



By: *Ferry Biedermann*

Trump's transactional theatrics could cost the US dearly



It's only the end of February, but with 'transactional' we already have a very strong candidate for word of the year. It might not be new, but with Donald Trump's help, it's fast becoming a leading focus in international relations.

This week, Ukraine's browbeaten president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, is paying tribute to the emperor in Washington D.C. in the form of a vague but undoubtedly extortionate **agreement** on sharing his country's mineral wealth with a rapacious US.

Things don't get much more ancient Roman than this. The chief of a subordinate nation will give a show of submission and transfer part of his country's wealth, much of which will probably flow not into state coffers but into the hands of a powerful elite.

Apart from the possibly fictitious gazillions of dollars involved, it is mostly a show for the populace. Bread and circuses and a display of bullying power. Apparently, Trump favours the nice round figure of \$500 billion that he also bandied about vis-à-vis Ukraine because it plays well with audiences.

It's been called an extortion racket and, a bit more politely, the return of transactional foreign politics, as if they'd ever been anything else. "America has no permanent friends or enemies, only interests," anybody?

That was Henry Kissinger, of course, and France's General De Gaulle had made a very similar, more general, observation. But whether either of them meant by it the same level of nakedly quid pro quo type of transactionalism is doubtful.

Raw power

Realpolitik, at least, comes with an awareness of what is needed to keep the wheels of diplomacy turning and the benefits of doing so. Trump mostly seems interested in displays of raw power that will, in the end, actually weaken the US, after having wrecked the West.

Presented as transactional, many of his more quixotic statements and actions must be viewed as mostly performative. From **pressuring** Canada and Mexico to **threatening** Denmark, the pay-off has been unsubstantial thus far, while the damage will be visible over time.

While some of it might actually be meant to intimidate longstanding allies, the script mostly reads as a performance for his own base, aimed at satisfying some atavistic American need to show who is top dog.

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Trump seems to feel that many Americans want to be reassured that they're not suckers. As if the US post-WWII had not shaped the existing network of alliances and agreements to mostly benefit itself.

In the spirit of no more handouts, except to their own billionaire oligarch cronies, Trump and Musk are both dismantling the remnants of the American welfare state as well as the country's overseas aid programmes.

The howls of pain from around the world feed back into the performative part of Trump's agenda. Even the withdrawal of favours and the chaos and disruption that causes are displays of power.

It's a performative transactionalism whose power is not wasted on Trump's countless far-right fellow travellers across the world. In the Netherlands, for example, the far-right minister of international development vowed to inject more transactionalism into overseas aid, quoting the example of Trump.

The EU has played a pioneering role

It's not clear, however, if Trump can actually be credited with inventing the much more

transactional approach to international relations that's now becoming in vogue. It has been years in the making, and the EU has played a pioneering role.

The bloc's and individual member countries' **agreements** with a slew of non-EU Mediterranean countries to stop migrants in exchange for cash or aid or both are some of the clearest examples of a hard-ball transactional approach that has been criticised roundly for its human rights implications.

Then, to keep to the world of aid, there has been the now long-standing pivot towards the aid-for-trade model of international development, pursued both by the US and Europe.



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While the focus in the West has often been on China forcing resource concessions in its partner countries, the West has not shied away either from using aid and trade leverage to receive favourable terms for access to resources.

This is both to say that, no, of course the US, nor Europe, have ever been naïve in international relations nor completely altruistic in their disbursement of aid. And thus, changing the approach to a seemingly harsher one, as Trump is now doing, is probably mostly theatre and, at the same time, probably damaging.

There's first of all the obvious damage to the

fabric of international alliances that have benefitted the US for the past eighty years. The existing world order is shaped in the image of the US and enhances and projects the country's power, whether we're talking about organisations such as the World Bank, IMF and WTO, but also NATO, Five Eyes and much, much more.

From the dollar serving as the world's reserve currency to allies, yes, allies, carrying most of the financial burden of stopping Russia in Ukraine, the US is at the centre of a system that it has consistently benefited from.

This is in raw economic terms as well as in less tangible but very real terms of benefiting from relative stability and soft power.

Trump is not facing a fading empire

There is one, albeit imperfect, parallel to Trump now dumping his allies so openly, and it was at the end of World War II when the freshly inaugurated president Truman abruptly stopped the Lend Lease programme to the UK, contrary to earlier American promises.

When the rug was pulled out from underneath an exhausted UK, it hastened the end of the British Empire, no bad thing as such, but achieved in a manner that led to much more instability and unrest than otherwise might have been the case, and thus eventually at a much higher cost to the US.

Trump is not facing a fading empire that needs to learn to live within its means

There was a plethora of reasons for Truman to base his decision on, including forcing the UK into reforms and financial sobriety. But among them was also the widespread domestic demand for an end to foreign handouts and a looming uphill election battle.

Trump is not facing a fading empire that needs

to learn to live within its means. Europe, despite its quirks, is a valuable ally and trading partner in a system that hugely benefits the US. To pull the rug from underneath that alliance is just destructive theatrics, not even transactional.