

A close-up, low-angle shot of the Statue of Liberty's head and crown, set against a bright, hazy sky. The statue's face is the central focus, with its crown's spikes radiating outwards. The image has a slightly desaturated, vintage feel.

DISCUSSION PAPER

Twilight of the Hegemon:

Trump, Turmoil, and
the End of American Order?

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PUBLISHER

TRT TRAINING AND RESEARCH DEPARTMENT

March 2025

TRT TRAINING AND RESEARCH DEPARTMENT

AHMET ADNAN SAYGUN STREET NO:83 34347

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Introduction

"Acting like a king because he's too weak to govern like a President!"

When journalist Ezra Klein assessed the first weeks of Donald Trump's second presidential term, he was not merely describing a leader's governing style but also capturing a profound transformation in American politics.

Trump's chaotic and populist approach to governance has strained the fundamental institutional structures of American democracy, deepening polarisation in domestic politics, unsettling relations with traditional allies in foreign policy, and forcing a structural transformation in the United States' global leadership capacity.

Washington's global leadership has historically been shaped not only by military and economic superiority but also by constructing an order based on ideological and institutional hegemony. In the post-World War II era, the Bretton Woods system, the founding of NATO, the establishment of international institutions such as the United Nations, and the mechanisms of cultural influence through Hollywood and the media made the U.S. the cornerstone of the global order. However, according to Gramsci, the sustainability of hegemonic power depends not merely on material capacity but also on the ideological consent it garners at the global level. Yet Trump's "America First" policy—marked by withdrawal from multilateral partnerships, a threatening rhetoric towards allies, and the use of trade wars as a tool of global diplomacy—has made the fragility of American hegemony increasingly visible.

This rupture did not, of course, begin with Trump. One of its fundamental causes is the long-term decline of American industry. Although the U.S. maintained its leadership in global manufacturing until 2009, the 2008 global financial crisis and China's state-backed industrial policies weakened American industry's global competitiveness. One of the key factors that made the U.S. a superpower was its competition with the Soviet Union. However, the crucial distinction during the Cold War was that the U.S. sustained its global leadership not only through economic and military capacity but also through strategic relationships with allies and ideological hegemony. However, a similar competition with China may not yield the same results

for the U.S. The greatest challenge Washington faces is China's economic rise and the increasing risk of losing its allies. As the European Union seeks to enhance its strategic autonomy against the U.S., China uses its economic power and alternative institutions to reshape the Western-centric order.

Meanwhile, Russia, through revisionist strategies, is challenging the existing status quo and is set to expand its geopolitical influence further following the Ukraine war. Regional powers like Türkiye also increase their mark on global politics through independent foreign policy moves. This process is leading the international system toward an increasingly multipolar structure.

At the same time, political polarisation within the U.S. stands out as another dynamic exacerbating the global leadership crisis. The wave of political violence symbolised by events such as the January 6 Capitol riot, assassination attempts targeting Trump before the presidential election, racial discrimination, and the fear of deportation among undocumented immigrants have all contributed to the erosion of democratic norms and the increasing fragility of the system. This situation could be the precursor to a period of mass street protests triggered by a minor spark, ultimately forcing the country into isolation.

Amid this transformation, the U.S. faces two possibilities: either it will redefine its global leadership role by adapting to new conditions or become a catalyst accelerating the shift toward a multipolar world order. However, considering Trump's persistent claims about the existence of a "deep state," if there is indeed a faction within the American bureaucracy working to prevent the collapse of global hegemony, it is also possible that Trump could become a direct target of such a structure. Such a scenario could trigger a chaotic rupture in American domestic politics, fundamentally shaking global power balances as well.

This discussion paper aims to analyse how the policies pursued during the Trump era have eroded U.S. global leadership from ideological, economic, and geopolitical perspectives.

Rising to Global Leadership

The journey of the United States' global leadership role began to take shape in the early 20th century and was solidified after World War II. However, this leadership is not solely based on military and economic power but also on establishing international institutions, ideological dominance, and geopolitical strategies. Examining this historical development is essential to understanding the U.S. global hegemony process.

Until the late 19th century, the U.S. remained a regional power, adhering to the Monroe Doctrine (1823) to stay out of Europe's sphere of influence. However, following the Spanish-American War of 1898, the U.S. emerged as an imperial power by acquiring territories such as Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines (Herring, 2008). During this period, the U.S. utilised its economic growth and military power to expand its influence, particularly in Latin America and the Pacific region.

After World War I, the U.S. briefly engaged more actively in global politics but adopted an isolationist policy in the 1920s, refusing to join the League of Nations (Kennedy, 2010). However, World War II became the most significant turning point in establishing U.S. global leadership. As Europe and Asia faced massive destruction, the U.S. emerged as the most powerful nation, both economically and militarily. With the Bretton Woods Conference in 1944, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank established the U.S. dollar as the global reserve currency, reinforcing American dominance over the economic system (Eichengreen and Leblang, 2008).

One of the most crucial factors institutionalising the U.S. global leadership role was the introduction of the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan in 1947. Under the Truman Doctrine, the U.S. provided military and economic aid to counter Soviet expansion, while the Marshall Plan financed Europe's economic reconstruction (Cox and Kennedy-Pipe, 2005). Thus, the U.S. positioned itself not only as an economic and military power but also as the protector of the Western world.

During the Cold War, U.S. global leadership was shaped within a bipolar system, with the U.S. engaging in economic, military, and ideological competition against the Soviet Union. Events such as the establishment of NATO (1949), the Korean War (1950–1953), and the Vietnam War (1955–1975) further increased the U.S.'s global engagements.

With the end of the Cold War, the bipolar world order collapsed, and the U.S. emerged as the sole superpower,

achieving hegemonic dominance in the global system. During this period, the U.S. sought to spread free-market economics and the liberal democratic model worldwide, supported NATO expansion, and expanded its military operations (Fukuyama, 1992). The 1991 Gulf War and NATO's intervention in Kosovo in 1999 demonstrated the U.S.'s ability to unilaterally shape global affairs.

However, by the 2000s, U.S. global leadership faced new challenges. After the September 11, 2001 attacks, the U.S. launched wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, whose long-term costs, along with policies that exacerbated humanitarian crises in occupied countries, weakened Washington's economic and political power (Ashbaugh, 2009).

The 2008 global financial crisis undermined confidence in the U.S. economic model and paved the way for rising powers like China to develop alternative economic frameworks. China's Belt and Road Initiative (2013) marked a significant shift in the global economic order, signalling the decline of U.S. hegemony (Khanal and Zhang, 2024).

Donald Trump's first presidency accelerated the erosion of U.S. global leadership. His "America First" policy, withdrawal from multilateral agreements, and distancing from traditional allies like NATO weakened U.S. leadership over global institutions, allowing alternative powers like China and Russia to fill the void (Yüksel, 2023).

While Joe Biden's administration aimed to repair alliances and rebuild the U.S.'s global image, its domestic political weaknesses and inconsistencies in foreign policy hindered these goals. The Ukraine crisis allowed the U.S. to reinforce its leadership in Europe, but uncertainties over Washington's economic and military commitments have raised deep concerns among NATO allies. Similarly, Biden's unwavering support for Israel regarding the Gaza issue has severely undermined the credibility of the U.S.'s human rights and democracy rhetoric. Failing to develop a strategic response to China's economic rise, the Biden administration struggled to convince regional nations of a long-term alliance with the U.S. despite its efforts to counter Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific.

Amidst domestic economic uncertainties and deepening polarisation, the Biden administration failed to redefine U.S. global leadership. Meanwhile, Trump's return to the Oval Office in November 2024 has ushered in an even more turbulent phase for Washington's global role than during his first term.

From Leadership to Hegemonic Crisis

The United States' global leadership role has been built upon a multilayered hegemonic order, where not only military and economic capacity but also ideological legitimacy serve as foundational pillars. This order, which emerged after the Cold War, was not merely a balance of power but also a historical moment in which Western liberal values became global norms. However, the longevity of hegemonic orders depends not only on material capacity but also on the sustainability of consent based on the legitimacy of that order. Over the past thirty years, U.S. global leadership has been trapped in a cycle of stability and erosion, oscillating between these two axes.

In the post-Cold War era, the U.S. positioned itself not only as the guarantor of the global order but also as its normative bearer. This leadership model, defined by Joseph Nye's concept of soft power, relied not only on military and economic strength but also on ideological hegemony constructed through American culture, democratic values, and global media networks. From Hollywood films to CNN's global news coverage, from the intellectual appeal of Ivy League universities to the rhetoric of human rights, these soft power networks framed U.S. global leadership not just as a geopolitical necessity but as a universal norm (Nye, 2023).

However, as emphasised in Gramsci's concept of hegemony, consent-based orders function not only around ideas but also within the constraints of material realities (Knight, 2023). The U.S. hegemonic order began confronting these constraints by the late 1990s. The first breaking point was the 2003 invasion of Iraq. By disregarding international law, the U.S. reinforced critiques that liberal values were merely a rhetorical facade. Research from that period indicates that global trust in the U.S. declined by 30% following the Iraq invasion (Friedman, 2024). This ideological crisis of consent marked the first signs of hegemonic erosion.

The 2008 Global Financial Crisis further deepened this crisis. While the free-market model promoted by the Washington Consensus led to growing global inequalities, the outbreak of the crisis undermined confidence in U.S. economic leadership. According to IMF data, the U.S. share of the global economy declined from 25% to 22% after 2008, while China's share rose from 8% to 16% (Niekerk, 2024). This shift can be seen as one of the first structural indicators of the material erosion of U.S. global leadership within the framework of Power Transition Theory.

However, explaining hegemonic decline solely through

shifts in the material balance of power is insufficient. As Gramsci emphasised, the collapse of hegemonic orders is not only the result of military and economic weaknesses but also of ideological crises. At this point, Trump's rise illustrates how global leadership has transformed not just into a geopolitical issue but also into a crisis of meaning and legitimacy. The rhetoric encapsulated in Trump's 2016 campaign slogan, "Make America Great Again," along with his isolationist approach—characterised by withdrawal from multilateral agreements and a divisive political style—not only revived American nationalism but also openly signalled the U.S.'s voluntary retreat from its role as the bearer of the liberal order.

Policies such as the U.S. withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Paris Climate Agreement, the cancellation of the Iran Nuclear Deal, and Trump's criticism of NATO funding weakened the country's leadership role in multilateral cooperation while simultaneously striking heavy blows to the normative framework of the liberal international order. In the context of Trump's first term, these events marked institutional breaking points in the Pax Americana system (Yüksel, 2023).

Trump's second-term policy outlook suggests that, as in his first term, U.S. hegemonic erosion may reach an irreversible breaking point both materially and ideologically. Domestically, the rhetoric and policies of Elon Musk, who leads the Government Efficiency Department and advocates for reducing federal bureaucracy and waste, have contributed to the weakening of democratic institutions—similar to the process leading up to the January 6 Capitol attack. This has intensified concerns among Democratic voters about the country's democratic backsliding.

In foreign policy, Trump's approach to traditional allies, his disregard for diplomatic protocol when hosting foreign leaders at the White House, and his overall conduct have called U.S. global leadership into question. Washington's sovereignty claims over Canada, Greenland, and Panama, its abandonment of the Western alliance in the Ukraine-Russia war, its stance on NATO, and its plans that shape Gaza's reconstruction in favour of Israel—including the forced displacement of Palestinians—have accelerated the erosion of U.S. normative legitimacy in the global order.

This trajectory may signal the final phase of hegemonic stability, prompting U.S. allies to seek alternative partnerships and thus accelerating global realignment.

The Unravelling of the Dollar Hegemony and the New Financial Order

The global leadership position of the United States is not solely based on military capacity but also on its dominance over the international financial system. The status of the dollar as the global reserve currency was institutionalised through the Bretton Woods system established in 1944. This system made the U.S. dollar the primary medium of exchange in global trade, placing the American economy at the centre of the global economic order. Even after the Bretton Woods system collapsed in 1971, dollar hegemony persisted through the petrodollar system and the continued use of the dollar in international trade (Pittaluga et al., 2021). Today, approximately 88% of global trade is conducted in dollars (Bertaut et al., 2023).

However, this financial hegemony is sustained not only through economic coercion but also through ideological consent mechanisms. Institutional frameworks such as the IMF, the World Bank, and the SWIFT system form the core components of this network of ideological hegemony. When examined through the lens of Gramsci's hegemony theory, accepting the dollar as the global reserve currency is not merely an economic choice but an ideological consent process rooted in the perception of American liberal capitalism as a universal model.

The 2008 Global Financial Crisis marked the first significant signs of erosion in this hegemonic order. The crisis exposed the fragility of the American financial system and deeply undermined confidence in the U.S.'s ability to maintain global financial leadership. In the post-2008 period, revisionist actors such as China and Russia accelerated their efforts to challenge the unipolar structure of the dollar-centric global financial order. China's initiatives, including the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and digital yuan projects, laid the institutional foundations for these alternative financial networks.

This process gained further momentum during Trump's first term. His decision in 2018 to reimpose sanctions on Iran led to the exclusion of Iran from global financial networks via the SWIFT system. However, these sanctions also revealed the tendency of the U.S. to use its financial hegemony as a geopolitical weapon. This development accelerated efforts by China, Russia, and the European Union to establish payment mechanisms independent of SWIFT. The European Union's INSTEX payment system,



(Dilara İrem Sancar - Anadolu Agency)

created in 2019, was one of the first institutional challenges from the West against dollar hegemony (Dagres, 2020).

Trump's second term began on March 12, 2024, with the imposition of a 25% tariff on steel and aluminium imports. Targeting countries such as Canada, Mexico, and China, this move aimed to reduce imports and stimulate domestic production in industries critical to American manufacturing. In retaliation, Canada imposed a 25% tariff on \$20 billion worth of American goods, covering steel, sporting equipment, and agricultural products. Similarly, the European Union prepared retaliatory tariffs on \$26 billion worth of American products, including steel, boots, bourbon whiskey, and motorcycles. The EU planned to fully implement these tariffs by the end of April 2024. In response, Trump threatened to impose a 200% tariff on European goods if the EU did not lift its 50% tariff on American whiskey (Clarke, 2025).

These trade wars could shape future developments that may further undermine the dollar's dominance. The share of non-dollar trade among BRICS countries, led by China and Russia, has risen to 35%. Additionally, the use of the digital yuan is rapidly expanding within the trade networks established through China's Belt and Road Initiative. A significant historical turning point in unravelling the petrodollar system occurred in 2024 when Saudi Arabia agreed to conduct oil transactions with China in yuan (Curtis, 2024).

The erosion of the dollar's status as the global reserve currency will be the most concrete indicator that U.S. hegemony has entered an irreversible process of decline.

The State Legitimacy Crisis

American democracy has been built not only on the functioning of constitutional institutions but also on stability rooted in ideological consent mechanisms deeply embedded within society. However, particularly in the last two elections, the ideological cohesion of American society has given way to polarisation and fragmented regimes of truth.

With Trump's presidency in 2016, polarisation became the defining axis of American domestic politics. Debates over Russian election interference in 2016, Trump's populist-nationalist rhetoric, and the January 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol marked a symbolic threshold in the escalation of political violence within the United States. However, this event should not merely be interpreted as a spontaneous uprising of far-right groups but rather as concrete evidence of the rapid erosion of the ideological legitimacy of the American state. Trump's rhetoric about a "stolen election" functioned not only as a political strategy but also as a counter-hegemonic discourse challenging the institutional authority of the state.

The political landscape leading up to the November 2024 elections was shaped by fear and violence. Donald Trump's branding of Kamala Harris as a "socialist" sought to revive Cold War-era ideological paranoia, creating a sense of existential threat among his voter base. Similarly, for Democrats, Trump was not just a political opponent but a direct threat to democratic norms and hard-won rights. Harris's warnings, invoking historical references to the dangers of Trump's return to the presidency, fuelled an atmosphere of fear among the Democratic Party's base. The assassination attempts against Donald Trump signalled that this cycle of violence had entered a new phase (Yüksel, 2024).

For Black Americans, systemic racism and economic inequality remain formidable barriers, while immigrant communities continue to live in a state of perpetual uncertainty. Although movements like Black Lives Matter have largely been peaceful, they have also demonstrated that responses to social injustice in the U.S. can, at times, escalate into violence. Likewise, the persistent threat of deportation for undocumented immigrants fuels desperation, laying the groundwork for broader social instability. As a result, American politics is increasingly defined by fear and insecurity, making society ideologically and sociologically more fragile (Yüksel, 2024). In 2017, only 8% of both Democrats and Republicans considered the



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use of political violence at least "somewhat justified" if it advanced their party's agenda. However, by September 2020, this figure had surged to 33% among Democrats and 36% among Republicans (Diamond et al., 2020). In other words, the likelihood of political polarisation and violent action in the U.S. has become tangible.

In Trump's second term, polarisation has further intensified, particularly through the rhetoric of figures like Elon Musk, while Trump's divisive discourse continues to exacerbate societal fragmentation. In such an environment, racially motivated acts of violence could escalate into mass unrest and violent incidents, potentially forcing the U.S. to turn its focus further inward, shifting its priorities away from global politics toward managing its deepening domestic crisis.

The Re-emergence of Multipolarity

Immanuel Wallerstein's World-Systems Theory emphasises that the capitalist world economy consists of core, semi-periphery, and periphery countries, with these structures constantly evolving. The United States has long been the hegemonic power at the core of this system. According to the theory, hegemonic powers often overlook peripheral dynamics while defending their economic dominance, leading to crises of hegemony (Agnew, 2021). Thus, it is essential to analyse the attempts of actors challenging U.S. economic and political superiority to transition from semi-periphery to core positions.

As of 2024, China continues rapidly expanding its global economy share. China's GDP, measured by purchasing power parity (PPP), has surpassed \$39 trillion, overtaking the U.S. While the U.S. still leads in nominal GDP, China's 4.5% growth rate compared to America's 2.2% suggests that this gap will close within the next decade. China's Belt and Road Initiative, with investments exceeding \$1 trillion across Asia, Africa, and Europe, has significantly expanded its global economic influence (Silver, 2025).

In his second term, Trump is expected to continue using tariffs as a tool of pressure in his economic war against China. However, the trade wars of his first term disrupted global supply chains and negatively affected the American economy. According to the Peterson Institute for International Economics, Trump's tariffs on China increased consumer prices in the U.S. by up to 20%, leading to the loss of approximately 300,000 jobs annually (David Dollar et al., 2022).

Another critical element of American hegemony is technological supremacy, yet China's advances in this domain threaten U.S. leadership. Companies like Huawei have pushed China to the forefront of 5G technology, forcing the U.S. into a defensive position. For instance, in 2023, Huawei's global 5G market share reached 31.3%. U.S. sanctions against Huawei only provided temporary advantages (Morris, 2025).

According to the Semiconductor Industry Association, the U.S. semiconductor production share declined from 37% in 1990 to just 12% in 2023. China's massive investments in this sector pose a significant threat to American economic dominance (New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2024). Additionally, as of 2024, China has surpassed the U.S. in supercomputing capacity. The Top500 list shows that 225 of the world's 500 fastest supercomputers are

now in China. Furthermore, China's artificial intelligence investments suggest that it may soon overtake the U.S. in this critical field. China has launched a new AI investment fund with an initial capital of 60 billion yuan (\$8.2 billion). According to the state-backed China International Capital Corp., China's AI market is expected to reach 5.6 trillion yuan (\$774 billion) by 2030 (Jiang, 2025).

American military power has been a cornerstone of international stability in the post-Cold War era. However, China not only surpasses the U.S. military in personnel by over two million but is also preparing to quadruple its nuclear warhead stockpile by 2035 (Yüksel, 2023).

The economic sanctions imposed by the U.S. on Russia during the Ukraine war strengthened Western solidarity but also reinforced China-Russia cooperation. By 2024, the trade volume between China and Russia exceeded \$200 billion. This alliance challenges U.S. hegemony both militarily and economically.

Beyond China, Russia has been a perennial irritant to the U.S. since Vladimir Putin came to power. Under Putin, Moscow has positioned itself as a revisionist power that has been challenging American global leadership since the early 2000s. Russia's interventions, including the 2008 war in Georgia and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, have demonstrated its capacity for aggressive defiance of the international order.

Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine prompted severe Western sanctions, military aid to Ukraine, and NATO expansion. However, Trump's electoral victory has shifted the geopolitical balance in Moscow's favour. The Kremlin's primary gain has been deepening fractures within the Western alliance.

Trump's accusations against U.S. allies regarding Ukraine aid, his undiplomatic reception of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky at the White House, and his pressure on Kyiv to negotiate peace have created serious rifts within NATO. This shift may enable Russia to rebuild and expand its influence in the former Soviet sphere. If Trump weakens NATO's commitment and European security structures, Russia could pursue more aggressive policies in the Baltic states, Moldova, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. Meanwhile, nations that wish to avoid Ukraine's fate may seek alternative allies outside the Western bloc, potentially strengthening ties with China.



(Kremlin Press Office - Anadolu Agency)

Russia's most significant achievement in this process has been its ability to create alternative economic channels despite Western sanctions. In 2023, energy agreements with China increased, while the BRICS+ expansion allowed Russia to reduce its dependence on Western financial systems. Additionally, alternative energy corridors have enabled Moscow to continue indirect energy exports to Europe.

Ultimately, Trump's approach to Ukraine and his insistence that Europe take on more responsibility have not only benefited Russia militarily but also granted it diplomatic and geoeconomic advantages.

Trump's transactional approach to alliances weakens America's traditional partnerships, prompting these allies to develop new strategic alternatives. His stance on NATO, his criticisms of allies regarding the Ukraine crisis, and even his suggestions of annexing Greenland indicate a new era for Europe. The debate over a European Army and the imposition of retaliatory tariffs suggest that Europe is moving toward greater independence from the U.S. If this trend continues, Europe may adopt a softer approach toward China and foster closer bilateral relations.

At this juncture, Türkiye could emerge as a key player. Russia's geopolitical constraints following the Ukraine war and Europe's strategic vacuum have positioned Türkiye as a rising power in the international system. Türkiye's military capacity, geostrategic position, and diplomatic credibility—reinforced by its role in the Ukraine conflict—make it an indispensable actor in Europe's future security architecture.

Ankara's invitation to the European Union Leaders Summit signifies its recognition as a strategic partner for the continent's security. As of 2024, Türkiye ranks as the world's ninth most powerful military, surpassing countries like France and Germany in Europe (World Population Review, 2024). Ankara's advances in the defence industry, particularly with Bayraktar TB-2 and Akıncı drones, played a decisive role in the Ukraine war and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, positioning Türkiye as a potential military leader in Europe. Should a European Army materialise, Türkiye's role at its command centre is increasingly seen as a reality.

Türkiye's rise is not limited to the military sphere. It has also achieved concrete gains in the Middle East and the Caucasus. The military integration of the Organization of Turkic States, with Türkiye taking a leading role, signals the emergence of a new power bloc in Central Asia, providing an alternative to China and Russia. A proactive foreign policy could establish Ankara as a major actor on the global stage.

In conclusion, the rise of new actors challenging U.S. global leadership leads to a more fragmented and volatile international system. While China seeks to reshape the Western-centric order through economic power and alternative institutions, Russia disrupts the status quo with revisionist strategies. Meanwhile, the European Union strives for strategic autonomy in response to America's declining leadership capacity. The global system may shift toward a multipolar order if these trends persist.

Conclusion

Immanuel Wallerstein's World-Systems Theory emphasises that the capitalist world economy consists of core, semi-periphery, and periphery countries, with these structures constantly evolving. The United States has long been the hegemonic power at the core of this system. According to the theory, hegemonic powers often overlook peripheral dynamics while defending their economic dominance, leading to crises of hegemony (Agnew, 2021). Thus, it is essential to analyse the attempts of actors challenging U.S. economic and political superiority to transition from semi-periphery to core positions.

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