



View from the Beltway

Peacenic Donald

BY OWEN ULLMANN



Can he cut deals that are for real?

President Donald Trump loves to threaten economic warfare against international friends and foes alike, using tariffs as his weapon of choice. But when it comes to actual warfare—conflicts involving troops and military weaponry—he sounds like a 1960s peacemaker.

That stance has all but escaped attention because of the near total media and political community's obsession with his views on the economy, immigration, federal budget, wokeism, and controversial choices for top government posts, in addition to tariffs. His embrace of a peaceful world is all the more surprising given his selection for Defense secretary, former Fox News host Pete Hegseth, who has promised to bring a "warrior culture" to the Pentagon.

Nonetheless, Trump sounded like a true pacifist in his second inaugural address: "My proudest legacy will be that of a peacemaker and unifier. That's

what I want to be: a peacemaker and a unifier... We will be a nation like no other, full of compassion, courage, and exceptionalism. Our power will stop all wars and bring a new spirit of unity

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to a world that has been angry, violent, and totally unpredictable."

And he doubled down on that viewpoint three days later in a video appearance at the annual World Economic Forum in Davos, where he called for nuclear disarmament. "We'd like to see denuclearization," he told the audience. During his first term, Trump said, he and Russian President Vladimir Putin "were talking about denuclearization of our two countries, and China would have come along ... And I will tell you that President Putin

really liked the idea of cutting way back on nuclear. And I think the rest of the world, we would have gotten them to follow. And China would have come along, too. China also liked it."

"Tremendous amounts of money are being spent on nuclear, and the destructive capability is something that we don't even want to talk about today, because you don't want to hear it. It's too depressing," he continued. "So, we want to see if we can denuclearize, and I think that's very possible."

This is certainly an opportune time to seek a world with fewer wars, because at the moment the world is engulfed by fighting to a degree not seen since World War II. While Russia's war with Ukraine and the Middle East conflict are dominating the news, they are only two of dozens of armed conflicts taking place in every corner of the globe.

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A website that tracks warfare, Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED), lists fifty countries on five continents involved in civil wars, cross-border fighting, or conflicts with terrorists, armed gangs, or drug cartels as of the end of 2024. That's double the number of conflicts from just five years ago and represents a 25 percent increase in political violence from the prior twelve months.

ACLED lists more than two dozen countries involved in "extreme" or "high" violence. Besides such obvious places as the Mideast and Ukraine, it includes Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, and Mexico in North America; Brazil, Colombia, and Venezuela in South America; Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Pakistan, and the Philippines in Asia,

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and ten African countries clustered mainly in East, Central, and West Africa. They include such populous nations as Nigeria and Ethiopia.

What is behind this global spike in conflict? Paul Poast, associate professor of political science at the University of Chicago and author of the 2005 book *The Economics of War*, noted that there has been a steady increase in global conflicts for three years in a row, suggesting something fundamental is going on, particularly since the previous two decades had witnessed such a noticeable drop in warfare that some scholars were declaring the end of modern wars.

"You always have to start by asking could it just be bad luck," he said. "You can't totally rule out coincidence and eventually the conflicts will go away. But I don't think that's the answer because of how it's gradually been increasing and increasing. There must be something more fundamental that's changed."

Donald Trump has often been underestimated when it comes to dealmaking, politics, and surprise disruption. He has made no secret of his envy of President Barack Obama for winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009 at the start of his presidency, and his narcissism has made him obsessed with winning that prize for himself, an honor he openly covets.



OFFICIAL WHITE HOUSE PHOTO BY SAMANTHA APPELTON

Poast postulated that the fundamental driver of this trend has been the shift in the international system towards a "multi-polar system" and away from a "uni-polar system," under which the United States was the sole superpower for more than a decade, and before that the "bi-polar system," or Cold War between the United States and Soviet Union that had dominated the world for four decades. By multi-polar, Poast means the rise of China, the resurgence and re-assertiveness of Russia on the world stage, India's seeming emergence on a path to becoming a great power, and even the United Kingdom trying to re-establish itself as a great power through Brexit. "Although all these major powers are not on the same level, you are seeing a world that is very different than the world that we were in, say, through the 1990s or the 2000s, when there was basically just the United States as the major power," he said. "And during the U.S.-Soviet Cold War era, there were a lot of hot wars happening in other places. But even then, the level of conflict was lower than it is today."

"Under uni-polarity, the United States had the power and bandwidth to be able to go around and address all sorts of conflicts: 'Oh, there's a

conflict happening there. Okay, we'll intervene. There's conflict happening here. Okay, we'll intervene. There's one happening there. We'll intervene.' It's not that conflicts don't happen, but you're able to help end them quickly and facilitate interventions into them," Poast continued. "That very much led to this notion of the United States as the world's policeman. During the Cold War, there was a similar dynamic where the United States and Soviet Union could tamp down con-

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flicts within their spheres of influence. There were long-running conflicts, but they could reel in allies, intervene, and facilitate diplomacy to quickly end these conflicts."

A multi-polar world makes it nearly impossible for the great powers to become preoccupied with any one conflict because there are so many other threats facing them. "There is this great phrase I've heard



At the entrance to the Khmeimim Air Base in Syria, currently operated by Russia, on December 18, 2024, after Bashar al-Assad's fall from power. The image of Assad that formerly hung beside the image of Russian President Vladimir Putin was torn down by Russian soldiers.

Danger of Distraction

Paul Poast, associate professor of political science at the University of Chicago and author of the 2005 book *The Economics of War*, suspects that Hamas' attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, was based on its belief that all the major powers were distracted by other conflicts and rivalries so no one was going to prevent the terrorist group's assault. Similarly, the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria in December

occurred in large part because Russia, President Bashar al-Assad's major patron, was too tied down in its war with Ukraine to rush troops to defend him from rebel forces that marched swiftly into Damascus. The rebels, who had been fighting Assad for years, no doubt took advantage of a distracted Russia in planning the timing of their assault.

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used that great power competition leads to great power distraction in that you're in a system with multiple major powers and there's a lot more uncertainty," Poast said. "Instead of being in a situation where you only have to focus on one adversary, you now have to focus on China and also on what Russia's doing. Maybe the two are working together, or maybe they're not. You no longer have the bandwidth to also deal with all these other minor conflicts."

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A multi-polar world also creates opportunities for the major powers to make aggressive moves themselves, convinced their rivals won't get directly involved. That might explain Russia's invasion of Ukraine and China's aggressive moves toward the Philippines, Japan, and other nearby nations, Poast said. "Great power competition feeds into great power distraction but also leads to a situation where then the great powers feel like they can take advantage of the situation themselves."

That analysis might explain Trump's belligerent rhetoric about gaining control of Greenland, the Panama Canal, and making Canada

the fifty-first state. Hyperbole? No doubt, but such comments can't be totally discarded. Trump surely isn't going to launch military invasions to expand U.S. territory, but he may well

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use economic warfare to try to achieve his goals. Look at how he forced Colombia in late January to accept deportation flights of undocumented immigrants after threatening ruinous tariffs on a country heavily dependent on U.S. trade. Always the businessman, Trump is keenly aware that actual warfare is almost never good for business—except defense contractors.

Bullying small nations like Colombia, Panama, or Denmark—which controls Greenland—is one thing, but pushing around Russia or China is another. True, Trump seems to have a knack for dealing with autocratic leaders like Putin, Xi Jinping, and Kim Jong Un, but getting them to work cooperatively with the United States on his terms is an awfully tall order. Filling his administration with China hawks and imposing new tariffs on Chinese imports in February certainly won't win over Xi.

Poast, who has a book coming out this year, *Wheat at War* (with co-author Rosella Cappella Zielinski, Oxford Press) about efforts of the Allied powers to cooperate during World War I to ensure wheat was supplied to soldiers and civilians, doesn't see a new world of cooperative superpowers ending regional wars during Trump's presidency. "I think we have to be prepared for the fact that we're in a new normal, that we're at a heightened level of conflict.

We're in this world at war, even if we continue to go on avoiding an actual world war," he said.

But Trump has often been underestimated when it comes to dealmaking, politics, and surprise disruption. He has made no secret of his envy of Barack Obama for winning the Nobel Peace Prize at the start of his presidency, and his narcissism has made him obsessed with winning that prize for himself, an honor he openly covets.

David Smick, founder and editor of *TIE*, observed that Trump is a natural negotiator who is not limited by strong ideological or partisan beliefs. "He begins any negotiation by throwing a grenade followed by fireworks. He sounds crazy. Canada as fifty-first state, buying Greenland, and so forth," Smick said. "His real intention is to secure positioning via a deal to potentially counter the Russian and Chinese moves in the North Pole. So I ignore his rhetoric and concentrate on his goals which are usually not pro-war. They are tactically designed like a chess move."

Trump already could claim credit for bringing about a ceasefire in Gaza

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that the Biden administration had long sought without success until after Trump's election. Yet his shocking proposal to displace all Palestinians from Gaza and turn it into some kind of seaside resort is a non-starter that won't bring the lasting peace to the region that he insists is possible on his watch.

As for the war in Ukraine, he did not end the fighting even before taking office, as he had boasted during the election campaign. But now Trump is pushing hard—maybe too hard—to force an end to hostilities so he

can take credit. His friendly phone call with Putin in which he proposed peace talks largely on terms sought by the Russian leader and bizarre attacks on Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and NATO allies in Europe are part of his pressure campaign to end the war as soon as possible, regardless of the price Ukraine and Europe might have to pay.

His blowup with Zelenskyy in the Oval Office is classic Trump: an incident that shows he is only thinking about himself. He figures the quickest way to end the war is to reward the powerful bad guy in Moscow and bully the weaker guy in Kyiv into making a bad deal for Ukraine, so Trump can bask in global adoration for ending a war, even if it requires terms that betray American values for the past eighty years.

Iran, severely weakened by Israel's defeat of its proxies in the Middle East, may be willing to negotiate a new nuclear treaty with Trump, who had pulled out of the earlier one negotiated by Obama. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who had a friendly meeting with Trump at the White House in February, could play a key role as a mediator in helping Trump end conflicts. North Korea remains a wild card but Trump has his "special relationship" with Kim, so who knows what will come of that bromance.

Trump understands that wielding economic power has more traction than threatening military confrontation with nuclear rivals who have the capacity to annihilate the world. At a time when Russia's economy is slowly sagging under the weight of war and Western sanctions, and China's economy is beset by myriad problems from rising unemployment to an imploding real estate market, the leader of the world's strongest economy has leverage and the chutzpah to cut deals that could make for a more peaceful world.

Nobel Prize Committee in Oslo, are you paying attention? ◆