ties in Turkey', Office of Senator Tom Udall, November 2019, https://udall.unm.edu/node/3337.
[497] 'Daily 202: Trump's "Little Conflict of Interest" in Turkey'.
[498] 'Trump's Ties to Erdogan Sold Him on This Year's NATO Summit. Turkey May Win Big in Other Ways', Associated Press, in KTAR News, July 2, 2026, https://ktar.com/national-news/trumps-ties-to-erdogan-sold-him-on-this-years-nato-summit-turkey-may-win-big-in-other-ways/5885620/.
[499] 'Trump's Ties to Erdogan Sold Him on This Year's NATO Summit'.

sanctions.[500] It does not prove that personal feeling is the cause, because Congress and the S-400 dispute also shape the outcome.

[500] 'Trump's Ties to Erdogan Sold Him on This Year's NATO Summit'.

Sphere of Influence - Latin America Venezuela, Cuba, Mexico, and the Monroe Doctrine

This section looks at how Trump treats states that benefit his agenda directly. Latin America is the clearest case. The United States has long treated the region as its own sphere of influence, a view that goes back to the Monroe Doctrine of 1823. Trump applies that view in a transactional way. He is interested in the region's resources, and in what each state can give him on resources, trade and security. The main example is the US invasion of Venezuela in January 2026, which went ahead without the legal and institutional approvals. The section also examines Cuba and Mexico, and considers how the other states in the region have been treated because of their resources. It covers both terms. It asks how far the second term continues the first, and how far it goes beyond it. The aim is to show how Trump behaves toward states that serve his own goals, as opposed to the allies discussed in the earlier sections.

Monroe Doctrine

On January 4, 2026, the day after US forces captured Maduro, Trump told reporters on Air Force One that Cuba was 'ready to fall'. Asked whether he would act against Colombia, he said it sounded good to him.[501] He said something had to be done about Mexico because the cartels were running it. He also said the United States needed Greenland 'from the standpoint of national security'.[502] A few days later he said land strikes against the cartels would soon begin.[503] The Panama Canal was not part of these remarks. He had threatened to retake it, by force if necessary, in his January 2025 inaugural address.[504] In early December 2025 the administration's National Security Strategy added a 'Trump Corollary' to the Monroe Doctrine. It ranks the hemisphere as the top regional priority, above Europe, the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific.[505] It calls for a hemisphere that 'remains free of hostile foreign incursion or ownership of key assets', which Al Jazeera reads as an oblique reference to China.[506] The document also promises to stop foreign ownership of strategic assets, to tie US support to rejecting outside influence, and to

[501] 'Trump Threatens 2 Other Countries and an Island Right After Venezuela Raid', Yahoo News, January 5, 2026, https://www.yahoo.com/news/articles/trump-threatens-2-other-countries-145414329.html.
[502] 'Trump Weighs US Action in 5 Other Nations Following Capture of Maduro', The Daily Signal, January 5, 2026, https://www.dailysignal.com/2026/01/05/trump-weighs-us-action-in-5-other-nations/.
[503] 'Trump Looking to Land Blows against Drug Cartels', RTHK, January 9, 2026, https://news.rthk.hk/rthk/en/component/k2/1839242-20260109.htm.
[504] 'Trump's "Corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine Is No Doctrine at All', World Politics Review, December 2025, https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/trump-corollary-monroe-doctrine-latin-america/.
[505] 'New Trump National Security Strategy Recasts Americas under Revived Monroe Doctrine', JURIST, December 2025, https://www.jurist.org/news/2025/12/new-trump-national-security-strategy-recasts-americas-under-revived-monroe-doctrine/.
[506] 'China Finds Risks, Opportunities as Trump Pushes for "Spheres of Influence"', Al Jazeera, January 8, 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/1/8/china-finds-risks-opportunities-as-trump-pushes-for-spheres-of-influence.

increase the US military presence, mostly against cartels.[507] The administration points to real developments. The strategy alludes to China's growing economic clout in Latin America.[508] A shipping analyst quoted by Fox said that Venezuela, Iran, Russia and China traded oil among themselves, with Venezuelan crude to China averaging about 600,000 barrels a day.[509] On January 7 the United States seized two tankers, one of them Russian-flagged. Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem said both belonged to a shadow fleet that moves sanctioned oil for Venezuela, Russia and Iran.[510] Critics say the revival has a cost. JURIST argues that it risks weakening American objections to similar arguments made by others.[511] Simona Grano of the University of Zurich said China is likely to read the strategy as confirmation that the United States is comfortable with spheres of influence. China claims much of the South China Sea and has disputes there with several neighbors.[512]

Four Kinds of Leverage

The **first** is energy. After the capture, the United States said it would control sales of Venezuelan oil, starting with 30 to 50 million barrels worth about $2.8 billion, and Trump said he would control the proceeds.[513] Rubio said interim president Delcy Rodríguez agreed to the deal.[514] Energy Secretary Chris Wright said Washington needed 'that leverage and that control' to drive change in Venezuela, and the White House said it would control sales indefinitely.[515] The **second** is tariffs. On January 29, 2026 Trump declared a national emergency over Cuba and allowed

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[507] 'Trump's "Corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine Is No Doctrine at All'.
[508] 'Trump Strategy Document Revives Monroe Doctrine, Slams Europe', Aaj English, December 6, 2025, https://english.aaj.tv/news/amp/330448127.
[509] 'Venezuelan Oil Shipments Surge to US Ports with Heavy Crude after Maduro Capture', Fox News, January 7, 2026, https://www.foxnews.com/politics/venezuelan-oil-shipments-surge-us-ports-heavy-crude-maduro-capture.
[510] 'US Seeks to Assert Its Control over Venezuelan Oil with Tanker Seizures and Sales Worldwide', in WABE, January 7, 2026, https://www.wabe.org/?p=896484.
[511] 'New Trump National Security Strategy Recasts Americas under Revived Monroe Doctrine', JURIST, December 2025, https://www.jurist.org/news/2025/12/new-trump-national-security-strategy-recasts-americas-under-revived-monroe-doctrine/.
[512] 'China Finds Risks, Opportunities as Trump Pushes for "Spheres of Influence"', Al Jazeera, January 8, 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/1/8/china-finds-risks-opportunities-as-trump-pushes-for-spheres-of-influence.
[513] 'Venezuelan Oil Shipments Surge to US Ports'.
[514] 'Venezuela to Turn Over 30-50 Million bbl of Oil to US; Washington Seizes Additional Tankers', Oil & Gas Journal, January 7, 2026, https://ogj.com/general-interest/government/news/55341937/venezuela-to-turn-over-30-50-million-bbl-of-oil-to-us-washington-seizes-additional-tankers.
[515] 'US Aims to Control Venezuela Oil Sales "Indefinitely"', Sky News, January 2026, in Black Country Radio, https://www.blackcountryradio.co.uk/news/business-news/us-aims-to-control-venezuela-oil-sales-indefinitely.

extra tariffs on goods from any country that directly or indirectly supplies oil to Cuba.[516] The Financial Times estimated that Mexico supplied about 44% of Cuba's oil imports and Venezuela 33% until the capture.[517] The order was never used. A law firm noted on February 2 that no tariffs had been imposed under it, and the order rested on IEEPA, which the Supreme Court ruled on February 20 does not allow such tariffs.[518] [519] The threat still seems to have moved Mexico. On January 27 Sheinbaum said Mexico had paused oil shipments to Cuba, calling it a sovereign decision and not the result of US pressure. Pemex had shipped about 20,000 barrels a day to Cuba in January to September 2025.[520] AFP reported three days later that she had denied stopping them.[521] The **third** is security. The United States captured a sitting head of state, who now faces narco-terrorism charges in New York, and then named other governments as possible targets.[522] Each of those governments now has to take that possibility into account when deciding how far to resist. The **fourth** is the way the threat is described. The Cuba order says the Cuban government supports Russia, China, Iran, Hamas and Hezbollah.[523] That wording presents US pressure as defensive, though I read this as my own analysis, not something the sources state. Mexico shows how hard this is to manage. After the capture Sheinbaum said the Americas 'do not belong' to any power.[524] She then asked her foreign minister to meet Rubio and strengthen

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[516] 'U.S. Declares National Emergency with Respect to Cuba and Threatens New Tariffs on Countries', Baker McKenzie Sanctions Blog, January 2026, https://sanctionsnews.bakermckenzie.com/u-s-declares-national-emergency-with-respect-to-cuba-and-threatens-new-tariffs-on-countries.

[517] 'Trump Threatens Tariffs on Countries Supplying Cuba with Much-Needed Oil', Al Jazeera, January 30, 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/1/30/trump-threatens-tariffs-on-countries-supplying-cuba-with-much-needed-oil.

[518] 'New Executive Order Opens Door to Tariffs on Countries Selling or Supplying Oil to Cuba', Holland & Knight, February 2, 2026, https://www.hklaw.com/en/insights/publications/2026/02/new-executive-order-opens-door-to-tariffs-on-countries.

[519] '"The Siege Must Be Broken": Countries Called to Ship Fuel to Cuba after Trump Tariffs Struck Down', Common Dreams, February 20, 2026, https://www.commondreams.org/news/cuba-tariffs.

[520] María Verza and Dánica Coto, 'Mexican President Says Her Country Has Paused Oil Shipments to Cuba', Associated Press, January 27, 2026, in NPR, https://www.npr.org/2026/01/28/nx-s1-5691086/mexico-oil-shipments-cuba.

[521] 'Trump Threatens Tariffs on Nations Selling Oil to Cuba', Agence France-Presse, January 30, 2026, in New Straits Times, https://www.nst.com.my/amp/business/economy/2026/01/1367658/trump-threatens-tariffs-nations-selling-oil-cuba.

[522] 'Trump Threatens 2 Other Countries and an Island Right After Venezuela Raid', Yahoo News, January 5, 2026, https://www.yahoo.com/news/articles/trump-threatens-2-other-countries-145414329.html

[523] 'Trump Threatens Tariffs on Nations Selling Oil to Cuba'.

[524] 'Trump Looking to Land Blows against Drug Cartels', RTHK, January 9, 2026, https://news.rthk.hk/rthk/en/component/k2/1839242-20260109.htm.

communication.[525] In a call with Trump on January 12 she said Mexico would keep coordinating without US intervention, adding 'No one else does' operate in Mexico.[526]

The "Trump Corollary"

The administration released its National Security Strategy in early December 2025. It put the Western Hemisphere first and added a 'Trump Corollary' to the Monroe Doctrine.[527] The text says that, after years of neglect, the United States will 'reassert and enforce the Monroe Doctrine to restore American preeminence in the Western Hemisphere'.[528] It also promises to 'deny non-Hemispheric competitors the ability to position forces or other threatening capabilities'. The text adds that the United States will also deny them the ability to own or control strategically vital assets in the hemisphere.[529] An Orion Policy Institute brief reads this as tying US aid to efforts that cut migration, and as widening American oversight of ports and canals.[530] The idea is also a reversal. Orion notes that in 2013 Washington said 'the era of the Monroe Doctrine is over'.[531] Trump used the doctrine's new name himself. At Mar-a-Lago on January 3, 2026, after Maduro's capture, he said the Monroe Doctrine was a big deal but that his administration had gone well beyond it, and that people now called it the 'Donroe Doctrine'.[532] Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said the next day that the doctrine was back in full effect. ABC also notes that the State Department's historian lists the Monroe Doctrine as a justification for US interventions in Cuba, Nicaragua, Haiti and the Dominican Republic.[533] Analysts disagree about how new this is. Juan Cruz of CSIS argues the strategy may simply put an America First foreign policy into words and treat counternarcotics as a national security matter, more than it shifts attention to the

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[525] 'Mexican President Urges Cooperation as US Threatens Cartel Strikes', Bernama (citing Anadolu), January 10, 2026, https://web11.bernama.com/en/news.php?id=2511007.
[526] 'Sheinbaum Rejects US Strikes on Mexico in Latest Call With Trump', Bloomberg Law, January 12, 2026, https://news.bloomberglaw.com/international-trade/mexicos-sheinbaum-touts-very-good-talk-with-donald-trump.
[527] 'Trump Strategy Document Revives Monroe Doctrine, Slams Europe', Reuters, December 5, 2025, https://gvwire.com/2025/12/05/trump-strategy-document-revives-monroe-doctrine-slams-europe/.
[528] 'What Is the Monroe Doctrine, and Why Does Trump Want to "Reassert" It?', Global News, December 2025, https://globalnews.ca/news/11568632/trump-national-security-strategy-monroe-doctrine/amp.
[529] Mariam Khan, 'Trump's "Donroe Doctrine" Seeks Influence over Western Hemisphere Citing Old US Policy', ABC News, January 5, 2026, https://abcnews.com/Politics/trumps-donroe-doctrine-seeks-influence-western-hemisphere-citing/story?id=128926397.
[530] Imdat Oner, 'The Trump Corollary: Venezuela as the First Test of a Neo-Monroe Doctrine', Orion Policy Institute, December 12, 2025, https://orionpolicy.org/the-trump-corollary-venezuela-as-the-first-test-of-a-neo-monroe-doctrine/.
[531] Oner, 'The Trump Corollary'.
[532] Khan, 'Trump's "Donroe Doctrine"'.
[533] Khan, 'Trump's "Donroe Doctrine"'.

hemisphere.[534] China is the main target. The New York Times reported before the operation that China accounted for 80% of Venezuelan oil purchases.[535] A shipping analyst quoted by Fox said Venezuelan crude going to China averaged about 600,000 barrels a day.[536] After Maduro's capture, China and Russia, along with Venezuela's leftist allies, condemned the operation.[537] Orion also points to the Panama Canal. In his January 2025 inaugural speech Trump suggested taking back control of the canal by force. Orion reads this as a warning to Panama and to China, whose companies run port facilities there.[538] World Politics Review adds that Trump then pressured Panama to renegotiate two port concessions controlled by Chinese companies.[539]

Transactional Mechanics

At his Mar-a-Lago press conference on January 3, 2026, Trump said the United States would run Venezuela until a 'safe, proper and judicious transition'.[540] He said the United States would stay until a 'proper transition can take place', and that a group including Secretary of State Rubio and Defense Secretary Hegseth would oversee the country. NPR reports that he added that US oil companies would have military backup as they moved in.[541] Two days later he told NBC News the United States might reimburse oil companies for rebuilding Venezuela's oil infrastructure. He also said Venezuela producing oil keeps prices down.[542] Experts disagree about how much oil explains the operation. Jeffrey Sonnenfeld of Yale wrote in TIME that oil is a 'bad excuse' for

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[534] Juan Cruz, 'Experts React: The NSS and Washington's New Approach to the Western Hemisphere', Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 2025, https://www.csis.org/analysis/experts-react-nss-and-washingtons-new-approach-western-hemisphere.
[535] 'Venezuela's Oil Is a Focus of Trump's Campaign Against Maduro', Deccan Herald, https://www.deccanherald.com/amp/story/world%2Fvenezuelas-oil-is-a-focus-of-trumps-campaign-against-maduro-3833401.
[536] 'Venezuelan Oil Shipments Surge to US Ports with Heavy Crude after Maduro Capture', Fox News, January 7, 2026, https://www.foxnews.com/politics/venezuelan-oil-shipments-surge-us-ports-heavy-crude-maduro-capture.
[537] 'Trump Moves to Control Venezuelan Oil after Maduro Arrest', Aaj English, January 8, 2026, https://english.aaj.tv/news/amp/330450596.
[538] Imdat Oner, 'The Trump Corollary: Venezuela as the First Test of a Neo-Monroe Doctrine', Orion Policy Institute, December 12, 2025, https://orionpolicy.org/the-trump-corollary-venezuela-as-the-first-test-of-a-neo-monroe-doctrine/.
[539] 'Trump's "Corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine Is No Doctrine at All', World Politics Review, December 2025, https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/trump-corollary-monroe-doctrine-latin-america/.
[540] Arthur Michelino, 'The Trump Corollary: How Gunboat Diplomacy Returned to the Americas', Geopolitical Monitor, January 6, 2026, https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/the-trump-corollary-how-gunboat-diplomacy-returned-to-the-americas
[541] 'Trump Says U.S. Will "Run" Venezuela and Sell Seized Oil in Remarks on the Strikes', NPR, January 3, 2026, https://npr.org/2026/01/03/g-s1-104346/trump-venezuela-maduro-press-conference.
[542] 'Trump Says the U.S. May Reimburse Oil Companies for Rebuilding Venezuela's Infrastructure', NBC News, January 5, 2026, https://www.nbcwashington.com/news/national-international/trump-reimburse-oil-companies-rebuilding-venezuela/4037829/.

the strike.[543] His argument is economic. Producers need $70 to $75 a barrel to restart rigs, and Venezuela's oil infrastructure has gone a quarter century without proper investment.[544] He also cited the International Energy Agency's forecast that supply would exceed demand in 2026 by 3.85 million barrels a day.[545] Jorge Heine, a former Chilean ambassador to China, takes the opposite view. In a CBC interview in November 2025 he called the fentanyl rationale a hoax and said the administration was most likely after Venezuela's oil reserves.[546] In a January 2026 essay for Bloomberg he wrote that 'a threshold has been crossed'.[547]

Diplomatic Consequences

The UN Security Council stayed gridlocked on Venezuela. Russia and China blocked meaningful action but could not impose costs on the United States.[548] UN officials, Brazil's President Lula and some US allies condemned the operation, but there was no coordinated response and no consequences for Washington.[549] Colombia's President Gustavo Petro condemned the operation, while Trump called him an 'illegal drug leader'.[550] In Cuba, the leaders of Mexico, Spain and Brazil met in Barcelona on April 18, 2026. They pledged more aid and warned against any actions 'contrary to international law'.[551] Mexico's position is mixed. In January Sheinbaum paused Mexican oil shipments to Cuba, which she called a sovereign decision.[552] Others worry about wider effects. ABC reported that Trump's rhetoric raised questions about Taiwan and could have consequences for Ukraine.[553] Two fellows at the European Council on Foreign Relations

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[543] Jeffrey Sonnenfeld, 'Oil Is a Bad Excuse for Trump's Strike on Venezuela', TIME, January 5, 2026, summarized at Yale School of Management, https://som.yale.edu/story/2026/time-oil-bad-excuse-trumps-strike-venezuela.
[544] Jeffrey Sonnenfeld, 'Oil Isn't the Real Reason Behind the Venezuela Operation', Yale Insights, 2026, https://insights.som.yale.edu/insights/oil-isnt-the-real-reason-behind-the-venezuela-operation.
[545] 'Trump Wants Oil Companies to "Fix" Venezuela's Infrastructure', Reason, January 6, 2026, https://reason.com/2026/01/06/trump-wants-oil-companies-to-fix-venezuelas-infrastructure/.
[546] 'Heine on the U.S. Airspace Ban in Venezuela and Where It May Lead', Boston University Pardee School, 2025, https://www.bu.edu/pardeeschool/?p=62507
[547] 'Heine on How Trump's Latin America Strategy Opens New Doors for China', Boston University Pardee School, 2026, https://www.bu.edu/pardeeschool/?p=62808.
[548] Arthur Michelino, 'The Trump Corollary: How Gunboat Diplomacy Returned to the Americas', Geopolitical Monitor, January 6, 2026, https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/the-trump-corollary-how-gunboat-diplomacy-returned-to-the-americas
[549] Michelino, 'The Trump Corollary'.
[550] Chad de Guzman, 'Trump's Potential Next Targets After Venezuela', TIME, January 5, 2026, https://time.com/7343093/trump-venezuela-us-next-colombia-cuba-greenland-iran-mexico/.
[551] 'Mexico, Spain and Brazil Call for Cuba's Sovereignty to Be Protected', Al Jazeera, April 18, 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/4/18/mexico-spain-and-brazil-call-for-cubas-sovereignty-to-be-protected.
[552] María Verza and Dánica Coto, 'Mexican President Says Her Country Has Paused Oil Shipments to Cuba', Associated Press, January 27, 2026, in NPR, https://www.npr.org/2026/01/28/nx-s1-5691086/mexico-oil-shipments-cuba.
[553] Mariam Khan, 'Trump's "Donroe Doctrine" Seeks Influence over Western Hemisphere Citing Old US Policy', ABC News, January 5, 2026,

said the capture reinforced fears that Washington is 'increasingly open to reordering the international system along great-power lines'.[554] In the same days, China ran military drills around Taiwan, and the State Department urged Beijing to show restraint.[555]

United States Adversaries and Rivals

This section looks at how Washington deals with its historical adversaries, North Korea and Russia, and how Trump has handled them in both terms. In each case he has used transactional relations, such as direct talks with leaders and offers of deals. This has moved the relationships so far back and forth that they no longer look as hostile as they once did. The section then turns to China. It first gives the historical background of US-China relations, then looks at how China manages the fluctuating relationship.

Historical Adversaries - North Korea

Before Trump, no sitting US president had met a North Korean leader.[556] Earlier presidents tried different approaches, including multilateral talks such as the Six-Party Talks, but none stopped the country from building a nuclear arsenal.[557] The first term began with open hostility. In January 2017, after Kim said North Korea was close to testing a missile that could reach the United States, Trump tweeted that it would not happen.[558] In August 2017 he warned that more threats would be 'met with fire and fury like the world has never seen'.[559] He called Kim 'Little Rocket Man', and Kim called him a 'mentally deranged U.S. dotard'.[560] This changed in 2018.

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https://abcnews.com/Politics/trumps-donroe-doctrine-seeks-influence-western-hemisphere-citing/story?id=128926397.

[554] Mariam Khan, 'Trump's "Donroe Doctrine" Seeks Influence over Western Hemisphere Citing Old US Policy', ABC News, January 5, 2026, https://abcnews.com/Politics/trumps-donroe-doctrine-seeks-influence-western-hemisphere-citing/story?id=128926397.

[555] Khan, 'Trump's "Donroe Doctrine"'.

[556] Steve Mollman, 'Trump Cites Kim Jong Un Ties in Calling for Reduced Korea Exercises', Newsweek, August 16, 2026 (updated August 17), https://www.newsweek.com/trump-kim-jong-un-south-korea-military-exercises-12329549.

[557] 'Washington's North Korea Reckoning', Korea Times, April 28, 2026, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/opinion/columns/deskcolumns/20260428/washingtons-north-korea-reckoning.

[558] Katie Dangerfield, 'From "Dotard" and "Rocket Man" to a Summit: A Timeline of Kim and Trump's Rocky Relationship', Global News, June 11, 2018, https://globalnews.ca/news/4266342/timeline-kim-jong-un-donald-trump-relationship/.

[559] Meghan Keneally, 'From "Fire and Fury" to "Rocket Man," the Various Barbs Traded between Trump and Kim Jong Un', ABC News, June 12, 2018, https://abcnews.com/International/fire-fury-rocket-man-barbs-traded-trump-kim/story?id=53634996.

[560] Katie Dangerfield, 'From "Dotard" and "Rocket Man" to a Summit: A Timeline of Kim and Trump's Rocky Relationship', Global News, June 11, 2018, https://globalnews.ca/news/4266342/timeline-kim-jong-un-donald-trump-relationship/.

On March 8 Trump agreed to meet Kim.[561] He cancelled the summit on May 24, then confirmed on June 1 that it was back on.[562] They met in Singapore on June 12. Afterwards Trump said that without his harsh rhetoric 'we wouldn't have been here', and that he sometimes felt foolish using it.[563] The second summit, in Hanoi in February 2019, collapsed over sanctions relief.[564] In June 2019 Trump crossed into North Korea at Panmunjom, the first sitting US president to do so.[565] The three meetings produced one joint statement on peace and denuclearization.[566] There were personal gestures too. In July 2018 Secretary of State Pompeo took Kim a copy of an Elton John album containing 'Rocket Man', signed by Trump, though he did not meet Kim. Trump said he still had a signed CD to give him.[567] After Hanoi, Kim turned to Russia. Benjamin Young of RAND wrote in 2024 that the failure in Hanoi left Kim 'embittered and disillusioned', and that Kim has since sent about 10,000 troops to support Russia's invasion of Ukraine.[568] Kim and Putin held summits in September 2023 and June 2024. At the second they signed a treaty that includes a mutual military assistance clause.[569] South Korean estimates say Pyongyang has received between $7 billion and $14 billion in weapons, technology, fuel and food from Russia.[570] US-North Korea diplomacy has been dormant since the talks in Stockholm in October 2019.[571] North Korea has not been a priority in the second term. In the first 100 days North Korea conducted five missile tests, stole $1.5 billion in cryptocurrency, sent 3,000 more troops to

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[561] Meghan Keneally, 'From "Fire and Fury" to "Rocket Man," the Various Barbs Traded between Trump and Kim Jong Un', ABC News, June 12, 2018, https://abcnews.com/International/fire-fury-rocket-man-barbs-traded-trump-kim/story?id=53634996.
[562] Dangerfield, 'From "Dotard" and "Rocket Man" to a Summit'.
[563] 'Trump Says Tough Rhetoric Led to North Korea Summit', PBS NewsHour (Associated Press), June 12, 2018, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/trump-says-tough-rhetoric-led-to-north-korea-summit.
[564] Priyanka Shankar, 'Trump Scales Down War Games with South Korea: Why It Matters', Al Jazeera, August 17, 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/8/17/trump-scales-down-war-games-with-south-korea-why-it-matters.
[565] 'Trump Posts Photo with NK Leader Kim, Says They "Get Along Great"', Korea Times, August 16, 2026, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/foreignaffairs/northkorea/20260816/trump-posts-photo-with-nk-leader-kim-says-they-get-along-great.
[566] Victor Cha, 'After Iran: A Scenario for Renewed Trump-Kim Summitry', CSIS, August 13, 2026, https://www.csis.org/analysis/after-iran-scenario-renewed-trump-kim-summitry.
[567] Nataly Pak, 'Trump Says He Still Has "Rocket Man" CD for Kim, Plans to Give North Korean Dictator Another "Little Gift"', ABC News, July 10, 2018, https://abcnews.com/Politics/trump-rocket-man-cd-kim-plans-give-north/story?id=56482099.
[568] Benjamin R. Young, 'North Korea's Bold Turn Toward Russia Poses Test for Trump's Second Term', RAND, December 5, 2024, https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2024/12/north-koreas-bold-turn-toward-russia-poses-test-for.html.
[569] Congressional Research Service, *Russia-North Korea Relations*, IF12760, https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/IF/PDF/IF12760/IF12760.5.pdf.
[570] Andrew Yeo, 'Rethinking North Korea Diplomacy', Brookings, April 30, 2026, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/rethinking-north-korea-diplomacy/.
[571] Andrew Yeo, 'Rethinking North Korea Diplomacy', Brookings, April 30, 2026, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/rethinking-north-korea-diplomacy/.

Russia and unveiled a new missile destroyer.[572] Brookings notes that the Venezuela strike and the Iran war have drawn attention away from the Korean Peninsula.[573] The 2026 National Defense Strategy, released on January 23, says South Korea is capable of taking 'primary responsibility for deterring North Korea' with more limited US support. It does not mention denuclearization.[574] Trump has kept talking about his rapport with Kim. In October 2025 he said, 'If he'd like to meet, I'm around'.[575] In March 2026 he reportedly told South Korea's prime minister that he keeps a good relationship with Kim.[576] Kim said in September 2025 that he has 'good memories' of Trump and would sit down with the United States if it dropped its demand for denuclearization.[577] At the June 2026 G7 Trump reportedly told South Korean President Lee Jae Myung that he would restart diplomacy, and he then posted a photo of his Singapore walk with Kim. Victor Cha of CSIS notes that Trump alternates between supporting denuclearization and calling North Korea a 'nuclear power'.[578] In August 2026 this rapport shaped a decision about South Korea. On August 15 Trump posted a 2019 photo of himself with Kim and wrote that they 'get along GREAT'.[579] The next day he ordered cuts to the annual Ulchi Freedom Shield drills with South Korea, citing his 'very good relationship' with Kim.[580] He also said he had asked South Korea's president whether Seoul would join the US effort against Iran, and that Seoul declined. The drills involve about 18,000 South Korean soldiers and 28,500 US personnel. North Korea's foreign ministry had criticized them days earlier.[581] Seoul's presidential office said it expected the friendship between the two leaders to lead to meaningful talks. Christopher Green of the International Crisis Group said Trump seemed genuinely affronted that allies did not help in the Iran war, and doubted that Kim was interested in talks.[582] Retired Rear Admiral Mark

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[572] Victor Cha and Andy Lim, 'Trump's Second Term Starts with Inaction over North Korea's Missile Provocations', CSIS, May 28, 2025, https://www.csis.org/analysis/trumps-second-term-starts-inaction-over-north-koreas-missile-provocations.
[573] Yeo, 'Rethinking North Korea Diplomacy'.
[574] 'South Korea Can Take "Primary Responsibility" for Deterring North, Says Pentagon White Paper', Korea JoongAng Daily, January 2026, https://www.koreajoongangdaily.com/korea/south-korea-can-take-primary-responsibility-for-deterring-north-says-pentagon-white-paper/11572470
[575] Yeo, 'Rethinking North Korea Diplomacy'.
[576] Yeo, 'Rethinking North Korea Diplomacy'.
[577] Yeo, 'Rethinking North Korea Diplomacy'.
[578] Victor Cha, 'After Iran: A Scenario for Renewed Trump-Kim Summitry', CSIS, August 13, 2026, https://www.csis.org/analysis/after-iran-scenario-renewed-trump-kim-summitry.
[579] 'Trump Posts Photo with NK Leader Kim, Says They "Get Along Great"', Korea Times, August 16, 2026, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/foreignaffairs/northkorea/20260816/trump-posts-photo-with-nk-leader-kim-says-they-get-along-great.
[580] Priyanka Shankar, 'Trump Scales Down War Games with South Korea: Why It Matters', Al Jazeera, August 17, 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/8/17/trump-scales-down-war-games-with-south-korea-why-it-matters.
[581] Shankar, 'Trump Scales Down War Games'.
[582] Priyanka Shankar, 'Trump Scales Down War Games with South Korea: Why It Matters', Al Jazeera, August 17, 2026,

Montgomery said the United States should be 'leveraging them, not punishing them', and that Trump did something similar in 2019.[583] On August 20, hours after Trump said he would meet Kim later this year, North Korea fired about 10 short-range missiles.[584] RAND's Young argued in 2024 that Trump is uniquely placed to work with Kim because of their personal rapport.[585] The substance has barely moved. Talks have been dormant since 2019.[586] Meanwhile Xi Jinping visited Pyongyang in June 2026, and Kim received support from both Moscow and Beijing.[587]

Historical Adversaries - Russia

Trump's praise of Putin started before he was president. In a December 2015 Morning Joe interview he said of Putin, 'at least he's a leader'. He brushed off the host's point that Putin kills journalists, saying the United States kills people too. Putin had called him 'unquestionably talented' the day before.[588] When pressed, Trump agreed that he condemned the killing of journalists.[589] At an NBC forum in September 2016 he said, 'If he says great things about me, I'm going to say great things about him', and called Putin a better leader than Obama.[590] During the campaign Trump repeatedly said Putin had called him a 'genius'.[591] Putin later said he had only called him 'bright'.[592] US intelligence agencies concluded that Russia interfered in the 2016 election to help Trump beat Clinton.[593] In the first term, the defining moment was the Helsinki

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https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/8/17/trump-scales-down-war-games-with-south-korea-why-it-matters.

[583] Geoff Bennett and Dan Sagalyn, 'South Korea Relationship Shift Highlights Trump's Transactional Approach to Allies', PBS NewsHour, August 18, 2026, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/south-korea-relationship-shift-highlights-trumps-transactional-approach-to-allies

[584] Andrew Yeo, 'The Iran War and America's Widening Strategy Gap in Asia', Brookings, September 2, 2026, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-iran-war-and-americas-widening-strategy-gap-in-asia/

[585] Benjamin R. Young, 'North Korea's Bold Turn Toward Russia Poses Test for Trump's Second Term', RAND, December 5, 2024, https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2024/12/north-koreas-bold-turn-toward-russia-poses-test-for.html.

[586] Andrew Yeo, 'Rethinking North Korea Diplomacy', Brookings, April 30, 2026, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/rethinking-north-korea-diplomacy/.

[587] Victor Cha, 'After Iran: A Scenario for Renewed Trump-Kim Summitry', CSIS, August 13, 2026, https://www.csis.org/analysis/after-iran-scenario-renewed-trump-kim-summitry.

[588] 'Putin, My Fan? It's Mutual, Says Trump', Agence France-Presse, in The Peninsula (Qatar), December 19, 2015, https://thepeninsulaqatar.com/article/19/12/2015/Putin-my-fan-It-s-mutual-says-Trump.

[589] 'Trump Defends Putin over Assassinating Journalists', National Review, December 2015, https://www.nationalreview.com/2015/12/trump-defends-putin-assasinations-journalists-morning-joe/amp/.

[590] 'Trump Says Putin Better Leader than Obama', Reuters, in Hürriyet Daily News, September 8, 2016, https://hurriyetdailynews.com/trump-says-putin-better-leader-than-obama-103721.

[591] Linda Qiu, 'Did Vladimir Putin Call Trump "Brilliant"?', PolitiFact, September 8, 2016, https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2016/sep/08/donald-trump/did-vladimir-putin-call-trump-brilliant/.

[592] '"Brilliant"? "Talented"? What Did Putin Really Call Trump?', Scripps News, June 2016, https://www.scrippsnews.com/Politics/presidential-election/brilliant-talented-what-did-putin-really-call-trump.

[593] 'Donald Trump Backtracks on Russia Election Meddling Comments, Says He Misspoke in Helsinki', ABC News (Australia), July 18, 2018,

summit on July 16, 2018. It came days after a grand jury indicted 12 Russian intelligence agents on election-related charges. Asked whether he believed US intelligence or Putin's denial, Trump said Putin was 'extremely strong and powerful in his denial'. NPR reported that he sided against his intelligence officials, and the reaction was bipartisan criticism. Senator John McCain called the summit a tragic error.[594] About 27 hours later Trump said he had meant 'wouldn't' instead of 'would', and that he accepted the intelligence conclusion. He added that it 'could be other people also'.[595] Putin then called Trump an 'interesting conversationalist'.[596] The first term was not all warmth. Trump expelled dozens of Russian diplomats in March 2018 and agreed to supply Ukraine with lethal weapons, which Obama had refused to do.[597] Between terms, in February 2022, after Putin ordered troops into separatist regions of Ukraine, Trump said on a right-wing podcast, 'This is genius'. He called the troops a peacekeeping force.[598] He later said he had meant Putin's negotiating posture before the invasion, and that 'There was nothing "genius" about that'.[599] He also told the Washington Examiner he was 'surprised' by the invasion and had thought Putin was negotiating.[600] In the second term, Trump hosted Putin on August 15, 2025 at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson in Anchorage. Putin got a red carpet, a flypast by US fighter jets and a ride in Trump's limousine. The meeting lasted under three hours instead of the six or seven expected, produced no ceasefire, and neither leader took questions. Trump rated it ten out of ten, and Putin told him, 'Next time, in Moscow'.[601] A B-2 bomber and F-35s took part in the flypast. Trump had threatened 'severe consequences' for Russia, but afterwards he said that because of the meeting he did not 'have to think about that' for now.[602] Angela Stent of Brookings wrote that Trump was running two tracks, one to reset relations and one to end the

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https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-07-18/trump-backtracks-on-russia-election-meddling-comments/10006442.

[594] Scott Horsley and Miles Parks, 'Trump's Refusal to Back U.S. Intel over Russia at Putin Summit Sparks Bipartisan Ire', NPR, July 16, 2018, https://www.npr.org/2018/07/16/628973563/trump-putin-to-meet-after-new-charges-over-russias-2016-election-interference.

[595] 'Donald Trump Backtracks on Russia Election Meddling Comments'.

[596] 'Putin Praises "Well-Qualified" Trump', Agence France-Presse, in Gulf News, https://gulfnews.com/news/americas/usa/putin-praises-well-qualified-trump-1.2252558.

[597] Horsley and Parks, 'Trump's Refusal to Back U.S. Intel'.

[598] 'Trump Calls Putin "Genius" over Ukraine Invasion', Rolling Stone, February 2022, https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/trump-calls-putin-genius-ukraine-invasion-1311025/.

[599] 'Trump Denies Calling Putin a "Genius"', Yahoo News, March 2022, https://news.yahoo.com/trump-denies-calling-putin-a-genius-214302904.html.

[600] 'Donald Trump Says He's "Surprised" That Vladimir Putin Invaded Ukraine', HuffPost, in Yahoo News, March 2022, https://news.yahoo.com/donald-trump-says-hes-surprised-110709263.html.

[601] Alastair McCready, 'Trump-Putin Meeting: Key Takeaways from Alaska Summit', Al Jazeera, August 16, 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/8/16/no-deal-at-trump-putin-meeting-key-takeaways-from-alaska-summit.

[602] Kathryn Watson, Haley Ott and Stefan Becket, 'Trump-Putin Summit in Alaska Ends with No Deal on Ukraine Ceasefire', CBS News, August 15, 2025, https://www.cbsnews.com/live-updates/trump-putin-meeting-alaska-ukraine/.

war. Putin brought a business delegation, but no deals were announced because there was no agreement on the war.[603] Peter Dickinson of the Atlantic Council wrote that Trump seemed to treat the talks as 'a geopolitical real estate deal', while Putin is fighting for Ukraine itself.[604] The relationship soured through the autumn. On October 21 Trump put a Budapest summit on hold, saying he did not want a 'waste of time'.[605] The next day he said the meeting 'didn't feel right'.[606] On October 22 the Treasury sanctioned Rosneft and Lukoil, the first direct sanctions on Russia of the second term. The two companies export 3.1 million barrels a day, about 70% of Russia's overseas crude sales. An analyst quoted by Al Jazeera doubted the sanctions would end the war, because Russia would keep selling oil.[607] Trump said, 'Every time I speak with Vladimir, I have good conversations, and then they don't go anywhere'. AFP reported that he had held off on sanctions for months, and Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent said Putin had not come to the table in an honest and forthright way.[608] The Wall Street Journal reported the sanctions had been drafted and ready for months.[609] Putin called them 'serious' but said they would not significantly hurt the economy, and called them an 'unfriendly act'.[610] Chinese state oil companies briefly suspended Russian oil purchases.[611] The pattern turned around again in 2026. In September Trump signed a sanctions law drafted by Senators Lindsey Graham and Richard Blumenthal. It targets Russian officials, banks and shadow fleet tankers, and it allows tariffs of up to 100% on

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[603] Angela Stent, 'Beyond the Alaska Summit', Brookings, August 21, 2025, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/beyond-the-alaska-summit/.
[604] Peter Dickinson, 'Alaska Summit: Trump Wants a Real Estate Deal. Putin Wants an Empire', Atlantic Council UkraineAlert, August 14, 2025, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/alaska-summit-trump-wants-a-real-estate-deal-putin-wants-an-empire/.
[605] '"Wasted Meeting": Hungary Summit between Trump and Putin Canceled', Associated Press, in Africanews, October 22, 2025, https://www.africanews.com/amp/2025/10/22/wasted-meeting-hungary-summit-between-trump-and-putin-canceled/
[606] 'Trump Says He Cancelled Meeting with Putin', Bernama (Xinhua), October 23, 2025, https://www.bernama.com/en/news.php?id=2481819.
[607] Alex Kozul-Wright, 'Will Trump's Sanctions against Russian Oil Giants Hurt Putin?', Al Jazeera, October 23, 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/10/23/will-trumps-sanctions-against-russian-oil-giants-hurt-putin.
[608] 'Trump Hits Russia Oil Giants with Sanctions, Says Putin "Not Honest" on Ukraine War', Agence France-Presse, in Malay Mail, October 23, 2025, https://www.malaymail.com/news/money/2025/10/23/trump-hits-russia-oil-giants-with-sanctions-says-putin-not-honest-on-ukraine-war/195596.
[609] 'Putin Defiant over War despite Conceding "Unfriendly" US Oil Sanctions Will Hurt Russia', Novaya Gazeta Europe, October 24, 2025, https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2025/10/24/putin-defiant-over-war-despite-conceding-unfriendly-us-oil-sanctions-will-hurt-russia-en-news.
[610] 'Putin Says US Sanctions "Serious" but Won't Significantly Hit Economy', Agence France-Presse, in EWN, October 23, 2025, https://ewn.co.za/2025/10/23/putin-says-us-sanctions-serious-but-wont-significantly-hit-economy.
[611] 'Putin Defiant after Trump Sanctions Russian Oil Companies over Ukraine', Reuters, in Arab News, October 24, 2025, https://www.arabnews.com/node/2620027/world.

the five biggest buyers of Russian oil and gas.[612] On October 9, after a call with Putin, Trump announced a deal for Russia to deliver more than 300,000 tonnes of diesel to American and global markets. Zelenskyy called it 'a gift to Putin'.[613] Axios reported that a US official said Trump made the deal after Zelenskyy ignored requests to stop striking Russian refineries, which were pushing up US fuel prices.[614] On October 16 Trump signed an order putting the new sanctions on hold, two days before the law's deadline. Putin's envoy Kirill Dmitriev called it 'an important and truly historic moment'.[615] Putin told Trump that resuming trilateral peace talks was unlikely, and Secretary of State Marco Rubio said the war was at a dangerous stalemate.[616] Analysts offer different explanations. One CNN analysis argues Trump is attracted to the strength of authoritarian rulers like Putin.[617] AFP framed the sanctions as frustration at being unable to persuade Putin 'despite what he calls his personal chemistry'.[618] John Sullivan, a former US ambassador to Russia, said the Alaska welcome looked like one for an ally, though Trump may have been flattering Putin to get peace.[619]

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[612] 'Trump Puts on Hold New Russia Sanctions He Signed into Law', Al Jazeera and AP, October 17, 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/10/17/trump-puts-on-hold-new-russia-sanctions-he-signed-into-law.
[613] 'Putin Tells Trump Peace Talks Are Unlikely, Cites Ukraine Drone Attacks', Reuters, in Al Jazeera, October 10, 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/10/10/putin-tells-trump-peace-talks-are-unlikely-cites-ukraine-drone-attacks.
[614] 'U.S. Official: Trump Cut Deal with Putin after Zelensky Ignored His Requests', Axios, October 10, 2026, https://www.axios.com/2026/10/10/trump-zelensky-putin-diesel-deal-war.
[615] 'Trump Puts on Hold New Russia Sanctions He Signed into Law', Al Jazeera and AP, October 17, 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/10/17/trump-puts-on-hold-new-russia-sanctions-he-signed-into-law.
[616] 'Putin Tells Trump Peace Talks Are Unlikely, Cites Ukraine Drone Attacks', Reuters, in Al Jazeera, October 10, 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/10/10/putin-tells-trump-peace-talks-are-unlikely-cites-ukraine-drone-attacks.
[617] 'Donald Trump Just Can't Stop Praising Vladimir Putin', CNN, March 28, 2022, https://amp.cnn.com/cnn/2022/03/28/politics/trump-putin-ukraine-russia-smart
[618] 'Trump Hits Russia Oil Giants with Sanctions, Says Putin "Not Honest" on Ukraine War', Agence France-Presse, in Malay Mail, October 23, 2025, https://www.malaymail.com/news/money/2025/10/23/trump-hits-russia-oil-giants-with-sanctions-says-putin-not-honest-on-ukraine-war/195596.
[619] Kathryn Watson, Haley Ott and Stefan Becket, 'Trump-Putin Summit in Alaska Ends with No Deal on Ukraine Ceasefire', CBS News, August 15, 2025, https://www.cbsnews.com/live-updates/trump-putin-meeting-alaska-ukraine/.

Rival - China

Beijing has studied Trump as a person and built its handling of him around what it found. The New York Times reported in June 2025 that Xi's approach was to exploit the American president's weaknesses to apply pressure, and then use the time gained to strengthen China's position.[620] The main weakness Beijing has used is his taste for ceremony and personal praise. On his May 2026 visit he received 'super VIP' treatment. A MERICS analyst said this was meant to flatter Trump and calm him, so that he would be more open to Chinese requests and less likely to start a public confrontation.[621] The method is not new. In 2017 Trump was received in the Forbidden City with a private Peking opera performance.[622] Chinese newspapers praised the Trumps as grateful students of Chinese culture.[623] China has also kept a direct channel to him. In 2017 it used Jared Kushner, who helped arrange the Mar-a-Lago summit. After the two leaders had met twice and spoken nine times, that channel was no longer needed.[624] Since then the leaders have dealt with each other directly, and Trump stresses this. In Beijing he called Xi 'my friend' and a 'great leader'.[625] In Washington in September he described a 'truly great friendship' built since 2016.[626] The South China Morning Post reported him calling Xi an old friend of over eleven years, whose personal connection let them settle difficult issues.[627]

Xi does not return this warmth in the same terms. The Christian Science Monitor noted that Trump repeatedly called Xi a friend and that Xi did not say the same in public.[628] Al Jazeera's

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[620] 'The Art of the Stall: China's Strategy for Dealing with Trump', *International New York Times*, 12 June 2025, via Deccan Herald, https://www.deccanherald.com/world/the-art-of-the-stall-chinas-strategy-for-dealing-with-trump-3583262.
[621] Claus Soong (MERICS), quoted in 'China Rolls Out Red Carpet for Trump as Tensions Simmer', *Newsweek*, 2026, https://www.newsweek.com/china-rolls-out-red-carpet-trump-tensions-simmer-11949723.
[622] Anthony Kuhn, 'China Lavishes Red-Carpet Treatment on Trump as He Arrives for Talks with Xi Jinping', NPR, November 2017, https://www.npr.org/transcripts/562819640.
[623] 'News Brief: China Lavishes Trump with Red-Carpet Treatment', NPR, November 2017, https://www.npr.org/transcripts/562997676.
[624] Kuhn, 'China Lavishes Red-Carpet Treatment on Trump'.
[625] "Never Mess It Up": What Xi and Trump Said on Day One of Beijing Talks', Al Jazeera, 14 May 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/5/14/never-mess-it-up-what-xi-and-trump-said-on-day-one-of-beijing-talks.
[626] 'Trump Hails Deep Friendship with Xi as China's Leader Urges "Healthy" Competition between Two Powers', Associated Press, via *Boston Globe*, 24 September 2026, https://www.bostonglobe.com/2026/09/24/nation/trump-xi-meeting/.
[627] Josephine Ma, 'The Xi-Trump Summit Is Over. What Comes Next in the US-China Rivalry?', *South China Morning Post*, May 2026, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3353774/xi-trump-summit-over-what-comes-next-us-china-rivalry.
[628] 'Beyond the Pomp and Pageantry, Xi Jinping Sent a Message to Donald Trump', *Christian Science Monitor*, 15 May 2026, https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-Pacific/2026/0515/Trump-Xi-Beijing-summit-US-China.

reporter in Beijing made the same point.[629] NPR summed up the September visit by saying that Trump played up his personal relationship with Xi, while Xi focused on geopolitics.[630] Crisis Group reports that by September Xi also spoke of their rapport, but he called in the same breath for 'healthy' competition 'within bounds'.[631] Xi's language stays formal and strategic. In May he asked Trump whether the two countries could avoid the Thucydides Trap, and in September he said it can be overcome.[632] The same pattern appeared in June 2025, when China's readout of a call with Trump criticised American policy in impersonal terms.[633] Nicholas Burns, a former American ambassador to China, said Xi will not be swayed by the flattery he receives.[634]

Two features make this approach effective. First, Beijing lets Trump announce results while keeping its own commitments vague. Rush Doshi of the Council on Foreign Relations notes that after the May summit Trump announced Chinese purchases of 200 Boeing aircraft and new farm commitments, and Beijing declined to confirm any of it.[635] Second, Beijing works with Trump's political calendar. Doshi says Xi has always seen Trump as unpredictable and at times solicitous, and that Beijing now feels it has 'tamed' him.[636] Jonathan Czin argued in 2025 that Trump would be unwilling to see a signature deal fall apart just before the midterm elections, which increases Beijing's leverage.[637] The pageantry has also begun to run in the other direction. Doshi writes that the honours given to Xi in Washington exceeded what Trump received in Beijing,[638] and Ryan Hass said Trump has taken pageantry further than most of his predecessors.[639]

In Leader-Centric terms, China manages Trump by working with how this particular leader behaves. He wants personal recognition and deals he can announce, and he is sensitive to

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[629] "Never Mess It Up": What Xi and Trump Said on Day One of Beijing Talks', Al Jazeera, 14 May 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/5/14/never-mess-it-up-what-xi-and-trump-said-on-day-one-of-beijing-talks.
[630] 'Takeaways from the Trump-Xi State Visit: Pageantry and Pandas', NPR, 25 September 2026, https://www.npr.org/2026/09/25/nx-s1-5981265/takeaways-trump-xi-state-visit-pageantry-pandas.
[631] International Crisis Group, 'On Our Radar', 25 September 2026, https://crisisgroup.org/sco/global/our-radar.
[632] 'Trump, Xi Wrap State Visit Centered on Spectacle over Substance. Here Are the Top Takeaways', CNBC, 25 September 2026, https://www.cnbc.com/2026/09/25/trump-xi-summit-takeaways.html.
[633] 'Trump and Xi Talk on the Phone, Their First Call Since the Tariff War Began', NPR, 5 June 2025, https://www.npr.org/2025/06/05/nx-s1-5421316/trump-xi-tariffs-phone-call.
[634] 'Takeaways from the Trump-Xi State Visit'.
[635] Rush Doshi, 'When Xi Comes to Washington', Council on Foreign Relations, September 2026, https://www.cfr.org/articles/when-xi-comes-to-washington.
[636] Rush Doshi, interview on 'From Cybersecurity to AI to Taiwan, What's at Stake in Trump's Summit with Xi', *Fresh Air*, NPR, 23 September 2026, via Texas Public Radio, https://www.tpr.org/2026-09-23/from-cybersecurity-to-ai-to-taiwan-whats-at-stake-in-trumps-summit-with-xi.
[637] Jonathan A. Czin, in Kyle Chan et al., 'What Happened When Trump Met Xi?', Brookings Institution, 5 November 2025, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-happened-when-trump-met-xi/.
[638] Doshi, 'When Xi Comes to Washington'.
[639] Ryan Hass, quoted in 'Trump, Xi Wrap State Visit Centered on Spectacle over Substance'.

domestic politics. Xi gives him a ceremony and a direct line, and keeps the substance of China's position fixed. The record shows the limits of the personal channel. Doshi notes that Beijing kept throttling rare earth supplies after the Busan deal.[640] Personal warmth has helped keep the truces alive, but China's main leverage still rests on its control of critical minerals. China also manages Trump through patience. Beijing does not try to settle the hardest disputes in a single meeting. The New York Times reported in June 2025 that China steered talks toward procedural 'frameworks' and away from the harder disputes over subsidies, dumping and market access.[641] Czin described Beijing as 'very comfortable with this cycle' of economic skirmishing followed by diplomacy that restores the status quo.[642] Hass argues that both leaders believe time is on their side. Beijing expects each truce to relieve pressure for structural change while it works toward technological self-reliance.[643] Czin made a similar point about Busan. A one-year pause in China's rare earth controls gave Beijing time to build the bureaucratic capacity to enforce them when it chooses.[644] Angela Zhang calls this 'strategic sequencing', meaning that China held back its strongest legal tools until it judged that using them would pay off.[645] This approach suits a leader who wants announcements. Hass notes that announcing deals is easy, while negotiating real ones is difficult.[646]

Middle East

Historical and Current Allies - Israel

This section examines how Trump has shaped peace and security in the Middle East during his two terms. His first term produced a peace proposal that largely favoured Israeli positions, according to the Congressional Research Service. It also produced the Abraham Accords, the first normalisation agreements between Israel and Arab states that his administration helped broker.[647] His second term has included the October 2025 Gaza ceasefire, a Security Council resolution that endorsed his Gaza plan, and a US-chaired Board of Peace.[648] It has also included

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[640] Rush Doshi, 'When Xi Comes to Washington', Council on Foreign Relations, September 2026, https://www.cfr.org/articles/when-xi-comes-to-washington.
[641] 'The Art of the Stall: China's Strategy for Dealing with Trump', *International New York Times*, 12 June 2025, via Deccan Herald, https://www.deccanherald.com/world/the-art-of-the-stall-chinas-strategy-for-dealing-with-trump-3583262.
[642] 'The Art of the Stall'.
[643] Ryan Hass, in Kyle Chan et al., 'What Happened When Trump Met Xi?', Brookings Institution, 5 November 2025, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-happened-when-trump-met-xi/.
[644] Jonathan A. Czin, in 'What Happened When Trump Met Xi?'.
[645] Angela Huyue Zhang, 'Strategic Restraint in China's Extraterritorial Legal Statecraft', *AJIL Unbound* 120 (2026): 219 to 224, https://doi.org/10.1017/aju.2026.10083.
[646] Hass, in 'What Happened When Trump Met Xi?'.
[647] Congressional Research Service, 'Israel: Major Issues and U.S. Relations', Report R44245, https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R44245.
[648] Laura Charlotte Schranz, 'The Day After: Perspectives on Political Reconstruction in Gaza after the Israel/Hamas War', VIIMES Research Report No. 30 (Vienna: Vienna International Institute for Middle

what Al Jazeera calls the US-Israel war on Iran.[649] Israel receives separate attention here because of its place in American policy. Scholars with very different political views argue that great power competition, oil and Israel are the main sources of American interest in the Middle East.[650] Several reasons explain why Israel matters so much to the United States. After Israel showed its military strength in the 1967 war, Washington pursued a closer relationship with it.[651] From 1967 to 1979, American diplomacy focused on the Arab-Israeli conflict and on keeping what it saw as strategic assets, among them Israel and Iran.[652] The two states also cooperated closely on defense. The United States has given Israel $158 billion in bilateral aid and missile defense funding, and Israel was the first foreign operator of the F-35.[653] Israel also anchors a wider network of regional partners. The 1979 peace between Egypt and Israel brought Egypt into the Western bloc,[654] and the Middle East Institute notes that Washington advanced the Abraham Accords in the hope that they would serve several core American interests.[655] Finally, support for Israel has a stated basis in shared strategic goals, democratic values and historical ties dating to 1948,[656] and it has strong backing in Congress. Roland Petty notes that this held even though a majority of Americans favoured a ceasefire in Gaza.[657]

This section draws on Roland Petty's research paper 'American Strategy and Policy in the Middle East: Past, Present, and Future', published by VIIMES in December 2025. Petty traces American strategy from the Truman administration to the Reagan administration, and then studies American support for Israel during the Gaza war. His paper does not cover the period from the end of the Cold War to the Biden administration, which includes Trump's first term.[658] This section therefore uses Petty mainly for the historical background and for his analysis of

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East Studies, 2026), https://viimes.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/VIIMES_final_report_Schranz_-1-by-iScanner.pdf.

[649] 'Trump Welcomes Xi to Washington as US, China Agree to Extend Trade Truce', Al Jazeera, 23 September 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/9/23/trump-meets-chinas-xi-jinping-at-us-airport-on-arrival-for-three-day-trip.

[650] Roland Petty, 'American Strategy and Policy in the Middle East: Past, Present, and Future', VIIMES Research Report No. 28 (Vienna: Vienna International Institute for Middle East Studies, 17 December 2025), 3, https://viimes.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/InternsReport28_17Dec2025.pdf.

[651] Petty, 'American Strategy and Policy', 4.

[652] Petty, 'American Strategy and Policy', 28.

[653] Congressional Research Service, 'U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel', Report RL33222, updated 1 March 2023, via EveryCRSReport, https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/2023-03-01_RL33222_7ba4408ea8cf4a56fc01dbcb3d6b1154f8868dc3.html.

[654] Petty, 'American Strategy and Policy', 29.

[655] Middle East Institute, 'The Abraham Accords', Backgrounder, https://mei.edu/backgrounder/abraham-accords/.

[656] Congressional Research Service, 'U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel'.

[657] Petty, 'American Strategy and Policy', 45 to 46.

[658] Petty, 'American Strategy and Policy', 5.

American support for Israel, and adds other sources for Trump's two terms. It gives Israel its own subsection before turning to the wider region.

Why Israel matters to the United States - Trump's two terms

Petty argues that US support for Israel combines strategic aims with pressure at home, and that it has survived changes of administration. Israel is the largest recipient of US military and economic aid, with $318 billion received since 1946. It is due to receive $3.8 billion a year until 2028, about 15 per cent of its defense budget.[659] Since 1973, Washington has also applied the principle of a 'Qualitative Military Edge', which aims to stop any neighbour from matching Israel's military strength.[660] Israel hosts a US weapons stockpile that it can draw on without Congress being told in advance.[661] Petty adds that the explanation for this steadiness lies mostly in domestic politics: religious belief, lobbying and the arms industry.[662]

First term (2017–2021)

In his first term, Trump used American recognition to strengthen Israel's position. His administration recognised Jerusalem as Israel's capital, moved the US embassy there, recognised the Golan Heights as part of Israel, and dropped sanctions on Israeli settlers.[663] The Biden administration restored the policy that calls the settlements illegal, but it did not move the embassy back.[664] In 2020, Trump also mediated the Abraham Accords between Israel, the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco. To win agreement, the US removed Sudan from its list of state sponsors of terrorism and recognised Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. It also promised a $3 billion 'Abraham Fund', which was never carried out.[665] Against Iran, Washington designated the Revolutionary Guard Corps a terror group in 2019 and killed its commander, Qassem Soleimani, in 2020.[666] Petty links these choices to Trump's own supporters. Trump said he moved the embassy 'for the evangelicals', and about 85 per cent of white evangelicals are Republican or lean Republican.[667] Miriam Adelson, an Israeli-American billionaire, was the largest financier of his presidential campaigns.[668] The embassy move was backed by AIPAC and opposed by J Street, which shows that the pro-Israel lobby is not fully united.[669]

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[659] Roland Petty, 'American Strategy and Policy in the Middle East: Past, Present, and Future', Research Report No. 28 (Vienna: Vienna International Institute for Middle East Studies, 17 December 2025), 50.
[660] Petty, 'American Strategy', 51.
[661] Petty, 'American Strategy', 52.
[662] Petty, 'American Strategy', 56–57.
[663] Petty, 'American Strategy', 49.
[664] Petty, 'American Strategy', 49.
[665] Petty, 'American Strategy', 49.
[666] Petty, 'American Strategy', 50.
[667] Petty, 'American Strategy', 59.
[668] Petty, 'American Strategy', 60.
[669] Petty, 'American Strategy', 61.

Second term (2025–present)

Petty finds that Trump has been more tolerant of Israel's conduct than Biden. Trump set no red line on the Gaza assault and kept moving what his administration treats as unacceptable.[670] In June 2025, he authorised strikes on three nuclear sites in Iran.[671] The US vetoed two UN Security Council draft resolutions on Gaza under Trump, in June and September 2025, and each time it was the only permanent member to do so.[672] Petty also notes that Israel struck Hamas negotiators in Qatar, and that it is unclear how far the US was involved.[673] After meeting Arab and Muslim leaders in September 2025, Trump promised that Israel would not annex Palestinian territory.[674]

Petty adds an economic motive. He argues that arms sales matter to American companies, and he points out that Trump often stresses the jobs they create.[675] He also points to large Pentagon contracts with technology firms, and he says Israel works as a testing ground for new military technology.[676] The ceasefire of 10 October 2025 shows Trump's personal role most clearly. Under his 20-point plan, Gaza is overseen by a Board of Peace chaired by Trump himself. Security is handled by a temporary international force, and Israeli withdrawal depends on security conditions. UN Security Council Resolution 2803 endorsed the plan on 17 November.[677]

The Board of Peace: Trump as Chairman

Trump signed the founding charter of the Board of Peace at Davos on 22 January 2026, together with representatives of 19 other countries.[678] Trump chairs the board, and a US official told CBS that he can hold the post until he resigns.[679] The White House named seven members of the founding executive board: Marco Rubio, Steve Witkoff, Jared Kushner, Tony Blair, the financier Marc Rowan, World Bank president Ajay Banga and Robert Gabriel. Two senior advisers, Aryeh Lightstone and Josh Gruenbaum, run its daily work.[680] The first meeting took place on 19 February 2026 in Washington, at a building the administration calls the Donald J. Trump Institute

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[670] Roland Petty, 'American Strategy and Policy in the Middle East: Past, Present, and Future', Research Report No. 28 (Vienna: Vienna International Institute for Middle East Studies, 17 December 2025), 56.
[671] Petty, 'American Strategy', 50.
[672] Petty, 'American Strategy', 54.
[673] Petty, 'American Strategy', 54.
[674] Petty, 'American Strategy', 56–57.
[675] Petty, 'American Strategy', 64.
[676] Petty, 'American Strategy', 64–65.
[677] Petty, 'American Strategy', 65–66.
[678] 'Trump Launches Board of Peace at Signing Ceremony in Davos', Al Jazeera, 22 January 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/1/22/trump-launches-board-of-peace-at-ceremony-in-davos.
[679] 'What to Know about Trump's "Board of Peace" as World Leaders Sign Founding Charter in Davos', CBS News, updated 22 January 2026, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-board-of-peace-what-to-know/.
[680] 'What to Know about Trump's "Board of Peace"', CBS News.

of Peace.[681] A country can obtain a permanent seat with a $1 billion contribution, although a US official said payment is not required for membership.[682] The board began as part of the 20-point Gaza plan, and the UN Security Council resolution that approved it limited the board's work to Gaza.[683] Trump wants a wider role. At Davos he said the board could 'spread out to other things as we succeed with Gaza'.[684] India was among the countries invited to join.[685] The structure gives most of the power to outsiders. No Palestinian sits on the board.[686] Palestinians run a technocratic committee led by Ali Shaath, but it reports to the board, and Israel has not allowed it to enter Gaza.[687] The board's mandate comes from the Security Council, which recognised it as a transitional administration, and the UN will review it in December 2027.[688] Its money and troops also depend on others. At the first meeting, members pledged $7 billion, and Trump committed $10 billion from the United States, which some members of Congress questioned as unlawful.[689] Aid agencies estimate that Gaza's reconstruction will cost closer to $70 billion.[690] In September, the board presented a recovery plan worth about $2.45 billion, which it has not fully funded, and Israel has refused to start carrying it out.[691] Six countries have promised personnel, but no stabilisation force has been deployed.[692] Israel holds about 60 per cent of Gaza, against the 50 per cent set in the plan, and about 227 aid trucks enter each day, against a target of 600.[693] One analyst, Simon Mabon, argues that the board lacks the power to hold Israel and Hamas to their

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[681] 'Trump's Board of Peace Pledges Billions of Dollars, Thousands of Troops for Gaza', KAXE, 19 February 2026, https://www.kaxe.org/2026-02-19/trumps-board-of-peace-pledges-billions-of-dollars-thousands-of-troops-for-gaza.
[682] ''What to Know about Trump's "Board of Peace" as World Leaders Sign Founding Charter in Davos', CBS News, updated 22 January 2026, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-board-of-peace-what-to-know/.
[683] 'What to Know about Trump's "Board of Peace"', CBS News.
[684] 'What to Know about Trump's "Board of Peace"', CBS News.
[685] 'Trump Invites India to Join "Board of Peace"; Permanent Seat Requires $1 Bn Contribution', Outlook Business, January 2026, https://www.outlookbusiness.com/news/trump-invites-india-to-join-board-of-peace-permanent-seat-requires-1-bn-contribution.
[686] 'Trump Launches Board of Peace at Signing Ceremony in Davos', Al Jazeera, 22 January 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/1/22/trump-launches-board-of-peace-at-ceremony-in-davos.
[687] 'What Has Trump's Board of Peace Achieved in a Year since Gaza "Ceasefire"?', Al Jazeera, 10 October 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/10/10/what-has-trumps-board-of-peace-achieved-in-a-year-since-gaza.
[688] 'What Has Trump's Board of Peace Achieved', Al Jazeera.
[689] 'Trump's Board of Peace Pledges Billions of Dollars, Thousands of Troops for Gaza', KAXE, 19 February 2026, https://www.kaxe.org/2026-02-19/trumps-board-of-peace-pledges-billions-of-dollars-thousands-of-troops-for-gaza.
[690] 'What Has Trump's Board of Peace Achieved', Al Jazeera.
[691] 'Scoop: Trump's Board of Peace to Unveil $2.45 Billion Gaza Recovery Plan', Axios, 23 September 2026, https://www.axios.com/2026/09/23/trump-board-of-peace-gaza-reconstruction-plan.
[692] 'What Has Trump's Board of Peace Achieved', Al Jazeera.
[693] 'What Has Trump's Board of Peace Achieved', Al Jazeera.

commitments.[694] In line with this paper's argument, it shows how personal the project is. Trump chairs the board and his name is on its headquarters, yet the board has little power of its own.

Kushner's Plan - Gaza as a Real Estate Development Project

The centre of the Board's economic vision is Jared Kushner's reconstruction plan. In December 2025, a draft became public, reported by the Wall Street Journal and Ynet. It was a 32-slide presentation called 'Project Sunrise', and it put the cost at no less than $112 billion over the first ten years. It included luxury beachfront hotels, a high-speed railway and smart electricity networks run by AI.[695] US officials doubted it would work, because Hamas refuses to disarm and other countries are unwilling to pay while fighting could return.[696] Kushner presented the public version at Davos on 22 January 2026. It was smaller in cost, but it kept the same business logic. The Board of Peace estimated that the plan needed more than $25 billion for utilities and public services, and Kushner said much of the money would come from the private sector.[697] He spoke of 'amazing investment opportunities'.[698] The plan includes 180 towers along the coast, which Middle East Eye and NPR report, though ABC counts 170. It also includes more than 100,000 housing units in a rebuilt 'New Rafah', with over 200 education centres and 75 medical centres. It targets Gaza's GDP at $10 billion and average household income above $13,000 by 2035.[699] Kushner said construction would take two or three years.[700] The plan says little about the people who live in Gaza now. Reconstruction would start only where Hamas is fully disarmed, or where people have already been removed and Israel controls the area.[701] It does not say how families in buildings that still stand in central Gaza and western Gaza City would be moved, although those areas would be demolished.[702] Al Jazeera's map comparison found that the plan would erase existing neighbourhoods, and it gave no details on where displaced people would live during construction.[703] The architecture professor Ali A. Alraouf called it the 'Vegas-ification' of Gaza

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[694] 'What Has Trump's Board of Peace Achieved', Al Jazeera.
[695] 'Report: Gaza Rehabilitation Project Will Cost $112 Billion, Includes Luxury Hotels and AI Networks', Ynetnews, 20 December 2025, https://www.ynetnews.com/article/s0185c329.
[696] 'Report: Gaza Rehabilitation Project Will Cost $112 Billion', Ynetnews.
[697] 'Jared Kushner Lays out Trump-Backed "Master Plan" for Post-War Gaza', ABC News, 22 January 2026, https://abcnews.com/Politics/jared-kushner-lays-trump-backed-master-plan-post/story?id=129461124.
[698] 'Jared Kushner Lays out Trump-Backed "Master Plan"', ABC News.
[699] 'Jared Kushner Unveils "Free Market Gaza" with Coastal Towers and Data Centres', Middle East Eye, 22 January 2026, https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/jared-kushner-unveils-free-market-gaza-coastal-towers-and-data-centres; 'What Jared Kushner's "New Gaza" Plan Includes, and What It Leaves Out', NPR, 2 February 2026, https://www.npr.org/2026/02/02/nx-s1-5694656/jared-kushner-new-gaza-plan; 'Jared Kushner Lays out Trump-Backed "Master Plan"', ABC News.
[700] 'Jared Kushner Lays out Trump-Backed "Master Plan"', ABC News.
[701] 'What Jared Kushner's "New Gaza" Plan Includes', NPR.
[702] 'What Jared Kushner's "New Gaza" Plan Includes', NPR.
[703] Mohammed Haddad and Mohammad Mansour, 'Map Shows What Would Happen to Gaza under the US "Master Plan"', Al Jazeera, 27 January 2026,

and ‘real estate fantasy rather than urban planning’.[704] It is unclear whether Palestinians were consulted.[705] The Board has no Palestinian members, and the analyst Tamer Qarmout said Palestinians ‘have no voice whatsoever in this plan’.[706]

Current Adversaries - Iran

Iran sits at the centre of the region’s security architecture, together with the US–Israel relationship. These two relationships are linked, as Washington and Israel have coordinated offensive measures against Iran and its allied groups, and Petty notes that this risks escalation across the region.[707] Iran also controls part of the Strait of Hormuz, which affects the entire region’s trade and security, and the price of oil. When Brent crude was near $103–105 on 8 October 2026, the strait was still contested.[708] Whatever Washington decides on Iran therefore affects Israel, the Gulf states and the world economy. Trump’s behavior has made this more uncertain, sometimes from one hour to the next. The war began on 28 February 2026, when the US and Israel launched joint attacks on Iran.[709] On 23 March, Trump claimed ‘almost all points of agreement’ with Iran, and Tehran denied it was negotiating.[710] On 7 April, he warned that a ‘whole civilisation will die tonight’ if Hormuz stayed closed, and with two hours left he announced a two-week ceasefire.[711] On 11 June, he threatened US ‘total control’ of Iran’s oil and gas industries, then called off attacks hours later, citing a breakthrough in talks.[712] A ceasefire memorandum signed on 17 June collapsed within days, and strikes resumed.[713] As of today (18th October 2026), there is no formal ceasefire, and the US blockade of Iranian ports continues. On 8 October, Trump promised no attack before the 3 November midterm elections, one day after The

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https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/1/27/map-shows-what-would-happen-to-gaza-under-the-us-master-plan.

[704] Haddad and Mansour, ‘Map Shows What Would Happen to Gaza’.

[705] ‘What Jared Kushner’s “New Gaza” Plan Includes, and What It Leaves Out’, NPR, 2 February 2026, https://www.npr.org/2026/02/02/nx-s1-5694656/jared-kushner-new-gaza-plan

[706] Mohammed Haddad and Mohammad Mansour, ‘Map Shows What Would Happen to Gaza under the US “Master Plan”’, Al Jazeera, 27 January 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/1/27/map-shows-what-would-happen-to-gaza-under-the-us-master-plan.

[707] Roland Petty, ‘American Strategy and Policy in the Middle East: Past, Present, and Future’, Research Report No. 28 (Vienna: Vienna International Institute for Middle East Studies, 17 December 2025), 49.

[708] ‘Trump Promises Not to Resume Strikes before Midterm Elections’, CBS News, live updates, 8–9 October 2026, https://www.cbsnews.com/live-updates/iran-war-nuclear-donald-trump-vance-rubio-strait-of-hormuz/.

[709] ‘“One Last Chance”: The Times Trump Threatened Iran, Said Deal Imminent’, Al Jazeera, 4 August 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2026/8/4/one-last-chance-the-times-trump-threatened-iran-said-deal-imminent.

[710] ‘“One Last Chance”’, Al Jazeera.

[711] ‘“One Last Chance”’, Al Jazeera.

[712] ‘“One Last Chance”’, Al Jazeera.

[713] ‘“One Last Chance”’, Al Jazeera.

Atlantic reported that the White House had asked the Pentagon for strike options.[714] His statements have therefore moved between threats and deals so often that neither the region nor his own officials can plan on them.

Historical context:

Distrust between the two states goes back to 1953. That year the CIA and British forces removed Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, who had nationalised Iran's oil, and put the Shah back in power.[715] After the Shah fell in 1979, students stormed the US Embassy in Tehran and took the staff hostage. The US answered with sanctions and cut diplomatic ties.[716] In the Iran–Iraq war, Washington gave military and intelligence help to Iraq, even late in the war when it knew Iraq used chemical weapons. At the same time, it sent covert arms to Iran in the Iran-Contra affair.[717] The first major agreement in decades was the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) of July 2015, which limited Iran's nuclear programme in return for sanctions relief.[718]

First term: On 8 May 2018, Trump announced that the US was leaving the JCPOA and brought sanctions back.[719] Iran answered in 2019. On 8 May it said it would no longer keep to the deal's stockpile limits. On 1 July, according to the IAEA, it went above the limit of 300 kilograms of low-enriched uranium.[720] Washington then designated Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps a terror group in 2019, and killed its commander, Qassem Soleimani, in 2020.[721] In November 2020, Trump also asked his advisers about striking Natanz, and Pence, Pompeo and General Milley warned him that this could start a wider war.[722] The first term shows the pattern: the US left an agreement, and the result was more confrontation.

Second term: Iran returns to the table. Iran came back to negotiations several times, and the US or Israel attacked during or right after talks twice, in June 2025 and February 2026. Iran later accused Washington of violating the June 2026 memorandum. The timeline below shows the sequence:

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[714] 'Trump Promises Not to Resume Strikes', CBS News.
[715] Roland Petty, 'American Strategy and Policy in the Middle East: Past, Present, and Future', Research Report No. 28 (Vienna: Vienna International Institute for Middle East Studies, 17 December 2025), 29.
[716] Petty, 'American Strategy', 34.
[717] Petty, 'American Strategy', 34.
[718] 'Timeline of Nuclear Diplomacy with Iran', Arms Control Association, https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Timeline-of-Nuclear-Diplomacy-With-Iran.
[719] 'Timeline of Nuclear Diplomacy with Iran', Arms Control Association.
[720] 'Timeline of Nuclear Diplomacy with Iran', Arms Control Association.
[721] Petty, 'American Strategy', 50.
[722] 'Trump Reportedly Asked Aides about Options for Striking Iranian Nuclear Site', Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, November 2020, https://www.rferl.org/amp/trump-reportedly-asked-aides-about-options-for-striking-iranian-nuclear-site/30954293.html.

12 Apr–23 May 2025	Five rounds of US–Iran talks in Oman and Rome, led by Steve Witkoff and Abbas Araghchi.[723]
13–15 Jun 2025	Israel strikes Iran during the talks. Iran suspends them, and the sixth round planned for 15 June in Oman is cancelled.[724]
22–24 Jun 2025	The US strikes Natanz, Fordow and Isfahan. Iran fires at Al Udeid air base in Qatar, and a US-brokered ceasefire starts on 24 June.[725]
Nov 2025	Oman urges both sides to return to the table. On 7 November, Trump says Iran has asked the US to lift sanctions and he is willing to talk.[726]
6, 17 and 26 Feb 2026	Oman-mediated talks in Muscat and Geneva. On 27 February, Oman says Iran agreed to cut its stockpile to the lowest level possible. Trump says he prefers diplomacy but ‘all options’ remain.[727]
28 Feb 2026	The US and Israel attack Iran two days after the Geneva round, before a planned round in Vienna.[728]
23–25 Mar 2026	Trump claims ‘almost all points of agreement’, and Tehran denies it is negotiating.[729] Pakistan delivers a 15-point US proposal, which Iran rejects with its own five

[723] ‘2025–2026 Iran–United States Negotiations’, Wikipedia, accessed 18 October 2026, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2025%E2%80%932026_Iran%E2%80%93United_States_negotiations.
[724] ‘2025–2026 Iran–United States Negotiations’, Wikipedia, accessed 18 October 2026, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2025%E2%80%932026_Iran%E2%80%93United_States_negotiations.
[725] ‘US, Israel Bomb Iran: A Timeline of Talks and Threats Leading up to Attacks’, Al Jazeera, 28 February 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/2/28/us-israel-bomb-iran-a-timeline-of-talks-and-threats-leading-up-to-attacks.
[726] ‘US, Israel Bomb Iran’, Al Jazeera.
[727] ‘US, Israel Bomb Iran’, Al Jazeera.
[728] ‘2025–2026 Iran–United States Negotiations’, Wikipedia.
[729] ‘“One Last Chance”: The Times Trump Threatened Iran, Said Deal Imminent’, Al Jazeera, 4 August 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2026/8/4/one-last-chance-the-times-trump-threatened-iran-said-deal-imminent.

	points.[730]
7–12 Apr 2026	A two-week ceasefire starts, mediated by Pakistan. Pakistan and Iran say it covers Lebanon, but the US and Israel say it does not. The Islamabad talks end without a deal, and the US announces a naval blockade of Iranian ports from 13 April.[731]
21 Apr–27 May 2026	Trump extends the ceasefire indefinitely, then US strikes resume after talks falter.[732]
17 Jun–17 Aug 2026	The US and Iran signed a 14-point memorandum with a 60-day negotiating window.[733] On 27 June, US strikes hit southern Iran. Iran says this broke Article 1. Trump declares the memorandum 'over' around 7 July, and it expires on 17 August.[734]
27 Jul–3 Aug 2026	Trump halts strikes and says 'perimeters of a deal' exist. He then gives Iran 'one last chance', and Tehran denies talking to the US.[735]
8 Oct 2026	Trump promises no attack before the 3 November midterms and cites 'productive conversations'. Iran says it will answer within days.[736]

[730] '2026 Iran War Ceasefire', Wikipedia, accessed 18 October 2026, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2026_Iran_war_ceasefire.
[731] '2026 Iran War Ceasefire', Wikipedia, accessed 18 October 2026, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2026_Iran_war_ceasefire.
[732] '"One Last Chance": The Times Trump Threatened Iran, Said Deal Imminent', Al Jazeera, 4 August 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2026/8/4/one-last-chance-the-times-trump-threatened-iran-said-deal-imminent.
[733] 'US-Iran Memorandum of Understanding Expires: How and Why It Fell Apart', Al Jazeera, 17 August 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/8/17/us-iran-memorandum-of-understanding-expires-how-and-why-it-fell-apart.
[734] 'US-Iran Memorandum of Understanding Expires', Al Jazeera.
[735] '"One Last Chance"', Al Jazeera.
[736] 'Trump Promises Not to Resume Strikes before Midterm Elections', CBS News, live updates, 8–9 October 2026, https://www.cbsnews.com/live-updates/iran-war-nuclear-donald-trump-vance-rubio-strait-of-hormuz/.

Both sides share blame for the memorandum's failure. Analysts say it was vaguely drafted, especially on Hormuz routes and on Lebanon, and that each side suspected the other of rewriting the deal. Iran also says it will not negotiate directly with the US while it sees violations.[737] The result for my argument is that Iran has little reason to trust an agreement signed with Washington.

Threats and reversals. Trump's threats follow a pattern. The table lists the main ones:

21–23 Mar	Destroy power plants within 48 hours unless Hormuz reopens.[738]	Five-day pause announced on 23 March, which Trump said followed 'productive conversations'.[739]
26 Mar	Hormuz deadline	Strikes delayed ten days, with Trump saying Tehran asked.[740]
30 Mar	Destroy power plants, oil wells and Kharg Island	No immediate escalation.[741]
1 Apr	Send Iran 'back to the Stone Age'	No attack followed.[742]
5 Apr (Easter)	Iran will be 'living in Hell'	Escalated into the 7 April post.[743]
7 Apr	'A whole civilisation will die tonight'.[744]	Two-week ceasefire announced before the deadline.[745]

[737] 'US-Iran Memorandum of Understanding Expires', Al Jazeera.
[738] 'Trump's Iran U-Turns Feed "Taco" Narrative', The National, 2 August 2026, https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/mena/2026/08/02/trumps-iran-u-turns-feed-taco-narrative/.
[739] 'Trump Taco Iran Markets Rally S&P 500 Crude Oil Peace Talks', Fortune, 23 March 2026, https://fortune.com/2026/03/23/trump-taco-iran-markets-rally-sp-500-crude-oil-peace-talks.
[740] '"One Last Chance": The Times Trump Threatened Iran, Said Deal Imminent', Al Jazeera, 4 August 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2026/8/4/one-last-chance-the-times-trump-threatened-iran-said-deal-imminent.
[741] 'Trump's Iran U-Turns', The National.
[742] 'Trump's Iran U-Turns', The National.
[743] 'Trump Sends Expletive-Laden Easter Message Threatening Iran's Infrastructure', InDaily, 6 April 2026, https://www.indailysa.com.au/news/just-in/2026/04/06/trump-expletive-laden-threat-2.
[744] 'US Denies Nuclear Plan as Deadline on Threat to Iran Civilisation Looms', Al Jazeera, 7 April 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/4/7/us-denies-nuclear-plan-as-deadline-on-threat-to-iran-civilisation-looms.
[745] '"One Last Chance"', Al Jazeera.

21 Apr	‘I expect to be bombing’	Ceasefire extended within hours.[746]
5–7 May	‘Project Freedom’ to escort ships through Hormuz	Paused after about two days.[747]
17–18 May	‘Nothing will be left’ of Iran	Action postponed, ‘hopefully maybe forever’.[748]
11 Jun	US ‘total control’ of Iran’s oil and gas	Attacks called off hours later.[749]
14 Jun	Hit Iran ‘very hard tonight’ and seize Kharg	Softened hours later.[750]
2–3 Aug	‘Locked and loaded’.[751]	Strikes called off on 2 August, then ‘one last chance’ on 3 August.[752]
8 Oct	Strike options requested	Promised no attack before the midterms.[753]

Critics call this **‘TACO’, short for ‘Trump Always Chickens Out’**. The Financial Times columnist Robert Armstrong coined the term in May 2025, and Trump answered a question about it by saying ‘it’s called negotiation’.[754]

Iran answered each major US or Israeli attack with strikes of its own. After the 28 February attack, it struck US bases and other targets across the region.[755] After the 27 June strikes, the

[746] ‘Trump’s Iran U-Turns’, The National.
[747] ‘Trump’s Iran U-Turns Feed “Taco” Narrative’, The National, 2 August 2026, https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/mena/2026/08/02/trumps-iran-u-turns-feed-taco-narrative/.
[748] ‘“One Last Chance”: The Times Trump Threatened Iran, Said Deal Imminent’, Al Jazeera, 4 August 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2026/8/4/one-last-chance-the-times-trump-threatened-iran-said-deal-imminent.
[749] ‘“One Last Chance”’, Al Jazeera.
[750] ‘Trump’s Iran U-Turns’, The National.
[751] ‘Trump’s Iran U-Turns’, The National.
[752] ‘“One Last Chance”’, Al Jazeera.
[753] ‘Trump Promises Not to Resume Strikes before Midterm Elections’, CBS News, live updates, 8–9 October 2026, https://www.cbsnews.com/live-updates/iran-war-nuclear-donald-trump-vance-rubio-strait-of-hormuz/.
[754] ‘Here’s How Trump Responded to Reporter’s “Nastiest” Tariff Question’, KTVU (remarks of 28 May 2025), https://www.ktvu.com/news/trump-taco-tariff-question.
[755] ‘US, Israel Bomb Iran’, Al Jazeera.

Revolutionary Guard said it hit US installations in response.[756] It also hit civilian technologies used for military purposes. On 1 March, Iranian drones struck two Amazon Web Services data centres in the UAE, and the Guard said it targeted data centres supporting 'the enemy's' military and intelligence activities. Iranian state media later threatened Microsoft, Google and Nvidia.[757] Iran also used the Strait of Hormuz as a lever, and the US threats over the strait drove most of Trump's deadlines.[758] This is asymmetric warfare and its responses were mostly timed and aimed as replies to specific attacks, though they hurt neighbours who were not at war.

International law: Guterres told the Security Council on 1 March that the US–Israeli strikes on Iran violated international law, including the UN Charter.[759] In April, over 100 US-based international law experts signed a letter saying the strikes 'clearly violated the United Nations Charter prohibition on the use of force' and that Iran had not attacked Israel or the United States.[760] Trump's own view specifically disregarded international law, stating in January 2026 to The New York Times, 'I don't need international law', and that the only thing that can stop him is 'my own morality'.[761] On 31 August, he said he would not use a nuclear weapon on Iran, calling the question 'stupid'.[762] In April, the White House had denied any nuclear plan, although Karoline Leavitt said only that 'Only the President knows where things stand and what he will do.'[763]

Conclusion: This record shows how US behavior has fed instability. Washington left the JCPOA, and Iran then moved past its limits. Washington or its partner attacked during talks twice, and the deals signed later broke down within weeks. As of 18th October 2026 there is no

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[756] 'US-Iran Memorandum of Understanding Expires: How and Why It Fell Apart', Al Jazeera, 17 August 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/8/17/us-iran-memorandum-of-understanding-expires-how-and-why-it-fell-apart.
[757] 'Why Iran Targeted Amazon Data Centers and What Does and Doesn't Change about Warfare', Georgia Tech, 1 April 2026, https://www.gatech.edu/news/2026/04/01/why-iran-targeted-amazon-data-centers-and-what-does-and-doesnt-change-about-warfare.
[758] '"One Last Chance": The Times Trump Threatened Iran, Said Deal Imminent', Al Jazeera, 4 August 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2026/8/4/one-last-chance-the-times-trump-threatened-iran-said-deal-imminent.
[759] 'UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres Condemns US-Israeli Airstrikes', News on Air, 1 March 2026, https://www.newsonair.gov.in/un-secretary-general-antonio-guterres-condemns-us-israeli-airstrikes.
[760] 'Professors' Letter on International Law and the Iran War', Just Security, 13 April 2026, https://www.justsecurity.org/135423/professors-letter-international-law-iran-war/.
[761] Interview with The New York Times, republished as 'Trump Interview: Power, Morality', The Boston Globe, 8 January 2026, https://www.bostonglobe.com/2026/01/08/nation/trump-interview-power-morality/
[762] Daily Caller, 31 August 2026, https://www.dailycaller.com/2026/08/31/donald-trump-iran-nuclear-weapons-pentagon-joe-kent/.
[763] 'US Denies Nuclear Plan as Deadline on Threat to Iran Civilisation Looms', Al Jazeera, 7 April 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/4/7/us-denies-nuclear-plan-as-deadline-on-threat-to-iran-civilisation-looms

formal ceasefire, the blockade continues. Brent crude was near $103–105 on 8 October, and the Strait of Hormuz is still contested.[764] The war has also strained the US itself. CSIS estimates that 759 to 827 Patriot interceptors remain, about a third of prewar stock, and 234 to 278 THAAD interceptors remain, down from 452. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth called the CNN report on the depletion 'NOT TRUE'.[765] The trend now is a smaller US footprint, but the evidence does not show a simple handover to Israel. The Pentagon is considering moving units out of the Persian Gulf toward Jordan, Israel and Saudi Arabia's Red Sea coast, with smaller, hardened positions instead of large bases. A Responsible Statecraft analysis of this plan says it is 'a far cry from a U.S. withdrawal'.[766] The last US troops left Iraq on 30 September 2026.[767] Trump has also held Israel back. On 8 June, he reportedly told Netanyahu, 'you better be careful, or you will be on your own very soon', and said Washington would not give Israel 'a green light'.[768]

Persian Gulf States

Historical relations. For decades, the US–Gulf relationship rested on a stable bargain. The US gave security guarantees and arms, and the Gulf states gave energy access and regional stability. It began in 1945, when Franklin D. Roosevelt met Saudi Arabia's founding king, Ibn Saud, aboard the USS Quincy. The meeting linked Middle Eastern oil to American national security.[769] No document was signed. Months later, a memorandum to President Truman said the US needed to support Ibn Saud financially to keep access to Saudi oil.[770] In 1950, after Ibn Saud threatened to nationalise Saudi oil, the oil company ARAMCO agreed to a 50/50 profit split. Washington used a tax break for the American companies to make this possible.[771] Over time the bargain became military. In the 1970s the US armed Iran and Saudi Arabia under a 'two-pillar policy'.[772] After 1979, President Carter said in January 1980 that an attempt by any outside force to control the Persian Gulf would be 'repelled by any means necessary, including military force'. He also

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[764] 'Trump Promises Not to Resume Strikes before Midterm Elections', CBS News, live updates, 8–9 October 2026, https://www.cbsnews.com/live-updates/iran-war-nuclear-donald-trump-vance-rubio-strait-of-hormuz/.
[765] Jennifer H. Svan, 'US Missile Defense Stockpile Dangerously Low', Stars and Stripes, 5 August 2026, https://www.stripes.com/theaters/us/2026-08-05/us-missile-defense-stockpile-dangerously-low-22462099.html.
[766] Abdelrahim Shalaby, 'After Iran, US Signals Major Security Shift in the Middle East', Responsible Statecraft, 31 August 2026, https://responsiblestatecraft.org/us-withdrawal-from-middle-east/.
[767] 'The U.S. Military Withdraws from Iraq over 2 Decades after Its Invasion', NPR, 30 September 2026, https://www.npr.org/2026/09/30/nx-s1-5983426/u-s-withdraws-final-troops-from-iraq.
[768] 'PM Called off Major Iran Strike after Trump Warned Israel Would Be on Its Own', The Times of Israel, 8 June 2026, https://timesofisrael.com/pm-called-off-major-iran-strike-after-trump-warned-israel-would-be-on-its-own/.
[769] Roland Petty, 'American Strategy and Policy in the Middle East: Past, Present, and Future', Research Report No. 28 (Vienna: Vienna International Institute for Middle East Studies, 17 December 2025), 5, 39.
[770] Petty, 'American Strategy', 39.
[771] Petty, 'American Strategy', 39.
[772] Petty, 'American Strategy', 30.

created a permanent task force to protect Gulf oil.[773] Once the Gulf Cooperation Council formed in 1981, the US sold arms to its members, which Petty describes as 'positioning them as surrogates for American interests and power'.[774] Bases formalised the arrangement. Naval Support Activity Bahrain hosts the Fifth Fleet, and the US Navy has used it since 1948. Al Udeid in Qatar holds forward elements of Central Command (CENTCOM). Al Dhafra in the UAE hosts the 380th Air Expeditionary Wing, and Camp Arifjan in Kuwait is the forward headquarters of the Army's CENTCOM component.[775]

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia the oldest and largest partner. Petty notes that Trump often points to the jobs created by arms deals with countries like Saudi Arabia.[776] The partnership has limits. Steven Cook of the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) writes that Trump did not come to Saudi Arabia's direct defense after Iran attacked Saudi oil facilities in 2019.[777] In May 2025, on his first foreign trip of the second term, Trump came home with Saudi pledges of $600 billion, including nearly $142 billion in weapons.[778] The trip also produced AI partnerships, including Nvidia's plan to ship 18,000 chips for a data centre being built by the Saudi firm Humain.[779]

The clearest case of leverage is the nuclear deal. In July 2026, Trump approved a 30-year civil nuclear agreement worth tens of billions of dollars.[780] Two US officials said the deal leaves open the possibility that Saudi Arabia will enrich uranium in the future, and that safeguards would be bilateral instead of run by the IAEA.[781] Trump wrote, 'There will be no enrichment of material!', and said the deal 'is totally subject to Saudi Arabia joining the very respected and successful Abraham Accords'. Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt confirmed that this is a condition, which was not part of the original agreement.[782] Erin Dumbacher of the CFR notes that the deal lacks

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[773] Petty, 'American Strategy', 31.
[774] Petty, 'American Strategy', 44.
[775] 'From Bahrain to Syria: Where US Forces Are Stationed in the Middle East', Al-Monitor (AFP), 18 June 2025, https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2025/06/us-bases-middle-east.
[776] Roland Petty, 'American Strategy and Policy in the Middle East: Past, Present, and Future', Research Report No. 28 (Vienna: Vienna International Institute for Middle East Studies, 17 December 2025), 5, 64.
[777] Steven A. Cook, 'The U.S.-Led Middle East Order Is Over. The Mecca Agreement Proves It', Council on Foreign Relations, 13 August 2026, https://www.cfr.org/articles/the-u-s-led-middle-east-order-is-over-the-mecca-agreement-proves-it.
[778] 'Trump Caps Gulf Tour in Abu Dhabi with Dizzying Investment Pledges', Al-Monitor, 15 May 2025, https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2025/05/trump-caps-gulf-tour-abu-dhabi-dizzying-investment-pledges.
[779] Alison Snyder and Dave Lawler, Axios, 18 May 2025, https://www.axios.com/2025/05/18/trump-gulf-ai-deals-saudi-uae-security-china-risk.
[780] 'Trump Approves US-Saudi Civil Nuclear Energy Agreement', ABC News, 23 July 2026, https://abcnews.com/International/trump-approves-us-saudi-civil-nuclear-energy-agreement/story?id=134976263.
[781] 'Trump Approves US-Saudi Civil Nuclear Energy Agreement', ABC News.
[782] 'Trump Approves US-Saudi Civil Nuclear Energy Agreement', ABC News.

the IAEA's Additional Protocol, and she calls the linkage a possible 'poison pill' in Congress.[783] One report says Saudi Arabia refused to normalize relations without credible progress toward Palestinian statehood.[784]

The United Arab Emirates

The UAE and Bahrain joined the Abraham Accords with Israel in 2020.[785] Under Trump's second term, the UAE's main gain has been technology. In May 2025, the two countries agreed to build a 10-square-mile AI campus in Abu Dhabi, run by the firm G42. Reuters sources said the UAE could import up to 500,000 of Nvidia's most advanced chips per year.[786] Under Biden, the UAE's ties to China had limited its access to these chips. The White House says the UAE committed to align its national security rules with those of the US.[787] A group of Democratic lawmakers said the deals lacked 'credible security assurances'.[788] A Wall Street Journal report raises a conflict-of-interest question. A UAE-linked firm tied to Sheikh Tahnoon bin Zayed, the national security adviser, bought 49 per cent of the Trump family's crypto company, World Liberty Financial, four days before the inauguration. About $187 million went to Trump-related entities.[789] The White House said Trump is not involved in the company's operations, and the company called any link to US policy 'completely false'.[790] The UAE has also been a target. Iranian drones struck two Amazon Web Services data centres in the UAE on 1 March 2026.[791]

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[783] Erin D. Dumbacher, 'The Saudi Nuclear Deal Would Set a Dangerous New Proliferation Precedent', Council on Foreign Relations, 28 July 2026, https://www.cfr.org/articles/the-saudi-nuclear-deal-would-set-a-dangerous-new-proliferation-precedent.
[784] Kyle Belmonte, 'Mecca Pact Blindsides Abraham Accords: Saudi Arabia Built Security without Normalizing', Tech Times, 12 August 2026, https://www.techtimes.com/articles/324200/20260812/mecca-pact-blindsides-abraham-accords-saudi-arabia-built-security-without-normalizing.htm.
[785] Roland Petty, 'American Strategy and Policy in the Middle East: Past, Present, and Future', Research Report No. 28 (Vienna: Vienna International Institute for Middle East Studies, 17 December 2025), 5, 49.
[786] 'Trump Strikes Historic Deal with UAE', Yahoo News, May 2025, https://www.yahoo.com/news/trump-strikes-historic-deal-uae-224813232.html.
[787] 'Trump Strikes Historic Deal with UAE', Yahoo News.
[788] Alison Snyder and Dave Lawler, Axios, 18 May 2025, https://www.axios.com/2025/05/18/trump-gulf-ai-deals-saudi-uae-security-china-risk.
[789] 'UAE-Linked Firm Bought 49% Stake in Trump Family Crypto Company Days before Inauguration: Report', WION, 2 February 2026, https://wionews.com/world/uae-linked-firm-bought-49-stake-in-trump-family-crypto-company-days-before-inauguration-report-1770026104694.
[790] 'UAE-Linked Firm Bought 49% Stake', WION.
[791] 'Why Iran Targeted Amazon Data Centers and What Does and Doesn't Change about Warfare', Georgia Tech, 1 April 2026, https://www.gatech.edu/news/2026/04/01/why-iran-targeted-amazon-data-centers-and-what-does-and-doesnt-change-about-warfare.

They also targeted Al Dhafra air base, although the UAE had said it would not allow its territory to be used for attacks on Iran.[792]

Qatar

Qatar shows how little a US base protects the host. In June 2017, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt cut ties with Qatar. Trump first showed 'great sympathy' for Qatar's critics, although State and Defense worried that the rift undermined US policy on Iran. The embargo ended on 5 January 2021, after Jared Kushner made the issue a priority in his last days in office.[793] Qatar hosts Al Udeid, the base with forward elements of CENTCOM.[794] In the second term, Qatar offered Trump a luxury aircraft, which opponents called 'blatant corruption', and Qatar Airways placed a $200 billion order for Boeing jets.[795] On 9 September 2025, Israel struck Doha, targeting Hamas leaders who were discussing a US ceasefire plan, and killed a Qatari security officer.[796] Qatar called the strike 'cowardly and treacherous'. After Netanyahu apologised, Trump signed an order on 1 October 2025 making it US policy to 'guarantee the security and territorial integrity of the State of Qatar against external attack', although the scope of the pledge is unclear.[797] Iran also hit Al Udeid on 9 March 2026, and Qatar condemned the attack on its territory while it deepened its defense ties with the US.[798] Oman and Qatar have led mediation between Tehran and Washington.[799] Bahrain and Kuwait. Bahrain hosts the Fifth Fleet, and Kuwait hosts Camp Arifjan and Ali al-Salem air base.[800] Both were hit in the war. A Bahraini desalination plant was reportedly damaged by a drone on 8 March 2026, and drones targeted Juffair in Bahrain the next day. On 6 April, Iran said it struck US forces that had moved to Bubiyan Island in Kuwait, even though Kuwait had said it would not allow attacks from its territory.[801]

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[792] Bertina Kudrin, 'The U.S.-Iran War: Fighting From "Neutral" Territory', Lawfare, 29 May 2026, https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/the-u.s.-iran-war--fighting-from--neutral--territory.
[793] Jon B. Alterman, 'GCC Rift over Qatar Comes to an End', CSIS, 5 January 2021, https://www.csis.org/analysis/gcc-rift-over-qatar-comes-end.
[794] 'From Bahrain to Syria: Where US Forces Are Stationed in the Middle East', Al-Monitor (AFP), 18 June 2025, https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2025/06/us-bases-middle-east.
[795] 'Trump Caps Gulf Tour in Abu Dhabi with Dizzying Investment Pledges', Al-Monitor, 15 May 2025, https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2025/05/trump-caps-gulf-tour-abu-dhabi-dizzying-investment-pledges.
[796] 'New Trump Executive Order Guarantees Qatar Security after Israeli Attack', Al Jazeera, 1 October 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/amp/news/2025/10/1/new-trump-executive-order-guarantees-qatar-security-after-israeli-attack.
[797] 'New Trump Executive Order Guarantees Qatar Security', Al Jazeera.
[798] Bertina Kudrin, 'The U.S.-Iran War: Fighting From "Neutral" Territory', Lawfare, 29 May 2026, https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/the-u.s.-iran-war--fighting-from--neutral--territory.
[799] 'Iran's Strikes on the Gulf States', Alhurra, 28 February 2026, https://alhurra.com/en/14632.
[800] 'From Bahrain to Syria: Where US Forces Are Stationed in the Middle East', Al-Monitor (AFP), 18 June 2025, https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2025/06/us-bases-middle-east.
[801] Kudrin, 'Fighting From "Neutral" Territory', Lawfare.

Transactionalism and changing security guarantees

Trump's Gulf diplomacy trades investment, arms, technology and nuclear cooperation for political alignment. Petty argues that economic interest drives US arms sales more than the strategic reasons officials give.[802] The record above fits this view: Saudi weapons and AI deals, UAE chips, a Qatari jet and order, and a nuclear deal made conditional on normalization with Israel. The cost is trust. Cook writes that the Saudis 'have clearly become concerned about the reliability of the United States'. He points to the 2019 attack and to partners often getting no warning of US policy shifts.[803] The 2026 war made this worse. The US and Israel launched the war on Iran without consulting their Persian Gulf allies, who then faced Iranian retaliation, and one scholar argues that the Gulf states lost deterrence once it began.[804] US bases did not shield the hosts. Lawfare argues that hosting US forces can make a state a target even when it limits their offensive use.[805] The interceptors that protect the hosts are also running low. CSIS counts 759 to 827 Patriot interceptors left, about a third of prewar stock, and 234 to 278 THAAD interceptors, down from 452.[806] The Pentagon is moving units out of the Gulf toward Jordan, Israel and Saudi Arabia's Red Sea coast, with smaller, hardened positions in place of large bases.[807] Umer Karim of the King Faisal Center says the US is not stepping back 'as such', but the limits of its presence have been exposed.[808] The Gulf states have therefore started to protect themselves in other ways. First, they hedge in diplomacy. Before the war, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait said they would not let their territory be used for attacks on Iran.[809] Oman and Qatar acted as mediators.[810] Second, they built their own pacts. On 17 September 2025, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan signed a mutual defense agreement stating that 'any aggression against either country shall be considered an aggression against both'. This came eight days after the Doha

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[802] Roland Petty, 'American Strategy and Policy in the Middle East: Past, Present, and Future', Research Report No. 28 (Vienna: Vienna International Institute for Middle East Studies, 17 December 2025), 5, 64.
[803] Steven A. Cook, 'The U.S.-Led Middle East Order Is Over. The Mecca Agreement Proves It', Council on Foreign Relations, 13 August 2026, https://www.cfr.org/articles/the-u-s-led-middle-east-order-is-over-the-mecca-agreement-proves-it.
[804] 'Trump Hails Mecca Pact: Can It Replace the Region's US Security Umbrella?', Al Jazeera, 17 August 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/8/17/trump-hails-mecca-pact-can-it-replace-the-regions-us-security-umbrella.
[805] Bertina Kudrin, 'The U.S.-Iran War: Fighting From "Neutral" Territory', Lawfare, 29 May 2026, https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/the-u.s.-iran-war--fighting-from--neutral--territory.
[806] Jennifer H. Svan, 'US Missile Defense Stockpile Dangerously Low', Stars and Stripes, 5 August 2026, https://www.stripes.com/theaters/us/2026-08-05/us-missile-defense-stockpile-dangerously-low-22462099.html.
[807] Abdelrahim Shalaby, 'After Iran, US Signals Major Security Shift in the Middle East', Responsible Statecraft, 31 August 2026, https://responsiblestatecraft.org/us-withdrawal-from-middle-east/.
[808] 'Trump Hails Mecca Pact', Al Jazeera.
[809] Kudrin, 'Fighting From "Neutral" Territory', Lawfare.
[810] 'Iran's Strikes on the Gulf States', Alhurra, 28 February 2026, https://alhurra.com/en/14632.

strike, although a Saudi official said it was not a response to specific events.[811] Pakistan has at least 170 nuclear weapons and has not signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty, so the pact leaves open a nuclear umbrella.[812] On 7 August 2026, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Pakistan signed the Mecca Joint Defence Agreement. No official text has been released, but reports say it contains a clause similar to NATO's Article 5, treating an attack on one as an attack on all.[813] The commitments are conditional. Turkey's foreign minister said a state under attack must first ask for help and say what it needs, and the analyst Mansoor Ahmed expects each country to decide the timing and scope of its help.[814] The first test was weak. Forty-eight hours after the signing, the Houthis fired on a Saudi Aramco refinery in Jazan, and Saudi leaders did not call on their partners.[815] Trump welcomed the pact, saying he was 'very happy' to see it 'finally' signed and that it shows 'the Middle East is coming together'.[816] Analysts see a hedge, not a replacement (hedging is a risk-management and alignment strategy where a state avoids choosing a single side among competing great powers, instead cultivating ties with all of them while keeping a backup plan). Karim says the pact 'doesn't really replace existing capabilities' and adds a separate layer of deterrence, and about 50,000 US troops remain in the region.[817]

Israel's role

Israel is part of all these dynamics, as a partner and as a source of insecurity. It is the reason for the Abraham Accords, which brought the UAE and Bahrain into open relations with Israel in 2020, and the US offered rewards to make them happen.[818] Saudi normalization is still missing, and Trump has now tied the nuclear deal to it.[819] But Israeli action has also hurt Gulf states.

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[811] 'Saudi Arabia Signs Mutual Defence Pact with Nuclear-Armed Pakistan', Al Jazeera, 17 September 2025, https://aljazeera.com/news/2025/9/17/saudi-arabia-signs-mutual-defense-pact-with-nuclear-armed-pakistan.
[812] Erin D. Dumbacher, 'The Saudi Nuclear Deal Would Set a Dangerous New Proliferation Precedent', Council on Foreign Relations, 28 July 2026, https://www.cfr.org/articles/the-saudi-nuclear-deal-would-set-a-dangerous-new-proliferation-precedent.
[813] Steven A. Cook, 'The U.S.-Led Middle East Order Is Over. The Mecca Agreement Proves It', Council on Foreign Relations, 13 August 2026, https://www.cfr.org/articles/the-u-s-led-middle-east-order-is-over-the-mecca-agreement-proves-it.
[814] 'Trump Hails Mecca Pact: Can It Replace the Region's US Security Umbrella?', Al Jazeera, 17 August 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/8/17/trump-hails-mecca-pact-can-it-replace-the-regions-us-security-umbrella.
[815] Cook, 'The U.S.-Led Middle East Order Is Over'.
[816] 'Trump Hails Mecca Pact', Al Jazeera.
[817] 'Trump Hails Mecca Pact', Al Jazeera.
[818] Roland Petty, 'American Strategy and Policy in the Middle East: Past, Present, and Future', Research Report No. 28 (Vienna: Vienna International Institute for Middle East Studies, 17 December 2025), 5, 49.
[819] 'Trump Approves US-Saudi Civil Nuclear Energy Agreement', ABC News, 23 July 2026, https://abcnews.com/International/trump-approves-us-saudi-civil-nuclear-energy-agreement/story?id=134976263.

Israel's strike on Doha killed Hamas team members and a Qatari security officer, and Trump issued a security pledge to Qatar after it.[820] The war on Iran, which the US and Israel began without consulting the Gulf allies, exposed them to Iranian retaliation.[821]

Regional rivalry is also changing. Cook writes that Turkey's gains under the Mecca Agreement come partly at the expense of Israel, and that Saudi Arabia and Turkey have proposed rerouting the planned India-Middle East-Europe rail corridor to bypass Israel.[822] One report argues that the pact raises the price of Saudi normalization without ruling it out, and the Israeli analyst Yoel Guzansky says it 'doesn't shut the door completely'.[823] If US units move out of the Gulf toward Jordan and Israel, Israel becomes more central to US regional defense, while the Gulf hosts become less central.[824]

Conclusion

The old bargain still exists in form, but it has changed. The US still offers protection through bases, and the Gulf states still offer energy and money. Protection now depends on separate deals and on one leader's decisions. The bases bring risk as well as safety, and the 2026 war showed that the US and Israel can start a war without asking the states that face the response. The Gulf states answer by hedging. They keep the US, but they also build pacts with Pakistan and Turkey, mediate with Iran and limit how their territory is used. These steps are untested and conditional, so they supplement the US instead of replacing it. Israel makes the picture harder, because it links the Gulf to the US through the Abraham Accords and also threatens Gulf security through its strikes. For regional security, the result is a Gulf that is less dependent on Washington but has no tested replacement for it.

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[820] Petty, 'American Strategy', 54; 'New Trump Executive Order Guarantees Qatar Security after Israeli Attack', Al Jazeera, 1 October 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/amp/news/2025/10/1/new-trump-executive-order-guarantees-qatar-security-after-israeli-attack.

[821] 'Trump Hails Mecca Pact: Can It Replace the Region's US Security Umbrella?', Al Jazeera, 17 August 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/8/17/trump-hails-mecca-pact-can-it-replace-the-regions-us-security-umbrella.

[822] Steven A. Cook, 'The U.S.-Led Middle East Order Is Over. The Mecca Agreement Proves It', Council on Foreign Relations, 13 August 2026, https://www.cfr.org/articles/the-u-s-led-middle-east-order-is-over-the-mecca-agreement-proves-it.

[823] Kyle Belmonte, 'Mecca Pact Blindsides Abraham Accords: Saudi Arabia Built Security without Normalizing', Tech Times, 12 August 2026, https://www.techtimes.com/articles/324200/20260812/mecca-pact-blindsides-abraham-accords-saudi-arabia-built-security-without-normalizing.htm.

[824] Abdelrahim Shalaby, 'After Iran, US Signals Major Security Shift in the Middle East', Responsible Statecraft, 31 August 2026, https://responsiblestatecraft.org/us-withdrawal-from-middle-east/.

MANAGING NARCISSISM AND THE BROADER APPLICATION TO THE FOREIGN POLICY AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

This paper has so far looked at Trump's behavior, at the traits that scholars and clinicians link to narcissism, and at how transactionalism shapes his foreign policy. This section asks the practical question that follows: how can other states manage relations with a leader like this? Trump has consolidated more power, weakened institutions at home and abroad, and made state relations personal. The author argues that this points to a new phenomenon, which she calls 'state narcissism': a state whose external conduct is driven by one leader's need for admiration, loyalty and visible wins. This section therefore borrows from a field that has studied the same behavior in individuals, the management of interpersonal relationships with narcissistic people, and applies it at state level.

Trump has not been clinically examined for this research, and the American Psychiatric Association's ethics rules bar psychiatrists from offering a professional opinion on public figures they have not examined and who have not given consent. This paper therefore does not diagnose Trump, rather treats narcissism as a pattern of behavior that can be observed in his public record. Dr Ramani Durvasula, the clinical psychologist whose work this section uses, makes a similar point: she describes narcissism as a pattern of behavior, not only a formal diagnosis.[897] The behaviors described in earlier sections are the evidence.

Why an interpersonal framework can apply to states

Leader-centric theory, which this paper utilizes as its core framework, holds that a leader's personality and beliefs can shape state policy, especially when power is concentrated in one person. The more personal power becomes, the more the leader's psychology matters to other governments, and the more useful a framework for dealing with that psychology becomes. Durvasula's work on narcissistic people is a suitable source. She is a clinical psychologist and professor at California State University, Los Angeles, and she has written widely on how people can live with, limit and leave narcissistic relationships.[898] Her advice is written for individuals, but the problems it describes will be familiar from the earlier sections: broken promises, shifting demands, a need for praise, and punishment for criticism. The sections below take her main techniques and show how each could work for a state.

Elaboration of Dr. Ramani's Core Framework

Dr Ramani Durvasula is a clinical psychologist and one of the most widely cited public voices on narcissism and its effects on those around it. Her advice rests on one premise. Narcissistic patterns are unlikely to change through persuasion, confrontation or appeals to empathy, so the burden of adjustment falls on the person who has to deal with them.[825] She describes narcissism as a pattern of behavior and does not treat it only as a formal diagnosis, which matters for this paper, since it does not diagnose any political leader.[826] The framework has four main parts.

1. The "Deep Technique" (DEEP: Don't Defend, Explain, Engage, Personalize)

Dr. Ramani prescribes DEEP Technique for any direct interaction with a narcissistic individual.[827] The rationale rests on a structural observation about narcissistic communication: it is not oriented toward mutual understanding or resolution, but toward control, narrative dominance, and emotional destabilization of the other party.[828] When a target defends themselves, they implicitly accept the premise of the narcissist's accusation and enter a rhetorical arena the narcissist is better equipped to win, because the narcissist is unconstrained by consistency, fairness, or good faith.[829] When a target explains their reasoning, they hand over information that can later be weaponized, since narcissists exploit intent and vulnerability disclosed in good faith.[830] When a target engages emotionally, they supply what Dr. Ramani terms "narcissistic supply", attention, in this case negative attention, which still validates the

[825] 'Dr. Ramani Durvasula: On the New Normal of Narcissism', CIIS Public Programs Podcast, hosted by Elizabeth Markle, recorded 2 October 2020, https://www.ciis.edu/podcast/dr-ramani-durvasula-new-normal-narcissism.
[826] 'Dr. Ramani Durvasula', CIIS Public Programs Podcast.
[827] ''Gray Rocking': The Communication Technique to Repel Narcissists', USA Today, https://www.aol.com/gray-rocking-set-boundaries-narcissist-130102711.html; Jordan Harbinger, 'Dr. Ramani | How to Protect Yourself from a Narcissist Part Two', *The Jordan Harbinger Show*, episode 743, 26 October 2022, https://www.jordanharbinger.com/dr-ramani-how-to-protect-yourself-from-a-narcissist-part-two/.
[828] Robin Young and Samantha Raphelson, 'How to Cope with Narcissistic People', *Here & Now*, WBUR, 14 November 2024, https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2024/11/14/narcissistic-people-book.
[829] Robin Young and Samantha Raphelson, 'How to Cope with Narcissistic People', *Here & Now*, WBUR, 14 November 2024, https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2024/11/14/narcissistic-people-book; 'Dr. Ramani Durvasula: On the New Normal of Narcissism', CIIS Public Programs Podcast, hosted by Elizabeth Markle, recorded 2 October 2020, https://www.ciis.edu/podcast/dr-ramani-durvasula-new-normal-narcissism.
[830] Eric W. Dolan, 'The Grey Rock Method: A Strategy to Disarm Narcissists and Toxic People', PsyPost, 19 March 2025, https://www.psypost.org/the-grey-rock-method-a-strategy-to-disarm-narcissists-and-toxic-people/; Jordan Harbinger, 'Dr. Ramani | How to Protect Yourself from a Narcissist Part Two', *The Jordan Harbinger Show*, episode 743, 26 October 2022, https://www.jordanharbinger.com/dr-ramani-how-to-protect-yourself-from-a-narcissist-part-two/.

narcissist's centrality.[831] When a target personalizes the interaction (treats the criticism as legitimate feedback about themselves), they absorb distortion as truth.[832] The technique is therefore not a communication strategy in the conventional therapeutic sense (which usually assumes good faith on both sides); it is a form of strategic non-participation designed to deny the narcissist the psychological "fuel" the interaction is actually engineered to extract.[833]

2. Radical Acceptance

Radical acceptance refers to a cognitive and emotional reframe wherein the individual relinquishes the expectation that the narcissistic person will change, apologize meaningfully, or develop insight.[834] This is distinct from resignation or approval, it is not "accepting" the behavior as acceptable, but acknowledging its permanence as a starting condition for decision-making.[835] Dr. Ramani situates this technique as necessary in relationships that cannot be exited (a parent, a co-parent, certain professional hierarchies), where continued hope for transformation produces a repeating cycle of disappointment, self-blame, and renewed vulnerability to manipulation.[836]

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[831] Robin Young and Samantha Raphelson, 'How to Cope with Narcissistic People', *Here & Now*, WBUR, 14 November 2024, https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2024/11/14/narcissistic-people-book; Anna Drescher, 'Narcissistic Supply: The Fuel Behind Manipulative Relationships', Simply Psychology, reviewed by Saul McLeod and Julia Simkus, updated 17 September 2026, https://www.simplypsychology.org/narcissistic-supply.html; Eric W. Dolan, 'The Grey Rock Method: A Strategy to Disarm Narcissists and Toxic People', PsyPost, 19 March 2025, https://www.psypost.org/the-grey-rock-method-a-strategy-to-disarm-narcissists-and-toxic-people/.

[832] Jordan Harbinger, 'Dr. Ramani | How to Protect Yourself from a Narcissist Part Two', *The Jordan Harbinger Show*, episode 743, 26 October 2022, https://www.jordanharbinger.com/dr-ramani-how-to-protect-yourself-from-a-narcissist-part-two/; Robin Young and Samantha Raphelson, 'How to Cope with Narcissistic People', *Here & Now*, WBUR, 14 November 2024, https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2024/11/14/narcissistic-people-book.

[833] Eric W. Dolan, 'The Grey Rock Method: A Strategy to Disarm Narcissists and Toxic People', PsyPost, 19 March 2025, https://www.psypost.org/the-grey-rock-method-a-strategy-to-disarm-narcissists-and-toxic-people/; Robin Young and Samantha Raphelson, 'How to Cope with Narcissistic People', *Here & Now*, WBUR, 14 November 2024, https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2024/11/14/narcissistic-people-book.

[834] 'Dr. Ramani Durvasula: On the New Normal of Narcissism', CIIS Public Programs Podcast, hosted by Elizabeth Markle, recorded 2 October 2020, https://www.ciis.edu/podcast/dr-ramani-durvasula-new-normal-narcissism; Robert T. Muller and Promise Busulwa, 'Breaking Free From a Narcissistic Parent', *Talking About Trauma*, Psychology Today, 18 August 2022, https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/talking-about-trauma/202208/breaking-free-narcissistic-parent.

[835] Robert T. Muller and Promise Busulwa, 'Breaking Free From a Narcissistic Parent', *Talking About Trauma*, Psychology Today, 18 August 2022, https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/talking-about-trauma/202208/breaking-free-narcissistic-parent.

[836] 'Dr. Ramani Durvasula: On the New Normal of Narcissism', CIIS Public Programs Podcast, hosted by Elizabeth Markle, recorded 2 October 2020, https://www.ciis.edu/podcast/dr-ramani-durvasula-new-normal-narcissism; Robert T. Muller and Promise Busulwa, 'Breaking Free From a Narcissistic Parent', *Talking About Trauma*, Psychology Today, 18 August 2022, https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/talking-about-trauma/202208/breaking-free-narcissistic-parent;

Radical acceptance functions as a prophylactic against what she elsewhere calls “hopium”, the addictive quality of intermittent reinforcement, where occasional good moments sustain false optimism about the relationship’s trajectory.

3. The Gray Rock Method

Gray rock is a self-presentation strategy in which the target deliberately minimizes their own emotional expressiveness, opinions, and personal disclosures in interactions with the narcissistic individual, rendering themselves, figuratively, as uninteresting and unreactive as a rock.[837] The clinical logic is that narcissistic engagement is often reinforced by emotional reactivity in others; a flat affect and minimal informational exchange deprive the interaction of its usual reward structure.[838] This method is typically recommended for lower-stakes, unavoidable contact (workplace exchanges, brief family gatherings) rather than as a long-term relational posture, since sustained emotional suppression carries its own psychological cost to the person practicing it.[839]

4. Selective Disclosure of Desire ("Reverse Psychology" Tactic)

This is among Dr. Ramani’s more tactically aggressive recommendations, and it departs from a purely defensive posture into an actively strategic one.[840] The premise is that narcissistic individuals are motivated less by outcomes per se than by the perceived act of denying others

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‘’Gray Rocking’: The Communication Technique to Repel Narcissists’, USA Today, https://www.aol.com/gray-rocking-set-boundaries-narcissist-130102711.html.

[837] Robin Young and Samantha Raphelson, ‘How to Cope with Narcissistic People’, *Here & Now*, WBUR, 14 November 2024, https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2024/11/14/narcissistic-people-book; Eric W. Dolan, ‘The Grey Rock Method: A Strategy to Disarm Narcissists and Toxic People’, PsyPost, 19 March 2025, https://www.psypost.org/the-grey-rock-method-a-strategy-to-disarm-narcissists-and-toxic-people/.

[838] Robin Young and Samantha Raphelson, ‘How to Cope with Narcissistic People’, *Here & Now*, WBUR, 14 November 2024, https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2024/11/14/narcissistic-people-book; ‘What Is the Grey Rock Method?’, U.S. News & World Report, via WTOP, June 2025, https://wtop.com/news/2025/06/what-is-the-grey-rock-method; Eric W. Dolan, ‘The Grey Rock Method: A Strategy to Disarm Narcissists and Toxic People’, PsyPost, 19 March 2025, https://www.psypost.org/the-grey-rock-method-a-strategy-to-disarm-narcissists-and-toxic-people/.

[839] Eric W. Dolan, ‘The Grey Rock Method: A Strategy to Disarm Narcissists and Toxic People’, PsyPost, 19 March 2025, https://www.psypost.org/the-grey-rock-method-a-strategy-to-disarm-narcissists-and-toxic-people/; ‘What Is the Grey Rock Method?’, U.S. News & World Report, via WTOP, June 2025, https://wtop.com/news/2025/06/what-is-the-grey-rock-method; ‘’Gray Rocking’: The Communication Technique to Repel Narcissists’, USA Today, https://www.aol.com/gray-rocking-set-boundaries-narcissist-130102711.html.

[840] Stephan Spencer, ‘The Narcissists Are Among You with Dr. Ramani Durvasula’, *Get Yourself Optimized*, 19 March 2020, https://www.getyourselfoptimized.com/the-narcissists-are-among-you-with-dr-ramani-durvasula/; ‘Narcissists, Psychopaths, and Sociopaths with Dr. Ramani Durvasula’, Easy Prey Podcast, 15 July 2020, https://www.easyprey.com/narcissists-psychopaths-and-sociopaths-with-dr-ramani-durvasula/amp/.

satisfaction and she frames this as their deriving gratification from control and from thwarting others' expressed wishes.[841] Consequently, transparent expression of a genuine preference invites its obstruction, whereas concealment or inversion of the stated preference can produce a more favorable outcome, since the narcissist "wins" by granting what they believe the target does not want.[842] The custody example she cites, in which a client expressed enthusiasm for reduced custody time and received full custody as a result, illustrates the mechanism.[843] This tactic requires caution in application: it is best reserved for high-stakes, structurally adversarial situations (legal negotiations, divorce proceedings) rather than ordinary relational contexts, where it risks reproducing the same deceptive dynamics the target is trying to escape.[844]

5. Narcissistic Fluffing

Fluffing refers to the deliberate, instrumental use of flattery and ego-affirmation to obtain a specific, limited objective from a narcissistic individual in a context that cannot be avoided — typically professional.[845] The underlying mechanism exploits the narcissist's chronic need for external validation (narcissistic supply): by satisfying that need briefly and specifically, the target can lower resistance and extract compliance or resources with minimal friction.[846] Dr. Ramani frames this explicitly as a transactional, boundaried maneuver "flatter, get what you need, get out" and not a sustainable relational strategy, and not a recommendation to establish rapport or trust.[847]

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[841] 'Narcissists, Psychopaths, and Sociopaths with Dr. Ramani Durvasula', Easy Prey Podcast, 15 July 2020, https://www.easyprey.com/narcissists-psychopaths-and-sociopaths-with-dr-ramani-durvasula/amp/.
[842] 'Narcissists, Psychopaths, and Sociopaths', Easy Prey Podcast; Spencer, 'The Narcissists Are Among You'
[843] 'Narcissists, Psychopaths, and Sociopaths', Easy Prey Podcast; Spencer, 'The Narcissists Are Among You'
[844] 'Narcissists, Psychopaths, and Sociopaths', Easy Prey Podcast; Spencer, 'The Narcissists Are Among You'.
[845] 'Narcissists, Psychopaths, and Sociopaths', Easy Prey Podcast; Spencer, 'The Narcissists Are Among You'.; Jay Girardot, 'Spotting Narcissistic Traits and Dealing with Narcissists', 15 July 2020
[846] Robin Young and Samantha Raphelson, 'How to Cope with Narcissistic People', *Here & Now*, WBUR, 14 November 2024, https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2024/11/14/narcissistic-people-book; 'Narcissists, Psychopaths, and Sociopaths with Dr. Ramani Durvasula', Easy Prey Podcast, 15 July 2020, https://www.easyprey.com/narcissists-psychopaths-and-sociopaths-with-dr-ramani-durvasula/amp/.
[847] 'Narcissists, Psychopaths, and Sociopaths with Dr. Ramani Durvasula', Easy Prey Podcast, 15 July 2020, https://www.easyprey.com/narcissists-psychopaths-and-sociopaths-with-dr-ramani-durvasula/amp/; Jay Girardot, 'Spotting Narcissistic Traits and Dealing with Narcissists', 15 July 2020 (last modified 26 August 2024), https://whatismyipaddress.com/narcissistic-traits-spotting-coping; Aditi Shrikant, 'Psychologist: Is Your Boss a Narcissist? My 3 Tips for Working with One', CNBC, 25 July 2024 (updated 1 August 2024), republished by NBC 6 South Florida, https://www.nbcmiami.com/news/business/money-report/its-untenable-in-the-long-term-to-work-for-a-narcissistic-boss-psychologist-says-heres-how-to-deal/3372041/.

6. The Narcissistic Abuse Cycle

Dr. Ramani, drawing on established abuse-dynamics literature, describes narcissistic relationships as following a recurring sequence: idealization, devaluation, discard, and frequently "hoovering," a re-engagement attempt once the target has begun to distance themselves, named for its function of "sucking" the target back into the relational orbit.[848] Recognition of this cyclical structure serves a specific psychological function: it externalizes the pattern, allowing the target to interpret the narcissist's behavior as a structural feature of narcissistic pathology rather than as a response caused by the target's own inadequacy or specific actions.[849] This reframing is central to reducing self-blame and interrupting the trauma-bond mechanism that keeps individuals cycling back into the relationship after each discard-and-hoover sequence.[850]

Non-Malleability of the Narcissistic Individual

A foundational premise underlying all of the above techniques is Dr. Ramani's clinical position is controversial in some therapeutic circles but central to her public work, that narcissistic personality patterns, particularly at the more severe end of the spectrum, are highly resistant to change through conventional means (reasoning, confrontation, couples therapy, appeals to empathy).[851] She argues this is because narcissistic individuals characteristically lack the self-reflective capacity and motivation necessary for therapeutic insight, and because they rarely

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[848] Jordan Harbinger, 'Dr. Ramani | Surviving and Recovering from Narcissistic Abuse', *The Jordan Harbinger Show*, episode 1006, 19 June 2024, https://www.jordanharbinger.com/dr-ramani-surviving-and-recovering-from-narcissistic-abuse/; 'Dr. Ramani Durvasula: 1 in 5 of Your Friends Are Narcissists', *The School of Greatness*, episode 1858, 3 December 2025, https://lewishowes.com/podcast/1-in-5-of-your-friends-are-narcissists-dr-ramani-durvasula/.

[849] Jordan Harbinger, 'Dr. Ramani | Surviving and Recovering from Narcissistic Abuse', *The Jordan Harbinger Show*, episode 1006, 19 June 2024, https://www.jordanharbinger.com/dr-ramani-surviving-and-recovering-from-narcissistic-abuse/; 'Signs You're Dealing with a Narcissist (New Research from World-Leading Expert Dr. Ramani)', *The Mel Robbins Podcast*, episode 147, 14 November 2024, https://www.melrobbins.com/episode/episode-147/.

[850] Jordan Harbinger, 'Dr. Ramani | Surviving and Recovering from Narcissistic Abuse', *The Jordan Harbinger Show*, episode 1006, 19 June 2024, https://www.jordanharbinger.com/dr-ramani-surviving-and-recovering-from-narcissistic-abuse/; Robin Young and Samantha Raphelson, 'How to Cope with Narcissistic People', *Here & Now*, WBUR, 14 November 2024, https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2024/11/14/narcissistic-people-book.

[851] 'Recognizing a Narcissist, with Ramani Durvasula, PhD', *Speaking of Psychology*, episode 37, hosted by Audrey Hamilton, American Psychological Association, 2016, https://www.apa.org/news/podcasts/speaking-of-psychology/narcissism; Aditi Shrikant, ''It's a Fundamental Truth' That the Narcissist in Your Life Won't Change, Says Psychologist Who's Treated 50 of Them', CNBC, 24 July 2024 (updated 29 July 2024), republished by NBC 7 San Diego, https://nbcsandiego.com/news/business/money-report/its-a-fundamental-truth-that-the-narcissist-in-your-life-wont-change-says-psychologist-whos-treated-50-of-them/3575362; Robert T. Muller and Promise Busulwa, 'Breaking Free From a Narcissistic Parent', *Talking About Trauma*, Psychology Today, 18 August 2022, https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/talking-about-trauma/202208/breaking-free-narcissistic-parent.

present for treatment voluntarily or acknowledge a need to change.[852] This premise reorients all intervention away from the narcissistic individual and toward the target's own boundaries, expectations, and exit or containment strategy.[853]

APPLYING THE FRAMEWORK TO FOREIGN POLICY AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The earlier sections show that many governments already use parts of this framework without naming it. Canada has stopped answering every post. China offers ceremonies and keeps its commitments vague. Türkiye courts Trump personally. Saudi Arabia is building defense ties outside the United States. This section reads these cases through Durvasula's techniques and asks which responses lowered risk for the state and which raised it. The step from individuals to states is the author's own.

Radical acceptance

Durvasula's first principle is to accept that a narcissistic person is unlikely to change, and to plan around the person as he is.[854] Section 1.B showed why this fits Trump. McAdams describes an episodic personality, in which every negotiation is a separate event and earlier commitments do

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[852] Aditi Shrikant, ''It's a Fundamental Truth' That the Narcissist in Your Life Won't Change, Says Psychologist Who's Treated 50 of Them', CNBC, 24 July 2024 (updated 29 July 2024), republished by NBC 7 San Diego, https://nbcsandiego.com/news/business/money-report/its-a-fundamental-truth-that-the-narcissist-in-your-life-wont-change-says-psychologist-whos-treated-50-of-them/3575362; 'Recognizing a Narcissist, with Ramani Durvasula, PhD', *Speaking of Psychology*, episode 37, hosted by Audrey Hamilton, American Psychological Association, 2016, https://www.apa.org/news/podcasts/speaking-of-psychology/narcissism; 'Dr. Ramani Durvasula: On the New Normal of Narcissism', CIIS Public Programs Podcast, hosted by Elizabeth Markle, recorded 2 October 2020, https://www.ciis.edu/podcast/dr-ramani-durvasula-new-normal-narcissism; Jodie Raybould and Daniel Waldeck, 'Can a Narcissist Really Change? What the Science Says', 1News (republished from The Conversation), 29 December 2025, https://www.1news.co.nz/2025/12/29/can-a-narcissist-really-change-what-the-science-says/.

[853] 'Dr. Ramani Durvasula: On the New Normal of Narcissism', CIIS Public Programs Podcast, hosted by Elizabeth Markle, recorded 2 October 2020, https://www.ciis.edu/podcast/dr-ramani-durvasula-new-normal-narcissism; Robert T. Muller and Promise Busulwa, 'Breaking Free From a Narcissistic Parent', *Talking About Trauma*, Psychology Today, 18 August 2022, https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/talking-about-trauma/202208/breaking-free-narcissistic-parent; Aditi Shrikant, ''It's a Fundamental Truth' That the Narcissist in Your Life Won't Change, Says Psychologist Who's Treated 50 of Them', CNBC, 24 July 2024 (updated 29 July 2024), republished by NBC 7 San Diego, https://nbcsandiego.com/news/business/money-report/its-a-fundamental-truth-that-the-narcissist-in-your-life-wont-change-says-psychologist-whos-treated-50-of-them/3575362.

[854] 'Dr. Ramani Durvasula: On the New Normal of Narcissism', CIIS Public Programs Podcast, hosted by Elizabeth Markle, recorded 2 October 2020, https://www.ciis.edu/podcast/dr-ramani-durvasula-new-normal-narcissism.

not bind him. For a state, this means that a signed agreement or a warm phone call cannot serve as a stable base for planning. The Iran case in Section 3.B shows the cost of ignoring this. Iran returned to the negotiating table repeatedly, and agreements were set aside each time, which deepened distrust on both sides. The European case shows the alternative. Ziyi Wang warns that allies may come to see Article 5 as a subscription that must be renewed every year.[855] A government that holds this view plans for the possibility that protection will be withdrawn, and does not wait to be surprised. In practice this means putting agreements in writing, preparing contingency plans, and judging the United States by what it does and not by what the president says.

D.E.E.P Technique

Durvasula's rule for direct contact is not to defend, engage, explain or personalise.[856] Two cases in this paper show the difference. Prime Minister Carney changed his approach over time. In January he said he would not comment on every Trump post, and in June he called Trump a very active social media user and said Canada would not react to everything he posts.[857] At Davos he criticised coercion by great powers without naming Trump or the United States.[858] Germany took the opposite route. On 27 April, Chancellor Merz said Iran was 'humiliating' Washington at the negotiating table.[859] Two days later Trump said the United States was reviewing a reduction of its troops in Germany, and on 1 May the Pentagon ordered about 5,000 troops withdrawn.[860] The

[855] Ziyi Wang, 'The Price of Trump's Transactional Diplomacy', Engelsberg Ideas, 27 August 2026, https://engelsbergideas.com/notebook/the-price-of-trumps-transactional-diplomacy/.
[856] ''Gray Rocking': The Communication Technique to Repel Narcissists', USA Today, https://www.aol.com/gray-rocking-set-boundaries-narcissist-130102711.html; Jordan Harbinger, 'Dr. Ramani | How to Protect Yourself from a Narcissist Part Two', *The Jordan Harbinger Show*, episode 743, 26 October 2022, https://www.jordanharbinger.com/dr-ramani-how-to-protect-yourself-from-a-narcissist-part-two/.
[857] 'Trump Refers to PM Carney as Future "Governor of Canada" in Social Media Post', CP24, 10 March 2026, https://www.cp24.com/news/canada/2026/03/10/trump-refers-to-pm-carney-as-future-governor-of-canada-in-social-media-post/; Corné van Hoepen, '"Focus Is on Getting Things Done": Expert Explains Why Carney Brushed Off Trump's Latest 51st State Comments', Yahoo News Canada, 5 June 2026, https://ca.news.yahoo.com/focus-is-on-getting-things-done-expert-explains-why-carney-brushed-off-trumps-latest-51st-state-comments-211643224.html.
[858] Christopher Nardi, 'Carney Urges Countries to Call out "Hegemons" and Bullies in Striking WEF Speech', National Post, 20 January 2026, in Yahoo News Canada, https://ca.news.yahoo.com/carney-urges-countries-call-hegemons-161426342.html.
[859] 'Merz Says Not "Giving up on Working with Trump"', Agence France-Presse, in The News International, 4 May 2026, https://www.thenews.pk/print/1413629-merz-says-not-giving-up-on-working-with-trump.
[860] 'Trump Says That He's Weighing Reducing American Troop Presence in Germany after Iran Feud', Associated Press, in KTAR News, 29 April 2026, https://ktar.com/national-news/trump-says-that-hes-is-weighing-reducing-american-troop-presence-in-germany-after-iran-fued/5854493/; Giuseppe Spatafora, 'Small Changes, Big Impact: How Trump's Latest Decision Removes a Key Component of Europe's Deterrence', European Union Institute for Security Studies, 7 May 2026,

sequence does not prove the cause, because the dispute over Iran was wider. It does show that a public judgement touching his status can bring a response within days. Carney's restraint also has limits. It did not prevent the 50% tariffs on Canadian goods that the administration announced on 20 July (Section 2.A). D.E.E.P. reduces the risk of escalation through reaction. It does not remove pressure that comes from the leader's own aims.

Gray rock and yellow rock

Durvasula describes gray rock as giving the narcissistic person little to react to, and yellow rock as a version with some warmth for cases where complete detachment is not possible. China uses both. On substance, Beijing is impersonal and slow. The New York Times reported that it steered talks toward procedural 'frameworks' and away from the harder disputes.[861] NPR summed up Xi's September visit by saying that Trump played up the personal relationship while Xi focused on geopolitics.[862] In the form, Beijing gives the ceremony. A MERICS analyst said the 'super VIP' treatment in May was meant to flatter Trump and calm him.[863] Allies that depend on American protection are closer to the co-parent in Durvasula's example. They cannot be silent, so the yellow version is the realistic one. Durvasula also notes that gray rock is not a formally studied clinical technique, which is a reason to treat its use in diplomacy as a hypothesis.[864]

Selective disclosure

Durvasula advises people dealing with a narcissistic person not to reveal their vulnerabilities and not to let him know their hand, and her examples come from divorce and business disputes.[865] China's handling of announcements fits this. Rush Doshi notes that after the May summit Trump announced Chinese purchases of 200 Boeing aircraft and new farm commitments, and Beijing

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https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/commentary/small-changes-big-impact-how-trumps-latest-decision-removes-key-component.

[861] 'The Art of the Stall: China's Strategy for Dealing with Trump', International New York Times, 12 June 2025, via Deccan Herald, https://www.deccanherald.com/world/the-art-of-the-stall-chinas-strategy-for-dealing-with-trump-3583262.

[862] 'Takeaways from the Trump-Xi State Visit: Pageantry and Pandas', NPR, 25 September 2026, https://www.npr.org/2026/09/25/nx-s1-5981265/takeaways-trump-xi-state-visit-pageantry-pandas.

[863] Claus Soong (MERICS), quoted in 'China Rolls Out Red Carpet for Trump as Tensions Simmer', Newsweek, 2026, https://www.newsweek.com/china-rolls-out-red-carpet-trump-tensions-simmer-11949723.

[864] ''Gray Rocking'', USA Today; Eric W. Dolan, 'The Grey Rock Method: A Strategy to Disarm Narcissists and Toxic People', PsyPost, 19 March 2025, https://www.psypost.org/the-grey-rock-method-a-strategy-to-disarm-narcissists-and-toxic-people/.

[865] 'Narcissists, Psychopaths, and Sociopaths with Dr. Ramani Durvasula', Easy Prey Podcast, 15 July 2020, https://www.easyprey.com/narcissists-psychopaths-and-sociopaths-with-dr-ramani-durvasula/amp/; Stephan Spencer, 'The Narcissists Are Among You with Dr. Ramani Durvasula', *Get Yourself Optimized*, 19 March 2020, https://www.getyourselfoptimized.com/the-narcissists-are-among-you-with-dr-ramani-durvasula/.

declined to confirm any of it.[866] Trump gets a result he can announce, and China keeps its commitments vague. Doshi says Beijing now feels it has ‘tamed’ him.[767] Europe offers a weaker example. Every European member except Spain agreed to spend 5% of GDP on defense by 2035, which gave Trump a headline number, and Wang notes that Europe is keeping much of the money inside its own defense industry.[867] That point is disputed (Section 2.A). Because Durvasula’s examples come from specific bargains, this technique is best seen as a tool for particular deals and not as a general rule for diplomacy. Concealment also only works while the other side does not check.

Fluffing

Durvasula describes fluffing as praising the narcissistic person to get what you need and then stepping back.[868] Türkiye is the clearest case. Erdoğan courts Trump personally. He told reporters that Trump returns his calls within 24 hours, and Trump said he went to the Ankara summit out of respect for Erdoğan.[869] After meeting Erdoğan on 7 July, Trump said the United States was ‘taking the sanctions off’ to allow F-35 sales, although the law still requires certification that Türkiye no longer operates the S-400.[870] Congress remains opposed (Section 2.A). Russia shows the limit. Putin received a red carpet in Alaska and Trump rated the meeting ten out of ten, but it produced no ceasefire.[871] The Gulf states offered investment pledges, including $600 billion from Saudi Arabia, and Qatar offered a luxury aircraft.[872] Durvasula presents fluffing as a short,

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[866] Rush Doshi, ‘When Xi Comes to Washington’, Council on Foreign Relations, September 2026, https://www.cfr.org/articles/when-xi-comes-to-washington.
[867] Ziyi Wang, ‘The Price of Trump’s Transactional Diplomacy’, Engelsberg Ideas, 27 August 2026, https://engelsbergideas.com/notebook/the-price-of-trumps-transactional-diplomacy/.
[868] ‘Narcissists, Psychopaths, and Sociopaths with Dr. Ramani Durvasula’, Easy Prey Podcast, 15 July 2020, https://www.easyprey.com/narcissists-psychopaths-and-sociopaths-with-dr-ramani-durvasula/amp/; Stephan Spencer, ‘The Narcissists Are Among You with Dr. Ramani Durvasula’, *Get Yourself Optimized*, 19 March 2020, https://www.getyourselfoptimized.com/the-narcissists-are-among-you-with-dr-ramani-durvasula/.
[869] ‘Trump’s Ties to Erdogan Sold Him on This Year’s NATO Summit. Turkey May Win Big in Other Ways’, Associated Press, in KTAR News, 2 July 2026, https://ktar.com/national-news/trumps-ties-to-erdogan-sold-him-on-this-years-nato-summit-turkey-may-win-big-in-other-ways/5885620/; Ragip Soylu, ‘Trump Told Erdogan He Is Attending Nato’s Ankara Summit “Just for Him”’, Middle East Eye, 18 June 2026, https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/trump-told-erdogan-he-attending-nato-summit-just-him.
[870] Emel Akan and Ryan Morgan, ‘Trump Says US Lifting Sanctions to Allow F-35 Sales to Turkey’, The Epoch Times, 7 July 2026, https://www.theepochtimes.com/us/trump-says-us-to-decide-on-f-35-sales-to-turkey-6058444.
[871] Alastair McCready, ‘Trump-Putin Meeting: Key Takeaways from Alaska Summit’, Al Jazeera, 16 August 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/8/16/no-deal-at-trump-putin-meeting-key-takeaways-from-alaska-summit.
[872] ‘Trump Caps Gulf Tour in Abu Dhabi with Dizzying Investment Pledges’, Al-Monitor, 15 May 2025, https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2025/05/trump-caps-gulf-tour-abu-dhabi-dizzying-investment-pledges.

boundaried manoeuvre and not a way to build rapport. Erdoğan's relationship is sustained, and what it gains stays revocable, because it depends on the president's mood and on a Congress that has not agreed.

The cycles

Durvasula defines hoovering as being sucked back into the dynamic.[873] Russia fits a similar sequence, as an analogy. In August 2025, Putin received the Alaska welcome. In October 2025, Trump put the Budapest summit on hold and the Treasury sanctioned Rosneft and Lukoil. He said, 'Every time I speak with Vladimir, I have good conversations, and then they don't go anywhere'.[874] In October 2026, after a call with Putin, he announced a diesel deal, and a week later put the new sanctions law on hold two days before its deadline.[875] North Korea shows the same shape. After Singapore in 2018 and the collapse in Hanoi, diplomacy went dormant. In August 2026 Trump posted a photo with Kim, cut the Ulchi Freedom Shield drills, and North Korea fired about 10 short-range missiles on 20 August, hours after Trump said he would meet Kim.[876] China expects the pattern. Jonathan Czin described Beijing as 'very comfortable with this cycle' of economic skirmishing followed by diplomacy that restores the status quo.[877] The

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[873] Jordan Harbinger, 'Dr. Ramani | Surviving and Recovering from Narcissistic Abuse', *The Jordan Harbinger Show*, episode 1006, 19 June 2024, https://www.jordanharbinger.com/dr-ramani-surviving-and-recovering-from-narcissistic-abuse/.

[874] '"Wasted Meeting": Hungary Summit between Trump and Putin Canceled', Associated Press, in Africanews, 22 October 2025, https://www.africanews.com/amp/2025/10/22/wasted-meeting-hungary-summit-between-trump-and-putin-canceled/; Alex Kozul-Wright, 'Will Trump's Sanctions against Russian Oil Giants Hurt Putin?', Al Jazeera, 23 October 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/10/23/will-trumps-sanctions-against-russian-oil-giants-hurt-putin; 'Trump Hits Russia Oil Giants with Sanctions, Says Putin "Not Honest" on Ukraine War', Agence France-Presse, in Malay Mail, 23 October 2025, https://www.malaymail.com/news/money/2025/10/23/trump-hits-russia-oil-giants-with-sanctions-says-putin-not-honest-on-ukraine-war/195596.

[875] 'U.S. Official: Trump Cut Deal with Putin after Zelensky Ignored His Requests', Axios, 10 October 2026, https://www.axios.com/2026/10/10/trump-zelensky-putin-diesel-deal-war; 'Trump Puts on Hold New Russia Sanctions He Signed into Law', Al Jazeera and AP, 17 October 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/10/17/trump-puts-on-hold-new-russia-sanctions-he-signed-into-law.

[876] 'Trump Says Tough Rhetoric Led to North Korea Summit', PBS NewsHour (Associated Press), 12 June 2018, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/trump-says-tough-rhetoric-led-to-north-korea-summit; 'Trump Posts Photo with NK Leader Kim, Says They "Get Along Great"', Korea Times, 16 August 2026, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/foreignaffairs/northkorea/20260816/trump-posts-photo-with-nk-leader-kim-says-they-get-along-great; Priyanka Shankar, 'Trump Scales Down War Games with South Korea: Why It Matters', Al Jazeera, 17 August 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/8/17/trump-scales-down-war-games-with-south-korea-why-it-matters; Andrew Yeo, 'The Iran War and America's Widening Strategy Gap in Asia', Brookings, 2 September 2026, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-iran-war-and-americas-widening-strategy-gap-in-asia/.

[877] 'The Art of the Stall: China's Strategy for Dealing with Trump', International New York Times, 12 June 2025, via Deccan Herald, https://www.deccanherald.com/world/the-art-of-the-stall-chinas-strategy-for-dealing-with-trump-3583262.

lesson for states is to read a warm call or a promise as one phase of the cycle and not as a change of policy, and to keep contingent measures ready for the next phase.

Non-malleability and disentangling - Diversification of resources as a core approach

Durvasula advises limiting contact and not taking on the job of changing the person.[878] The state-level version is **diversification**. Carney said that a country negotiating alone with a hegemon negotiates from weakness, that middle powers who do not act together will be 'on the menu', and he listed Canada's response: doubling defense spending by the end of the decade, joining the EU's SAFE procurement programme, and signing twelve trade and security deals in six months.[879] Max Bergmann argues that European leaders did not act only to please Trump, because they also no longer believe they can rely on the United States.[880] The Gulf states are taking a similar path with the Saudi–Pakistan pact and the Mecca Joint Defence Agreement, which analysts read as a hedge and not a replacement for the US.[881] Kim turned to Russia after Hanoi.[882] Coordination matters too. Durvasula notes that having even one person who confirms your experience helps against gaslighting. At the state level, the equivalent is a shared record and joint positions.

Taken together, these cases suggest that the most useful parts of the framework are radical acceptance, recognising the cycle and disentangling, because they do not depend on the leader's cooperation. The other techniques help with single deals and short-term contact.

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[878] 'Dr. Ramani Durvasula: On the New Normal of Narcissism', CIIS Public Programs Podcast, hosted by Elizabeth Markle, recorded 2 October 2020, https://www.ciis.edu/podcast/dr-ramani-durvasula-new-normal-narcissism.

[879] Nardi, 'Carney Urges Countries to Call out "Hegemons"'; 'Davos 2026: Special Address by Mark Carney, Prime Minister of Canada', World Economic Forum, January 2026, https://www.weforum.org/stories/2026/01/davos-2026-special-address-by-mark-carney-prime-minister-of-canada/.

[880] Max Bergmann, 'Transatlantic Relations Under Trump: An Uneasy Peace', Center for Strategic and International Studies, 6 October 2025, https://www.csis.org/analysis/transatlantic-relations-under-trump-uneasy-peace.

[881] 'Trump Hails Mecca Pact: Can It Replace the Region's US Security Umbrella?', Al Jazeera, 17 August 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/8/17/trump-hails-mecca-pact-can-it-replace-the-regions-us-security-umbrella; 'Saudi Arabia Signs Mutual Defence Pact with Nuclear-Armed Pakistan', Al Jazeera, 17 September 2025, https://aljazeera.com/news/2025/9/17/saudi-arabia-signs-mutual-defense-pact-with-nuclear-armed-pakistan.

[882] Benjamin R. Young, 'North Korea's Bold Turn Toward Russia Poses Test for Trump's Second Term', RAND, 5 December 2024, https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2024/12/north-koreas-bold-turn-toward-russia-poses-test-for.html.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper advances four recommendations. The first three aim to strengthen the knowledge base on which assessments of leaders depend, and the fourth is addressed to governments that must manage relations with the United States in the present. The recommendations are directed at professional associations, foreign ministries, universities and states, respectively. They follow from the findings of the preceding sections, and, given the novelty of the approach, they are offered as provisional.

Recommendation 1: Reconsider the Goldwater Rule in light of international security

The American Psychiatric Association prohibits its members from offering a professional opinion on a public figure whom they have not examined and who has not given authorisation. The Association reaffirmed the rule in March 2017, stating that a public opinion on a public figure given without consent violates the underlying principle.[883] The rule was designed to prevent speculation during an election campaign. Its application to a sitting head of state is more problematic. A clinical examination of a president is not realistic, and the only physician with access is employed by the White House. When Representative Raskin requested a cognitive assessment from the White House physician in April 2026, the request was dismissed.[884] The decisions in question now concern war and nuclear authority, which makes the rule's practical effect a blanket silence in the cases where the stakes are highest.

The rule has also been challenged on ethical grounds. Kroll and Pouncey argue that its consent requirement duplicates the confidentiality protections already contained in the Association's code, and that the same code permits disclosure where the risk of danger is significant. They conclude that the rule is itself unethical where it suppresses discussion of potentially dangerous public figures.[885] The ruling in *Tarasoff* supports the same reasoning, since it established that therapists may be obliged to act to protect third parties from a patient's dangerousness.[886]

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[883] American Psychiatric Association, 'APA Reaffirms Support for Goldwater Rule', 16 March 2017, https://www.psychiatry.org/newsroom/news-releases/apa-reaffirms-support-for-goldwater-rule; American Psychiatric Association, *Principles of Medical Ethics*, sec. 7.3.

[884] 'Ranking Member Raskin Demands White House Physician Immediately Evaluate Donald Trump's Cognitive Fitness Amid Bipartisan Alarm, Calls to Invoke 25th Amendment', House Committee on the Judiciary, Democrats, 10 April 2026, https://democrats-judiciary.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/ranking-member-raskin-demands-white-house-physician-immediately-evaluate-donald-trump-s-cognitive-fitness-amid-bipartisan-alarm-calls-to-invoke-25th-amendment.

[885] Jerome Kroll and Claire Pouncey, 'The Ethics of APA's Goldwater Rule', *Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law* 44, no. 2 (2016): 226–35, https://jaapl.org/content/44/2/226.

[886] *Tarasoff v. Regents of the University of California*, 17 Cal. 3d 425 (1976).

This paper does not propose abolishing the rule. It proposes shifting the question from diagnosis to dangerousness, as James Gilligan formulates it.[887] The American Psychiatric Association and comparable professional bodies should review the rule as it applies to heads of state and governments with nuclear authority. They should consider creating a separate and clearly labelled category of public-interest risk assessment. Such an assessment should describe documented patterns of behavior and their implications for public safety, state explicitly that no examination took place, refrain from diagnostic labels, apply the same standard to every leader irrespective of party or nationality, and undergo peer or ethical review prior to release. The principle has bipartisan precedent. As noted in the earlier section of this paper, Republican committee chairs treated presidential cognitive fitness as a legitimate national security matter when they subpoenaed President Biden's physician.[888]

Recommendation 2: Institutionalise continuous and transparent profiling of state leadership

Leader profiling is an established practice. Jerrold Post founded the Central Intelligence Agency's Center for the Analysis of Personality and Political Behavior, and he contributed to the 'Camp David profiles' of Menachem Begin and Anwar Sadat that preceded the 1978 negotiations.[889] In the academic field, Margaret Hermann's Leadership Trait Analysis codes the public interviews, speeches and writings of leaders for traits such as the need for power and distrust of others, and her group has profiled more than 700 world leaders since 1999.[890] What is lacking is continuity, transparency and use beyond intelligence services. The findings in Section 1.G indicate why this matters. Where populism concentrates authority in a single person, that person's conduct has a greater effect on other states.

Foreign ministries and independent research centres should maintain standing profiles of leaders in key positions, updated ahead of summits and during crises. The profiles should rely exclusively on public conduct, use published methods and avoid clinical labels. They should cover all leaders, including those of allies and of the profiling state itself, and their methods and limits of confidence should be disclosed. Independent ethical review should oversee the process, and forecasts should be compared with later behavior so that errors are identified and corrected. Profiles describe tendencies and do not predict outcomes. The episodic pattern described in Section 1.B makes any forecast concerning Trump uncertain, and the profiles should state this plainly. The principal risk is misuse, since a profile can be employed to discredit a political

[887] James Gilligan, 'The Issue Is Dangerousness, Not Mental Illness', in *The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump*, ed. Bandy X. Lee.
[888] 'Ranking Member Raskin Demands White House Physician Immediately Evaluate Donald Trump's Cognitive Fitness', House Committee on the Judiciary, Democrats.
[889] 'In Memoriam: Jerrold M. Post', GW Today, 9 December 2020, https://gwtoday.gwu.edu/node/16306.
[890] 'What Makes Them Tick?', Maxwell School, Syracuse University, 1 June 2013, https://www.maxwell.syr.edu/news/article/what-makes-them-tick.

opponent. The independent review and the equal standard for all leaders are therefore essential safeguards.

Recommendation 3: Integrate psychology into international relations scholarship and curricula

Traditional foreign policy analysis treats the state as a single rational actor, as noted in the introduction. This paper has demonstrated what that assumption omits. Universities should incorporate political psychology and leader-centric analysis into international relations programmes, including methods of profiling and the ethics of assessing public figures. Research funders should support interdisciplinary teams that combine psychologists, international relations scholars and regional specialists, since no single discipline can address the question alone. Researchers should construct open datasets of leader conduct, covering reversals, threats and agreements honoured or broken, so that claims about personalised foreign policy can be tested. The work should extend to other personalised leaders, so that findings do not rest on a single case. Finally, scholars should test whether the narcissism-management techniques discussed in Section 7 are associated with better outcomes, through detailed process-tracing of cases such as Canada, Türkiye and China.

Recommendation 4: Apply narcissism-management principles at the state level

Earlier sections found that the most useful elements of the framework are radical acceptance, recognition of the cycle and disentanglement, because they do not depend on the leader's cooperation. Governments that deal with the United States, in particular allies and middle powers, should adopt the following measures:

1. Planning for reversals: Agreements should be recorded in writing, anchored in legislatures and multilateral institutions, and supported by contingency plans for the withdrawal of American guarantees.
2. Responding to actions rather than statements: Governments should answer formal acts, such as orders, tariffs and troop movements, speak through a single official channel and avoid public personal rebuttals.
3. Tracking the cycles: Conciliatory calls and promises should be treated as one phase of a recurring pattern. Responses should be agreed in advance, and countermeasures should be kept ready for the next phase.
4. Separating substance from form: Governments should remain impersonal and firm on substance and courteous on ceremony, as China has done.
5. Diversifying dependence: Trade, defense and supply chains should be diversified within defined timelines and with their costs assessed.

6. Coordination: Allies should maintain a shared record of statements and agreements, and take joint positions wherever possible, so that no state bargains alone.
7. Using flattery and selective disclosure sparingly. These tools should be reserved for specific transactions with written terms.
8. Maintaining a working-level channel: Contact should be sustained with Congress, executive agencies and the business community, since American policy does not depend on one individual alone.

Limitations of this paper and directions for further development

The approach taken in this paper is new, and its limitations must be recognised:

1. Examining foreign policy through personalisation is not yet an established method. 'State narcissism' is a concept proposed by the author, not a recognised category, and it requires a precise definition, indicators and empirical testing. The paper derives the concept from a single leader
2. The paper analyses public conduct and does not diagnose. Its psychological material draws on secondary sources, including a family memoir, a volume of essays by clinicians who hold strong views, and one original interview. These sources have their own positions. There is also a tension between the paper's argument for reforming the Goldwater Rule and its own dependence on remote analysis.
3. The findings may not apply to other leaders. The paper cannot fully separate personality from structure, advisers, Congress and the distribution of power, so its causal claims, such as the sequence observed in the German case, remain suggestive
4. Dr. Durvasula writes about individuals in close relationships. Her techniques have not been formally studied, and her public statements derive from interviews and press articles, not from peer-reviewed research.[891] States possess institutions, multiple decision-makers and exit costs that individuals do not, so the application in Section 7 is the author's own extension
5. The events covered extend to October 2026, and many sources are news reports, some of them single-sourced or dependent on unnamed officials. The war with Iran and other developments may alter the picture after writing. The sources are predominantly English-language and Western, with limited primary Gulf or Iranian voices, and the paper does not cover every relationship, such as those with Japan, India or Africa.

[891] Eric W. Dolan, 'The Grey Rock Method: A Strategy to Disarm Narcissists and Toxic People', PsyPost, 19 March 2025, https://www.psypost.org/the-grey-rock-method-a-strategy-to-disarm-narcissists-and-toxic-people/.

6. Reforming the Goldwater Rule and institutionalising profiling carry genuine risks of politicisation and misuse, and the narcissism-management measures have not been evaluated as policy.

Further work should define and test the concept of state narcissism, compare Trump with other personalised leaders, assess the management techniques against outcomes, bring clinical psychologists and political scientists together, and add practitioner evidence, such as interviews with diplomats who have negotiated with this administration.

CONCLUSION

The United States is speeding up the world's shift toward multipolarity, and that it does so mainly through its own mistakes and inconsistency. The planned advance of rival powers plays a smaller part. The pattern is conditional and transactional. Relationships last only as long as they bring a return, whether economic, military or reputational, and they are downgraded or dropped when that return falls. This follows the cycle of devaluation and discard described in the paper. Ethical commitments and legal obligations are treated in the same way. They are invoked when they are useful and put aside when they are not, and neither choice carries much cost.

This is a serious problem for international law in particular. A legal order keeps its authority only when the most powerful actor accepts the cost of compliance, even at moments when breaking the rules would pay. Once that willingness depends on transactional benefit and not on obligation, the order weakens at its centre and not only at its edges. Other states respond rationally to this signal. They hedge, they diversify their dependencies, and they build alternative institutional and economic arrangements that leave them less exposed to being discarded by one power. This is the main mechanism behind the present drift toward multipolarity. It comes from a wider loss of confidence in the reliability of the existing order, and not from the calculated rise of competing powers.

The paper has also found that narcissistic patterns of behavior do not respond well to appeal or persuasion. There is therefore little reason to expect this trend to reverse without a structural correction, meaning a return to engagement based on obligation and not on transaction. Without such a change, the trajectory described here is likely to continue. The ethical and legal framework that has supported the international order since 1945 will erode gradually, and largely through the conduct of the power that built it, more than through the actions of its challengers.

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