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**The Making and Unmaking of US  
Grand Strategy**

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# The Making and Unmaking of US Grand Strategy

By Bart M.J. Szewczyk | April 23, 2024

*The very existence of US grand strategy, let alone its contours, will turn on the outcome of the country's November presidential elections.*

Strategy—an alignment of ends and means, or objectives and resources—is easy for any government or institution to articulate. Indeed, strategic documents abound. But implementing a coherent vision across a large organization requires determination, competence, and discipline. President Joe Biden has it; his predecessor and potential successor, Donald Trump, does not.

## **Strategy vs. Unstrategy**

A second Biden administration, should it come about, would likely continue the main strategic elements of the first, though its execution may see some adjustment.

First, Biden would double down on his support of Ukraine's fight against Russia by expanding military aid and financial assistance. Second, he would continue efforts to constrain and outcompete the People's Republic of China (PRC) by expanding the US presence in the Indo-Pacific. Third, he would strengthen the sinews of the free world by deepening alliances, partnerships, and institutions committed to a world that is "free, open, prosperous, and secure". The administration would then leverage this network to preclude Beijing's ability to "reshape the international order in favor of one that tilts the global playing field to its benefit". Fourth, particularly in light of the conflict in Gaza, the administration would continue to pursue "de-escalation and integration" in the Middle East, even as these objectives are elusive in the near term and would require further US engagement.

A second Trump administration, should it come about, would also likely mirror the first. It would be chaotic, erratic, and arbitrary.

As before, Trump would serve as a black hole at the center of the executive branch. He would absorb political energy but shed little strategic light. Some predict that Trump has learned from experience and would consequently rely on a new team comprising loyalists ready and willing to execute his will unquestioningly. But even if there were fewer centrists with internal guardrails—the likes of H.R. McMaster and James Mattis—the new team would likely lack a coherent foreign policy vision. Instead, Trump's supporters include competing camps on major issues: those advocating a more forceful posture toward Russia or capitulation; those urging confrontation with the PRC or preserving economic relations; those pushing for engagement in the Middle East or standing back. Trump himself has yet to articulate any considered or established views on any of these complex issues. Moreover, he showed little evidence of improvement in forming and executing foreign policy during his first term. Instead, he would again pursue a foreign policy that was sometimes mischaracterized as transactional but in reality was whimsical and improvisational.

Perhaps the only consistency Trump would show would be on one aspect of trade. He has called for a 100% tariff on imported cars, a 60% tariff on goods from the PRC, and a 10% tariff on all other imports. These increased taxes on American consumers would trigger reprisals from other countries, increasing costs even further and decreasing global economic output.

Biden, in contrast, pledges to pursue a trade and foreign policy for the middle class that prioritizes the consequences for American workers and manufacturing. It would be characterized by a more targeted manner rather than the absence of any rhyme or reason.

### **Allied vs. Alone**

Biden and Trump present an equally stark contrast for US relations with allies and adversaries.

Biden would continue to invest extensively in deepening existing alliances, especially through NATO, and with Japan and South Korea. He would seek to forge closer partnerships with, for example, Australia and India through AUKUS and the Quad. The aim would be to leverage, on top of the United States' approximate 25% of global GDP, more than half of the world's economic and military resources by working with allies and partners in Europe and the Indo-Pacific. This relative power of the free world has been surprisingly stable since the end of World War II, and it can help the wider West continue to prevail in this age of great-power competition.

Trump would instead continue to hollow out alliances such as NATO and partnership with the EU, which he has called a foe. He would also likely refuse to implement commitments under AUKUS because it was Biden's initiative—just as he upended President Barack Obama's nuclear deal with Iran and withdrew from the Paris climate agreement—even if the pact is generally consistent with some of his supporters' desired approach toward the PRC.

For adversaries, Biden would present a formidable challenge as leader of the free world. Russian President Vladimir Putin would find sustaining his war of aggression increasingly difficult amid ongoing Western weapons deliveries to Ukraine and economic isolation. His Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, would find his maneuverability increasingly limited as the United States and its allies and partners expand their global presence and connections.

Trump would also challenge adversaries, but primarily through his unpredictability. Putin and Xi may try to appeal to his authoritarian inclinations, but his erratic nature would make it difficult to sustain any deals. The two dictators prefer Trump mainly because he would weaken the United States and its alliances.

### **Maximizing Success**

Strategy is no guarantee of success in foreign policy. Success often depends as much on execution, circumstances, and sheer luck as on strategy. For this reason, Napoleon is reputed to have preferred lucky generals to good generals because the lucky ones won battles.

But strategy can help maximize the chances of success and prevent downside risk. And "unstrategy", or whimsical improvisation, will accomplish little that is good and lasting. Even worse, it can lead to dangerous scenarios, especially when a key international player such as the United States is involved.

Much indeed depends on the outcome of the US presidential elections in November—for the country and the world.

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### **About the Author**

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Dr. Szewczyk recently worked as advisor on global affairs at the European Commission's think tank, where he covered a wide range of foreign policy issues, including international order, defense, trade, transatlantic relations, Russia and Eastern Europe, Middle East and North Africa, and China and Asia. Previously, between 2014 and 2017, he served as member of Secretary John Kerry's policy planning staff at the U.S. Department of State, where he covered Europe, Eurasia, and global economic affairs. From 2016 to 2017, he also concurrently served as senior policy advisor to the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Samantha Power, where he worked on refugee policy.

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