

## **In a second Trump term, liberal democracies must lead themselves**

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President

2025-04-09

As U.S. President Donald Trump begins his second term, now entering its third month, the tone and direction of his foreign policy have rekindled deep anxiety among traditional U.S. allies. Once again, the Trump administration has shown a striking willingness to challenge long-held diplomatic norms — not only through sweeping tariffs, but also through statements that appear to diminish the sovereignty of allied nations.

Shortly after taking office, Trump told reporters that Greenland — a territory of NATO member Denmark — might soon be "ours." He has continued to suggest that Canada should become "America's 51st state," remarks that blur the line between offhand bravado and dangerous provocation. A French senator recently warned that this approach signals the "confiscation of democracy." Others have dubbed Trump a "Neanderthal realist," a leader who views the world through a purely transactional lens.

These unsettling shifts go beyond rhetoric. On March 18, Trump held a phone conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin in which he appeared to entertain the idea that Russia may retain the Ukrainian territories it seized by force. This position stands in sharp contrast to a previous commitment by Washington to defend Ukraine's sovereignty following Russia's illegal 2022 invasion. It also sends a troubling message: that aggression, when met with convenience, may be rewarded.

Trump's view appears to be shaped by a belief that authoritarians can be managed through limited incentives — that as long as the United States avoids moral crusades abroad and pressures allies to pay more, it can turn inward and "make itself great again."

But history has shown that authoritarian regimes are not easily appeased. Leaders who repress their citizens at home often seek legitimacy and distraction through conquest abroad. When they see no consequence for aggression, they do not step back — they push further.

In this context, U.S. ambivalence toward its alliances is not simply a diplomatic misstep, it is a strategic liability. If Washington continues to deride and pressure its allies, it risks unraveling the very liberal international order it spent decades constructing. Allies may begin to question whether the values that bind them to the United States — democracy, human rights, the rule of law — are still shared principles or mere slogans.

That erosion has real consequences. A weakened alliance system would leave democratic nations more vulnerable to coercion, less capable of organizing collective responses to crises, and further disadvantaged in the long-term strategic competition with China. U.S.-led initiatives to restructure global supply chains, including efforts to secure semiconductor manufacturing, could also falter without strong allied support.

In the absence of steady U.S. leadership, democratic nations must take on more responsibility themselves. Over the past few years, a shift has already begun. Instead of relying on the traditional “hub-and-spoke” model in which the United States sits at the center of bilateral relationships, allies have begun forming a more resilient, interconnected network — a “lattice-like” alliance. This new model emphasizes horizontal cooperation rather than vertical dependence.

Such a framework offers two key benefits. First, it acts as a deterrent. European countries, disillusioned by Washington’s wavering stance on Ukraine, have begun preparing for a future in which U.S. support for NATO can no longer be taken for granted. Several governments have committed to rearmament, announcing the “Readiness 2030” road map, which sets an ambitious goal of military renewal within five years.

Second, a stronger alliance network helps meet one of the Trump administration’s core demands: burden-sharing. By investing in collective defense, liberal democracies can make themselves indispensable partners — not dependents — even to a White House driven by self-interest. A more capable and confident group of allies does not undercut U.S. leadership. It reinforces it.

Asia, too, must act decisively. The region faces a growing axis of authoritarian cooperation — among Russia, China and North Korea — that demands a unified response. The time has come to move beyond informal dialogues and seriously consider the creation of a regional security framework, possibly modeled on NATO.

That effort could include a NATO-style nuclear sharing arrangement to reinforce deterrence against North Korea, and formal consultation mechanisms that bring together both Atlantic and Pacific democracies. Since 2022, South Korea, Japan, Australia and New Zealand have participated in NATO summits as the “Indo-Pacific Four.” This participation should be institutionalized through joint training exercises, coordinated planning and shared strategic objectives.

The liberal democratic alliance was born under U.S. leadership, but it is not for the United States alone to preserve. If Washington grows indifferent, the burden must be carried by others. What is at stake is not merely an alliance system, but the very norms and rules that have kept the world stable — albeit

imperfectly — since the end of World War II.

The Trump administration may seek to redefine Washington's role in the world, but that does not give it license to dismantle the foundation of the liberal order. If anything, it offers liberal democracies an opportunity — and a responsibility — to demonstrate that their values are not contingent on the mood of a single superpower.

For the sake of global stability, and for the future of democratic governance, it is time for the world's democracies to lead — not in defiance of the United States, but in defense of what it once stood for.

\* The view expressed herein was published on April 9 in *The Korea JoongAng Daily* and does not necessarily reflect the views of The Asan Institute for Policy Studies.