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## **Donald Trump's state of mind is a global risk**

*di Edward Luce*

US psychiatrists have been discouraged from commenting on the mental health of public figures since the so-called Goldwater rule in the 1970s. To the uncredentialed, however, the American president's hold on reality seems to be erratic. The dwindling universe of respectable Donald Trump apologists attribute his daily flights of fancy to trolling. He is just winding liberals up, they say. That Pavlovian excuse is wearing thin. As Trump readies a US armada for a Middle Eastern war whose aims he cannot articulate, an honest reckoning of geopolitical risks would place his wayward psychology high up.

That Trump often lies is, in itself, not proof of irrationality. That he is encouraged to believe his own lies is more serious. Many of the US president's foreign counterparts deal with the Trump challenge by trying to stoke his vanity. Nato's secretary-general, Mark Rutte, depicts Trump as a "Daddy" who is doing the manly things necessary to keep the family safe.

Assuming Rutte does not believe his flattery, the aim is to boost Trump's ego so as to steer his actions. The risk is that such honeyed words only push him deeper into fantasyland. When a leader has an outsized estimate of his own powers, truth-tellers are indispensable. Who are Trump's truth-tellers?

With Trump's cabinet, that question is rhetorical. His top appointees outdo each other in praise for their leader. Trump is the greatest president in US history (Pam Bondi, attorney-general); he has created an American

golden age (Howard Lutnick, commerce secretary); he has pulled off the most powerful military raid "I would say in world history" (Pete Hegseth, defence secretary, after the Venezuela operation); and so on. These are one notch below saying that Trump can turn back the waves. A good public servant is supposed to give the commander-in-chief a realistic appraisal of his options. Can America be confident of Hegseth's advice to Trump on Iran?

It goes without saying that liberals are fantasising when they call for the 25th amendment — the constitutional tool that allows for removal of a president who is "unable to discharge the powers and duties of his office". That can only be triggered by the vice-president with a majority vote of the cabinet. It is impossible to imagine JD Vance playing Brutus to Trump's Caesar. The vice-president's basis for succeeding Trump rests on his unimpeachable loyalty.

Trump, however, is encountering a growing number of roadblocks as more US institutions push back. The more he is hemmed in, the more he is liable to lash out.

The most dramatic was the Supreme Court's 6-3 vote last Friday to strike down the bulk of the president's tariffs. His response was rageful. He called the two Trump-appointed judges who crossed him, Neil Gorsuch and Amy Coney Barrett, "disloyal", "unpatriotic" and (he implied) under the sway of foreign interests. His anger was borne of surprise. That senior aides reassured Trump his tariffs rested on solid legal ground is in little doubt. His ire should have been vented on them.

He is also meeting obstacles at the US Federal Reserve. Jerome Powell, the Fed chair, last month gave an unprecedented address defending its independence after Trump's Department of Justice threatened him with criminal indictment over the bank's renovation costs. Powell's remarks were all the more potent for his unshowy resolve. Trump could discover that Kevin Warsh, Powell's nominated replacement, will prove as unpliant as his Supreme Court appointees. US core inflation is heading in the wrong direction — and no incoming chair wants to start out being outvoted by the rest of the Fed's 12-member interest rate-setting committee.

Public opinion is also going the wrong way. Masked ICE agents are widely distrusted and meeting growing resistance. Civic society, in addition to the lower courts, is becoming a real hindrance to Trump's deportation plans. The Supreme Court might also take courage from its own example when it hears oral arguments on Trump's challenge to US birthright citizenship in the coming weeks.

For all the talk of Trump as a madman, my colleague's Taco rule (Trump always chickens out) generally holds.

He can reasonably be described as a bully and a narcissist. But he backs off when he is outgunned. Taco only works, however, when Trump knows what is at risk. Whether foreign or American, people who tell him what he wants to hear, not what he needs to know, are playing a dangerous game. The road to Trumpian recklessness is paved with flattery.