

## Is he making America great again? The role of Trump's rhetoric in the downturn of the United States hegemony

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Throughout Richard Nixon's presidency (1969–1974), U.S. foreign policy was often conducted under the president's complex – and at times unreasonable – auspices, particularly regarding the actions of U.S. troops in the Vietnam War. This approach, labeled “The Madman Theory”, is clarified by the measures adopted to threaten an opponent with extreme and disproportionate use of force applied to resolve a dispute. The opponent understands that the one who threatens is capable of reckless or irrational acts to achieve their interests (Burr; Kimball, 2015 *apud* Boys, 2021, p. 05).

In this regard, understanding emotions is fundamental to comprehending the decisions made by representatives, ministers, or advisors. Since foreign policy decision-making processes are inherently high-pressure environments, often defined by fear and anger, the cognitive element serves to explain how political actors analyse situations and outline military and political strategies against threats. This encourages reactions based on preexisting beliefs or rationalizing an ambiguous decision (Ramanzini Junior; Farias, 2021).

Donald Trump's election for his second term as the U.S. 47th president reinforces Burr and Kimball's approach through its aggressive and unstable behaviour. Having previously recognized anger as the driving force behind his first-term actions, justified by the “mess left in the country by incompetent leaders” (Drezner, 2025), his current administration continues this paradigm. Rather than a departure, Trump's second term is an overstretch of his former policy, which excessively dismissed multilateralism and democratic institutions, in contrast to China's rise, global order crises, and the economic measures imposed on other states. This context changes the positive tone of his inaugural speech into a pressing question: Is America's decline over? (Trump, 2025).

This discussion aims to examine how Trump's rhetoric

corroborates as a counterpart to his government's highly praised slogan, "Make America Great Again". This study will employ political psychology and discourse analysis to investigate Trump's second term as a partial causality in the downturn of the United States hegemony.

## Political psychology and the emotional logic of Trump's rhetoric

Emotions are subjective mental expressions that reveal deep feelings toward an object, event, or person, often accompanied by bodily, psychological, and/or behavioural changes (APA, 2025). In the field of political psychology, since emotions encompass human cognitive psychological methods, their shipping to international political thought positions the foreign policy decision-making process as both a psychological and political phenomenon practiced by political actors influenced by cultural circumstances, beliefs, and institutions (Sasley, 2011; Zilincik, 2024). According to this perspective, individual emotions are enlarged, indicating that the group and the individual influence one another mutually. Depending on the impact of a given issue on the domestic sphere and the state's international behavior, the resulting emotions can influence key foreign policy decisions. Thus, personal conceptions and interpretations of reality shape, to some extent, the identity a nation seeks to build up and serve as relevant factors in decision-making (Zilincik, 2024).

Renshon and Lerner (2012) identify two emotional categories relevant to understanding the decision-making process: integral and incidental emotions. Integral emotions are associated with the decision at hand, representing rational projections that support the decision-making process. Notwithstanding, they also affect cognitive evaluation when multiple options are present, as they are filtered through the decision-maker's personal experiences within a given scenario. Incidental emotions, on the other hand, influence decisions in an unexpected way. They arise from previous situations or factors particular to the individual's personality – such as egocentrism, narcissism, negligence, fear, or anger. These emotions can manifest in foreign policy actors targeting different sectors and groups, in themes such as security, climate change, or migration (Lerner; Renshon, 2012).

Accordingly, the relevance of political psychology is evident in the actions of leaders like Donald Trump, who act as catalysts and mediators of collective emotions. Political discourse, in this context, is not only informative; it is fundamentally a rhetorical instrument that evokes and outlines feelings, beliefs, and biases in public opinion. It constructs subjects as agents of meaning, capable of shaping realities through the mechanisms employed to project them (Lima, 2003). Therefore, the ability to “frame” complex issues in simplified emotional terms allows once unpopular or irrational decisions to acquire legitimacy, manipulating a State's ability to project its influence and maintain – or not – its hegemony.

In his inaugural speech in January 2025, Trump promoted a rough, controversial, and nationalist rhetoric that previewed an assertive and punitive foreign policy. His speech included claims to take over the Gulf of Mexico, the Panama Canal, transform the United States into the envy of all nations, and defend the country against threats and invasions in unprecedented ways (Trump, 2025). The global economy was severely impacted by the intensified trade war between the U.S. and China in April 2025, creating significant uncertainty. Such escalation saw the U.S. under Trump raise tariffs on all Chinese imports to 145%, prompting China to implement countermeasures of 125% on U.S. goods. (Holland; Knight, 2025).

On Liberation Day, the universal tariffs declared under the America First Trade Policy were accompanied by a discourse that not only aimed to expedite the strengthening of the U.S. sovereignty through an economic independence allegation. It effectively characterized other nations as pillagers, cheaters, and scavengers (The White House, 2025). Altogether with the hostilities in the Oval Office against leaders of South Africa, Jordan, and United Kingdom (Collinson, 2025), this punitive diplomacy alongside with the threats toward nations' sovereignty reinforces MAGA as a project to destabilize American international support and to undermine its hegemony in a long-term understanding.

Therefore, by articulating an emotionally charged narrative that displays external threats, the fragility of domestic institutions, and the promise of national greatness in his discourse, Trump fostered coordinated support among interested groups and reinforced the national identity through an anti-systemic approach.

## Pax Americana in decline?

Multilateralism is one of the main axes of the American unipolar order after the Cold War. A system designed after the victorious outcome of the Allied forces, it is the centerpiece of a Western international liberal order, based on the rule of International Law, integrity, and sovereignty. It was paramount to cement the American preponderance, albeit it allowed some insertion and rise of middle and regional powers, such as India and China. Promoting a forum for cooperation, engagement, and solution of controversies for maintaining a relative international order.

It is interesting to note that those rules-based orders were consistently violated when greater US interests occurred, within different administrations. For example, NATO's intervention in the Balkans (1995), the US's intervention in Iraq (2003-2011), or the 1998 missile attacks against Al-Qaeda. When it comes to the hegemon, some bendings of the law were enacted, even with protests in the international community, due to its preponderance and superiority.

However, the Trump administration, both the 47th mandate and the 45th mandate, showed special and open disregard, contempt for the same order that the US created and invested large sums of money, through the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and consistent and substantial contributions to the United Nations systems. Although in his first term in office, he met resistance within his political circle and the Republican Party regarding the disruption of free trade negotiations and multilateralism, in the current mandate, this pattern does not occur. What is seen is an outright support for Trump's ideas and his movement.

The 2024 Milwaukee Republican Convention showed this. "Trump was the first person to secure three consecutive major-party nominations for the presidency since Franklin Roosevelt" (The Economist, 2024). It is appalling seeing old critics, in the mentioned convention and nowadays, fully supporting Trump, like Nikki Haley and Ted Cruz. Altogether with the capitalization of the party's structure by Trump's relatives, as his daughter-in-law as co-chair of the party, and his son's influence in selecting J.D. Vance as running mate (The Economist, 2024). A party rallying behind Trump despite his indictment and conviction, albeit with no penalties, in the criminal hush money case (CNN, 2025). Quite the opposite when compared with the Watergate scandal with Nixon and the pressure made by GOP's leaders Barry Goldwater — conservative movement icon of the

70s —, Hugh Scott (Senate Republican leader), and John Rhodes — House Republican leader — for the resignation (Blumenthal, 2024).

Those interests, aligned with the radical right, are rooted in an anti-liberal perspective (Clark, 2018). With disregard for Globalisation, not in a critical manner aimed at the inequalities that this process conceived with greater concentration of income and loss of purchase power, and cooperation. Trump sees the world in a quasi old-fashioned 19th imperialism mindset, with the superpowers having the right to pursue and maintain spheres of influence (Saraiva, 2025; Grant, 2025). That is, Trump operates in a logic where hard power is paramount, seeking revenues and jobs, not the maintenance of a Washington's build world order (Harb, 2025). A foreign policy purely transactional, bullying bilateralism based on the law of the jungle (Patrick, 2025).

This is observable through the break of protocol and public humiliation of the Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy on February 21st (Schmunk, 2025). An ailing country, seeking support for its war effort with a traditional ally since the beginning of the conflict, is met with a virulent and macho president and vice president, in a mediatic performance for strength, power showing and ego empowerment. This show was met with uproar and apprehension in Europe, and cast doubt in the US commitment of protecting the Western world.

Those goals of hard superpower are perceived through his sweeping executive order on February 4th, concerning the State's engagement with multilateral institutions funding (White House, 2025). As well as the USAID closing, impacting severely humanitarian aid and world development — likewise the projection of Soft Power by the US — (Oxfam America, 2025). Or the withdrawal of the US from the World Health Organization (The White House, 2025). As well as bullying Ukraine for its critical minerals (Kotassová and Butenko, 2025), and pressing for a compromising peace deal with Russia against Europe's interest. Europe, in addition, is faced with the apparent retreat of the USA as a security provider through NATO, in this sense, deepening the rift inside the European Union.

The actions outlined above already have an impact on America's global standing. According to the IPSOS survey (2025), the global average of 29 countries' perceptions regarding the United States having a somewhat or strongly positive influence in world affairs has dropped 13pp., resulting in a 46% positive perception. This survey was made

outcomes of his foreign policy.

## The destruction of the American dream?

Given the abovementioned, Trump's discourse regarding South Africa's land ownership reparations policies, dubbing a white genocide -- white supremacist statement centred in an exclusionary nationalism (Wilson, 2018) -- and the humiliation suffered by Ramaphosa in the meeting of the Oval Office shows the inherent racism of MAGA's ideology. Altogether with the anti-liberal and resentful attacks on Ivy Leagues institutions, like Columbia and Harvard, demonstrates the implicit anti-liberal perspective of the same movement (Clark, 2018). Eroding diplomatic protocol and freedom of opinion, inherent in American society, with a virulent discourse, supported with actions, aiming at political gain.

Furthermore, another critical issue, pivotal to Trump's election in this conjecture of far-right engagement and ascension, is immigration. Trump demonstrates to his political base from MAGA that this specific worldview, of exclusion and discrimination, will be enforced through aggressive rhetoric. The combination of administrative actions declaring immigrants, particularly Latin Americans, as "invaders aliens", deputizing state and local police, and simultaneously cutting federal funding from sanctuary jurisdictions, exhibits the punitive diplomacy settled in a narcissistic perspective of the international system (Frelick, 2025).

## Final considerations

Trump canalizes the discontentment of a specific segment of American society, their racism, and prejudice, for political gain. He and his movement are the personification of this contempt of a liberal and progressive world. Through aggressive rhetoric combined with actions a specific agenda is set: one of exclusion, of one America, with its particularities and vicissitude. A society where power and ego is paramount and prevalent, one America above all and everyone, with specific roles for each individual. Where relations are purely transactional and aimed for personal gain. A place where fear is enforced, with only the weakest part making compromises and the value of covenants are disregarded.

MAGA's ideology reveals the downfall of the United States hegemony gradually. The actions taken domestically and internationally shows a decision-making process built upon an egocentric, isolationist and authoritarian basis that weakens over its second mandate. Trump, through its strategy toward a former Pax Americana, presents an effective perspective on how emotions, such as fear and hatred, assist the erosion of U.S. democracy.

Regarding the pivotal question handling this analysis, Trump policies shows a negative perspective over his highly glorified "Make America Great Again". The punitive foreign policy, alongside with tough domestic measures, point to an America burst by radical right, which led to extensive damage in international order and critical problems in U.S. economic, political and social spheres. The unattractive, nationalist, and rogue United States run by Trump indicate, previously, the brutal challenges that the international order will need to resolve in 2028.



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