

The Big Read Donald Trump

Flatter or confront? How world leaders are dealing with Trump



Four months after Donald Trump returned to the White House, governments are still agonising over how to approach an erratic, unpredictable American president

James Politi in Washington, **Andrew England** in Doha, **Henry Foy** in Brussels, **Lucy Fisher** in London and **Joe Leahy** in Beijing

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For Donald Trump, his swing through the Middle East this week captured exactly how he expects to be treated on the world stage: with the highest pomp, investment pledges worth hundreds of billions of dollars, and effusive praise.

But while the Gulf's top leaders were happy to oblige, not every country has been taking the same approach. For weeks, China had been resisting any praise or even engagement with the US president despite the punitive tariffs from both governments that raised fears of a deep economic slump.

The lack of adulation did not matter: Trump backed down anyway. On Monday, on the shores of Lake Geneva, US and Chinese officials agreed to a sharp de-escalation in mutual import duties.

Flattery or confrontation? It has been nearly four months since Trump's return to the White House and world leaders are still agonising over how to manage an erratic, unpredictable American president with far-reaching ambitions to remake the world order and a lust for dealmaking that extends from trade to conflict resolution.

While some are choosing the path of the Gulf countries — trumpeting commercial agreements and unabashedly pampering his ego with grand gestures — others are standing up to the president and willing to take more risks.

“A little bit of this is like poker. Poker is partly about the game, but it's also partly about being able to read the people you're playing with . . . and Trump has made this very personal,” says Jon Alterman, chair in global security and geostrategy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies think-tank. “And different countries with different tools and different interests are trying to get different things.”



Donald Trump in Saudi Arabia during his tour of the Middle East, where he met Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman among other leaders, some of whom believe they can manage Trump's transactional style © APAImages/Shutterstock

The UK, for instance, has led the way in trying to pacify Trump and managed to clinch an early trade agreement. Even though the tariff relief was confined to a few sectors, Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer nonetheless glowingly told the US president the pact was a “tribute to your leadership”. Yet the EU has taken a different approach, gambling that it will benefit more than suffer from a more protracted negotiation with Washington.

Trump's counterparts have learnt that relationships with him can be precarious, yet they can also be repaired. Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine's president, is now on better terms with the US president than he was in late February during their brutal, public Oval Office spat.

Mark Carney, the Canadian prime minister, campaigned on an anti-Trump platform

to win the country's election last month, but seemed to have earned Trump's respect by the time he visited Washington earlier this month, even as he rebuffed the threatening taunts to make Canada the 51st US state.

"[Trump] wants to revisit areas long considered settled to see if he can't squeeze out better terms for the US. He is definitely anti-status quo [and] there is no specific format or template for how to respond to those attitudes," says Peter Rough, director of the Center on Europe and Eurasia at the Hudson Institute, a conservative think-tank in Washington.

"He is perfectly content opening multiple negotiations at once, projecting strength in all of them, and then pocketing what he can get. But I think partners risk taking countervailing moves at their own peril. I think it is far better to make the US a generous offer and negotiate flexibly."

The autocratic Gulf countries were arguably destined to be the most obsequious of all to Trump.

Despite their frustration with the US for its pro-Israel policies during the Gaza war, they have for decades looked to the US as their security guarantor and as a prime investment destination.

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in particular had embraced Trump during his first term after years of frustration with the Obama administration. They also believe they can manage Trump's transactional style and appreciate his willingness to ignore human rights and not lecture them on domestic issues.





Mark Carney in Ottawa. Canada's prime minister campaigned on an anti-Trump platform to win his country's election, but seemed to have earned his respect by the time he visited Washington this month © Spencer Colby/The Canadian Press/Bloomberg

Qatar has been working to make up lost ground after enduring a rocky start in Trump's first term. Shortly after Trump visited Riyadh in May 2017 and railed against Iran at a summit, Saudi Arabia and the UAE led an extraordinary regional embargo against Qatar, accusing it of financing terrorism and being too close to Tehran. Trump called Qatar a "high level" sponsor of terrorism, even as Doha — which denied the charges — hosted the biggest US military base in the region.

In its most recent efforts to woo Trump, Qatar has offered to give an aircraft to the US to replace its ageing Air Force One — a proposal that the White House is considering despite criticism that it amounts to brazen corruption. As he met Trump on Wednesday in Doha after a parade of camels and red cybertrucks lined the streets to accompany the US motorcade, Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, the emir of the country, praised his diplomatic prowess. "I know you are a man of peace," he said.

Christopher Chivvis, director of the American Statecraft project at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, says the [visit to the Gulf](#) — and the generous royal reception — perfectly matched Trump's diplomatic needs because they could address his yearning for "global social climbing".

"The extent to which they try to treat him, not just as a head of state, but as royalty . . . is probably somewhat effective," says Chivvis. "He's like a classic wealthy parvenu — a wealthy bourgeois figure who's trying to establish himself with the global aristocracy."

On international trade, America's trading partners are still reeling from the “liberation day” tariffs announced by Trump on imports from virtually every country.

The White House set a baseline levy of 10 per cent that applies universally, and then added so-called reciprocal tariffs on top of those, with each country getting its own number.



A warehouse full of imported goods in Shanghai. China had been resisting engagement with Trump until US and Chinese officials agreed to a sharp de-escalation in mutual import duties this week © Raul Ariano/Bloomberg

In the face of a steep sell-off in global equities and turmoil in bond markets, Trump paused those extra levies until July, and began negotiating alternatives with willing capitals.

“Once people understood what the president meant and where he was going . . . serious countries got together and figured out a way to get with the key players and the president and negotiate. And that’s where we are now,” says Ed McMullen, the US

ambassador to Switzerland during Trump's first term.

The UK dashed to win the first trade deal with the US this month in the hope it will boost Starmer's weak standing with voters domestically, but Whitehall figures are privately wary that more patient nations could end up securing better terms with Washington.

UK officials say there is a significantly higher level of contact — including direct calls and texts — between the most senior US figures and their British political counterparts, compared with the previous Democrat administration.

While British government figures welcome the scale of this continuing dialogue between London and Washington, they warn it is also significantly more work keeping abreast of which figures in Trump's inner circles have the president's ear at any one time, amid greater volatility in the influence of his senior allies.

On the security front, UK officials believe the most important imperative is to avoid accelerating the drawdown of US military assets and resources from Europe, given it will take the continent years to re-arm. This means avoiding criticism of Trump and his approach. "We've got to hug him close," says one official.

In Brussels, the initial panic in response to Trump's tariffs has morphed into a more circumspect approach.

Trump's more moderate stance towards Ukraine in recent weeks, after his previous animosity towards Kyiv and apparent endorsement of Russia's broad demands for peace, has bolstered European hopes that he will soften in other areas, particularly on trade.





Trump with Britain's ambassador to the US Peter Mandelson in the Oval Office earlier this month. The UK has led the way in trying to pacify the US president and managed to clinch an early trade agreement © Evan Vucci/AP

EU officials say they have learnt three things from the trade negotiation experience so far, drawn mainly from the Chinese and British approaches. First, it's best not to escalate and provoke Trump unless you're willing to tolerate more economic pain. Second, waiting for Trump to calm down himself is a better approach than telling him to do so. And third, rushing to strike a deal means you are more likely to get a bad one lacking in details.

European officials are closely liaising with other like-minded partners such as Japan, the officials say, to share insights and co-ordinate their moves. That is proving particularly useful given how unclear the Trump negotiators are on specific details, they add.

The British approach to the negotiations was "lousy", says one official. "It has proved the merits of our evolution from a bold to a more cautious approach."

Michal Baranowski, Poland's deputy trade minister, said on Thursday that there were some grounds for "optimism because we are seeing elements of de-escalation on the American side", adding that he believed EU-US negotiations were "speeding up".

But people close to Trump say that the EU, led by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, will need to do far more to get into the White House's good graces, let alone reach a deal.

“The EU unfortunately has a dilemma. You have sovereign nations that are looking to negotiate and want to negotiate, being held back by a very vocal, very adversarial von der Leyen and that is not productive,” says McMullen, the former ambassador. “I wish that [she] would learn a lesson from the Swiss and a lesson from the Brits. There is no fighting Donald Trump on this issue.”

Governments around the world are also looking to China’s experience of dealing with Trump for insights.

One of the lessons of China’s successful showdown with Trump on tariffs is to not “appease” him, says Wang Yiwei, an international relations scholar at Renmin University in Beijing. The best approach for those countries in favour of the global free trade system, he believes, would be to stay united in opposition to his policies.

“If it’s one against everyone, the price will be too high for the US,” he says. “You can’t appease President Trump, otherwise he will just want more, so it’s better to be united, not try to forge bilateral deals to appease him.”





Trump with Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine's president, at the Vatican last month. World leaders have learnt that relationships with the US president can be precarious, yet they can also be repaired © Ukrainian Presidency/Anadolu/Getty Images

Idanna Appio, portfolio manager and senior research analyst at First Eagle

Investment Management, a New York-based fund, says China has learnt “and probably everyone else has learnt too, that it is good to be strong when dealing with Trump, it’s good to have leverage when dealing with Trump”.

While there are not many other countries that could precisely follow China’s playbook because they lacked its economic heft, the lesson is that Trump “will back down if he feels enough pain and so it’s worth absorbing some pain domestically”.

“I think going into this, there was this mistaken belief here [in the US] among our policymakers that the capacity for pain was greater in the US than in China, which I think anyone who knows the Chinese thinks that’s probably pretty laughable,” she says.

Some analysts question whether other countries can afford to take the Chinese approach.

“They are in a category of their own,” the Hudson Institute’s Rough says of Beijing.

“China is a superpower competitor that is not a defence dependent of the US. So, it can risk escalating on trade in ways that US allies probably cannot.”

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