

The World's Wildcard Lynchpin

Trying to make sense of a Trump-led US as a global actor

Insight paper by Harmattan Risk

2 February 2026

The US, a lynchpin global player, has become a change bomb, and having a clear sense of the US as an agent on the world stage is critical to sense-making that can inform appropriate strategic responses. But as it stands, Trump, whose character shapes his administration, is a wildcard. He is seemingly bored to tears by stability in any issue he deals with, and bored by a set menu of priorities.

Do we resign ourselves to perpetually playing catch up with US moves and their reverberations, or is it possible to get ahead of the Trumpian storm with a reasonably accurate sketch of the US as a global actor? If its moves were guided by strategic rationality, we would be able to extrapolate some idea of its future behaviour, and even a sense of how the international system might look in a few years and the critical challenges any given state might present.

Seasoned observers of US politics and international behaviour might have foreseen some of what it is happening now, but by and large they did not expect Godzilla. Thus, they have often latched onto their own predispositions to fill in the considerable blanks. This has, for the most part, yielded two poles of interpretation. One is that Trump and his team are acting on a strategic assessment, and that despite apparent mayhem their moves are rational, even coldly calculating. The other is that the US has succumbed to the baser aspects of personal rule. Thus, Trump's eccentric character and ego are the main source of US global behaviour. Along with this is the notion that his administration's ideological ardour injects additional irrationality, because dense ideological lenses can lead their wearers to seeing ghosts and walking into walls.

The emerging reality no doubt lies somewhere in between, but to triangulate to an approximation, we need to prod around both poles of interpretation. How will we do this? As an anachronism (old-school Westerner) I am hopelessly biased when it comes to Trump, and as we noted earlier, many experts are having trouble escaping their preconceptions. Thus, I decided to ask an extraterrestrial friend for help. It

(he or she, I'm not sure – it's a black box with some thin filaments protruding) is quite new to Earth, but it is a seasoned observer of planetary political dynamics in a number of star systems, so it can at least draw on comparative reference points. BeeBee (for Black Box or, as it likes to say, Boltzmann Brain) and I will have brief discussion in which I will try to pose some relevant questions, and BB will provide its replies as a relatively unbiased newcomer.

A caveat is that the result will not be an answer. Despite having been pulled into Trumpian dynamics since 2024, we are not experts on Trump or the US, and this brief piece cannot be much more than a thought experiment. That said, every reference point helps, and hopefully this is a contribution in that respect. Along with this, we can note that this is not an ethical assessment. Much of what Trump does, from ICE's indiscriminate methods at home to cutting aid abroad, is dubious from the perspective of humanitarian values. Ethics are relevant to an understanding of political dynamics, but for our purposes they are not particularly instructive.

With that, BB and I can begin.

Author: BB, do you have a sense of a strategic concept or broader rationale that could be underpinning some of the behaviour we've seen?

BB: Yes. The US feels that it has been like Atlas, with the burden of upholding a global order when other powers are free to pursue their own interests without that encumbrance. The old order helped to keep the US safe during the Cold War, when things were relatively simple. Since then, the world has become too complex for any one power to retain centrality in the international system. There is a common historical observation: the most powerful polity becomes the hegemon, and hegemons decline under the weight of the responsibility, ultimately becoming weaker than prior to running the show, if they survive intact at all. The US is trying to avoid becoming another example of this dynamic. It is trying something quite new: proactively relinquishing hegemony in order to become more nimble and capable of focusing on its own core interests. On a practical level, the idea is that this should make the US even more powerful than it was, because it will be free of system maintenance and able to focus its power for its own benefit.

There is some irony in the outcry that the US has aroused among other Western leaders and among the commentariat. They are claiming that Trump's behaviour is leading to the demise of the rules-based international order, as though Trump hadn't noticed and would get back on board once he realised how reckless he'd been. The US has traded in a clunky minibus for a muscular sportscar. Members of the old

carpool can go find their own rides. The US did so sensing that the old gig was nearly up, and knowing that it would really be up once the US started tearing around town showing off its new wheels.

Author: So how does that position relate to some of the nasty treatment of American allies? It seems to me that this is partly for Trump's ego satisfaction. And within the concept you outlined, what would the limits to Trump's apparent abusiveness?

BB: The US wants to be able to focus on its own interests. It is trading in supremacy through centrality in the international system for supremacy through agility and leverage. That does not mean that it can do without allies, but alliances need to be beneficial to the US, not a burden. Past US administrations had tried to convince allies, particularly Europe and Canada, to do more in their own neighbourhoods, but no one really believed the US would stop being their backstop, and they continued to underinvest in their own power. Trump's US saw a dilemma. If it went off in pursuit of its own interests instead of carrying on with system maintenance, its allies might not be able to bear hostile pressure on their own and become useless to themselves and the US. The US decided it was time for some shock therapy. It has been a jerk, colloquially speaking, to try to get others to pull up their socks.

Again, in other Western countries we have seen clamour around the US' apparent unreliability as an ally and calls for becoming more independent of American power. And again there is some irony in this. This outcry is partly meant to chide the US, but for the US it would be music to the ears. Allies are finally facing up to the notion that they need to be responsible for themselves, which in turn that means that they will be less reliant on the US, and more useful to it when joint interests are challenged.

An example of the US approach could be Venezuela and Greenland, both cited by Trump's Western critics as evidence of destructive, irrational behaviour. Both cases could be interpreted as part a broader ploy when viewed in the context of the shock therapy approach. This is only a hypothesis, by the way. We don't really know what went on behind closed doors. Here goes:

My friends don't invest in their own power, but I feel I can't look after both them and myself anymore, and I'm also tired of holding the fort. I demonstrate my willingness to be break the old rules (Venezuela), then I tell them that if they are not willing to help guard an important patch of the neighbourhood (Greenland), I'll take it and guard it as my own turf. They freak out and commit a great deal of resources to the task. In fact, they coordinate on securing that patch for the first time. After that, they don't trust me very much, but that's fine, because they're finally taking their own power seriously. And I also made it a lot easier for them to sell bigger defence budgets to their own people, because my insolence and

threats have galvanised citizens too. Was the US really so coldly calculating? Perhaps not, but one can rightfully ask if Europe was ever going to take Greenland's security onto its own shoulders. They will now, at least to a large extent.

As for limits to the mistreatment of allies, for the most part they are the point at which further pressure on them starts to erode accrued gains. The Greenland case, for example, had gains up until tariff threats began to incur deep hostility and a market reaction. Trump backed off, and the episode levelled off to remain a nett benefit in terms of European commitment to Greenland's security.

US allies are going to have to develop a knack for understanding when what the US is asking for, whether in trade or security, is actually fair in terms of rebalancing and burden-sharing, or is actually aimed at getting them to do what they would have to do anyway if the US is not going to carry the slack. There is no point in kicking and screaming when the US has a point, however abrasively the point is made. On the other hand, the US has ditched the rule book of the old order, and it is well aware of its own power. It will press the envelope to see how much it can get in terms of its own specific interests. When that exceeds fairness or goes beyond joint interests, pushback is appropriate and it often works. Trump is sensitive to sustaining nett gain, and tends to back off when the balance sheet starts to slip.

Author: How do Ukraine and Russia play into this picture? Some observers think that Trump's administration has a concept of spheres of influence, and that it is setting Russia up to control the European sphere.

BB: The US does not feel that the precise post-war status of Ukraine is a critical national interest, the war itself is a significant risk and distraction, and further alienating Russia, a nuclear superpower, is not in the US' long-term interests. Thus, an expeditious end to the war is preferable to an ideal, or just, one. Europe has concerns that if Russia feels like it won, it might have the confidence to attack another European NATO country. The US has not stated that it has retracted the nuclear umbrella, and in its National Defense Strategy 2026 it declared that Europe (via NATO) should be responsible for its own *conventional* defence, strongly implying that the nuclear umbrella will persist. We can surmise that: In the US view, European concerns about Russian post-war moves, while justified, are another useful impetus for Europe to commit to self-defence, while the US will still thwart any Russian intention to use nuclear blackmail to gain hegemony in some or all of Europe.

As an aside, no one can say for certain how long the extended American nuclear deterrent will remain credible, but unless the US is prepared to see Europe's utility as an ally, and even as a trading partner,

severely diminish, it needs to sustain a certain level of credibility (even during the Cold War no one really knew what the US would do if Europe were attacked – nuclear deterrence is a mind game for the most part). It will likely remain intact for the foreseeable future. Europe is right to consider the possibility of facing Russian nuclear threats on its own. However, by taking responsibility for its conventional defence, it would look more valuable to the US and hence a retraction of the nuclear umbrella at some future point would be less likely. If it looks like a lost cause and a costly burden, then US calculations might shift.

As for spheres of influence, both the National Security Strategy and the National Defense Strategy make it clear that the US will initiate an updated Monroe doctrine, but they do not suggest that the US is going to relinquish its access to and freedom to manoeuvre in other regions. It has sought to warn China to the notion of a balance of power in the Indo-Pacific, making it clear that the US will respect China's core interests while at the same time remaining prepared to defend US regional interests. This will continue contestation, but, the US administration hopes, within clearly defined parameters, thereby reducing the potential for miscalculation. There is no evidence that Trump sees Russia as an appropriate hegemon in Europe, although the administration certainly has no aspiration to diminish Russia, partly because of deep-seated admiration for Putin's regime, and partly because it hopes to weaken the ties between Russia and China.

Author: How about Trump's apparent bent for personal rule? Is this rational or strategic too? It seems like it's all just about ego and ideology.

BB: I see some strategic rationality to it. The US has noted that its principal adversary, China, has effectively had one-man rule under Xi since 2012, and before that it was still highly authoritarian. This has made it possible for Chinese leaders to quickly initiate new policies and orientations, and to command their implementation. The US, by contrast, has typically seen policy momentum swing between elected governments, and it is far more difficult in the US democratic system to be agile and decisive (this is actually Xi's argument against democracy too).

The old rules-based international order was a sort of self-correcting, semi-automated machine in which the US and other states could take shelter. It required a lot of costly maintenance, but in terms of strategic thinking and innovation, if one wanted to, one could nearly go on autopilot. The system's demise is liberating for the US, but there is no more autopilot option. The US will need maximally agile decision-making and execution. That calls for a nimble leadership unimpeded by institutional constraints.

It also calls for strategic momentum, which one cannot achieve when subsequent leaders change direction.

Don't get me wrong. I disagree that authoritarianism is a good idea. A country might get lucky and have really wise leadership, but that is relatively rare in any system. Democracy, the full package and not just voting, protects people from bad leaders and keeps the door open for leadership changes. But if I was convinced that I knew what was best, and that somehow my wisdom would perpetuate in the system I constructed, then from my perspective, authoritarianism is rational. As for whether or not it is rational to try to build authoritarianism in a long-standing democracy, well, frankly speaking, with sufficient planning and the right conditions it is not unfeasible. Unfortunately for many Americans, there has not been concerted pushback against anti-democratic moves. They certainly generate far less noise and passion than the culture wars. Perhaps people cannot really believe that things could go that far – and that is usually how leaders manage to pull off the entrenchment of their rule, if they are so inclined. I would expect that Trump's top team is somewhat surprised at how relatively easy it has been so far, although it is early days and it is certainly premature to foresee an authoritarian US.

Author: Speaking of the culture wars, do you see any rationality to the administration's apparent bent for stoking them? That seems pretty dumb to me if it's trying to be a powerful, agile player – you can't have half your society hating the other half, or you never really get national consensus on anything, including appropriate foreign policy aims.

BB: This is a tricky one in the context of our question. It shows both rationality and ideological silliness. It is rational in two ways. First, if I were a master strategist on the global stage, I would be stronger if my team were more or less uniform in their confidence in me, and in their willingness to abide by my guidance. Naysayers weaken cohesion and give enemies the impression that my power base has cracks in it. I might not be able to get everyone to agree with me, but if I can at least get most people to resign to the pre-eminence of my principles, then I don't get drag from active naysayers and the cracks are less apparent to my foreign opponents. A culture war supported by a powerful state wears the naysayers down and might eventually achieve this situation.

Second, the domestic culture which the administration is seeking to create is masculine, hard-working, hostile to enemies and therefore willing to support strong national defence, and firm in their support for a domineering leader. In the US far-right perspective, woke-ism and limp-kneed liberalism have emasculated the US and woke-ism in particular has led to an explosion of contrived identities few of

which have America as their anchor point. It has made the US weak at home, and this weakens the US as a global actor in a dangerous world. Thus, the culture wars are essential to allow traits that make the US tough, cunning and resilient to take hold.

Again, then, although from an ethical perspective pitting people against each other is nasty, if the administration thinks it can achieve the kind of uniformity it is seeking, then it is rational to try. That said, compared to tinkering with the erosion of democracy, the culture wars look more likely to badly backfire. The idea in this process is that tensions build as the battle lines are defined, then there is sort of denouement before the opposing side gets tired and starts to resign to a new orientation, if only to get back to a semblance of normal life. But what if tensions gets stuck at the denouement or just keep getting worse? Then the country is starkly, persistently divided, and the goal of having a unified power base, and the appearance of cohesion from the perspective of foreign opponents, goes up in smoke.

While it is rational to try to force a unified orientation, persisting in the face of a worsening situation is a result of rogue ideological ardour. The administration is making the US look like a socio-political basket case on par with a fragile state. It had the option of building on remaining shared values and concerns, but it is very hard to switch gears now, because the government has had such a visible hand in the culture wars. This is going to be a drag on the administration's focus, and the US' global standing, for some time to come. I should add, while the culture wars make a lot of noise and in some ways actually distract from the administration's erosion of democratic institutions, at some point political-cultural resistance could begin to include, or shift towards, direct pushback against authoritarianism. It would have been a lot smarter for the administration to not get directly involved on the culture war front and just keep quietly nibbling away at institutions until it had achieved de facto non-democratic rule. Experienced dictators know that the less they show their hand, keep repression to the shadows and slowly normalise restrictions, the more willing people are to pretend that their form of government is not a troublesome matter. ICE agents carousing around effectively baiting political-cultural opponents is hardly from the best practice playbook.

Author: So far this is the only thing you've mentioned in which irrationality has been a major factor. I am assuming it's not the only example you can see.

BB: No, there are quite a few. I could even go on at length. But we need to keep this reasonably concise, so I'll just mention a few things that have stood out:

- **Climate change:** The US has been directly experiencing the effects of climate change, and it is painfully apparent to any clear thinker that unless it is addressed, all countries will become poorer and weaker, the US included. But it is not fashionable in US nationalist populist ideology: it is a global challenge and addressing it means partaking in global initiatives, and that would be an infringement on sovereignty. Additionally, the US has a lot of fossil fuels and selling them is lucrative for itself, whereas climate change action benefits everyone – that is against the spirit of America First. Thus, the US is handing the ever larger task of dealing with climate change to future generations of Americans, and meanwhile ceding the greentech arena to its number one adversary, China, who is gaining global leverage through its leadership in the sector.
- **Tariffs:** Tariffs can help reindustrialisation, but to do so they need to be either carefully targeted or simply imposed at a moderate level across the board. While US tariffs have had some of the intended effect, ego and ideology have significantly diminished the benefit. They have become a stick to wield and they have been applied very erratically. They have caused trading partners to distrust potential deals with the US and to seek to develop alternative partnerships, including with China, the US' main competitor as it seeks to rebuild its manufacturing base. And they have had an impact on market confidence in the dollar. A lower dollar might not be a bad thing for trade competitiveness, as Trump has said, but if it happens through a perception of economic eccentricity and not through controlled moves, it is hazardous in terms of economic stability.
- **Russia:** Military capacity aside, it is no exaggeration to characterise Russia as a fragile state, and it has been for a long time. It is run by a personalised network which is brittle and rigid, and even if Putin or another future leader wanted to initiate much needed socio-economic reform, fear of collapsing the edifice would be a major impediment. Aside from natural resources, Russia has little to offer that cannot be found in far less politically risky places. Meanwhile, Trump's administration seems to have a very naïve view of Putin and his regime. Admiration for Putin because he looks like a kindred far right strongman has hindered a clear view of highly divergent national interests and Russia's deep hostility to a dominant US, Trump-led or otherwise. Finally, while Russia has reasons to distrust China, it is certainly not going to risk that relationship because the capricious Trump suggests that there might be great deals to be had.
- **Allies and China:** While a degree of haranguing allies makes sense, as we discussed, when it starts to corrode the alliances on which the US depends for its economic and strategic competition with

China, it has clearly exceeded any strategic merit. That has certainly happened: erstwhile US allies are hedging their bets by walking back trade restrictions with China and strengthening bilateral engagement. Trump's ego, along with the satisfaction some members of his administration seem to take in belittling other countries, is mainly responsible for making China look relatively safer than it did under Biden. This creates a dilemma for the US – it can wave a stick even more to try to keep allies on board, but that could just make them walk the other way with even stronger commitment.

- **US soft power**: The Trump administration's crusade against multilateralism, along with cutbacks in diplomacy, aid, and public broadcasting, all deemed somehow too woke or too touchy-feely to be how a tough country engages, have left a gaping soft power void much to China's benefit. Proffered deals and pressure have their place, but they are no substitute for soft power in terms of sustaining global influence. Perhaps a cost-benefit analysis of where to trim and emphasise soft power would make sense, but dismantling it across the board has been the result of bias and ideological blinkers, not any rational strategic assessment.
- **Supporting “patriots” in Europe**: This is rather absurd, because as Trump well knows, nationalist populist movements ultimately put their own nations ahead of anyone else's interests, and see any diminution of sovereignty in the darkest light. If most of Europe were run by far right “patriot” parties, they would not be accommodating to a foreign country seeking to press its own ideas and plans in the region. The good vibes between far right parties are purely based on their shared contention against globalist elites and the old liberal order. Once they're in power, as it says on the label, their nations come first, and if they need a political lift, a pushy foreign power would do nicely. This is the Trump administration's ideological blinkers at play.
- **The apparent obsession with foreign adventures**: Trump was mainly elected to make Americans more prosperous and to give them better social mobility. Many people felt like the US government spent far too much time and energy on foreign affairs than they did on domestic challenges, and their view of America First was that American citizens were at the heart of it. Trump has an opportunity to deliver on that promise and thereby better secure the political future of the US far right. There is no escaping a need to manage global affairs and there are complementarities between global and domestic strategy, but Trump has been obsessed with international issues. He also creates them. Observers note two reasons. One is that for a major power they are easier than managing the thorny trade offs and sensibilities involved in domestic reform. They are also far more glamourous,

and hence more gratifying for the ego. The other is that Trump uses foreign issues as a distraction from domestic political vulnerabilities, such as the Epstein files and a perception of his weak performance on the domestic economic front. With respect to the latter, we might see a loop forming. The more distracted Trump is overseas, the worse his economic performance at home, the more vulnerable he becomes, and the more he relies on global galivanting to distract from his vulnerabilities. Thus, I suppose we have a third source of irrationality in addition to Trump's ego and innate eccentricity, and ideological blinkers – the administration's perceived need to create noise to obscure domestic vulnerabilities.

Author: We have a mixed bag. So, if you were an international planner in a company or NGO, what would you look at in order to sense future US moves and their reverberations?

BB: Stated strategy is a starting point. Both the National Security Strategy and the National Defense Strategy are plainly written and do seem to broadly reflect US behaviour so far. I would suggest that instead of relying on second-hand reviews, one reads them for oneself, since there are number of interpretations floating around which do not seem to be supported by what's in them. Of course they will not directly translate to action, but the authors seem to have taken considerable pains to spell out what makes the administration's strategy distinct, and they did not pull their punches in terms of the administration's ideological position.

We can expect to see US behaviour at least broadly consistent with stated strategy, as well as with the aim of reindustrialising and becoming a manufacturing power again. Additionally, given that the US has discarded the old rule book and is well aware of its own power and eager to use it for its own interests, we can anticipate the US using leverage and coercive rhetoric to try to get more than what is fair or sensible for others to give. That is entirely rational, and it is up to others to create costs that bring US demands back into balance. We will see more pushback, since it is becoming clear that appeasement invites more pressure. However, bear in mind the basic equation I mentioned earlier. The US administration tends to back down when nett gain starts to decline. If pushback occurs on an issue that the US sees as a critical national interest, then pushback might not be effective – the gain is essential, and so the US risk appetite would be very substantial. When critical national interests clash, the US will not be averse to using nearly any tool in its arsenal to come out on top. It sees that as its right in this new world where it is no longer the boring, responsible driver of the neighbourhood minibus. That is not to say that other countries should not challenge the US on critical issues, but they should pick their battles wisely and prepare themselves in advance for what could be a very rough ride.

The irrational aspects of US global behaviour, namely Trump's eccentric character, ideological ardour and distracting from domestic political vulnerabilities, will be major variables too. I would suspect that the last of these will become increasingly important over time, especially as it relates to Trump's performance on the economy. On the one hand, distracting from underperformance will drive foreign adventurism and brinksmanship, but on the other, if economic performance becomes a strong bilateral issue in the US, Trump could be forced to buckle down, in which case he would not have the bandwidth for global gameplaying and might even try to stabilise foreign relations so he could better focus on the homefront.

Author: Do you think the US might actually start a major war if Trump really starts to flop on the homefront, as a way of diverting attention and stirring up nationalist support?

BB: Maybe, but I don't think he would risk a serious war unless critical US interests or the country itself were really threatened. He tends to push those who let themselves be pushed or who are far weaker than the US, and thus far there have been instances when even a moderate increase in risk to himself or the US has caused Trump to calm down. As a useful distraction from his problems at home, he would not mind a war with limited aims and a clear chance of victory, but he would be highly averse to one with high stakes. That said, we have not seen him in full political crisis mode yet, and given the importance of the question, we should take any sanguine answer with a grain of salt.

Author: Just out of curiosity, would Canada be one of those cases that's too risky? After all, Trump has talked about melding it with the US, and we have the reviving of Monroe doctrine.

BB: Canada probably would be too risky. Canada is not going to become a threat, so war with it would be optional, not essential. If it happened, the US would win the war but probably lose the peace in a big way, and even by today's hazy moral standards it would become an international pariah. The administration would likely know this pretty quickly if it got to the point of seeking a feasibility assessment. But again, given the stakes, it is worth keeping an open mind, as Canada is apparently doing. Canada also needs to ready for US subversion, which would focus on dividing provinces and political-cultural segments in order to create gaps for US influence. This would be less risky than a forceful takeover, although it might require more patient persistence than a Trumpian US can muster.

Author: Thanks BB, we'll leave it there.

BB: You're welcome, and good luck to all Earthlings in this tumultuous period. By the way, if things ever get too hot to handle, there's always a seat in the wormhole traverser.

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