

# Would A Trump Presidency Bring Back Isolationism and Threaten NATO?

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Global Research, March 13, 2024

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#)

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*Indian academic Pratap Bhanu Mehta, a former president of the Centre for Policy Research, [writes](#) that a Trump election would be a threat for democracy in the US. Other experts have argued Trump could endanger NATO and bring back American isolationism. Things might not be quite so simple, though.*

As I [wrote](#) recently, besides the much talked about issue of NATO's enlargement, one should also consider the expansion of the US infamous Central Intelligence Agency (CIA): according to a recent New York Times's [exposé](#), in the past decade the Agency has backed a "network of spy bases" in Ukraine, including "12 secret locations along the Russian border" and a "secret intelligence partnership" has transformed the country into "one of Washington's most important intelligence partners against the Kremlin." [Commenting on that](#), Mark Episkopos, a Eurasia Research Fellow at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, highlights the fact that such a CIA-Ukraine partnership actually "deepened under the Trump administration, yet again putting the lie to the baseless idea that former President Trump was somehow amenable to Russia's interests while in office."

Moreover, in December 2017 then US President Donald Trump sold Kyiv "defensive" weapons, which, according to University of Chicago political science professor John Mearsheimer, "certainly looked offensive to Moscow and its allies in the Donbas region." Of course, Ukrainian-American ties grew under US incumbent president Joe Biden, with 2021 Operation Sea Breeze 'provocations the [U.S.-Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership](#) the same year, and much more, all the way to today' crisis. The point however is that albeit arguably less blatantly hostile to Moscow (in some areas), it would be inaccurate to describe the previous Trump presidency as anything remotely similar to a "pro-Russian" administration.

It is true that last month, speaking at a rally, Trump said he once told an unnamed NATO

ally that he would not, as the president, defend allies who fail to meet the Alliance's defense spending duties. According to himself, he said:

"You didn't pay? You're delinquent? No, I would not protect you. In fact, I would encourage them to do whatever the hell they want. You gotta pay. You gotta pay your bills."

This kind of rhetoric, though, typical as it is of the former president style, should rather be interpreted as pre-election rhetoric to inflame his base – plus as a valid criticism, from an American perspective, of the fact that most NATO countries do [fail to meet the agreed expenses goal](#) of using at least 2 percent of their GDP in military spending.

This of course overburdens Washington – at the expense of its taxpayers. Trump's (rhetorical) point has been denounced by many as a serious threat of letting Russia "conquer" much of Europe. In the real world, though, Moscow has [no goal of conquering Ukraine](#) (as any serious expert will [tell you](#) – its main concerns being about NATO enlargement), much less any interest in invading NATO countries in Western Europe and thus bringing about Third World War – and, even if that were the case, the United States, with or without Trump, would of course have its own strategic reasons to oppose such hypothetical scenario by coming to the defense of its European allies, be they delinquent or not.

In the make-believe world of pro-Biden propagandists, Trump is a kind of "Russian agent" hell-bent on destroying American hegemony globally and thus letting "evil" prevail. The fantasies of some of the more naïve analysts of an "anti-imperialist" persuasion are quite similar, the only difference being that they perceive that to be a good thing and imagine the Republican favorite as a champion of multipolarity, world peace, and even of the Global South, if you will ([Venezuelans might differ](#)). None of that should be taken seriously, but, unfortunately, in the age of propaganda and of information warfare, it often does.

Rhetoric aside, far from being a marginal stance, the notion that military victory in Ukraine is unattainable is slowly gaining ground amid the American Establishment.

Trump could arguably be a little more quick to let it go, but that is all. James Stavridis, former NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe, [writing for Bloomberg](#) in November 2023, for instance, argued that Washington should learn from "the lessons of South Korea" and negotiate a ["land for peace" deal](#) to end combat in Ukraine.

This scenario would involve a kind of strategic retreat, from a Western perspective, to then invest in Western Ukraine, so to speak, so as to nurture it as a kind of Eastern European South Korea (with a persistent CIA presence, one could expect).

It is not always over even when it is "over": such a scenario would clearly not do much for regional stability or peace in the long run. As I've [written](#) on more than one occasion, even after peace is achieved, as long as the [Russian minority](#) remains marginalized in Ukraine and as long as NATO enlargement continues, there will still be plenty of room for tension and conflict.

There is yet another issue: with the escalation of conflict in Palestine, the center of gravity for global tensions has changed. Israel's ongoing military campaign in Gaza and the West Bank, plus its operation in Syria and Lebanon, are also part of the Jewish state's ["non-official](#)

[war” against Iran](#), with [global consequences](#). The current crisis in the Red Sea, involving the Houthis is largely a collateral effect of the US-backed disastrous Israeli campaign in the Levant. Well, it turns out Trump is, by all indication, more of an unconditional supporter of Israel than Biden is – no matter how many red lines are crossed by the Jewish state in the Middle East. One may recall that it was then president Trump who [assassinated Iranian general Soleimani](#), for instance. Recently, Trump has famously [stated](#) that Tel Aviv must “finish the problem.”

When [interviewed](#) for a Boston Globe’s story titled “[Vote all you want. The secret government won’t change](#)”, in 2014, Michael J. Glennon, professor of international law at The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University (and author of “National Security and Double Government”), explained that much of the US foreign policy “programs” are, as John Kerry once famously said, “on autopilot”, and that “policy after policy after policy all continue virtually the same way that they were in the George W. Bush administration.” This situation is explained by this analyst with the concept of a “double government”, which is how he describes an almost self-governing defense and national security apparatus that operates in the United States without much accountability. Glennon’s aforementioned book was praised by former members of the State Department, Defense Department, CIA, and the White House. There is no reason to assume its conclusions are less true today.

To sum it up, there are limits on how much change a US president, on its own, can bring about to the superpower’s system of “double government” in terms of defense and foreign policy. The center of gravity of global tensions is changing, and Ukraine is no longer that important, to put it bluntly. Finally, Trump’s record as a former president in no way allows for a description of his administration either as “isolationist” or as “pro-Russian”.

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*This article was originally published on [InfoBrics](#).*

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