

Opinion **Donald Trump**

## Europe should brace itself for Trump

Unlike in 2016, this time the former president has a coherent plan for governing

**EDWARD LUCE**



A second Trump term would be likely to spell the end of the west as an organising idea on the world stage © Morry Gash/AP

**Edward Luce** 9 HOURS AGO

No one can say that Donald Trump did not warn them. In an unusually detailed interview with Time magazine this week, the Republican nominee sent fresh chills down liberal spines by laying out what he would do if he recaptured the presidency.

This included rounding up millions of illegal immigrants, deploying the military to disperse protests on America's streets, imposing loyalty tests on federal civil servants, letting Republican states monitor women's pregnancies, and scrapping the White House's pandemic preparedness office (because last time that went so swimmingly). He repeatedly declined to rule out violence if he lost in November.

America's media is understandably focused on the radical import of Trump's domestic agenda. But some of his clearest language was directed at Europe. There was nothing new in his plans to treat Nato like a fee-paying club — countries that miss their 2 per cent of GDP defence spending target would not be able to count on America coming to their aid. Nor was it a surprise that he would escalate his first term's transatlantic trade war.

What was striking, however, was the repeated emphasis he put on both. "The [EU] is brutal to us on trade," Trump said. "We went over it, the cars, they don't want our agriculture. They don't want anything from us. It's like a one-way street. Well, it's the same thing with Nato. They treat us very badly. They don't pay their bills."

One European response is to hope that Trump will lose in November. That would be a rash wager. In 2020, Biden beat him by more than 4 percentage points in the popular vote. Average polls in the last three months show Trump with a 1.5 percentage point lead. More ominously, he leads, albeit marginally, in each of the seven swing states. It is too soon to take such polls seriously. But if the US election were held today, Trump would win.

A second response, which many US business leaders are taking, is to say that Trump was not that bad the first time round. There would be winners and losers but life would go on. Earlier this year, Jamie Dimon, the chief executive of JPMorgan, said that each of Trump and Biden had their strong points. “My company will survive and thrive in both.” Many in Europe would be inclined to echo Dimon’s self-reassurance. That, too, would be foolhardy.

The difference between 2024 and 2016, when Trump last won the presidency, is that this time he has a plan. From Europe’s perspective, it would look like Fortress America. Moreover, he can now draw on a roster of true believers to carry it out. In his first term, he appointed establishment figures, such as Rex Tillerson as secretary of state and Jim Mattis as defence secretary.

This time he would pick proven Europe-sceptics, such as Elbridge Colby, who runs the Marathon Initiative think-tank, and overt Europhobes, such as Richard Grenell, Trump’s former ambassador to Germany. “The advantage I have now is I know everybody,” said Trump. “I know the good, the bad, the stupid, the smart . . . When I first got to Washington, I knew very few people.”

It is unclear what Europe can do to hedge against Trump 2.0. A tiny minority of European leaders, notably Hungary’s Viktor Orbán, would welcome his return. So would Russia’s Vladimir Putin. If, as expected, Europe’s far right does well in next month’s European parliamentary elections, Trump would have a larger group of sympathisers in Brussels than before. He might also be able to count on the support of Giorgia Meloni, Italy’s hard-right prime minister, who, to the surprise of some, has co-operated with Biden over Ukraine.

Among Europe’s mainstream parties, another strategy is to tame the tiger. The UK’s Labour party, which will almost certainly win Britain’s next general election, has been putting out feelers to key figures in Trump world. Britain’s shadow foreign secretary, David Lammy, will visit Washington next week for the sixth time since becoming shadow foreign secretary. He has forged relationships with Colby, JD Vance, the Republican senator and Ukraine sceptic, Robert O’Brien, Trump’s

JD Vance, the Republican senator and Ukraine sceptic, Robert O'Brien, Trump's last national security adviser, and Mike Pompeo, Trump's last secretary of state.

Since Trump has a special animosity for the EU, Britain, regardless of its government, might even be a beneficiary. In the pro-Trump Heritage Foundation's 887-page "[Project 2025](#)" document, the de facto plan for a Trump presidency, Britain is singled out as the only country with which a Trumpian US would seek to do more trade.

None of these tactics — sticking your head in the sand, making friends with Trump, or even welcoming him — are foolproof. The larger reality is that a second Trump term would be likely to spell the end of the west as an organising idea on the world stage.

This would be great news for Putin and terrible for Ukraine. It could also open a nuclear Pandora's box. If Nato could no longer count on America's umbrella, countries such as Germany and even Poland might consider going nuclear. It is no small irony that Trump would probably have no issue with that.

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