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Turning the World on its Head: Trump Returns

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Donald Trump's return to the White House is already achieving what he promised: turning the world on its head.

Over the last few weeks, Trump has stated that he will not rule out using force to acquire Greenland, showing that he has no regard whatsoever for Greenlanders as a self-determining people, or the Kingdom of Denmark as a faithful NATO ally. He is threatening to destroy the Canadian economy with punishing tariffs if we do not join the United States. Canadians have not heard this kind of annexationist rhetoric for a century and a half. And Trump's combative statements at the World Economic Forum yesterday set up the European Union as a hostile competitor against which he may impose tariffs.

Is Trump deliberating converting the US into an adversary of its key Western allies under the incredulous guise that this is advancing American self-interests? Could our adversaries ask for anything more beneficial to them than Trump's bombastic, destructive rhetoric that seeks to divide democratic allies?

This week we have Trump on Truth Social declaring his love for the Russian people and his "very good relationship with President Putin," while blaming President Zelensky for resisting Russia when it launched its brutal, unprovoked, full-scale invasion of Ukraine's sovereign territory. According to Trump's logic, Zelensky should have surrendered to its larger neighbour before the war started simply because Putin demanded that they do so. Trump is telling us how he thinks small states should behave when bullied by a major power.

Welcome to Trump's desired new world order: might makes right. Xi and Putin are certainly welcoming the end of the U.S.-led liberal order.

Now Trump is declaring that he is going to stop "the ridiculous war" in Ukraine – and stating on Truth Social that he will be doing "a very big FAVOR" for Putin. While threatening further sanctions to cripple the Russian economy if Putin does not reach a deal with Zelensky, the language is nonetheless telling: the US President is talking about doing favours for Russia. This is a dramatic reversal of the tenor of all recent US strategic documents taking a hardline against the Kremlin's brutal and unjustified war on its neighbour. Trump shows a softening of U.S. resolve, not a hardening of it.

Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy, released last month, describes the U.S. our "closest partner and ally in the Arctic." History shows that this is an apt description.

Enter Donald Trump, the master of uncertainty and disruption. If Canadians think that our Arctic and North is somehow insulated from this, they should reconsider.

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Our new Arctic foreign policy seeks to “advance bilateral cooperation with the United States in the North at all levels of government in existing areas of importance and explore new avenues of cooperation in critical areas of national interest.” These include the defence of North America and the bolstering of our shared security and safety. Trump’s abject dismissal of Canada’s military and accusations of lax border security do not offer a strong foundation of mutual respect upon which to build forward together. His economic threats could disrupt priorities related to energy security, supply chains, and critical mineral development. I am also skeptical that Trump’s interests will align with Canada’s in mitigating climate change, marine and terrestrial conservation, and the protection of transboundary species. Opportunities around Indigenous cross-border mobility may also find that they hit a Trump border wall.

At best, Trump’s recent statements are bombast and bluster, seeking to push the world back on its heels so that he can extract concessions and create an advantageous position from which to negotiate to advance his interests. Or perhaps it really is his plan to destroy the liberal democratic international order that the U.S. has been building over the last century. Whatever the case, we face a different U.S. than we did even a few weeks ago.

John Winthrop’s idea that the U.S. should behave like a “city on a hill” – a beacon of light that the world would watch and want to emulate – no longer drives Trump and his sycophants. Trump is in danger of extinguishing America’s inspirational light in the world – which is exactly what our adversaries around the world would love to see happen. Canada and its circumpolar allies have stood up to Chinese “wolf warrior” diplomacy that insisted small states have no right to question a large state’s diktats. It is sad that this logic may now have to apply to Trump and his administration.

It is too early to predict where this will all lead, but Canadians need to have serious conversations about our priorities and values. I have been a stalwart supporter of the Canada-US relationship throughout my career, and I remain convinced that our destiny in North America is one where our two sovereign countries prosper as close partners and reliable allies. It is time to reach out to Americans, and particularly those who voted for Trump, and remind them why an independent Canada is the best neighbour and partner that anyone could imagine.