

Trump's Foreign Policy: The Shifting Nature of International Friendship

prof. Jean-François Caron

Nazarbayev University and Research Fellow at the University of Opole, Poland

jean-francois.caron@nu.edu.kz

Donald Trump's foreign policy comes as a shock to its traditional allies that are now either facing the threat of tariff barriers, but that are also facing the prospect of having to secure the European continent from the Russian menace without even being invited at the negotiation table. It seems as if the friendly relationship the United States used to have with its Northern and Southern neighbors as well as with its European allies has now vanished. What lies at the heart of this fundamental change?

An Understanding of Friendship

Answering this question first needs to rely upon an understanding of one of philosophy's most discussed notion, namely "friendship" and especially through the angle of Aristotle (2009) for who took great care in Book 8 of his *Nichomachean Ethics* to provide an explanation of its meaning. He described three forms of friendship that people can form under specific conditions and for different purposes, with only the third one allowing for the creation of stronger bonds favorable to the creation of mutual trust, respect, sacrifice and of collaboration that will manage to remain intact in times of trouble. Firstly, he talked about friendships of utility and friendships of pleasure that are respectively—as their names suggest—based either upon the usefulness one can benefit from collaboration with another person and based on the enjoyment of a shared activity or simply by their presence.

In both these cases, these relationships have little to do with character and can end as quickly as they appeared as soon as one can no longer provide to the other party the usefulness it was enjoying or when someone's likes or dislikes end up changing. For Aristotle, only the third type of friendship, which he called the friendship of virtues was worthy of being called the noblest and most perfect form of human relationships. These friendships are built out of time and familiarity, have the potential to outlast shared difficulties, are built upon common virtues that can positively influence both sides to become better persons and to allow them to make sacrifices that are deemed necessary for the preservation of the virtues that are defining their friendship.

For decades, United States' allies have thought about their relationships with Washington as a virtuous form of friendship built on the beliefs that the sharing of common values had allowed them to overcome past difficulties and that they were built on the character of two equals that were inspiring one another to a shinier future and that allowed them to make sacrifices specifically in the name of what was defining their common identity and self-perceived moral superiority, namely their belief in Liberalism and its associated values firstly during the Cold War against their Communist enemy and after 1991 with the belief that Liberalism was meant to extend its influence all around the world. In other words, they have openly envisaged a world in which states could be genuine Aristotelian friends. Their belief recently collapsed like a house of cards with the return of President Trump to the Oval Office.

What is Useful to the United States? That is the Question

What a shock it has been: the one who was thought to be as friend now seems to be the worst possible enemy. What has caused this shift on the part of that dear friend who had been for decades their closest ally? Some would say that the best way to understand the new reality that is now unfolding in front of our eyes was clearly announced in Marco Rubio's speech in front of the US Senate on January 15 when he was confirmed as the new Secretary of State.¹

As he made it clear, "yesterday's world" is over for the Trump administration. An open, free-trade world that has hindered the United States in terms of trade and defense policies. Indeed, countries today hostile to America took advantage of this world of convergence to enrich themselves before closing their borders after taking advantage of this open market. This world has also done the United States a disservice because its main allies fell into the trap of juvenile idealism and came to believe that they were now virtuous allies in the realization of the "end of History": an approach Rubio explicitly rejected in his confirmation speech. They adopted without any second thought the idea of a world of peaceful cooperation by dramatically reducing their military spending: reductions which were justified all the more so as the American gendarme had demonstrated that he was ready to take leadership without requiring anything other than simple moral support when a rogue state needed to be punished as it is expected of genuine friends united by sacred values.

These right-thinking people believed that this American benevolence and friendship would last forever and justify on the part of Washington tremendous sacrifices for the sake of the fulfillment of their virtuous ideas that defined their common identity or friendship. In a way, Washington's support for Ukraine and unity with its European counterparts in this struggle has been the last incarnation of this Aristotelian virtuous friendship as they spoke the same language from both sides of the Atlantic.

Donald Trump has ended this friendship and he has permanently reshuffled the cards. As he and Marco Rubio have promised, America will solely act from now on according to its national interests, even if this means transforming yesterday's allies into simple vassals when they can provide the US no economic or strategic utility. For the White House, virtuous friendship has not only become impossible due to the fact that its European partners are taking advantage of the American market and its defense system without upholding their promises of investing at least 2% of their GDP in their armed forces, but also because the United States and Europe are no longer on the same page in terms of common values. This is in essence what Vice-President J.D. Vance recently said at the Munich Security

¹ Secretary-designate Marco Rubio Confirmation Hearing Opening Remarks. January 15, 2025. https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/6df93f4b-a83c-89ac-0fac-9b586715afd8/011525_Rubio_Testimony.pdf

Conference by blaming the European Union for their hypocrisy by preaching on the hand the virtues of liberalism, while, on the other hand, celebrating the cancelation of elections and senior officials threatening to cancel others and also for advocating in favor of what he called “digital censorship”². For Vice-President Vance, this double talk is an additional proof that a virtuous friendship is no longer possible with Europe since the continent has retreated “from some of its most fundamental values—values shared with the United States of America” and that sharing these values implies “living them” rather than simply “talk about them”. By stepping away from Liberal values and by adopting a “Soviet-era” rhetoric against its dissidents, Europe has in the eyes of the US administration, broken the moral essence of their bonds with the United States that has consequently adopted the following logic: “your actions are showing that nothing can unite us beyond utility and since you are not even able to demonstrate your usefulness to us, we simply do not care anymore about you”.

Feeling that the US had been cheated in this unequal relationship and that Europe is no longer upholding the values that have always constituted the core of their relationship, the Trump administration has placed its allies in front of their own contradictions and has forced them to stop hiding behind a rhetoric of friendship that has no actual meaning in the eyes of the White House. For those who had genuinely come to believe otherwise and that states could have this sort of virtuous relationship with other entities have been brought down to earth with a bang that they have not yet recovered from. That radical breakup with a friend that has suddenly decided to turn its back on them is a hard pill to swallow and is even perceived by many as a form of treason on the part of a former trusted friend. Even worst: this former friend is now engaging with talks with whom was only a few months ago considered as their common evil enemy *in addition* to being excluded from the same talks that will lead to a settlement they will eventually have to live with.

Washington's interest is no longer to feed the former good conscience or the post-liberal Western community of interests, but rather to take the lead in a world where the United States was in any case doomed to lose its influence in a world that has become multipolar. Donald Trump is only stating an irrefutable reality here by taking the lead in adapting to this new reality based on his terms and not those imposed by the fatality of *fortuna*.³ We only need to look at what the new adversaries of the United States are doing to fully understand what Trumpian realism consists of, which is, for the moment, economic. In a world that is closing in, the main danger is to find oneself cut off from strategic resources essential for the functioning of a national economy and, arising from this reality, the primary strategy consists of limiting access to these resources to one's adversaries, hence Trump's insistence on the Panama Canal, Canada, and Greenland. Closing Chinese trade access eastward from the Pacific and via Latin America and the Northwest Passage to prevent Beijing from forging ties with countries at the heart of Fortress America to cut off its access to rare material and other strategic resources. In short, do everything to slow down its development by restricting it to a limited area. In this matter, President Trump is only copying the method of Xi Jinping who is also trying to monopolize the same resources in Southeast and Central Asia and to control the very strategic Strait of Malacca.

Farewell virtues; welcome efficiency and usefulness. The post-Cold War paradigm of Liberal convergence can now rest in peace (1991-2025). If George W. Bush once became famous for having said “you are either with us, or against us”, the Trump's administration will for its part become known for its business-like vision of international relations: “you better be useful to us”.

² U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance's remarks at the Munich Security Conference. February 14, 2025. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/02/18/vance-speech-munich-full-text-read-transcript-europe/>

³ See Machiavelli 2008.

Can Trump's Foreign Policy Proved Itself to be Counter-Productive?

Under this new paradigm, whoever will be useful to Washington will become its friend of utility, which is why Marco Rubio never said that the new foreign policy of the US had to be perceived as a form of isolationism. Partnerships will still be possible insofar as the United States will feel that they are allowing the country to be safer, stronger or more prosperous: Rubio's three amoral lines of conduct of his foreign policy. Through this utilitarian approach, the United States is clearly hoping to stop the trend that has led many countries to take advantage of the opportunities the multilateral order was providing them, especially being able to engage in closer ties with China while still being fully integrated within the Western world infrastructure. Knowing full well that time may be its worst enemy, the end goal of the US administration seems to force these countries to make a choice now about who ought to be their partners by placing them in front of a Cornelian choice that pays little attention to their moral choices or identity. The message of the Trump administration is simple to understand and lies upon a purely utilitarian logic: "if you can be of any use to us, with which empire do you wish to prosper? Us or China? If you decide to side with us, we can be friends of utility insofar as this partnership makes us safer and more prosperous. If it is not the case, we will do everything we can to prevent you from becoming one of our enemies' friends of utility". An amoral view of state-to-state relations that explains why Marco Rubio showed an openness in resuming commercial trade with Russia to the astonishment of many who are still operating in the former paradigm and why Saudi Arabia has been hosting the peace talks on the war in Ukraine. Indeed, for both sides, Riyadh is a friend of utility that has shown its openness to President Trump's business interests and to Vladimir Putin by maintaining after February 2022 oil production to levels that would not negatively impact Russia's state revenues (and also by offering to the Russian President and his cronies guarantees that they would not be arrested).

The whole question is whether this strategy will be profitable to the US or rather detrimental to its interests. The answer to this question will depend upon nations' willingness to adopt the same utilitarian view of state-to-state relations and how they will calculate the benefits of building up ties with the United States rather than with China. In this regard, it is clear that both China and the United States have convincing arguments to make. While the former controls a larger market and essential rare-earth metal, the latter is one step ahead in terms of technological innovations and largely controls the production of semi-conductors. The Trump administration is probably hoping that the values that were central to the former paradigm will be sufficient to push many nations in their arms knowing full well that their citizens would not accept siding "with the devil". That decision however may be easier in lesser liberal states that might see the future economic prosperity more towards the Eastern side of the world than in America. Only time will tell if Washington's strategy will prove itself an effective one or not.

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