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The Paradox of Trump 2.0

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PROSPER MALANGMEI, APR 13 2025

In his return to the White House, Donald Trump once again sounded the slogan “Make America Great Again” (MAGA), which echoed nationalist pride and nostalgic appeal. Yet, beneath the populist rhetoric lies a paradox: while claiming to restore American greatness, Trump’s political agenda systematically undermines the pillars that historically sustained it. From the liberal international order (LIO) and democratic institutions to America’s global economic leadership and soft power influence, Trump 2.0 appears not to be rebuilding American preeminence but instead dismantling its foundations. As the United States (U.S.) retreats from global leadership and veers into political polarisation, it risks ceding geopolitical ground to China and descending into domestic instability. What results is not a renewed era of greatness but a new phase of grief—economically, diplomatically, and ideologically.

To understand what is at stake, one must first ask: what made America great? The post-World War II LIO is central to the answer. Anchored by institutions such as the United Nations (UN), World Trade Organisation (WTO), International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank (WB), and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), these institutions were primarily designed by the U.S. to foster peace, economic interdependence, neoliberalism, free trade and democratic norms. Coupled with this institutional architecture was America’s unparalleled soft power—a term coined by Joseph Nye (2004)—referring to its ability to influence global affairs not through coercion but through attraction. Hollywood, Silicon Valley, and the Ivy League exemplified a cultural and intellectual hegemony that inspired admiration and emulation worldwide. The American Dream, symbolising economic growth and individual liberty, became an aspiration for many who want a better living standard.

America’s economic leadership was dominant. The U.S. dollar functioned as the world’s reserve currency, its markets drove global growth, and its innovations—from microchips to vaccines—set the pace of technological progress. For decades, the U.S. was a military superpower and a beacon of democratic institution and capitalism, where academic freedom, meritocracy, and multiculturalism prosper. Trump’s recent political resurgence threatens to unravel this legacy. His nationalist and isolationist policy goes against multilateralism, rejects immigration, and erects trade barriers—all under the ruse of restoring sovereignty and MAGA. Yet, these policies conflict directly with the LIO, which enables America’s hegemony.

Perhaps the most conspicuous example is Trump’s antagonism toward U.S. alliances and multilateral institutions. His labelling of NATO as “obsolete”, withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord, threats to exit the World Health Organisation (WHO) during a global pandemic, and his undermining of the WTO represent a radical break from years of bipartisan foreign policy consensus. Trump’s plan does not project strength but signals a cession from responsibility and leadership, creating a power vacuum increasingly filled by China, Russia, and regional powers in international politics. Trump and Zelensky’s clash in the Oval Office does not augur well for the allies to repose faith in the U.S. for security.

In economic terms, Trump’s “America First” trade policy led to tariff wars with allies and adversaries, particularly China. While framed as a strategy to protect American manufacturing, these trade wars resulted in increased consumer costs, retaliatory tariffs that hurt U.S. farmers, and disruptions in global supply chains. The rejection of multilateral trade agreements, such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), allowed China to enhance its influence in Asia-Pacific markets unopposed. China has instituted a Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in the Asia-Pacific. Trump’s protectionist policies pose significant challenges to the American economy and the broader

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process of free trade, a domain in which the U.S. has historically played a leading and trendsetting role.

More disturbing is the erosion of American democratic norms under Trump's presidency. The deportation of student protestors, cutting research funding to universities, curtailing scientific research collaboration, Trump supporters attacking Capitol Hill, threatening to cut funds for the DEI programme (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion), reducing USAID (United States Agency for International Development) and Elon Musk's interference in governance mark a significant democratic backsliding. America's international image as a stable democracy—once a source of soft power—is now shadowed by internal strife and political extremism.

As the U.S. turns inward, China accelerates its global ascent, often occupying the very spaces the U.S. vacates. Through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China is expanding its geopolitical and economic footprint across Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Beijing now leads in renewable energy investments, scientific research, and infrastructure diplomacy, projecting itself as an alternative to U.S.-led LIO. China's growing participation in UN peacekeeping, aggressive technological advancements in semiconductors and 6G further illustrate this shift. In contrast, Trump's withdrawal from world forums surrendered normative and strategic ground to Beijing—transforming what was once a unipolar world led by the U.S. into a multipolar contest with authoritarian overreach.

The consequences of these policy shifts are deeply felt domestically and internationally. Domestically, America is experiencing rising political polarisation, cultural division, and economic recession. Globally, trust in American leadership is decreasing. Allies in Europe and Asia increasingly question U.S. reliability. Multilateral cooperation is strained by American unpredictability. Trump has asserted that both allies and adversaries have exploited the U.S., resulting in substantial national losses. By portraying America as a victim, Trump appeals to nationalist sentiments, encapsulated in his slogan MAGA. This narrative parallels China's strategic invocation of its historical experience of foreign invasions and national humiliation, which contributed to the decline of the *Pax Sinica*. In contemporary world politics, both the U.S. and China appear to be mobilising nationalism to rejuvenate their respective nations—whether to sustain *Pax Americana* or to revive a new form of *Pax Sinica*.

If America continues on Trump's trajectory, it will not result in greatness but in grief and, consequently, a decline of influence, legitimacy, and power. The U.S. may be on the verge of experiencing an economic downturn reminiscent of the Great Depression (1929–1939), a period marked by a catastrophic stock market crash and prolonged recession. Recent developments, such as the announcement of China's DeepSeek AI—positioned as a potential rival to ChatGPT—have generated significant volatility in U.S. financial markets, contributing to investor uncertainty. Additionally, the ongoing tariff-driven trade tensions under Trump's administration have fuelled bearish trends in the stock market. In this context, the slogan MAGA could transform into “Make America Grieve Again”, similar to the Great Depression.

Donald Trump's MAGA rhetoric may appeal to those nostalgic for a bygone era of unchallenged American supremacy. However, the policy path it charts erodes the very foundations of that supremacy. America's greatness was built not on walls and tariffs but on openness, alliances, leadership, and democratic integrity. In undermining these principles, Trump 2.0 risks replacing greatness with grief—imperiling the American exceptionalism and the global order it once led. If the U.S. is to reclaim true greatness, it must recommit to the ideals and institutions that elevated it, not retreat from them. Trump must understand that states run on statecraft, not on populism. Populism can win an election, but in the long run, populist policy is detrimental to the state.

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