

## EXCEPTIONAL TIMES IN THE EURO-ATLANTIC SECURITY ORDER: lessons from Washington and London

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# 828

MARCH  
2025

*A series of recent events aimed at ending the Russo – Ukrainian war, including the spectacular visit of President Volodymir Zelensky to the White House and the “new Ukraine peace deal” proposed at the European summit held in London a few days afterward, were depicted in the media as extraordinary – even shocking – events revealing the pivotal momentum in the entire Euro-Atlantic security order. How may this unusual, fast, and in many respects surprising dynamic be discussed through the prism of the academic discipline of international relations? Are there ideas and approaches to foreign policy and international politics that can be useful and serve as explanatory tools for deciphering the dramatic collisions we are witnessing nowadays?*

**F**or the chaotic cacophony of the recent events in Washington, D.C. and London we do have a general frame of analysis – the concept of exceptionalism. Its first obvious manifestation was the full-scale Russia’s invasion of Ukraine meant to challenge the whole set of norms established after the end of the Cold War. However, attempts to find ways out of the war are also marked with their own policies of exception. Each day it becomes more and more clear that international norms become dysfunctional, and all solutions are searched through measures with different degrees of exceptionality. Old norms are increasingly circumvented, while new ones are still obscure.

However, there are two different ways of dealing with the current “state of exception”: some international actors use it for breaking and radically transforming the rules of the post-Cold War order, while others intend to adjust to the extraordinary situation for saving the rules that were constitutive for Western international society during the last several decades. Let us start with the first group of actors which is exemplified by the Trump – Putin relations.

The best way to characterize United States’ foreign policy under this second Trump administration would be through the lens of transactionalism, a theory that projects business reasoning onto the sphere of international relations. This logic is hybrid: it allows Trump to make apparently imperial gestures (when it comes to Panama, Canada, Greenland, or Ukraine’s rare

minerals), and at the same time to play an isolationist game (“make a deal, or we are out”). The new American isolationist geopolitics is articulated through Donald Trump’s recurrent references to the Atlantic Ocean that separates his country from – rather than connects with – Europe, which gives him a reason for (at least partly) disengaging with European allies in general and Ukraine in particular.

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In Trump’s imagined universe, there are neither friends nor enemies – only business partners. This is why Volodymyr Zelenskiy’s direct reference to Putin as the aggressor (and even his outfit visually reminding about exceptional circumstances Ukraine is going through) were met with anger in the White House. The reverse – and quite paradoxical - side of this business-like mindset of a global entrepreneur is a *de facto* normalization of war: instead of addressing the Russian aggression as the root cause of the problem, Trump repeatedly spoke about its consequences – the multiple insecurities that Ukraine has to face nowadays because of the Russian attack. By claiming his own exceptionality as the only person in the world who can strike a deal with Putin, Trump ended up with approaching security assistance to Ukraine as one of the most pro-American nations in the globe not as a matter of diplomacy, but rather as a part of his own cost – benefit calculus.

The result is deplorable: today’s US administration undermines at least two basic intellectual pillars of the post-Cold War international society. One is the democratic peace theory that not only says that democracies don’t fight each other, but also presumes that they tend to stick together against autocracies. What Trump is doing is exactly the opposite: he feels more convenient to team up with the Russian dictator than with the leader of democratic Ukraine. Another victim of US revisionism is a theory known as liberal institutionalism which claims that democratic governments invest their resources in building – rather than destroying – institutions as hotbeds for norms, rules and principles of international behavior. Again, this thinking about international society is alien to Trump’s mental and cognitive map.

Russian foreign policy shares a lot with US government’s vision of the international scene. For both regimes, ethics is removed from the domain of foreign policy. Both don’t believe in universals: each case is separate, specific and unique. Due to that, both don’t mind ignoring international

law (which clearly characterizes Russia's military intervention in Ukraine as an act of aggression) and substituting it with the power of material resources, both military and extractive. To borrow from Giorgio Agamben, for both the White House and the Kremlin authority is 'what remains of law if law is wholly suspended'.

Neither Putin nor Trump deem that the time for empires has gone. Yet Putin's imperialism has different roots – it comes not from a business calculation of such decades-long tycoons as Trump or Musk, but from an inferiority complex of a loser of the Cold War who wishes to take a geopolitical revenge for the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. For that the Kremlin can afford being economically and financially irrational, losing both material and human resources for the sake of an obsessive idea of civilizational messianism ending up in attempts to subjugate a neighboring country.

Ukraine in this sense is driven by a completely different script. It can be summarized as liberal internationalism with its emphasis on centrality of universal rules and principles as the guarantee for long-lasting peace. The constant reference to the basics of global normativity, including the ban on the application of force, inviolability of borders and respect for territorial integrity, is a backbone of Ukraine's **normative agency**. Of course, Ukrainian political system had to adjust to the Russia-imposed state of exception and introduce such extraordinary measures as restrictions on cross-border mobility for male citizens or a moratorium on elections during the war, but they were meant to safeguard – not to destroy - the normative foundations of Ukrainian statehood and its further integration with Europe. These digressions are in line with a school of thought grounded in the legality of derogations from the 'normal' functioning of public institutions in cases of emergency.

Ukraine's adherence to liberal internationalism largely coincides with the dominant European vision of international politics. EU's adaptation to the state of exception is manifested through the raising of military spending and improving defense capabilities, which is seen as a drastic departure from what was perceived as a norm in the previous decades of peace and prosperity. At the same time, the language of exceptionalism (a "coalition of the willing" to protect Ukraine) became part of the current European security narrative. The reference to political will looks promising on the one hand, yet at the same time it has potential drawbacks and risks of disunity: for example, the three Baltic states - who are among the most consistent supporters of Ukraine - were not invited to the London summit on March 3, and therefore feel being unduly marginalized within the new contours of the transforming European security landscape.

The most likely result of the wide proliferation of policies of exceptions is the growing anarchy which is hardly compatible with international liberalism. This anarchy is sustained by a series of fast policy shifts we have observed recently: from 'brotherhood' to war in Moscow's relations with Ukraine, from enmity to collusion in Russia – US relations, and from treating the European Union in the US as a major security and economic ally to blaming Europeans of profiteering on American resources.

These shifts may be explained as parts of a post-modern irony embedded in the contemporary international relations; alternatively, they can signify a lack of consistent understanding of national interests in major capitals of the world. In any case, the forthcoming anarchy triggered by the Trump administration can be detrimental for America itself: it would be logical to expect that in the future European countries will have much less incentives to support the White House in its policy of balancing China, and much more reasons to wonder how exactly the US is going to contain China if it miserably failed to constrain Russia.