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## **Peace for our Time**

**critisticuffs**

“The United States will once again consider itself a growing nation — one that increases our wealth, expands our territory, builds our cities, raises our expectations, and carries our flag into new and beautiful horizons.” — US President Donald Trump’s Inaugural Address, 20 January 2025

With these words, Donald Trump declared an end to a central pillar of the American world order. This world order prevailed over half of the world since the end of the Second World War and has prevailed essentially across the entire globe since the 1990s. This declaration by Donald Trump upends the competing calculations of capitalist states worldwide, which now contemplate the odds of war, not only with the US but also with each other.

## 1 Imperialism 1.0

Capitalist states do not merely guarantee and regulate the capitalist economic order on their territories but also promote the growth of their national economies.<sup>1</sup> This economic growth then fuels their power, through resources that can be taxed and a broader economic base for the money which the State issues and goes into debt in.<sup>2</sup> Thus, there is a cycle where the State subordinates its actions and its power to the purpose of promoting its national economy and this growth then augments the State’s power.

From the point of view of these capitalist states, a perspective beyond their territories starts to emerge. When capitalist accumulation functions well, when business grows, when demand for raw materials grows, and when mountains of goods that are to be sold grow, the State notices that its territory, its population and its national wealth are no longer adequate for the level of growth now demanded by its capital.

As a consequence, the State becomes critical of itself. The limit of its authority is a limit to the capitals that it is a home to. The State recognises the importance of organising opportunities for economic growth beyond its territory.

From a capitalist state’s perspective, capturing territories and populations by force makes sense. It is thus not true to claim that economic development or trade inhibits war made for economic benefit. The appeal of territories beyond a state’s border to the growth of its national economy is the fundamental link between global wealth and inter-state violence.

This logic played out at a time when European powers were establishing themselves as modern nation-states and defined their borders, for example, through the German wars of Unification be-

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<sup>1</sup> Most of the first few sections are lifted from *The Conflict between the US and China* available at <https://critisticuffs.org/texts/usa-and-china>.

<sup>2</sup> See *Sovereign debt and the crisis in the Eurozone* for an introduction to sovereign debt, it is available at <https://antinational.org/en/sovereign-debt-and-crisis-eurozone-all-parts/>.

tween 1815-1870. It also played out when the most powerful states built colonial empires. Examples of this logic are the First and Second World Wars, which were fought between rival imperialist powers.

## **2 Imperialism 2.0: the American world order**

After the Second World War, the US phased out this strategy for economic success. It urged its allied colonial powers like the UK and France to release their colonies into independence. Exclusive national spheres of influence were to be brought to an end, as these contradicted the US's objective of unleashing its capital worldwide. Furthermore, since capital was lacking in every country save itself, the United States offered dollar credit to all participants in its new world economic order. This way, the United States participated in the successes of the worldwide upswing of capitalism after the Second World War.

This enabled the US to play a decisive role in driving forward this new world economic order. A relatively free trade in goods and services replaced conquest and direct control as the modern method of using the world for national wealth. Sovereign borders were to be respected and not revised by military force. States mutually recognised each other as sovereigns to negotiate treaties which set out conditions under which capital could engage worldwide.

The success of the United States then and now depends on this world market because its capital is engaged globally. Its banks lend globally, its businesses buy, produce and sell across the globe, and international trade is done in dollars.

As a consequence, the US has been chiefly interested in maintaining this global order, benefiting from its impartial rules. It did not need to use direct violence to reap the spoils of the world market because its capitals competed so well on it.

Under this system the reasons for inter-state violence do not go away; rather, they escalate due to increasing co-dependence among countries. Trading relations produce winners and losers who have reasons to "correct" losses or to enforce beneficial treaties against parties who stand to lose. Here, "correcting" does not merely mean securing natural resources or land by force but something more fundamental: correcting the economic relations between nations, their treaties, and negotiation positions.

The Eden of a global free market where parties recognise each other as legal persons to engage in contracts is not to be had without a constant threat of a transition to open violence that would undo it.

To protect its global order, the US claimed responsibility, in principle, for all conflicts across the globe. It aimed to rule out attempts to forcefully correct national boundaries, the world market's results or the principles of international political or economic relations as such. Its standpoint was not merely

that of assessing how a redrawing of the map in a region of the world would affect America's immediate economic and strategic interests, but also what this redrawing would mean for the "rule-based" world order it had set up and protected. This did not always mean US boots on the ground, but it meant that the threat of this step was on the table, in principle, for any state attempting a "correction".

The free world market, as the project and basis of the economic power of the USA, required permanent and absolute superior might over other states. To illustrate this, the US has 11 aircraft carriers, while China, India, Italy, Japan and the UK have two each. A single US aircraft carrier can carry 80 aircraft; Belgium had 69 in its air force total as of 1999, and the UK had 222 as of 2011 – fewer than would fit on four US aircraft carriers. In total, the US had 3,318 combat aircraft as of 2011. Similarly, the only power in the world with a strategic nuclear arsenal that can threaten the US homeland is Russia. The need to maintain the global order in order to benefit from it, explains why the US has a military presence in many parts of the world and why it has claimed responsibility for settling conflicts across the globe.

Until the 1990s, this all played out against the backdrop of the Cold War, i.e. a systemic conflict between the capitalist world market on the one hand, and the countries of the real-socialist Eastern block, on the other hand. This further disciplined the lesser powers under the protection of the US.

### **3 America's competitors rise under America's protection**

The United States shaped the global order, its rules and its institutions. Under the conditions it established, other countries have also been able to develop, which in turn also benefited the US: these countries representing markets, investment spheres and production sites. Initially, it was (West-)Germany and Japan that rose. Now, China is emerging as a major economic power, using the rules set by the US for its ascent.

One notable aspect here is that (West-)Germany and Japan managed to experience significant economic growth without requiring substantial expenditures on military capabilities. Indeed, West Germany managed this feat while being a frontline state in the Cold War against the Soviet Union. This is because the US had guaranteed their place in the Western order, providing them with the stable and secure conditions needed to make use of the world market. As a result, they were able to focus on developing their economies without worrying about the associated costs of militarily threatening their partners and rivals.

West Germany's success on the world market, guaranteed by the US, brought with it a strong currency, the deutschmark. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and Germany's unification, Germany proposed that its European partners and rivals merge their currencies and economic powers to launch an attack on the hegemony of the dollar: the euro. Germany's territory, workforce and economy were too small to truly compete with the dollar as a world money, a problem the euro was meant to fix. Protected by America's military might, Germany, France and other European powers launched their

attempt to compete with the dollar. For now, this project has established the euro as a major currency but it is integrated into the world market under America's and the dollar's leadership.

## 4 The European Union

The euro and the European Union are contradictory constructions, where competing capitalist states sacrifice some of their sovereignty to a supra-national institution in order to strengthen their respective national might.

On the one hand, these countries pool their economic power to compete with the US. Here "pooling" means doing business in one currency and on a single market big enough to compete with the US market, in the hopes of also creating and promoting "global player" corporations that can compete with their US (and other) counterparts.

On the other hand, these states still compete with each other. For example, they still maintain their own tax base and issue their own debt, benefiting from the strength of their own economy at the expense of other, also European, economies.

This contradiction came to the fore during the Eurozone crisis in 2010, when two paths offered themselves: press ahead with economic unification to resolve the crisis or maintain the status quo in which Germany's economy outcompeted many of its European partners and rivals.<sup>3</sup> The crisis directly posed questions of the sovereignty of EU countries such as Greece and Italy, which had surrendered some of their economic powers to European institutions dominated by Germany, their competitor. The end result was some partial suspension of competition (debt jointly guaranteed by all European countries to fend off the sovereign debt crisis) but no fundamentally deeper economic integration.

The European Union is hailed by its proponents as a victory of peaceful coexistence over European wars of old; The Nobel Peace Prize 2012 was awarded to the European Union "for over six decades contributed to the advancement of peace and reconciliation, democracy and human rights in Europe". Yet, as explained above, the world market does not make reasons for conflict go away but creates new reasons of it. The Nobel Peace Prize 2012 was awarded to the European Union (EU) "for over six decades contributed to the advancement of peace and reconciliation, democracy and human rights in Europe" its own: the firmness of peace in Western Europe is explained by the US ruling out such wars between America's allies. Forced to compete only economically and incapable of "correcting" the outcomes of this competition or to "settle" territorial disputes, pooling their economic might is somewhat viable. The premise of the power bloc Europe is America's military might.

As an illustration, only under America's guarantees could a situation arise where Germany, a relatively weak (non-nuclear) military power, is the leading power in the EU instead of the militarily significantly

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<sup>3</sup> See *Sovereign debt and the crisis in the Eurozone*, it is available at <https://antinational.org/en/sovereign-debt-and-crisis-eurozone-all-parts/>.

stronger (nuclear power) France (and previously also the UK).

## 5 America's self-critique

The American offer was: “nations of the world, think of yourself and try to promote your national interest within the rules of the free world market”. In accepting this offer, states (which included West Germany and Japan) made themselves the means for the United States' enrichment, so that its position of being the number one in all areas was continuously re-established.

Indeed, the United States was the undisputed champion in all significant fields until the 1980s. The free world order after the Second World War was the means for the United States to maintain this undisputed position over and over again. However, from the 1980s onwards this was no longer the case: first with Japan and West Germany, now with China.

This has made America's decision-makers call into question the premise of its guarantee of this global order. This standpoint was and is not one unique to Donald Trump: Biden, Obama, Bush and Clinton had also noticed that the possibility of being overtaken (in some key sectors) had gradually become a reality.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, a series of crises, including financial, sovereign debt, COVID-19, and inflation, have weakened the global economy and the place of the US within it. The financial, (also US) sovereign debt and inflation crises have weakened the world economy, the solidity of US credit and the dollar. The COVID-19 crisis encouraged countries worldwide to distrust global supply chains and to start “on-shoring” key industries, weakening international trade. These crises have also further encouraged attempts to reassert the status quo and to re-establish the US as the unbeatable champion of the system it set up and protects.

## 6 Trump 1.0 cancels the American world order

Under the first presidency of Donald Trump (2017 to 2021), it was the guarantor of the American world order, the United States, which announced that it no longer wanted to observe the rules it had set for the world.<sup>5</sup>

This surprised politicians and newspapers around the world, and even in the United States this change was not uncontroversial. Trump was being told how much and in how many ways the US benefited from the free world order along the lines explained above. Measured by the standard: “The world

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<sup>4</sup> “Make America Great Again!” (Donald Trump's campaign 2016); “Build Back Better” (Joe Biden's campaign 2020).

<sup>5</sup> This section is mostly lifted from *What is Imperialism?* available at <https://antinational.org/en/what-is-imperialism-talk/>.

market is the means of subsistence of the United States and the world market keeps it in a strong position” Trump’s policy was absurd.

Yet Trump had, and has, a more radical standard. The development of serious challengers to America’s supremacy worried him: it was not meant to be that way. While Obama and e.g. Germany pursued the goal of breaking China economically by committing it to better follow the rules of (their idea of) the free world market, Trump took on a different outlook : if the free world market and its rules are not currently serving to clearly reproduce the superiority of the United States then the free world market is not a suitable means for the United States and is unfair.

Trump not only focused on China, but was also beginning to define Germany, Europe and Japan as new major opponents. In his eyes, they all cheated the United States. The proof in his mind: in some fields they undermine the clear and deserved superiority of the US.

Trump started imposing punitive tariffs. Going forward, he only wanted to negotiate bilaterally. He no longer wanted to “waste” money on maintaining loser states around the world.

This was not isolationism. It was his attempt to get the world order back on track, by which he means to a status where it clearly re-establishes America as the undisputed champion in all areas deemed important by America. Now, as before, the purpose was simply to ensure the unquestioned superiority of the United States.

## **7 Trump 2.0 escalates the cancellation: territorial annexation is back**

On the one hand, under Biden the US tried to reestablish its superiority by refocusing on its strategic alliances and treaties. On the other hand, economically, the Biden administration maintained several of Trump’s policies. For example, it maintained Trump’s tariffs on China, and escalated the conflict with restrictions on some key technologies (such as chips optimised for machine learning algorithms). Moreover, the Biden administration introduced the Inflation Reduction Act which contained measures – like subsidies and preferential treatment of domestic firms – considered by, among others, the EU as an assault on free trade. For example, French President Emmanuel Macron eloquently characterised it as “super aggressive”.

Trump’s return to the White House has been accompanied by an acceleration of the US’ pivot, also in the strategic arena. During his first term, Trump threatened and engaged in trade wars. He also threatened to relax American security guarantees for Europe, but he did not threaten the deployment of the military might of the US directly for economic or territorial gain. Trump’s second term sees a significant escalation in this area.

Since taking office for the second time Trump has not only announced in general terms his intention for the US to “expand its territory” (Inaugural Address), but he has also repeatedly threatened the annexation of Canada, the annexation of Greenland, an invasion of Panama and Mexico and the takeover

of Gaza and the permanent displacement of its population.<sup>6</sup>

Through these statements, the power that policed the inviolability of sovereign borders over the last decades has announced that it is prepared to disregard the sovereignty of its closest allies (and foes). US military might is no longer to be used to secure the world market peace that produces reasons for war among competing parties but to secure a direct advantage over other competing parties.

This is, on the one hand, a signal to every state in the world that it must now consider in its calculations a potential US invasion for immediate economic or strategic reasons. But it is also, on the other hand, a signal to every state in the world that territorial disputes can again be settled by military force. The US no longer intends to uphold a principle where sovereign borders ought to be respected.

An example of such a dispute so far kept in check by America's insistence and close to home is that between Greece (backed also by France) and Türkiye over Cyprus, with Greece being an EU and NATO member and Türkiye being a strategic partner of the EU and a NATO member.

The difference between these lesser powers and their ambitions, and Trump's America and its ambitions is that the US is in a much stronger position to impose its will on its rivals, by virtue of its military might but also by virtue of effectively controlling most institutions of the "rule-based world order" that it established. It is quite something when the strongest country in the world convinces itself that it is hard done by.

## 8 Europe considers war with the US

Initially, Denmark and other European states did not treat the renewed interest of the US Government in Greenland as a serious concern (Trump had already proposed to buy Greenland during his first term in 2019). For example, David Lammy, the UK Foreign Secretary stated that a US seizure of Greenland is "not going to happen" in January 2025. But after a phone call between the Danish Prime Minister and Donald Trump, in which the Danish side reportedly made concessions regarding US military presence and mineral rights, the Danish Government considers the American threat as real.

Within NATO several European countries reportedly privately discussed what they would do in case of a US invasion of Greenland, e.g. whether NATO clauses could be triggered to ask NATO allies to defend a NATO member against a US invasion, i.e. the main power behind NATO. Germany and France are reported to have considered sending troops to Greenland for its defence.

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<sup>6</sup> Moreover, on 30 January 2025, Marco Rubio, US Secretary of State, gave an interview in which he stated: "So it's not normal for the world to simply have a unipolar power. That was not — that was an anomaly. It was a product of the end of the Cold War, but eventually you were going to reach back to a point where you had a multipolar world, multi-great powers in different parts of the planet. We face that now with China and to some extent Russia, and then you have rogue states like Iran and North Korea you have to deal with." In declaring itself a multi-great power, the US declares itself a power that intends to secure its sphere of influence and advantage with its military might and not the general rules of the world market where states respect each other's territorial integrity.



Robert Brieger, chairman of the European Union Military Committee, billed as “the EU’s top military official”, also suggested sending European troops to Greenland, both as a gesture to the US which cited strategic concerns regarding China and Russia for its take-over plans, and as a “**strong signal**” to the US.

As of writing, the Labour Government in the UK has **not yet committed itself** which side in a US-Danish conflict it would support. Among Conservatives, however, there exists at least some support for siding with the US. In the Telegraph’s reporting on the clandestine European NATO meeting, they managed to find a “NATO diplomat” who claimed that Germany lacked a “moral compass” contrasting Germany’s reported commitment to Greenland with that to Ukraine. Already in January, the Telegraph had published an opinion piece asserting that “**history is on Donald Trump’s side in his bid to annex Greenland**”. Moreover, the British right-wing press **gleefully reported** that the UK would have a claim to Greenland itself, if it were for sale.

## 9 Fault lines in Europe

Forming a military bloc that integrates the various national military forces has been a topic for European countries for decades, with predominantly France pushing for more integration under its leadership. Already in 2019, Macron had declared NATO “brain dead”. The EU’s leading power, Germany, on the other hand has mostly rejected such advances also because this would threaten its leading role within the EU vis-à-vis France.

However, Friedrich Merz, the likely next chancellor of Germany, has now called for a European nuclear umbrella, i.e. called on France and the UK to either share access to their nuclear arsenal or to extend formal security guarantees to Germany as well. The former is rather **unlikely to happen**. Macron has, however, **indicated his willingness to discuss the latter**, which would reconfigure the balance of power in Europe, establishing France as the guarantor and strategic direction giver.<sup>7</sup> French rightwing politician Marine Le Pen already also voiced opposition to this option: “The French nuclear deterrent must remain a French nuclear deterrent”.

The fundamental reason for Europe’s inability so far to position itself as a military power is the contradiction built into the EU: competing capitalist powers pooling their economic power to compete on the world market while still competing against each other on this world market.

This tension finds political expression in various “eurosceptic” parties gaining momentum in the EU. Britain already left in 2020. Surveying rightwing parties, the AfD won 20% of the votes in the 2025 national election in Germany. In France, while the National Rally no longer campaigns to leave the Eurozone it remains eurosceptic. In Italy, Giorgia Meloni heads up a eurosceptic coalition but has so

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<sup>7</sup> It has been remarked by analysts that the UK’s nuclear arsenal is contingent on America’s support and thus could not provide an alternative to America’s security guarantees.

far proved amenable to the EU's policies and priorities. In the Netherlands, the Freedom Party (PVV) – heading up the ruling coalition – is eurosceptic.

It is an open question how these patriots will position themselves when faced with the great power conflicts that are arising and may arise. They may double down on their scepticism that the European bloc delivers for their respective fatherlands (against global competitors and rivals, but also against other European economies). Or they may see some strategic European integration as a solid path towards respect in this multi-polar world. But neither result is certain.

## 10 What is to be done

In February 2025, The Times newspaper expressed alarm: “Gen Z think UK is racist and would not fight for their country”. The conservative newspaper reported that “only 11 per cent would fight for Britain — and 41 per cent said there were no circumstances at all in which they would take up arms for their country”. The warning was received by the UK Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer, who responded in the same newspaper: “But The Times finding that less than half of young people are proud to be British is a signal about our social contract that cannot be ignored.”

The UK is a long way off from **sacrificing an entire generation (of men) for the fatherland** – for the time being its military needs are smaller, quickly deployable military units not mass armies used in a land war. It also wants a population that supports the war efforts and is prepared to make economic sacrifices for it: austerity. In any event, this poll and the Government's response to it suggest that this state's ambition to fight wars for its might and the population's willingness to go along are two separate matters.

This is a task ahead, then. To explain to anyone, young and old, that sacrificing, fighting, killing and dying for the fatherland is not worth it. Let the US have Greenland, let Russia dominate Europe, let China, Russia and the US deprive the UK of its ability to defend its interests, let Türkiye have the Mediterranean, let Argentina have the Falkland Islands, let the invader have any piece of territory it wants.

It does not matter what nation rules a piece of land, but it matters what they do to the people they rule over. Whatever authoritarian regime the conquerors have, it is defeated in a general strike not by fighting the wars of its rivals for respect in this new multipolar world order. On either side of a great power war, the people who are reduced to casualty and war-readiness statistics in government briefings have more in common with each other than they have with those who send them to kill, maim and die.