

'AMERICA FIRST' ON STEROIDS

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March 10, 2025

(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



The new team entrusted with the task of delivering President Donald Trump's agenda in his second term is steadily taking shape. While Republicans have a majority in the Senate, several Senators may go beyond party lines and vote not to confirm some of the contentious nominees.

In his selection of cabinet members, President Trump predictably displayed a preference for loyalty, while assigning critical positions in the Administration. While JD Vance was elected as Vice President, Marco Rubio has been confirmed as Secretary of State; Pete Hegseth as Secretary Defence and Kristi Noem as Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security. These appointments remained some of the most highly anticipated in Trump's cabinet as the wars in Ukraine and Gaza raged on.

President Trump has chosen John Ratcliffe as Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director; Tulsi Gabbard as Director of National Intelligence (DNI); Mike Waltz as the National Security Advisor (NSA); and Kash Patel as head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Among many important ambassadorial positions, Warren Stephens is set to become the ambassador to the UK; Mike Huckabee as ambassador to Israel; Keith Kellogg as envoy to Ukraine and Russia; Mathew Whitaker as Ambassador to NATO; and Steve Witkoff as Special Envoy to the Middle East. Paul Kapur has been nominated as Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia. In addition, New York Congresswoman Elise Stefanik has been picked to serve as the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations.

At the White Office, Susie Wiles has been appointed as Chief of Staff; Stephen Miller is the choice for Deputy Chief of Staff; William McGinley will take on the role of White House Counsel; Karoline Leavitt as the Press Secretary; and Massad Boulos as the Adviser on Arab and Middle Eastern Affairs.

Foreign Policy Outlook

As anticipated, Trump's initial foreign policy moves are rattling many across the globe, making it increasingly evident that over the next four years, the U.S. will aggressively pursue interests concerning trade and tariffs, opposition to immigration, and resistance to pro-climate policies, with expansionist and transactional policies.¹ Moreover, U.S. foreign policy under Trump is primarily focusing on an interest-centric approach, imposing steep tariffs on imports from Canada, Mexico, China, and other trade partners. While President Trump imposed new tariffs—a 25% on Canadian and Mexican goods and an increase from 10% to 20% on Chinese products, effective March 3, 2025,²—he also granted a one-month exemption for U.S. automakers.³

Quietly, the 'America First' approach is turning the U.S. towards economic nationalism with business-like engagements. The shift manifests higher tariffs on key trading partners and withdrawals from international agreements. Corporate influences on decision-making may also gain a significant role under the current Administration. This may lead to increased involvement by business leaders and corporate interests shaping foreign policy decisions. This could result in interventions in traditional bilateral relations and a shift in established political dynamics.

Within weeks of taking office, President Trump has disrupted the existing traditional U.S. foreign policy trajectory by dramatically changing both domestic and external policy agendas. His swift moves in his first month illustrated the confidence of an administration with a much firmer grip on the levers of government than during his last stint in the White House.⁴

In the past few weeks, the Trump Administration has restructured trade policy by introducing 'reciprocal tariffs' undermining U.S. commitments to the World Trade Organization (WTO), further challenging the global trade environment. Moreover, diplomatic efforts by the Western countries led by Washington to isolate Russia in the aftermath of the Ukraine conflict were reversed as his administration engaged in discussions with Russia while sidelining Ukraine from negotiations,⁵ and

¹ Anchal Vohra, "Trump Is Rattling Europe's Far Right," *Foreign Policy*, February 17, 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/02/17/trump-is-rattling-europes-far-right/>

² Martin Wolf, "The Economic Cost of Trump's Assault on the Global Order," *Financial Times*, March 4, 2025, https://www.ft.com/content/2389b7f1-e38e-43d9-ba95-b39b5ea7d5e6?utm_source=chatgpt.com

³ Michael Wayland, "Trump Grants Automakers One-month Exemption From Tariffs," *CNBC*, March 6, 2025, <https://www.cnbc.com/2025/03/05/trump-grants-automakers-one-month-exemption-from-tariffs.html>

⁴ Luke Broadwater, "An Unchecked Trump Rapidly Remakes U.S. Government and Foreign Policy," *New York Times*, February 15, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/15/us/politics/trump-foreign-policy-government-firings.html>

⁵ Luke Broadwater, "An Unchecked Trump Rapidly Remakes U.S. Government and Foreign Policy," *New York Times*, February 15, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/15/us/politics/trump-foreign-policy-government-firings.html>

suggesting that Ukraine surrender territory to achieve peace. In addition, President Trump temporarily froze foreign aid and proposed dismantling USAID.

In the same manner, President Trump increased tariffs on all Chinese goods, to which China retaliated by announcing tariffs on U.S. goods. Many believe that while President Trump's stance on economic competition with China is clear, his stance on security issues – including the defence of Taiwan and guarantees to U.S. military allies like the Philippines – is not.⁶

President Trump's foreign policy approach is isolating the U.S. while providing space to other major powers to fill the vacuum. His policies have proved to be more isolationist. While he promises to engage the world, his actions stress unilateralism as evident from the U.S.'s departure from the World Health Organization (WHO), and the USAID pause. In his first week in office, he withdrew again from the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the Paris Climate Accords and imposed tariffs on traditional U.S. trade partners. In addition, radical statements such as taking over Greenland, the Panama Canal, Gaza and even Canada have not only sent shock-waves throughout the world but also shaken the very foundations of traditional old alliances of the U.S.⁷

In the coming days, major policy revisions are expected concerning America's defence commitments, especially concerning NATO. While a withdrawal from the alliance is unlikely, further pressure will be exerted on NATO member states to raise their defence budgets to 5% of their respective GDP. This approach could lead to a scenario where defence alliances and commitments are made contingent on financial contributions by the countries, in the process straining traditional defence partnerships. Many believe that this approach can backfire as an increasingly more self-interested or even antagonistic attitude of the U.S. towards its defence partners can raise the prospect of ambiguity engulfing the formal regional commitments, creating opportunities that other, especially China, could capitalize on.⁸

In a nutshell, the new U.S. Administration seeks to reinforce a more conservative foreign policy signaling a shift in domestic and global strategies over the next 4 years. Donald Trump's second term has noticeably begun with the Administration moving away from the long-established 'rule-based'

⁶ William Mathews, "Trump's ambiguous stance on China raises the risk of accidental conflict in the Indo-Pacific," Chatham House, January 16, 2025, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/01/trumps-ambiguous-stance-china-raises-risk-accidental-conflict-indo-pacific>

⁷ Franco Ordonez, "Trump's aggressive foreign policy decisions have shaken the globe," NPR, February 13, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/02/13/nx-s1-5287002/trumps-aggressive-foreign-policy-decisions-have-shaken-the-globe>

⁸ William Mathews, "Trump's ambiguous stance on China raises the risk of accidental conflict in the Indo-Pacific," Chatham House, January 16, 2025, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/01/trumps-ambiguous-stance-china-raises-risk-accidental-conflict-indo-pacific>

system that has been a fundamental part of U.S. foreign policy. Many are questioning whether this trajectory is moving the U.S. more towards isolationism or imperialism or a more unilateral approach. At the same time, it is deepening polarization globally, straining alliances, and raising alarm for many developing countries.