

Is Restraint a Realistic Option for Donald Trump?

Written by Özgür Öztürk

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ÖZGÜR ÖZTÜRK, JUN 23 2025

Six months have passed since Donald Trump was inaugurated as the 47th President of the United States on January 20th. In this short period, both domestic and international politics have witnessed rapid and turbulent developments—from heightened tensions between Israel and Iran to Trump's controversial decision to launch airstrikes against Iranian targets. These events raise important questions about the trajectory of American foreign policy under Trump's leadership. To understand what lies ahead, it is helpful to examine these actions in the context of broader shifts in the international system and the evolving rules of the liberal international order.

Leading realist scholars such as John J. Mearsheimer, Stephen M. Walt, Barry R. Posen, and Christopher Layne have actively debated the foreign policy choices facing the Trump administration. They argue that Trump must operate in an increasingly multipolar system shaped by the resurgence of great powers like China and Russia. Realists contend that multipolarity is inherently more unstable than bipolarity and more prone to great power conflicts. The pursuit of global hegemony by past US administrations, despite this structural shift, has only deepened instability and heightened the risk of war. In this context, realists advocate for a grand strategy of restraint—a policy that limits military entanglements abroad and focuses on core national interests. Yet, whether such a strategy is compatible with Trump's political agenda remains questionable. Exploring the feasibility of restraint under Trump is crucial to understanding the possible trajectory of US foreign policy in the coming years.

“The old world is dying, and the new world is struggling to be born; now is the time for monsters”, the famous quote by Antonio Gramsci, is often used to describe moments of structural turbulence in the international system. Indeed, the history of international relations is largely a history of great powers seeking to build and maintain international order. In the post-Cold War era, the “old world” came to refer to the liberal international order that the United States sought to institutionalize as the sole power. Drawing on the perceived legitimacy of liberal democracy—which some declared as the “end of history”—the US converted its unmatched material power into a hegemonic project cloaked in universalist rhetoric. Milestones such as Russia's accession to the IMF and the World Bank (1992), China's admission to the WTO (2002), and the expansion of NATO and the EU into Eastern Europe were seen as signs of global convergence around the liberal order.

However, this narrative began to unravel. The US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the 2008 global financial crisis, Brexit, Trump's rise to power, Russia's renewed aggression in Ukraine, and China's military expansion have collectively undermined the foundations of the liberal order. What once seemed like an inevitable trajectory toward liberal convergence now appears to be giving way to a fragmented and contested international order.

These shifts in the global order were explicitly acknowledged in the 2017 US National Security Strategy, published during Trump's first term. The document marked a departure from post-Cold War assumptions by declaring the return of “great power competition,” as China and Russia were increasingly seen as strategic rivals challenging U.S. global influence. Since then, discussions of systemic change have intensified. The 2025 Munich Security Conference echoed this view, concluding that the international system is moving steadily toward multipolarity—not only with the assertiveness of China and Russia, but also with the growing geopolitical weight of emerging powers such as India, Japan, South Africa, and Brazil. This transition underscores the complexity and fragmentation of the evolving world order.

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The developments outlined above inevitably led to a corrosive weakening of the rules underpinning the international order. The United States has long eroded the principle of sovereign equality by stretching the boundaries of international law and crafting exceptional rules to justify its military interventions around the globe. Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine constituted a blatant violation of the principle of territorial integrity. Although Trump expressed a desire to win the Nobel Peace Prize during his second presidential term, he quickly deepened the erosion of international norms by suggesting the annexation of the Panama Canal and Greenland—if necessary, by force. His unilateral imposition of tariffs further extended this transformation into the realm of international trade. These shifts in the rules of the international order are both products of ongoing structural fluctuations and factors that intensify them. As such, American foreign policy and the restraint strategy must be assessed in light of these broader structural transformations.

The principles of the restraint strategy emerged from the post-Cold War debate over American grand strategy. Within this debate, a group of realist scholars in international relations contended that the U.S. pursuit of global liberal hegemony was both costly and counterproductive, ultimately endangering American national security. In their view, Washington's hegemonic ambitions led to unnecessary military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, fueled the threat of global terrorism, and provoked the formation of a Russo-Chinese alignment against the United States by expanding NATO and promoting democracy abroad.

Realists caution that the alternative to global hegemony is not a full retreat into isolationism confined to the Western Hemisphere. Instead, they argue that preserving the balance of power in key regions—namely Europe, the Asia-Pacific, and the Middle East—is essential for safeguarding U.S. national interests. From this perspective, the rise of a regional hegemon in Europe or the Middle East does not currently pose a serious threat, and thus, the United States should scale back its military presence in these areas, encouraging local actors to assume responsibility for their own security. However, China's rise in the Asia-Pacific region is regarded as the primary strategic challenge to the United States. Accordingly, American efforts should concentrate on counterbalancing Chinese power in that region. Realists believe that Trump could feasibly integrate regional powers such as India, Japan, and South Korea into an anti-China coalition—and potentially even bring Russia, under Putin, into this alignment.

Shortly after securing victory in the presidential election, Donald Trump asserted that the Russia-Ukraine war would never have begun had he been in office, and that he would have brought it to an end swiftly after assuming power. He also urged European allies to increase their defense spending and to reduce their dependence on the American security umbrella. In a speech delivered in Riyadh on May 13, Trump emphasized that the prosperity and security of the Middle East must be achieved by the region's own leaders and peoples—not by Western powers pursuing a vision of global liberal hegemony. His views were echoed by key members of his administration. Speaking in Brussels on February 12, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth stated that, in light of “hard strategic realities,” the Trump administration's top priority is “deterring war with China in the Asia-Pacific,” rather than focusing on Europe. On May 25, Tom Barrack—Trump's ambassador to Ankara and Special Envoy for Syria—posted on social media that the Sykes-Picot Agreement was a historical mistake and that the era of Western interventionism in the Middle East had come to an end.

Such statements have led some analysts to believe that the Trump administration has learned from the foreign policy failures of previous governments and will adopt a strategy of restraint going forward. However, these expectations overlook a fundamental reality: since 1945, the United States has acted not as a traditional balance-of-power actor, but as a multi-regional hegemon with unmatched military capabilities. This historical and structural context offers a foundation for drawing several key conclusions when analyzing the foreign policy trajectory of the Trump administration.

First, the Cold War was not a straightforward period of bipolar balance between two superpowers. Rather, it was a time when the United States consolidated hegemony across Europe, the Middle East, and the Asia-Pacific, while the Soviet Union struggled to catch up through an arms race. In this light, it is unlikely that the Trump administration would easily abandon America's entrenched hegemonic posture across multiple regions. Additionally, negotiating the withdrawal of U.S. forces from key strategic theaters, particularly with European allies who have long embraced the American security presence, presents a major challenge—one that also undermines prospects for ending the Russia-

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Ukraine war through diplomacy.

Second, a major insight of power transition theory is that it is often the established hegemon—not the rising challenger—that adopts revisionist behavior. In line with this, the Trump administration quickly took disruptive steps after coming to power: it floated ideas of annexing the Panama Canal, Canada, and Greenland; signed a precious metals deal with Ukraine amidst its war with Russia; imposed unilateral tariffs; withdrew from the Iran nuclear agreement; and openly supported Israeli military actions in the Middle East. These moves destabilized the strategic status quo in the Western Hemisphere, Europe, and the Middle East.

Finally, the Trump administration's shift toward revisionism is also driven by domestic political factors. The influence of the pro-Israel lobby encouraged policies that supported Israel's actions in Gaza and guaranteed its security in the event of conflict with Iran. Furthermore, the growing internal elite struggle—intensified by Trump's bureaucratic purges—has contributed to a more confrontational foreign policy, particularly evident in the administration's escalating rivalry with China.

Given these realities, Trump's aspiration to be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize—based on his stated intention to end the Russia-Ukraine war and withdraw American troops from the Middle East—appears to rest on shaky ground. His recent authorization of airstrikes against Iran further undermines the credibility of such ambitions. In conclusion, there are growing indications that the Trump administration is unlikely to embrace a genuine strategy of restraint in the period ahead. Instead, the dynamics of great power politics are poised to dominate, with the United States continuing to position itself as a military rival to both Russia and China—not only in the Asia-Pacific, but also across Europe and the Middle East.

About the author:

Özgür Öztürk completed his PhD at Ankara University with a dissertation titled “Insular Great Power and Hegemony: The Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman Era in United States Foreign Policy”. His research interests include international security, American foreign policy and Turkish foreign policy.