

Why Trump prioritises Putin ahead of NATO

President's new world order rests on recognising the competing interests of big powers rather than just propping up allies

by Gerard Baker, Friday 14th February 2025, The Times

Any lingering hopes held by Atlanticists on both sides of the pond that the world's foremost alliance of the past century might survive the supremacy of the Trumpian global order sank this week somewhere in the vast ocean that gives Nato its name.

Before Wednesday it might still just have been possible to think that, for all the US president's bluster about Nato's inadequacies, for all his curious affinity for Vladimir Putin and his more explicable enmity for leading members of the EU, the hard, cold facts of American national interest might still incline him, reluctantly, to keep the Atlantic show on the road.

Russia is, after all, the close ally of America's big strategic foe, China, as well as of its lesser threatening adversary, Iran. And so continuing to isolate Moscow and keep its troops bogged down in a war of attrition in Ukraine could only help in the wider prosecution of the Second Cold War. The Europeans, for all their fecklessness on defence, have been moving slug-like in the right direction, partly at Trump's behest, recognising belatedly their own vulnerability in the face of a turbulent world and the need to beef up their own militaries.

Trump's team of foreign policy aides — Marco Rubio, the secretary of state; Mike Waltz, national security adviser; Pete Hegseth, defence secretary; and his special envoy on Russia/Ukraine, the retired General Keith Kellogg — have all spoken hawkishly about Russia and have records of warm support for Nato. Perhaps Europe and its friends in Washington, remembering the dictum to take Trump's rhetoric seriously but not literally, thought that a bit more give on military spending, flattering words for the president and a negotiated end to the Ukraine war that included some long-term path for Kyiv's Nato membership might all breathe some life into the old alliance.

But as Hegseth was delivering his inaugural, blunt message to European allies in Brussels midweek, Trump was preparing for the most important diplomatic *démarche* of his presidency: a 90-minute telephone call with Putin. The double act will have shattered any remaining illusions.

Hegseth's words were a stark warning that it's Trump — not Rubio or Waltz or Kellogg — calling the shots in Washington; that the president's promise to end the Ukraine war was both literal and serious; and that it is likely to be realised by a quiet abandonment of Kyiv, a rebuff to Volodymyr Zelensky's hopes to lock what remains of Ukraine into Nato and a clear signal to the alliance itself that, for America, it is no longer a priority.

Hegseth became the first US official to say publicly what many have said in private: that it is “illusionary” to think Ukraine should return to its pre-2014 borders, and that Nato membership for Kyiv is not a “realistic outcome” of a negotiated settlement. Any security commitment for the country after a settlement will be a non-Nato one, staffed and overwhelmingly funded by Europeans.

Though he later made friendlier noises about the future of Nato, there was no mistaking his master's voice. As far as the larger strategic picture is concerned, the US would no longer “tolerate an unbalanced relationship that promotes dependency”.

Trump, meanwhile, was eagerly telling Putin he looked forward to seeing him and in essence liberating him from his international isolation. He had warm words for the sacrifices made by Russians in war and while Hegseth was laying down conditions for Ukraine and Nato, Trump was notably avoiding the same for Putin.

It's easy to see all this through the dark prism of Trump's apparent consistent affinity for the authoritarian adversary over the democratic ally and his own suspiciously autocratic inclinations. But there is a wider strategic thinking, now closer to fully formed, that underlies Trump's approach to Europe and the world.

Trump views foreign relations through a great power framework, a return to something of a 19th-century approach to keeping the peace — not by alliance and co-operation but by the balancing of sheer competing muscle. The world order is not maintained by nebulous shared ideals but by hard strength. Overseas aid and soft power are luxuries that perhaps a single superpower could once afford but which, in a multipolar great power world, the US can no longer indulge.

So while China and to a lesser extent Russia have advanced by focusing on their narrow national interests, the US has spent too much time in this view nurturing a network and architecture that no longer works for it. Europe has free-riden for too long on expensive US security guarantees — even as it has ripped off America in economic terms, running a big trade surplus Trump ascribes to “cheating” by Europeans and “subsidies” from America.

You can object to both the geopolitics and the economics of this analysis, but the direction in which it leads Trump's America is undeniable. Instead of some American-led global liberal order, the world reverts instead to a condition captured by the Thucydides quote where “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must”.

America must not merely concentrate on enhancing its power — by, for example, acquiring useful territory in its own hemisphere and jettisoning expensive commitments to unreliable partners. It also must acknowledge the strength and interests of the other powers: Russia, but even China too. For all the hawkish talk of his aides on Beijing, don't be surprised if Trump seeks to use his second term for a big, bold rapprochement with the world's other great power.

Trump probably isn't that conversant in the wisdom of 5th-century BC Greek historians. He may not care much either about 19th-century British statesmen. But his unsentimental approach to America's international relations unconsciously echoes that of Viscount Palmerston: “We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow.”