



Owning the liberal international order

European View
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journals.sagepub.com/home/euv**Suzanne Schneider**

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Abstract

The coalition that returned Donald Trump to the American presidency is a diverse and divided one, even among the ‘post-liberal’ members of the so-called New Right. Much attention has been paid recently to the rival social and political visions promoted by the nationalists, on the one hand, and the tech elite, on the other. Important as these disagreements are to domestic politics, both factions are openly contemptuous of liberal internationalism, albeit for different underlying reasons. The result is that Trump’s administration will be more united on the world stage than at home, looking to reset the rules of international relations using three tactics: unilateralism, economic warfare and the personalisation of diplomacy.

Keywords

Liberalism, International law, New Right, Unilateralism, Trade wars, Personalism

Introduction

Since returning to the White House, Donald Trump has quickly moved to signal his disdain for international boundaries, laws and institutions. In short order, the old–new president withdrew from the Paris climate agreement (again) and the World Health Organization, threatened to invade Greenland and Panama, and proposed that the US assume control over Gaza and expel the Palestinians living there.

The president has often been described as transactional—an ideological mercenary who lacks deep commitment to principles. He will certainly not adhere to a rules-based international order, even in the selective manner typical of past American leaders. But this

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does not mean that there are no indications of how the new administration will conduct its affairs. Three trends in particular appear solid enough to identify: (1) unilateralism, (2) economic warfare and (3) the personalisation of international relations. All carry outsized implications for European allies.

Because US presidents have the most room to manoeuvre in the realm of foreign policy, it is here that we can expect some of the most disruptive shifts to occur. Moreover, the president is emboldened by a coalition that—despite its disagreements over domestic economic policy—is mostly united in its contempt for the project of liberal internationalism. In short, there are few internal constraints on President Trump’s grandiose vision of remaking the world in his image. Should he falter, it will either be on account of external resistance or due to the self-sabotaging nature of his proposals.

Springtime for Great Men

I have written (Schneider 2024a) at length elsewhere about the rival social and economic visions expressed by two important factions of the New Right, whom I have termed the engineers and the traditionalists. The former includes Silicon Valley founders and funders such as Marc Andreessen, Ben Horowitz, Joe Lonsdale, Peter Thiel, David Sacks (who has recently been appointed White House AI & Crypto Czar) and, of course, Elon Musk. The engineers tend to be techno-optimists; formerly libertarian in outlook, they soured on the democratic project some time ago on account of its inefficiencies. Many of them follow the neo-monarchist philosophy of Curtis Yarvin, who argues that only a ‘sovereign reboot’ of the state, overseen by a CEO qua absolute monarch, can save decaying democracies in the West from further decline. The vision is one of an explicitly authoritarian form of capitalism, where state and market are merged, the population is depoliticised and the trains always run on time.

The engineers make strange bedfellows for another key part of the Trump coalition, the traditionalists, who have gathered strength under the organisational umbrella of Yoram Hazony’s National Conservatism (NatCon) movement (Schneider 2023). For the NatCon crowd, the problem with liberalism is that a philosophy built around individual freedom is fundamentally atomising, leading to the breakdown of the family, community and, ultimately, nation. They do not share the engineers’ optimistic view of technology and are far more concerned with the revitalisation of civic virtue than godless experiments in longevity. They desire a return to the patriarchal, single-breadwinner social model anchored in the congregation, aided by industrial policy and greater public support for child-rearing.

The tensions between these two sides of the Trump coalition—most recently seen in the sparring matches over the H1B visa programme—are potentially explosive, with both groups trying to tie their agenda to the president’s charismatic politics (Wendling 2024). But these tensions largely relate to domestic issues—from taxation and education to reindustrialisation and immigration—or in the case of tariffs, the effects on American businesses and consumers. On matters of foreign policy, the varied factions of the New

Right present a more unified front, fuelled by their belief in American exceptionalism, an obsession with greatness, and a disdain for norms and legacy institutions.

For the traditionalists, the EU and the UN represent imperial bodies bent on undermining the sovereignty and singular character of the nation, while international law and institutions are little better than absurdist temples engaged in senseless theorising about the rights of man. No one has articulated this critique more forcefully than Hazony—who began his political career as a speechwriter for Benjamin Netanyahu—whose disparaging view of liberal institutions is closely correlated to his defence of Israeli violations of international law. As he argues (Hazony 2018, 11) in *The Virtue of Nationalism*, ‘liberal–political ideals have become among the most powerful agents for fomenting intolerance and hate in the Western world today’, with organisations like the UN, the International Court of Justice, the International Criminal Court and the EU overseeing ‘a shaming campaign [towards Israel] of a kind that few nations have historically experienced’ (Hazony 2018, 192).

This context is important for understanding the vitriol that Hazony exhibits towards the values of liberal internationalism and the institutions that embody it. This pragmatic opposition is echoed in his political philosophy, which asserts that collective, national freedom overrides individual liberty. He notably rejects the principle of universal self-determination (which he cannot, for obvious reasons, extend to the Palestinians) and views the principle of universal human rights as a meaningless abstraction. He has argued that states need not embrace equality before the law, criticising liberal members of the Israeli Supreme Court for asserting that ‘the general purpose of all legislation is to secure equality among human beings without discrimination on the basis of religion or nationality’ (Israeli Supreme Court, quoted in Hazony 2015). More recently, he has tried to root his opposition to human equality in an austere conservative tradition, stating in a 2024 interview:

People who go to a liberal school, a liberal university and then a liberal profession—live in a bubble where all human beings are equal and similar. One may ask: is it true that all human beings are equal? Conservatives will say that human beings come from a certain place, with a certain history, a certain religion, certain values, and therefore are not all equal. The liberals get angry when they hear that. (Whitman 2024)

The NatCon movement has made significant inroads in recent years among elected Republicans who fancy themselves as intellectuals, including, most notably, Vice-President J. D. Vance, who has been a regular on the NatCon circuit since 2019. With his ties to PayPal founder Peter Thiel and the Silicon Valley venture capital world, Vance serves as a bridge between the traditionalists and the engineers, trying to smooth over their significant contradictions (Schneider 2024b). This is less difficult when it comes to foreign policy, as the Silicon Valley entrepreneurs who dominate the new Trump administration show no attachment to liberal internationalism or its institutions, seeing them as the embodiment of a sclerotic, risk-averse and constraining order that undermines their desired vision of technological and social progress.

Indeed, a Nietzsche-flavoured revolt against our twenty-first century ‘slave morality’ is underway, taking aim at the culture of restraint that has become synonymous with EU regulators. As venture capitalist and Trump supporter Marc Andreessen (2023) wrote in his ‘Techno-Optimist Manifesto’: ‘Our present society has been subjected to a mass demoralization campaign for six decades—against technology and against life—under varying names like “existential risk”, “sustainability”, “ESG”, “Sustainable Development Goals”, “social responsibility”, “stakeholder capitalism”, “Precautionary Principle”, “trust and safety”, “tech ethics”, “risk management”, “de-growth”, “the limits of growth”. . . . Our enemy is anti-merit, anti-ambition, anti-striving, anti-achievement, anti-greatness.’

The emphasis on greatness is a thread that runs through both sides of the New Right. Though they couch it in different terms, both factions speak in mythic registers about civilisational malaise and the need for Great Men of world historical stature to throw caution to the wind and save us from the pit of meaninglessness. In the words of one politically active young American man, ‘I looked up to Trump when I was little in the same way that maybe a kid in France might’ve looked up to Napoleon two hundred years ago’ (Afsari 2025).

Central to this critique is the idea that existing liberal institutions—with their emphasis on risk management, incrementalism and multilateral action—stifle excellence and individual genius. This is a critique of liberalism that extends at least as far back as Alexis de Tocqueville’s study of American democracy, and one which Friedrich Nietzsche offered in far sharper relief at the end of the nineteenth century in his classic text, *On the Genealogy of Morality*:

We see today nothing that wishes to become greater, we sense that things are still going downhill, downhill—into something thinner, more good-natured, more prudent, more comfortable, more mediocre, more apathetic, more Chinese, more Christian—man, there is no doubt, is becoming ever ‘better’ . . . Precisely here lies Europe’s doom—with the fear of man we have also forfeited the love of him, the reverence toward him, the hope for him, indeed the will to him (Nietzsche 1998, 24).

Today’s liberal institutions exist because the last men who clumsily tried to remake the world in the *Übermensch*’s image brought it to the edge of destruction. But for the engineers, nothing is more ‘based’¹ than walking the line of cataclysm for the sake of greatness, and hopes are high that Trump will unleash a new wave of innovation (Stokes et al. 2024). Just remember that when they say ‘move fast and break things’, they mean the world we share.

From theory to practice

In other administrations, it would be easy to dismiss the ramblings of online philosophers as irrelevant to the business of policymaking. Yet the irony is that—while certainly no intellectual himself—Trump has empowered those who take such ideas seriously, most

notably Elon Musk, whose attempts to seize control of the federal government bear a striking resemblance to Curtis Yarvin's ideas of sovereign reboot and 'RAGE': retire all government employees. Trump has also nominated the political theorist and noted white nationalist Darren Beattie to the role of under-secretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs (Breland 2025). What sort of engagement with the world can we expect to see under such men? We can identify three major tendencies that are likely to influence the Trump administration's adversarial approach to the international community.

Unilateralism is the first. Trump has often—and in my eyes, wrongly—been labelled an isolationist on account of his continual reference to 'America First'. But that phrase does not mean what it did in earlier centuries of American history, when the US was not yet a global hegemon, nor does it necessarily signify a retreat to hemispheric politics, as some conservatives have (hopefully) argued (Mead 2025). The idea that Trump will withdraw from global commitments to shore up power closer to home—a vision of managed imperial decline—is probably too optimistic. In the Middle East, for instance, the Trump administration has promised ever-greater levels of military funding and diplomatic cover to Israel—even leaving aside the suggestion of an American occupation of Gaza, which would have high costs in terms of blood and treasure.

More ambiguity exists regarding the administration's approach to China, which Trump has long regarded as a unique threat to American power (Matthews 2025). Potential conflicts stemming from the South China Sea and the status of Taiwan—which provides the US with an estimated 44% of its advanced semiconductor chips—are arising against the backdrop of a massive Chinese military build-up and panic over the country's pace of artificial intelligence innovation (Jones et al. 2023). It is not clear how Trump will navigate these waters, but it is hard to imagine him scaling back the US military presence in the region. Finally, the president's designs on Greenland need to be understood as part of a new Arctic policy focused on gaining control of shipping lanes and rare minerals (Goddard 2025). These considerations signal that if the US is indeed reviving the Monroe Doctrine, it is at the global level—along lines determined unilaterally by the administration. The goal is not merely hemispheric dominance, but the creation of a network of aligned states that seek inclusion in the American economic and security umbrella.

This brings us to the second trend: economic warfare. Trump's willingness to impose tariffs on historical allies—starting with Mexico and Canada, with promises to target the EU soon—indicates an attempt to reset the rules of international trade (Iqbal et al. 2025). The administration seems to envisage an era of great-power competition wherein countries choose between US- and China-led economic blocs—and acquiesce to the new terms and conditions. Great Men of History do not ask for permission—nor, as Vance said regarding Greenland, 'care what the Europeans scream at us' (Edwards 2025). But it is impossible to separate economic warfare from the real thing, and the new administration has signalled its desire to leverage American military might to secure preferable economic treatment. This is the proper context in which to understand the suggestion that the US commitment to NATO might hinge on whether EU regulatory bodies lay off X, Elon's Musk's social media platform (Kilander 2024).

How does a nation secure its place in the American economic–defence orbit? Here we come to the final trend, which is the personalisation of international relations. Trump has often stressed the personal nature of his connections with foreign leaders, including decidedly illiberal ones such as Viktor Orbán, Benjamin Netanyahu, Mohammad bin Salman and even Vladimir Putin. He has similarly shown little regard for historically friendly relationships and seems to revel in insulting liberal leaders of allied nations. As Ádám Csobánci has noted (2025), ‘This personalization of US foreign policy will likely be reinforced by Trump’s anticipated radical reforms to the US bureaucracy, which aim to concentrate decision-making power in the hands of the President and his appointees’. Thus far, the Trump administration has put US Agency for International Development employees on administrative leave in an attempt to shutter the agency and offered ‘deferred resignation’ to millions of government employees, including those at the Central Intelligence Agency, National Security Agency and the State Department (Luhby et al. 2025). The personalisation of diplomacy will introduce new volatility to international affairs, as Trump’s relationships are not with countries but with individual leaders and factions that align with his vision.

Each of these trends presents distinct challenges for European countries, which have, for better or worse, assumed the basic stability of the international system. Weathering the storm will require a Europe that is more unified than ever before and that is willing to leverage access to its market to extract its own concessions from the dealmaker-in-chief and the American tech companies at his side. Building popular support for such an agenda requires speaking to people in clear language about the dangers posed by the law of the jungle—not chiefly to norms and institutions, but to their rights, well-being and even lives.

Conclusion

There is a famous story about the Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi being asked for his views on Western civilisation. ‘I think it would be a good idea’, he supposedly quipped. The fact that the story is most likely apocryphal does not undermine the critical sting. Somehow the Europe of Homer, Michelangelo and Kant was also the Europe of the African slave trade, the Bengali famine and the Holocaust. This is the right note to conclude any discussion of liberal internationalism and its possible demise in the face of an emboldened Trump administration. The ease with which the president has run roughshod over the rules-based international order points to its underlying fragility, the signs of which were already evident prior to Trump’s return: a UN that has failed to restrain the militarism of its members or enforce global coordination around climate goals; leaders such as Benjamin Netanyahu who flaunt their contempt for international legal institutions (while the US moves to sanction officials at the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court) (The White House 2025); and financial bodies such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank which stand discredited in the eyes of many after decades of liberalisation, debt and austerity policies.

Any serious reflection about how we got here cannot afford to ignore the failings of the rules-based international order, including its selective application. But nor can we

afford to abandon hope that its principles—international law, universal human rights and institutions for global governance—may one day exist not just in theory, but in practice. The prospect of such an international order remains, in short, a very good idea—one that European and other countries will have to keep alive during the difficult years to come.

Note

1. In right-wing circles this term is used to signal approval of unapologetic individuality or swagger, especially if it runs counter to social expectations.

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