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The Predatory Hegemon

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Ever since Donald Trump first became U.S. president, in 2017, commentators have searched for an adequate label to describe his approach to U.S. foreign relations. Writing in these pages, the political scientist Barry Posen suggested in 2018 that Trump’s grand strategy was “illiberal hegemony,” and the analyst Oren Cass argued last fall that its defining essence was a demand for “reciprocity.” Trump has been called a realist, a nationalist, an old-fashioned mercantilist, an imperialist, and an isolationist. Each of these terms captures some aspects of his approach, but the grand strategy of his second presidential term is perhaps best described as “predatory hegemony.” Its central aim is to use Washington’s privileged position to extract concessions, tribute, and displays of deference from both allies and adversaries, pursuing short-term gains in what it sees as a purely zero-sum world.

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Illustration by Adam Maida

Given the United States' still considerable assets and geographic advantages, predatory hegemony may work for a time. In the long run, however, it is doomed to fail. It is ill suited for a world of several competing great powers—especially one in which China is an economic and military peer—because multipolarity gives other states ways to reduce their dependence on the United States. If it continues to define American strategy in the coming years, predatory hegemony will weaken the United States and its allies alike, generate growing global resentment, create tempting opportunities for Washington's main rivals, and leave Americans less secure, less prosperous, and less influential.

APEX PREDATOR

Over the past 80 years, the broad structure of world power has gone from bipolarity to unipolarity to today's lopsided multipolarity, and U.S. grand strategy has shifted along with those changes. In the bipolar world of the Cold War, the United States acted as a benevolent hegemon toward its close allies in Europe and Asia because American leaders believed their allies' well-being was essential to containing the Soviet Union. They used American economic and military supremacy freely and sometimes played hardball with key partners, as President Dwight Eisenhower did when Britain, France, and Israel attacked Egypt in 1956 or as President Richard Nixon did when he took the United States off the gold standard in 1971. But Washington also helped its allies recover economically after World War II; created and, for the most part, followed rules intended to foster mutual prosperity; collaborated with others to manage currency crises and other economic disruptions; and gave weaker states a seat at the table and a voice in collective decisions. U.S. officials led, but they also listened, and they rarely tried to weaken or exploit their partners.

During the unipolar era, the United States succumbed to hubris and became a rather careless and willful hegemon. Facing no powerful opponents and convinced that most states were eager to accept American leadership and embrace its liberal values, U.S. officials paid little attention to other states' concerns; embarked on costly and misguided crusades in Afghanistan, Iraq, and several other countries; adopted confrontational policies that drove China and Russia together; and pushed to open global markets in ways that accelerated China's rise, increased global financial instability, and eventually provoked a domestic backlash that helped propel Trump to the White House. To be sure,

Washington sought to isolate, punish, and undermine several hostile regimes during this period and sometimes paid scant attention to other states' security fears. But both Democratic and Republican officials believed that using American power to create a global liberal order would be good for the United States and for the world and that serious opposition would be confined to a handful of minor rogue states. They were not averse to using the power at their disposal to compel, co-opt, or even overthrow other governments, but their malevolence was directed at acknowledged adversaries and not toward U.S. partners.

Under Trump, however, the United States has become a predatory hegemon. This strategy is not a coherent, well-thought-out response to the return of multipolarity; in fact, it is exactly the wrong way to act in a world of several great powers. It is instead a direct reflection of Trump's transactional approach to all relationships and his belief that the United States has enormous and enduring leverage over nearly every country in the world. The United States is like "a big, beautiful department store," said Trump in April 2025, and "everybody wants a piece of that store." Or as he said in a statement shared by White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt, the American consumer is "what every country wants that we have," adding, "To put it another way, they need our money."

During Trump's first term, more experienced and knowledgeable advisers such as Defense Secretary James Mattis, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, White House Chief of Staff John Kelly, and National Security Adviser H. R. McMaster kept Trump's predatory impulses in check. But in his second term, his desire to exploit other states' vulnerabilities has been given full rein, empowered by a cadre of appointees selected for their personal loyalty and by Trump's growing if misplaced confidence in his own grasp of world affairs.

DOMINANCE AND SUBMISSION

A predatory hegemon is a dominant great power that tries to structure its transactions with others in a purely zero-sum fashion, so that the benefits are always distributed in its favor. A predatory hegemon's primary goal is not to build stable and mutually beneficial relations that leave all parties better off but to ensure that it gains more from every interaction than others do. An arrangement that leaves the hegemon better off and its partners worse off is preferable to an arrangement in which both sides gain but the partner gains more, even if the latter case

yields larger absolute benefits for both parties. A predatory hegemon always wants the lion's share.

All great powers engage in acts of predation, of course, and they invariably compete for relative advantage. When dealing with rivals, all states try to get the better end of any deal. What distinguishes predatory hegemony from typical great-power behavior, however, is a state's willingness to extract concessions and asymmetric benefits from its allies and adversaries alike. A benign hegemon imposes unfair burdens on its allies only when necessary, because it believes that its security and wealth are enhanced when its partners prosper. It recognizes the value of rules and institutions that facilitate mutually beneficial cooperation, are perceived as legitimate by others, and are enduring enough that states can safely assume that those rules will not change too often or without warning. A benevolent hegemon welcomes positive-sum partnerships with states that have similar interests, such as keeping a common foe in check, and may even allow others to reap disproportionate gains if doing so would leave all participants better off. In other words, a benign hegemon strives not only to advance its own power position but also to provide what the economist Arnold Wolfers called "milieu goals": it seeks to shape the international environment in ways that make the naked exercise of power less necessary.

By contrast, a predatory hegemon is as likely to exploit its partners as it is to take advantage of a rival. It may use embargoes, financial sanctions, beggar-thy-neighbor trade policies, currency manipulation, and other instruments of economic pressure to force others to accept terms of trade that favor the hegemon's economy or to adjust their behavior on noneconomic issues of interest. It will link the provision of military protection to its economic demands and expects alliance partners to support its broader foreign policy initiatives. Weaker states will tolerate these coercive pressures if they are heavily dependent on access to the hegemon's larger market or if they face still greater threats from other states and must therefore depend on the hegemon's protection, even if it comes with strings attached.

Because a predatory hegemon's coercive power depends on keeping other states in a condition of permanent submission, its leaders will expect those within its orbit to acknowledge their subordinate status through repeated, often symbolic, acts of submission. They might be expected to pay a formal tribute or be called on to openly acknowledge and praise the hegemon's virtues. Such ritual expressions of deference

discourage opposition by signaling that the hegemon is too powerful to resist and by portraying it as wiser than its vassals and therefore entitled to dictate to them.

Predatory hegemony is not a new phenomenon. It was the basis for Athens's relations with weaker city-states in its empire, a dominion that Pericles himself, the preeminent Athenian leader of his time, described as a "tyranny." The premodern, Sinocentric system in East Asia rested on similar relations of dependence, including the payment of tribute and ritualized subservience, although scholars disagree about whether it was consistently exploitative. The desire to extract wealth from colonial possessions was a central ingredient in the Belgian, British, French, Portuguese, and Spanish colonial empires, and similar motives influenced Nazi Germany's one-sided economic relations with its trading partners in central and eastern Europe and the Soviet Union's relations with its Warsaw Pact allies. Although these cases differ in important ways, in each one a dominant power sought to exploit its weaker partners to secure asymmetric benefits for itself, even if its efforts did not always succeed and if some clients cost more to acquire and defend than they provided in wealth or tribute.

In short, a predatory hegemon views all bilateral relations as inherently zero-sum and seeks to extract the greatest possible benefits from each one. "What's mine is mine, and what's yours is negotiable" is its guiding credo. Existing agreements have no intrinsic value or legitimacy and will be discarded or ignored if they do not yield sufficient asymmetric benefits. Some predatory efforts may fail, of course, and there are limits to what even the most powerful states can extract from others. For a predatory hegemon, however, the overriding objective is to push those limits as far as possible.

UPPING THE ANTE

The predatory nature of Trump's foreign policy is most evident in his obsession with trade deficits and his attempts to use tariffs to redistribute economic gains in Washington's favor. Trump has repeatedly said that trade deficits are a "rip-off" and a form of looting; in his view, countries that run surpluses are "winning" because the United States pays more to them than they pay to Washington. Accordingly, Trump has either imposed tariffs on those countries, ostensibly to protect U.S. manufacturers by making foreign goods more expensive (even though the cost of a tariff is mostly paid by Americans who purchase imported

goods), or threatened such tariffs to force foreign governments and firms to invest in the United States in exchange for relief.

Trump has also used tariffs to force others to alter noneconomic policies that he opposes. Last July, he levied a 40 percent tariff on Brazil in a failed attempt to pressure its government into pardoning former President Jair Bolsonaro, a Trump ally. (In November, he lifted some of those tariffs, which had contributed to higher food prices for U.S. consumers.) He justified raising tariffs on Canada and Mexico by claiming that they were not doing enough to halt fentanyl smuggling. And in October, he threatened Colombia with higher tariffs after its president criticized the U.S. Navy's controversial strikes on more than two dozen boats in the Caribbean, which, according to the Trump administration, had been targeted for smuggling illegal drugs.

Trump is as likely to coerce traditional U.S. allies as acknowledged adversaries, and the on-again, off-again quality of his threats underscores his desire to extract as many concessions as possible. Trump believes unpredictability is a powerful bargaining tool, and his endlessly shifting set of threats and demands is intended to force others to keep searching for new ways to accommodate him. Threatening to impose a tariff costs Washington very little if the target caves quickly, but if the target stands firm or if markets are spooked, Trump can defer action. This approach also keeps attention riveted on Trump himself, helps the administration portray any subsequent agreement as a victory regardless of its precise terms, and creates obvious opportunities for corruption that benefit Trump and his inner circle.

To maximize U.S. leverage, Trump has repeatedly linked his economic demands to allied dependence on U.S. military support, largely by raising doubts about whether he would honor alliance commitments. He has insisted that allies should pay for American protection and suggested that the United States might leave NATO, refuse to help defend Taiwan, or abandon Ukraine completely. But his goal is not to make U.S. partnerships more effective by getting allies to do more to defend themselves—and, in fact, drastically increasing tariff levels will damage partners' economies and make it harder for them to meet higher defense spending targets. Instead, Trump is using the

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threat of U.S. disengagement to extract economic concessions. This strategy has paid some short-term dividends, at least on paper. In July, EU leaders accepted a one-sided trade deal in the hope of convincing Trump to keep backing Ukraine, and Japan and South Korea got their tariff levels lowered, in deals signed in July and November, respectively, by pledging to invest in the U.S. economy. Australia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Pakistan, and Ukraine have all sought to solidify U.S. support by offering the United States access to or partial ownership of critical minerals located in their territory.

A predatory hegemon prefers a world where, in Thucydides's famous phrase, "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must." That is why such a country will be wary of norms, rules, or institutions that might limit its ability to take advantage of others. Not surprisingly, Trump has had little use for the United Nations; has been happy to tear up agreements negotiated by his predecessors, such as the Paris climate accord and the Iran nuclear deal; and has even reneged on agreements that he negotiated himself. He prefers to conduct trade talks bilaterally rather than deal with institutions such as the EU or the rules-based World Trade Organization because dealing one-on-one with individual countries further enhances U.S. leverage. Trump has also sanctioned top officials of the International Criminal Court and launched a furious assault on an emission pricing scheme developed by the International Maritime Organization. The IMO proposal sought to slow climate change by encouraging shipping companies to use cleaner fuels, but Trump denounced it as a "scam" and deliberately sabotaged it. After his administration threatened tariffs, sanctions, and other measures against those who supported the measure, the vote on its formal approval was postponed for a year. The U.S. delegation was "behaving like gangsters," one IMO delegate said in October. "I've never heard anything like it at an IMO meeting."

No discussion of Washington's predatory hegemony would be complete without mentioning Trump's expressed interest in territory that belongs to other states and his willingness to intervene in other countries' domestic politics in violation of international law. His repeated desire to annex Greenland, and his threats to impose punitive tariffs on European states that oppose this action, is the most visible example of this impulse. As Danish military intelligence warned in its annual threat assessment, released in December, "The United States uses economic power, including threats of high tariffs, to enforce its will, and no longer rules out the

use of military force, even against allies.” Trump’s musings about making Canada the 51st state or reoccupying the Panama Canal zone suggest a similar degree of geopolitical avarice and opportunism. His decision to kidnap Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro—an act that sets a dangerous example for other great powers to follow—reveals a predator’s disregard for existing norms and a willingness to exploit others’ weaknesses. The predatory impulse even extends to matters of culture, with the administration’s National Security Strategy declaring that Europe is facing “civilizational erasure” and that U.S. policy toward the continent should include “cultivating resistance to Europe’s current trajectory within European nations.” In other words, European states will be pressured to embrace the Trump administration’s commitment to blood and soil nationalism and its hostility to nonwhite and non-Christian cultures or religions. To a predatory hegemon, no issue is off-limits.

Trump is also using the United States’ privileged international position to obtain benefits for himself and his family. Qatar has already gifted him a plane, which will cost U.S. taxpayers several hundred million dollars to refurbish and may end up at his presidential library after he leaves office. The Trump Organization has signed multimillion-dollar hotel development deals with governments seeking to curry favor with the administration, and influential figures in the United Arab Emirates and elsewhere have purchased billions of dollars of tokens issued by Trump’s World Liberty Financial cryptocurrency operation—around the same time that the UAE secured special access to high-end chips that are normally subject to strict U.S. export controls. No president in American history has managed to monetize the presidency to anywhere near the same extent or with such obvious disregard for potential conflicts of interest.

Like a Mafia boss or an imperial potentate, Trump expects foreign leaders seeking his favor to engage in demeaning shows of deference and grotesque forms of flattery, much as members of his cabinet do. How else can one explain the cringeworthy behavior of NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte, who told Trump that he “deserves all the praise” for getting NATO members to increase their defense spending, even though such increases were well underway before Trump was reelected, and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine was at least as important in spurring this shift? Rutte also declared, in March 2025, that Trump had “broken the deadlock” with Russia over Ukraine (which was manifestly not true); lauded U.S. airstrikes on Iran in June as something

“no one else dared to do”; and likened Trump’s peace efforts in the Middle East to the actions of a wise and benevolent “daddy.”

Rutte is not alone: other world leaders—including in Israel, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritania, and Senegal—have publicly endorsed awarding Trump the Nobel Peace Prize, with the president of Senegal tossing in gratuitous praise for Trump’s golf game. Not to be outdone, South Korean President Lee Jae-myung gifted Trump with an enormous gold crown during his recent visit to Seoul and capped off an official dinner

Trump cannot
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powers the way
he has bullied
weaker states.

by serving him a dish labeled “Peacemaker’s Dessert.” Even Gianni Infantino, the president of soccer’s global governing body, has gotten into the act, creating a meaningless “FIFA Peace Prize” and naming Trump as its first recipient at a gaudy ceremony in December 2025.

Demanding shows of fealty is not solely a product of Trump’s apparently limitless need for attention and praise; it also serves to reinforce compliance and discourage even minor acts of resistance. Leaders who challenge Trump get a dressing down and threats of harsher treatment—as Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has experienced on more than one occasion—while leaders who shamelessly flatter Trump get gentler handling, at least for the moment. In October 2025, for example, the U.S. Treasury extended a \$20 billion currency swap line to bolster Argentina’s peso, even though Argentina is not an important U.S. trading partner and was supplanting U.S. soybean exports to China (which had been worth billions of dollars before Trump launched his trade war). But because Argentine President Javier Milei is a like-minded leader who openly praises Trump as his role model, he got a handout instead of a list of demands. Even convicted drug traffickers, including former Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández, can win a presidential pardon if they appear to be aligned with Trump’s agenda.

Efforts to curry favor by flattering Trump are akin to an arms race, as foreign leaders compete to see who can dish out the most praise in the least time. Trump is also quick to hit back at leaders who depart from the script. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi learned this when, weeks after he rejected Trump’s claim to have halted border clashes between India and Pakistan, India was hit with a 25 percent tariff (later raised to 50 percent to punish India for purchasing Russian oil). After Ontario’s provincial government broadcast a TV advertisement criticizing

Trump's tariff policy, Trump promptly raised the tariff rate on Canada by another ten percent. Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney soon apologized, and the ad immediately vanished from the airwaves. To avoid such humiliations, many leaders have chosen to bend the knee preemptively—at least for now.

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

Trump and his supporters see these acts of deference as evidence that playing hardball brings the United States significant tangible benefits. As Anna Kelly, a White House spokesperson, put it in August, "The results speak for themselves: the president's trade deals are leveling the playing field for our farmers and workers, trillions of dollars in investment are flooding into our country, and decades-long wars are ending. . . . Foreign leaders are eager for a positive relationship with President Trump and to participate in the booming Trump economy." The administration appears to believe it can prey on other states forever, and that doing so will make the United States even stronger and further increase its leverage. They are mistaken: predatory hegemony contains the seeds of its own destruction.

The first problem is that the benefits touted by the administration have been exaggerated. Most of the wars Trump claims to have ended are still underway. New foreign investment in the United States falls well short of trillions of dollars and is unlikely to fully materialize. Apart from data centers fueled by the mania over artificial intelligence, the U.S. economy is not booming, partly because of the headwinds created by Trump's economic policies. Trump, his family, and his political allies may be benefiting from his predatory policies, but most of the country is not.

Another problem is that China's economy now rivals the United States' in many respects. China's GDP is smaller in nominal terms but larger in terms of purchasing power parity, its growth rate is higher, and it now imports nearly as much as the United States does. Its share of global goods exports has risen from less than one percent in 1950 to roughly 15 percent today, whereas the U.S. share has fallen from 16 percent in 1950 to just eight percent. China has a lock on the market for refined rare-earth elements on which many others, including the United States, depend; it is rapidly becoming a leading player in many scientific fields; and many other actors, including U.S. farmers, want access to its markets. As Trump's recent decisions to suspend the trade war with China and to shelve plans to sanction China's Ministry of State Security for a

cyber-espionage campaign targeting U.S. officials have demonstrated, he cannot bully other great powers the way he has bullied weaker states.

Moreover, although other states still want access to the U.S. economy and its wealthy consumers, it is no longer the only game in town. Shortly after Trump raised the tariff rate on Indian goods to a draconian 50 percent, in August 2025, Modi flew to Beijing to participate in a summit meeting with Chinese leader Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin. In December, Putin visited Modi in New Delhi, where the Indian prime minister described his country's friendship with Russia as "like the North Star" and the two leaders set a target of \$100 billion in bilateral trade by 2030. India wasn't formally aligning with Moscow, but Modi was reminding the White House that New Delhi has options.

Because rearranging supply chains and trade arrangements is costly and time-consuming, and habits of cooperation and dependence do not vanish overnight, some countries have chosen to appease Trump in the short term. Japan and South Korea convinced Trump to lower tariff rates by agreeing to invest billions in the U.S. economy, but the pledged payments will be strung out over many years and may never be fully realized. In the meantime, Chinese, Japanese, and South Korean officials held their first trade negotiations in five years in March 2025, and the three countries are considering a trilateral currency swap intended to "bolster the region's financial safety net and deepen economic cooperation amid U.S. President Donald Trump's trade war," according to the *South China Morning Post*. Over the past year, Vietnam has expanded its military ties with Russia, reversing previous efforts to move closer to the United States. "The unpredictability of Trump's policies has made Vietnam very skeptical about dealing with the United States," according to one analyst quoted in *The New York Times*. "It's not only trade but the difficulty of reading his mind and actions." Trump's vaunted unpredictability has a clear downside: it encourages others to look for more reliable partners.

Other states are also working to reduce their dependence on the United States. Carney has repeatedly warned that the era of ever-closer cooperation with the United States is over, set a goal to double Canada's non-U.S. exports within a decade, signed his country's first-ever bilateral trade deal with Indonesia, is negotiating a free trade pact with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and made a fence-mending visit to Beijing in January. The European Union has already signed new trade deals with Indonesia, Mexico, and the South American trading bloc Mercosur, and as of late January was close to finalizing a new trade

pact with India. If Washington keeps trying to take advantage of other states' dependence, such efforts will only accelerate.

BUY NOW, PAY NEVER?

U.S. allies tolerated a certain amount of bullying in the past because they were highly dependent on American protection. But such tolerance has limits. The level of predation practiced in Trump's first term was limited, and U.S. allies had reason to hope that his time in office would be an isolated episode that would not be repeated. That hope has now been shattered, especially in Europe. The administration's National Security Strategy, for example, is openly hostile to many European governments and institutions. Together with Trump's renewed threats to seize Greenland, it has raised additional doubts about NATO's long-term viability and shown that European leaders' efforts to win Trump over by accommodating him have failed.

Moreover, threats to withdraw American military protection will cease to be effective if they are never implemented, and they cannot be implemented without eliminating U.S. leverage entirely. If Trump keeps threatening to disengage but never actually does so, his bluff will be called and will lose its power to coerce. If the United States does withdraw its military commitments, however, the leverage it once had over its former allies would evaporate. Either way, using the promise of American protection to extract a never-ending series of concessions is not a sustainable strategy.

Neither is bullying. Nobody enjoys being forced to engage in demeaning acts of fealty. Leaders who share Trump's worldview may relish the opportunity to sing his praises in public, but others undoubtedly find the experience galling. We will never know what foreign leaders forced to kiss Trump's ring were thinking as they sat mouthing flowery platitudes, but some of them undoubtedly resented the experience and went away hoping for an opportunity to deliver a little payback in the future. Foreign leaders must also reckon with public reaction back home, and national pride can be a powerful force. It is worth remembering that Carney's electoral victory, in April 2025, owed much to his anti-Trump "elbows up" campaign and to voter perceptions that his Conservative Party rival was Trump lite. Other heads of state, such as Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, have seen their popularity soar when they defied Trump's threats. As humiliation builds, other world leaders may find that pushing back can make them more popular among their electorates.

Predatory hegemony is also inefficient. It eschews reliance on multilateral rules and norms and instead seeks to engage with other states on a bilateral basis. But in a world of nearly 200 countries, relying on bilateral negotiations is time-consuming and certain to produce hasty and poorly designed agreements. Moreover, imposing one-sided deals on dozens of other countries encourages shirking because they know it will be difficult for the hegemon to monitor compliance and enforce all the agreements it has reached. The Trump administration appears to have belatedly realized that China never purchased all the U.S. exports it agreed to buy in the Phase One trade deal it signed with the United States in 2020, during Trump's first term, and launched an investigation into the matter in October. Multiply the task of monitoring compliance across all of Washington's bilateral trade arrangements, and it's easy to see how other states can promise concessions now but renege on them later.

Finally, renouncing institutions, downplaying common values, and bullying weaker states will make it easier for U.S. rivals to rewrite the global rule book in ways that favor their interests. Under Xi, China has repeatedly tried to portray itself as a responsible and unselfish global power seeking to strengthen global institutions for the benefit of all mankind. The confrontational "wolf warrior" diplomacy of a few years ago, which saw Chinese officials routinely insult and bully other governments to no good purpose, is out. With rare exceptions, Chinese diplomats are now an increasingly energetic, active, and effective presence at international forums.

China's public declarations are obviously self-serving, but some countries see this posture as an appealing alternative to an increasingly predatory United States. In a survey of 24 major countries, published by the Pew Research Center last July, majorities in eight countries held a more favorable opinion of the United States than they did of China, whereas respondents from seven countries viewed China more favorably. The two powers were viewed similarly in the remaining nine. But the trends are in Beijing's favor. As the report notes, "Views of the U.S. have become more negative while views of China have turned more positive." It is not hard to see why.

The bottom line is that acting as a predatory hegemon will weaken the networks of power and influence on which the United States has long relied and which created the leverage that Trump is now trying to exploit. Some states will work to reduce their dependence

on Washington, others will make new arrangements with its rivals, and more than a few will yearn for a moment when they have an opportunity to get back at the United States for its selfish behavior. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but a backlash could come with surprising swiftness. To quote Ernest Hemingway's famous line about the onset of bankruptcy, a consistent policy of predatory hegemony could cause U.S. global influence to decline "gradually and then suddenly."

A LOSING STRATEGY

Hard power is still the primary currency in world politics, but the purposes for which it is used and the ways it is wielded are what determine whether it is effective in advancing a state's interests. Blessed with favorable geography, a large and sophisticated economy, unmatched military power, and control over the world's reserve currency and critical financial nodes, the United States has been able to build an extraordinary array of connections and dependencies and gain considerable leverage over many other states during the past 75 years.

Because exploiting that leverage too openly would have undermined it, U.S. foreign policy was most successful when American leaders exercised the power at their disposal with restraint. They worked with like-minded countries to create mutually beneficial arrangements, understanding that others would be more likely to cooperate with the United States if they did not fear its appetite. No one doubted that Washington had a mailed fist. But by cloaking it in a velvet glove—treating weaker states with respect and not trying to squeeze every possible advantage out of others—the United States was able to convince the world's most consequential states that aligning with its foreign policy was preferable to partnering with its main rivals.

Predatory hegemony squanders these advantages in pursuit of short-term gains and ignores the long-term negative consequences. To be sure, the United States is not about to face a vast countervailing coalition or lose its independence—it is too strong and favorably positioned to suffer that fate. It will, however, become poorer, less secure, and less influential than it has been for most living Americans' lifetimes. Future U.S. leaders will operate from a weaker position and will face an uphill battle to restore Washington's reputation as a self-interested but fair-minded partner. Predatory hegemony is a losing strategy, and the sooner the Trump administration abandons it, the better. 🌐