

Trump's Old World Order

Does he want deals with Russia and China to carve up the planet? He should tell Americans.

By [The Editorial Board](#)

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With his first weeks back in office, and especially after Friday's Oval Office brawling with Ukraine's president, it's clear President Trump has designs for a new world order. Perhaps he could share this vision with the country when he addresses Congress on Tuesday.

The conventional view of Mr. Trump is that he's above all transactional. He wants deals, at home and abroad, that he can sell as great successes. But the way his second term is unfolding, this may undersell his ambition. Mr. Trump's strategy seems to be moving toward that of Tucker Carlson and JD Vance, who view America as in decline and no longer able to lead or defend the West.

It seems clear that Mr. Trump wants to wash his hands of Ukraine. "You're either going to make a deal, or we're out," Mr. Trump ordered Volodymyr Zelensky on Friday. This will embolden Vladimir Putin to insist on even harsher terms for a cease-fire deal. Mr. Trump seems mainly concerned with rehabilitating Mr. Putin in world councils, such as the G-7. He wants an early summit with the Russian, though Mr. Putin has made no concessions on Ukraine or anything else.

While he solicits Moscow, Mr. Trump is hammering traditional U.S. friends. He plans 25% tariffs on Canada and Mexico, in violation of his own USMCA trade deal, and his defense secretary has threatened to invade Mexico to pursue drug cartels. He wants to hit Western Europe with heavy tariffs on its autos, and slap reciprocal tariffs on the rest of the trading world.

These tariffs are harsher than those he has put on China. He is clearly courting Xi Jinping, the Communist Party boss, calling him a great leader and talking about a new mutual understanding. He has shown no similar interest in defending Taiwan, and he has said in the past that China can easily dominate the island democracy in a conflict. Watching Mr. Trump and Ukraine, the leaders of Taiwan and Japan should be deeply worried.

Meanwhile in the Americas, Mr. Trump has demanded control over the Panama Canal, which the U.S. ceded by treaty in 1999. And he wants Denmark to sell Greenland to the U.S. These moves taken together hint at a worldview that has long been the goal of American isolationists: Let China dominate the Pacific, Russia dominate Europe, and the U.S. the Americas. The Middle East would presumably remain a region of contention, at least until Mr. Trump does a nuclear deal with Iran.

All of this would amount to an epochal return to the world of great power competition and balance of power that prevailed before World War II. It's less a brave new world than a reversion to a dangerous old one.

Mr. Trump hasn't articulated this, but some of the intellectuals surrounding him have. Elbridge Colby, nominated for the chief strategy post at the Pentagon, has argued that the U.S. must leave Europe and the Middle East to their own devices to focus on the Asia-Pacific. But Mr. Colby has also said that South Korea might have to fend for itself, and he said in a letter to us last year that "Taiwan isn't itself of existential importance to America."

Mr. Vance is the most vigorous promoter of the abandon Ukraine strategy, arguing that the war with Russia is little more than an ethnic dispute. Ross Douthat, the [New York Times](#) columnist who has become Mr. Vance's Boswell, says the Vice President and President are merely "stripping away foreign policy illusions." He says they believe America is "overstretched" and needs to "recalibrate and retrench."

Yet that isn't what either leader is saying openly. Mr. Trump says he is making America great again, not retreating from the defense of freedom. He says he wants "peace," but is it peace with honor, or the peace of the

grave for Ukraine and accommodation to Chinese domination in the Pacific? And why isn't he increasing defense spending?

If Messrs. Trump and Vance really are "stripping away" illusions, why not have the courage to say what those illusions are? Perhaps it's because such retreat might not be as popular as vague promises of peace. And perhaps because American retreat might not be as peaceful as they think.

If Russia drives peace on its terms in Ukraine, look for Russia to invade elsewhere in the future and other stronger states to grab territory from their neighbors. Look for America's allies to seek new trading and security relationships that don't rely on the U.S. and might conflict with U.S. interests. Japan will have little choice but to become a nuclear power to deter China, and there will be others.

As Charles Krauthammer famously said, decline is a choice. Mr. Trump has an obligation to tell Americans what new order he thinks he is building. Then we can have a debate about his intentions and its consequences. Tuesday night would be a good moment to make his ambitions clear.