



By: **Chris Patten**

“Might is right” is not a sustainable geopolitical strategy



After nearly a decade dominated by populist politics, the United Kingdom and the European Union could be set to change course.

Although overly cautious, British Prime Minister Keir Starmer's overtures toward European allies are a welcome first step on what is likely to be a long path out of Brexit's shadow.

Since leaving the European Union – its largest market and closest political ally – five years ago, the UK has become increasingly aware of its true place in the world – arguably the country's most encouraging political development in years.

With the US abandoning multilateralism, Starmer's Labour government is working to rebuild relationships with allies such as Germany, France, Italy, and the Netherlands.

Starmer, a naturally cautious politician, can hardly be accused of moving too quickly or seeking power for its own sake.

But his efforts to strengthen the UK's trading relationship with the EU, deepen security cooperation with key European powers (particularly in support of Ukraine), and re-engage with democratic allies around the world signal an ambitious objective: restoring Britain's place at the heart of the Western alliance.

The clearest example of this shift is the joint **statement** by the UK, France, and Canada denouncing Israel's "wholly disproportionate" actions in Gaza and the West Bank, which, they warned, "risk breaching international humanitarian law."

At the same time, they reaffirmed their unequivocal condemnation of Hamas's attack against Israel on October 7, 2023, and called for the immediate release of all remaining Israeli hostages.

Chaos within international institutions

All three countries find themselves increasingly sidelined and pressured by US President Donald Trump's administration. But Trump's authoritarian and erratic behavior is being widely shunned.

Globally, opposition to Trump has become an effective electoral strategy, enabling responsible parties across the political spectrum in countries like Canada and Australia to win elections despite unfavorable early polling (though a populist endorsed by Trump narrowly won Poland's recent presidential election).

Trump tends to treat allies as adversaries and vice versa

Trump's presidency has unleashed chaos within international institutions. Over the past three months, his administration has launched a deliberate effort to dismantle the multilateral order and subvert the core values upheld by every US president since the end of World War II.

Unlike Dwight Eisenhower, Harry Truman, John F. Kennedy, and Ronald Reagan, who promoted international cooperation and sought to make the US – in the **words** of former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright – an "indispensable" partner for democracies worldwide, Trump tends to treat allies as adversaries and vice versa.

"Might is right" worldview

His deference to Russian President Vladimir Putin's repressive regime is a case in point. Trump has repeatedly gone out of his way to excuse or downplay Putin's invasion of Ukraine and blatant violations of international law, including assassinations of political opponents abroad.

In fact, Trump and the billionaire property developers **shaping** his foreign policy appear to have more sympathy for Putin than for traditional US allies, let alone for Ukraine, which Russia aims to exterminate as an

independent nation-state.

This “might is right” worldview is also evident in Trump’s economic agenda, which centers on tariffs and massive spending cuts, and has pushed the US economy to the brink of recession.

Fortunately, **chainsaw**-waving billionaire Elon Musk has **stepped** away from his role at the Department of Government Efficiency, though not before recklessly gutting numerous programs designed to support low-income households and vulnerable populations around the world.

Trump’s relentless barrage of threats and incoherent tariff announcements has destabilized the global economy

The consequences extend far beyond US borders, as Trump’s relentless barrage of threats and incoherent tariff announcements has destabilized the global economy and jeopardized America’s long-term prosperity.

These actions have also played directly into China’s hands, undermining American credibility on the world stage.

What can those of us outside the US do?

Meanwhile, Trump’s anti-immigration agenda has eroded America’s capacity for innovation and strengthened China’s position in the AI race.

Rather than seeking to boost the US economy’s global competitiveness, Trump has turned his ire inward, launching an unprecedented attack on elite universities and targeting some of the world’s leading scientists, many of whom are outspoken critics of his agenda.

But recent developments suggest there are grounds for cautious optimism even in the US.



Liberal democracies must take the lead - Chris Patten

Although Trump has shown little regard for the rule of law, the courts may yet prove to be an effective check on his unlawful actions. This is especially true in the case of his sweeping tariffs, which **require** Congressional approval and cannot be imposed unilaterally by the president.

Perhaps resilient institutions and engaged citizens can bring this turbulent chapter of American history to a close.

Future generations may look back on it with the same disbelief and shame that surround the McCarthy era of the 1950s and the Palmer Raids of the early 1920s. As with McCarthyism, many Americans are already asking: “How did we let that happen?” The rest of the world, watching anxiously, is asking the same question.

So, what can those of us outside the US do? For now, the answer seems clear.

Liberal democracies must take the lead, building on the emerging partnership between Starmer, French President Emmanuel Macron, and Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney.

Encouragingly, a growing coalition – from Australia and Japan to central Europe – is committed to upholding World Trade Organization rules.

This alliance should serve as a foundation for economic cooperation that fosters stability, peace, and shared prosperity. Other countries that wish to join should be welcomed. Those that do not will eventually discover that “might

is right” is not a sustainable geopolitical or economic strategy.

Trump, Chinese President Xi Jinping, and Putin may continue to posture and jeopardize their countries’ futures with reckless policies. The rest of us have serious work to do.

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