

The architects of 'America First' and the potential consequences of a Trump victory for European security

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The prospect of Donald Trump's potential victory in the US presidential election raises questions regarding the consequences of his possible presidency for European security. During the election campaign, he repeatedly announced his intention to swiftly bring an end to the Russian-Ukrainian war and questioned the extent of US involvement in NATO. In a potential second term, his foreign and security policy may be more heavily influenced by think tanks, non-profit organisations, and conservative groups that have emerged in recent years. These groups bring together former Trump administration staffers and attract significant funding from key Republican Party donors.

These organisations are involved not only in devising political plans but also in recruiting candidates for future government roles. Although their proposed solutions share common elements, such as initiating Ukraine-Russia peace negotiations or reducing US military involvement in Europe, they differ significantly in several aspects. However, implementing their plans will depend on who is appointed to key positions in the new administration, as well as the post-election balance of power in Congress.

Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 presidential election came as a surprise, as Hillary Clinton had led the polls up until election day. As a result, when he assumed office, he had neither a detailed political plan nor sufficient personnel. The Heritage Foundation, one of the most influential conservative think tanks in the US, established in the 1970s, attempted to fill this gap to some extent. At the time, the organisation's leadership endeavoured to both persuade Trump to adopt some of its political proposals (including a plan for introducing significant tax breaks, which was put to a vote and adopted at the end of 2017) and to assist him in finding candidates for the most critical roles in his administration. Despite these efforts, numerous vacancies and a high turnover rate among top-level officials became significant challenges his administration had to contend with.

If Trump wins the presidential election on 5 November 2024, his second administration would likely differ in this respect. Numerous conservative organisations have begun preparing for his possible victory in two key areas. The first involves gathering information on individuals who could be appointed to specific government roles, while the second focuses on devising detailed action plans.



'Project 2025': a stronger president and no consensus over Russia

'Project 2025' is the most well-known manifestation of this activity and has received extensive media coverage. Although it is led by the Heritage Foundation, over 100 smaller organisations have also contributed to its development. One of the project's aims is to build a database containing personal details of individuals willing to seek employment in government institutions following a potential Republican victory. This is intended not only to avoid staffing issues, but also to facilitate the extensive replacement of federal officials (up to 50,000 individuals). This is linked to one of the foundational assumptions of a political plan devised as part of 'Project 2025', published under the title *Mandate for Leadership. The Conservative Promise*.¹ The document includes over 30 authors who consulted around 400 experts (referred to as contributors in the document) from various conservative groups.

The document outlines a plan for a comprehensive overhaul of the state, with the primary goal appearing to be the enhancement of the president's role at the expense

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of independent federal agencies and career officials in key departments. This aligns with the so-called unitary executive theory,² which posits that the current involvement of independent federal agencies in shaping regulations and the protections preventing the dismissals of mid-level officials violate the constitutional provision stating that the executive power is vested in the president.

The successive chapters of the *Mandate for Leadership* contain specific recommendations for modifications to be implemented in various spheres of US politics. Foreign policy issues, including those related to Europe and NATO, are discussed in the section concerning the State Department. The document identifies China as the greatest threat to the US and also includes a section on the challenges posed by Russia and its aggressive policies in Europe.

The section on Russia demonstrates that American conservatives, including those involved in 'Project 2025', hold differing assessments of the Russian threat. Some argue that Russia poses a threat to the United States and that the US should engage in European security, with the objective of the ongoing war in Ukraine being to defeat Russia and restore pre-1991 borders. Another group of conservatives claims that the United States has no strategic interest in the ongoing conflict and that European states should support Ukraine, with the war ending as soon as possible. Aside from these two stances – one interventionist and the other one isolationist – a third position has emerged, emphasising US security and interests. It argues that Washington should limit itself to providing military assistance, with clearly defined goals for US involvement. The presentation of three distinct perspectives on Russia, without prioritising any one of them, highlights the significant divergence of opinions.

The *Mandate for Leadership* also addresses NATO. According to its authors, the United States cannot be expected to provide a defence umbrella for countries unwilling to contribute adequately. The minimum expected contribution is 2% of GDP on defence, which is in line with the 2014 pledge. However, the document suggests that NATO members should be encouraged to exceed this commitment. European allies should be capable of deploying most conventional forces necessary to deter Russia, while relying on the US primarily for nuclear deterrence. Consequently, this shift would allow the US to reduce its military presence in Europe.

¹ P. Dans, S. Groves (eds.), *Mandate for Leadership. The Conservative Promise*, The Heritage Foundation, 2023, static.project2025.org.

² C.R. Sunstein, A. Vermeule, 'The Unitary Executive: Past, Present, Future', *The Supreme Court Review* vol. 2020, The University of Chicago Press Journals, journals.uchicago.edu.

'Project 2025' has been the subject of a negative campaign launched by the Democrats. Kamala Harris criticised Trump, citing excerpts from the *Mandate for Leadership* during her speech at the party convention,³ and in the September debate.⁴ In response, the former president emphatically denied any involvement in devising the document or having links to its authors. Extensive media coverage has negatively impacted the initiative and diminished the Heritage Foundation's influence on Trump's political platform.⁵ Moreover, the publication's final wording reflects compromises among its numerous authors, whose influence on the actions of a prospective administration would likely be uneven. Although the document compiles important insights into the intentions of a potential Republican administration, it should not be considered its political platform.

The new conservative think tanks: breeding grounds for cadres and concepts

Following Trump's defeat in the 2020 election, the US witnessed a new phenomenon: the emergence of several conservative organisations aiming to shape the future Republican political agenda. Two of these organisations are particularly noteworthy: the Center for Renewing America (CRA) and the America First Policy Institute (AFPI). Notably, representatives from Trump's first administration are involved in these organisations; some members maintain close ties to the former president, and the institutions receive substantial financial support from key Republican Party donors. Certain elements of their agenda are reflected in 'Project 2025' (both organisations contributed to its development), as well as in the Republican Party platform adopted at the July 2024 convention.⁶

The Center for Renewing America was founded in 2021 by Russell Vought, who served as deputy director and subsequently director

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in the White House Office of Management and Budget during Trump's first term. Vought was not only involved in developing 'Project 2025' as one of the key authors of the *Mandate for Leadership* but was also appointed as policy director of the Republican Party's platform-writing committee. He is regarded as one of Trump's closest aides and could potentially assume a key role in a new administration, such as White House chief of staff.⁷ The CRA, which he heads, is involved in recruiting candidates for positions in a prospective administration and in devising policy plans, including those concerning foreign policy.

The America First Policy Institute was also founded in 2021 and, like the CRA, focuses on preparing personnel for a potential new administration and developing political agendas. It is led by Brooke Rollins, who held a senior position in Trump's first administration as director of the United States Domestic Policy Council.

Linda McMahon, another member of the organisation's executive team, has been tasked by Trump with checking potential candidates for top government positions.⁸ Additionally, members of the AFPI include several of Trump's close aides, such as Larry Kudlow, Robert Lighthizer, and retired general Keith Kellogg. The advisors include Kiron Skinner, who authored the foreign policy section of the

³ K. Harris, 'Full Transcript of Kamala Harris's Democratic Convention Speech', *The New York Times*, 23 August 2024, [nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com).

⁴ 'Harris-Trump presidential debate transcript', *ABC News*, 11 September 2024, abcnews.go.com.

⁵ M. Schaffer, 'After Project 2025, Knives Are Out for Heritage – On the Right', *Politico*, 13 September 2024, [politico.com](https://www.politico.com).

⁶ '2024 GOP Platform', *The American Presidency Project*, 8 July 2024, [presidency.ucsb.edu](https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu).

⁷ B. Reinhard, 'Trump loyalist pushes 'post-Constitutional' vision for second term', *The Washington Post*, 8 June 2024, [washingtonpost.com](https://www.washingtonpost.com).

⁸ J. Swan, M. Haberman, C. Savage, 'Well Behind Schedule, Trump Names Allies to Lead Transition Team', *The New York Times*, 16 August 2024, [nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com).

Mandate for Leadership. Lobbyists and wealthy donors acknowledged the organisation's close personal ties to Trump and his involvement in its development (a fundraiser for the AFPI was held at the former president's estate in Florida).⁹

The CRA opposes further US support for Ukraine and actively lobbied to block the most recent aid package, which Congress ultimately approved in April 2024.¹⁰

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It supports the initiation of peace

negotiations between Moscow and Kyiv, asserting that, following the failure of the 2023 counteroffensive, Ukraine has no realistic path to victory.¹¹ According to the CRA, involvement in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict is not in the US interest, with Russia's repeated failures in this war showing that it is incapable of achieving dominance in Europe. The CRA views further NATO expansion as a mistake that provokes aggressive responses from the Kremlin and unnecessarily entangles Washington in European affairs. The CRA argues that a peaceful resolution to the current conflict in Ukraine should be based on the notion that neutral states as a buffer zone could benefit both Russia and the West. Additionally, according to the CRA, the threat of nuclear escalation remains significant. Although it is difficult to envisage the restoration of mutual trust between the US and Russia, Washington must acknowledge that a future security framework in Europe will necessitate some level of participation from Moscow. Furthermore, the peace plan should consider the interests of the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine, and the sustainability of a future settlement will rely on EU-Russia cooperation, such as in developing ‘monitoring and peacekeeping mechanisms’.

The CRA has also presented a detailed plan for the future of NATO. The concept, termed ‘dormant NATO’, envisions a defensive alliance to be activated only in emergencies.¹² This approach would allow for a substantial reduction in NATO bureaucracy, along with a decrease in the number of US conventional forces in Europe by their gradual withdrawal. The process would follow a schedule agreed upon with allies, starting with NATO's eastern flank, followed by troops stationed in Germany. American soldiers would either return to the United States or redeploy to the Indo-Pacific region, while Europe would remain under the US nuclear umbrella. Interoperability and joint military exercises would continue as standard practice. The CRA contends that NATO enlargement should cease permanently, as it does not align with US interests. Finally, the US should ensure that the Constitution of the United States always takes precedence over its NATO commitments, to prevent the country from being drawn into an armed conflict against its will.

The foreign policy vision presented by the AFPI slightly differs from that unveiled by the CRA. It too includes proposals for a ceasefire and peace negotiations between Kyiv and Moscow. These are based on the conviction that Ukraine cannot win the war, and that prolonging it with US support, which is expected to continue ‘as long as it takes’, is a mistake.¹³ The conflict should be frozen along the current frontline, with Ukraine retaining its territorial and financial claims against Russia, which it could pursue following Putin's departure. Unlike the CRA, the AFPI does not rule out Ukraine's accession to NATO.

⁹ H. Fuchs, M. McGraw, ‘Meet the think tank planning a second Trump administration. (It's not Project 2025.)’, Politico, 29 August 2024, politico.com.

¹⁰ *Annual Report 2023*, Center for Renewing America, americarenewing.com.

¹¹ S. Maitra, ‘Primer: It's Time for a Negotiated Settlement for Ukraine’, Center for Renewing America, 20 November 2023, americarenewing.com.

¹² M. Meadowcroft, S. Maitra, ‘Q and A: a “Dormant NATO” Supplemental’, Center for Renewing America, 3 May 2024, americarenewing.com.

¹³ F. Fleitz, ‘The Floor is Falling Out From Under Biden's Ukraine Policy’, AFPI, 1 December 2023, americafirstpolicy.com.

However, it acknowledges that this prospect should be delayed for several decades, as it currently obstructs possible negotiations with the Kremlin.¹⁴ To initiate peace talks, Washington should pressure Kyiv by making further assistance conditional on its participation in negotiations, while simultaneously threatening Russia with a substantial increase in US support for Ukraine, should the Kremlin refuse to engage in talks. The US could provide security guarantees to Ukraine and arm it sufficiently to deter Moscow from further expansion. The AFPI views a Russian invasion of a NATO country as unlikely, arguing that the Kremlin lacks both the resources and intent for such an invasion.¹⁵ The organisation also cautions against prolonging the war and the US supporting Ukraine's plans to strike targets deep within Russia, as this could provoke Putin to consider a nuclear strike. It further suggests that European allies should assume greater responsibility for the situation in Europe.

The president's staff, officials, and Congress

It is far from certain that these foreign policy concepts will be implemented, with personnel issues being the first obstacle. Potential candidates for senior government roles include individuals without connections to the two organisations discussed above. One example is Elbridge Colby, who co-authored the 2018 National Defence Strategy published by the Department of Defence during Trump's first term. He proposed significantly reducing US involvement in Europe to focus on its rivalry with China.¹⁶ Another prominent figure is Robert O'Brien, who served as the president's national security advisor from 2019 to 2021. He argues that the US should return to the Reagan-era formula of 'peace through strength'.¹⁷ Mike Pompeo, US Secretary of State from 2018 to 2021, is also a key figure. He suggested that the US could help Ukraine achieve peace by increasing its assistance to Kyiv while simultaneously intensifying sanctions against Russia, aligning with the 'peace through strength' concept.¹⁸ Other candidates for senior roles in a potential second Trump administration include Richard Grenell, former US ambassador to Germany (2018–20), and Christopher Miller, acting Secretary of Defence in early 2021. Trump himself has suggested that Miller should be appointed to this position.

J.D. Vance may also play an important role. Although vice-presidents typically have limited influence on an administration's policy-making, it should be noted that Vance re-

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ceived his nomination with the backing of figures such as Donald Trump Jr., political commentator Tucker Carlson, and influential Republican Party donors Elon Musk and David Sacks.¹⁹ Therefore, his status among Trump's aides could be relatively strong. Vance has repeatedly expressed scepticism about US support for Ukraine. He has also suggested establishing a demilitarised zone between Russia and Ukraine along the current frontline and that Ukraine should abandon its ambitions for NATO membership. In considering staffing for a potential future administration, it should also be noted that Trump's first term was marked by a remarkably high turnover of senior officials and numerous internal conflicts. Given the former president's personality traits, this instability could reemerge in a second administration.

¹⁴ K. Kellogg, G. McDonald, 'Pushing For Ukraine's NATO Membership Threatens to Derail an End to the War', AFPI, 2 November 2023, americafirstpolicy.com.

¹⁵ F. Fleitz, 'An America First Approach to End the War in Ukraine', AFPI, 28 July 2023, americafirstpolicy.com.

¹⁶ J. Dettmer, 'Trump ally has tough love for Europe', Politico, 17 May 2024, politico.eu.

¹⁷ R.C. O'Brien, 'The Return of Peace Through Strength', Foreign Affairs, 18 June 2024, foreignaffairs.com.

¹⁸ M. Pompeo, D.J. Urban, 'A Trump Peace Plan for Ukraine', The Wall Street Journal, 25 July 2024, wsj.com.

¹⁹ P. Oamek, 'How Tucker Carlson and Elon Musk Secretly Lobbied Trump on J.D. Vance', The New Republic, 16 July 2024, newrepublic.com.

Actions taken by mid-level officials could pose another major obstacle. Plans devised by Trump's political advisors envision the replacement of tens of thousands of federal employees, aiming to ensure that the administration follows the president's orders more diligently and effectively than it did from 2017 to 2021. However, to achieve this, Trump would need to issue an executive order to revoke provisions that protect this group of employees against dismissal, though US courts could potentially block this move. Despite the efforts of the aforementioned conservative organisations, recruiting such a large group of individuals could present numerous challenges. If this process is successfully completed, the replacement of civil servants could disrupt institutional continuity and provoke chaos in key government institutions during the first two years of the new administration's term. This, in turn, could slow down the implementation of the objectives outlined above.

Finally, Congress will also play a significant role. Although the Republicans are well-positioned to maintain their majority in the House of Representatives, where they currently hold 220 out of 435 seats, they are unlikely to expand it significantly. If this occurs, the situation in the House of Representatives will remain challenging for party leadership, as radical Republicans will retain their ability to block bills they oppose. They are also likely to take control of the Senate following the elections to the upper chamber, which will coincide with the presidential election. This outcome is expected because the Democratic Party is set to lose senate seats from Montana and West Virginia, states that are predominantly Republican.

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However, some are increasingly arguing that the US should focus on its rivalry with China (particularly at the expense of its engagement in Europe), while others advocate for a more restrained foreign policy and a focus on domestic issues. Although only a portion of the Republican camp supports the views expressed by the AFPI and CRA, this group includes not only the radical Freedom Caucus (which has fewer than 40 members),²⁰ and may grow as sentiment among the Republican electorate shifts. In the Senate, the slim Republican majority will hinder the smooth passage of bills. It should also be noted that pro-Ukrainian views have thus far prevailed among Republican senators. Given this political balance of power in both houses of Congress, some of Trump's plans may face severe constraints. For example, Congress could prevent the withdrawal of US troops from Europe by blocking funding for this purpose, as it did in 2020.²¹

Outlook

The personnel and policy issues that affected the first Trump administration have led to the emergence of new conservative think tanks aimed at addressing both challenges. The involvement of individuals linked to the former president, the significant financial support from Republican donors, and their evident influence on the Republican Party agenda and on Trump himself, all suggest that these think tanks are now largely responsible for shaping his future policies, including towards NATO and the conflict in Ukraine.

A review of articles and analyses published by these organisations suggests there is a consensus among Trump's aides that the ongoing conflict should be frozen as soon as possible, and peace negotiations

²⁰ An extremist Republican Party wing in the House of Representatives.

²¹ R. Sisk, 'Congress Moves to Block US Troop Withdrawal from Afghanistan and Germany', *Military.com*, 5.12.2020.

should be initiated. Moreover, their representatives appear convinced that the US should reduce its involvement in Europe, shift responsibility and costs to European allies, and focus US military resources more heavily on the Indo-Pacific. There is also a general consensus that Russia poses no threat to NATO members. However, their positions differ, for example, regarding further NATO expansion to include Ukraine and other countries, US security guarantees for Kyiv post-war, and the extent to which the US should reduce its involvement in NATO.

It should be noted that significant obstacles exist to implementing these objectives, both in Congress and within the federal bureaucracy. The personnel factor is also worth considering: many individuals from outside the aforementioned organisations could be appointed to top government positions, and turnover in these roles is likely to be high, as it was during Trump's first term. Other important factors include the influence of Trump's closest aides, including family members. Meanwhile, pro-Trump groups are convinced that Poland is an important US ally and a pillar of European deterrence and defence. If politicians manage to skilfully leverage this, it could influence European security calculations during a possible second Trump presidency.