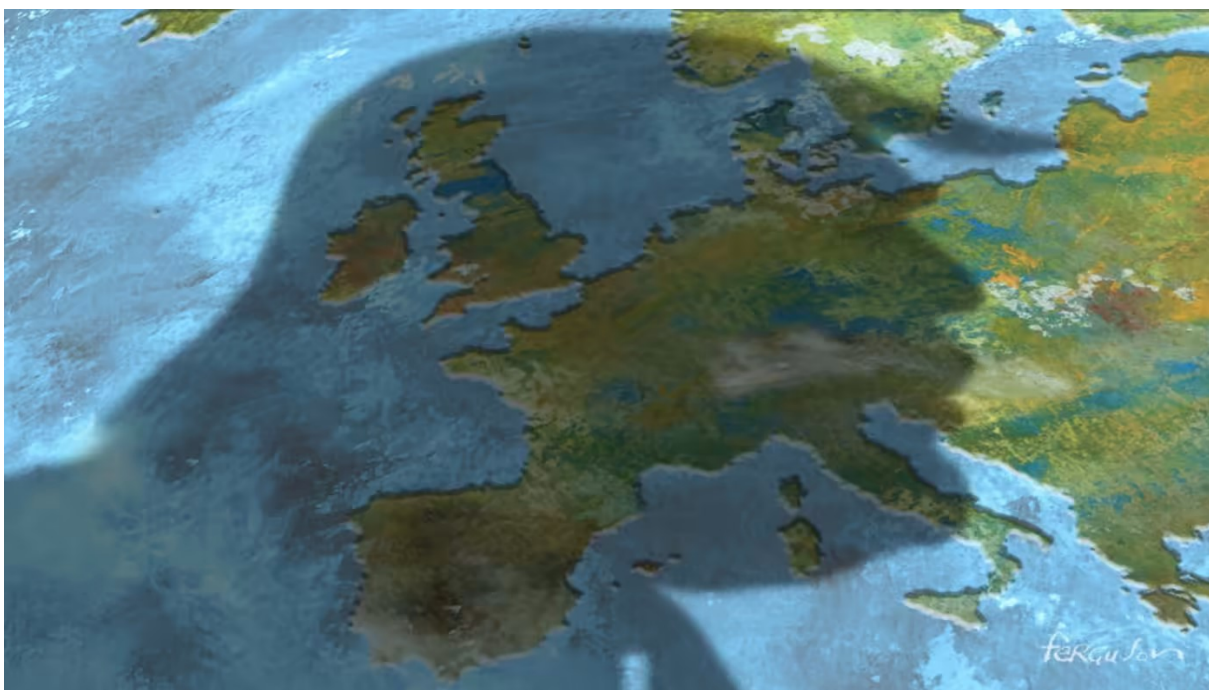


Opinion **Donald Trump**

Western allies are hedging against Donald Trump

What happens in Washington would not stay in Washington

GIDEON RACHMAN



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Gideon Rachman YESTERDAY

A spectre is haunting Europe. The spectre of Donald Trump.

Many European decision makers admit that they were caught unprepared by Trump's election as US president in 2016. They are determined not to make the same mistake again.

But knowing that Trump might win the presidency back in 2024, and knowing what to do about it, are different things. That is all the more the case since a second Trump presidency would probably be even more radical and unpredictable than the first.

In Europe, the most widely anticipated and feared adjustment would be a sudden shift in US policy towards Ukraine. Trump has [boasted](#) that he could end the Ukraine war in a day. As president, he had a history of antagonism towards the Zelenskyy government, which failed to co-operate with his efforts to implicate Hunter Biden in corruption.

Led by the US, Nato nations say repeatedly they will do "whatever it takes" to help Kyiv win. But if Trump subjected Ukraine to an Afghanistan-style aid cut-off, the Europeans would not have enough military materiel to keep Ukraine going. The US is also in a position to sharply reduce the budgetary support on which Kyiv depends.

Poland's government, which hails from the populist right, has fond memories of Trump. As president, he made his most significant speech in Europe in Warsaw. The nativist conservative nationalism of the ruling Law and Justice party (PiS) in Poland maps quite closely on to the ideology of key Trump advisers, such as Stephen Miller.

But PiS's ideological affinity with Trump may be blinding them to the danger of a sudden US withdrawal of support for Ukraine. That would leave the countries closest to Russia, including Poland, high, dry and on the front line. If Trump combined a Ukraine cut-off with a strengthening of his often-stated scepticism about Nato, there would be a full-scale security scare in Europe. That, in turn, would give new impetus to a weakened Russia.

In the long run, a second Trump presidency might push Europeans towards seeking the "strategic autonomy" from the US that President Emmanuel Macron of France has long called for. But that kind of shift takes time and money. Europe is short of both.

The chances of Europe being plunged into a security crisis by a Trump presidency are strengthened by the fact that there is a powerful [strain](#) of thought in Republican circles which argues that the US should concentrate all its resources on the challenge from China, and leave Europe to deal with the supposedly lesser threat posed by Russia.

Both the Trump and Biden administrations have adopted more confrontational policies towards China, increasing restrictions on trade and strengthening America's network of alliances in Asia. Observing that trend, one Chinese policymaker argued to me recently that Beijing can remain loftily indifferent to the results of the US presidential election. Whoever wins, he argued, it is likely to be more of the same.

But Trump is highly unpredictable. Others in Beijing are concerned that he would empower some of the most hawkish voices in Washington such as Mike Pompeo, Trump's former secretary of state, who has [called](#) for America to recognise Taiwan as an independent country. China has always insisted that Taiwanese independence would mean war.

Trump's own instincts, however, are isolationist. A well-received [book](#) on his policies towards China, during his first term, claims that Trump made it clear, in private, that he had no intention of defending Taiwan. If that indifference to the fate of Taiwan became more explicit during a second Trump term, it would embolden Beijing and alarm America's allies in the region.

If Trump seriously weakened America's security presence in Asia, Japan, South Korea and Australia would all face an acute security dilemma. One possible response would be to develop nuclear weapons. Another would be to go in the opposite direction and shift towards appeasement of China.

There are, of course, some countries and leaders that would unambiguously welcome Trump back into the White House. Benjamin Netanyahu's Israel, Viktor Orbán's Hungary and Mohammed bin Salman's Saudi Arabia would be prominent among them. All these governments have been criticised, however mildly, by Democratic party leaders for human rights abuses or democratic backsliding. Trump's indifference to those kinds of concerns — and his weakness for strongman leaders — would make him a popular choice in Riyadh, Jerusalem and Budapest.

Trump's own rhetoric, however, suggests that he is much more preoccupied with [revenge](#) on his domestic enemies than with the outside world. A second Trump presidency might see the US government plunged into chaos as the White House sought to purge the "deep state", putting diehard Trump loyalists in charge of key institutions such as the FBI and the Department of Justice.

America's allies could not assume that what happened in Washington would stay in Washington. Creeping authoritarianism and the erosion of judicial independence in Hungary, Poland and Turkey are real concerns for those countries' Nato allies and EU partners. But it would be a much bigger deal if an American president pursued Orbán-style policies. The US remains the bedrock of the western alliance. If that rock began to crumble, America's allies would be in deep trouble.

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