



View from the Beltway

Warlord Donald

BY OWEN ULLMANN

Goodbye bipolar superpower world.

At the start of his second term, Donald Trump vowed to be the “Peace President,” as he put it. Trump mentioned it in his 2024 election night victory speech and again in his 2025 inaugural address. Obsessed with winning the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to Barack Obama, the object of his all-consuming hate and envy, Trump vowed to end Russia’s war with Ukraine on “day one” and then move on to quickly halt Israel’s war with Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

It didn’t quite work out as planned, obviously. While he succeeded in negotiating a fragile ceasefire in Gaza, Trump’s mediation of peace talks between Russia and Ukraine went nowhere, prompting him to blow up at Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky for refusing to cave in to Russia’s unreasonable demands for ending the war. Still, Trump believed he could become a Nobel laureate, as

he boasted about negotiating ceasefires in seven other wars in 2025. While that was an exaggeration because most were minor border disputes and some combatants soon re-

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sumed fighting, Trump continued to tout his successes as a peacemaker.

The Nobel Prize committee was not impressed and made it quite clear that he could forget about becoming a recipient, a snub that has provoked Trump’s ire to this day. That slight may well have been a major motivation in his dramatic shift from Peace President to War Lord.

Over fifteen months through April, Trump has ordered military strikes on ten countries: Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Pakistan, Somalia, Libya, Syria, Venezuela, Nigeria, and

Iran. That’s a record for modern day presidents, surpassing the seven countries Barack Obama ordered strikes on over eight years and the five by Joe Biden and George W. Bush over four and eight years, respectively.

Trump also has ordered strikes on more than fifty small vessels he has claimed—without evidence—were involved in drug trafficking. While most of the U.S. attacks involved brief bombing raids, the military’s success in kidnapping Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro on January 3 emboldened Trump to wage war two months later, triggering a conflict that proved to be more prolonged, complex, and threatening to the global economy than Trump had expected.

In addition to actual strikes, he has threatened military action against Cuba’s communist regime, Colombia’s and Nicaragua’s leftist

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governments, Greenland if Denmark refuses to cede control of the island, Mexico’s drug cartels, Panama’s government for not turning over its canal to U.S. control, and even Canada for refusing to voluntarily become the fifty-first state. Granted, most of these threats are hyperbolic and not serious ... but then, with Trump you can never be sure when he is boasting or telegraphing his true intentions.

So why the dramatic turnaround? Trump’s ego and sensitivity to slights offer a reasonable explanation for his newly aggressive behavior, along with the fact that as commander-in-chief, he has broad constitutional latitude in ordering military offensives that Congress either cannot or will not

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block. Plus, he has a compliant staff ready to pounce when he gives the word. U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, who renamed the Pentagon the Department of War, has installed loyalists among the top brass and vowed to imbue his troops with a “warrior” culture.

Trump’s spate of military assaults may have originated with his sense of personal grievance but it also reflects a new world order—or more aptly, world disorder—in which he finds himself. Several conflict-monitoring groups have documented that there are currently more ongoing conflicts, from civil wars to cross-border fighting, than at any time since World War II, a trend that began several years ago and seems to be accelerating. Consider the following:



FIFA President Gianni Infantino awards U.S. President Donald Trump the inaugural FIFA Peace Prize in December 2025. Trump was overlooked for the 2025 Nobel Peace Prize.

■ The International Committee of the Red Cross is tracking some 130 armed conflicts across the globe—more than double the number from fifteen years ago.

■ The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project in Madison, Wisconsin, recorded more than 185,000 conflicts in 2025, with acts of global state or group political violence averaging more than 550 incidents daily. According to ACLED’s 2026 Conflict Index, more than 800 million people across the world were exposed to conflicts in 2025.

■ The Uppsala University Conflict Data Program in Sweden recorded sixty-one active state-based conflicts in its most recent annual update covering 2024–2025, the highest number

since the group began keeping records in 1946.

■ A database kept by the Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights in Switzerland currently tracks more than 110 armed conflicts globally.

The world is well aware of the four-year-old Russian war on Ukraine and Israel’s war with Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Iran. Most of the other ongoing conflicts, however, are raging under the radar. A partial list includes civil wars in Sudan, Myanmar, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Yemen. Then there are government battles with drug cartels or terrorist groups in Mexico, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, Afghanistan, Ethiopia,



WHITE HOUSE PHOTO

In January 2026, Venezuelan opposition leader **María Corina Machado** presented U.S. President Donald Trump with her recently received Nobel Peace Prize “in recognition of President Trump’s principled and decisive action to secure a free Venezuela.” Trump had previously told Fox News that it would be a “great honor” if Machado were to present him with her prize.

Haiti, and Ecuador. Add periodic flare-ups along the borders of Pakistan and Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, and Turkey, Iraq, and Syria. In other words, just about everywhere.

Why is virtually every corner of the globe exploding in violence and chaos? The most likely explanation is a transition from a “bipolar” su-

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perpower world (1945–1990) to a “unipolar” superpower world (1991–2010) and now a “multipolar” superpower world beginning in 2011.

The bipolar superpower world was better known as the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. Their massive arsenals of nuclear weapons led to the MAD (mutual assured destruction) doctrine. Both superpowers knew that

a nuclear war between them would result in global annihilation. Such an existential threat forced them to actively prevent smaller border disputes or simmering civil strife from escalating into larger conflicts that would drag them into a direct confrontation.

It helped that each had its own group of formal allies: the U.S.-led NATO alliance and the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact. If a country tied to either sought to go rogue, their powerful patron could cut off political support and weapons.

The two superpowers also had an understanding about “red lines” that neither would cross, lest they wound up in a nuclear standoff. The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, when Russia’s attempts to place nuclear weapons in Cuba brought the world close to catastrophe, is an example of how the United States and the Soviets found a way to back down through diplomacy. That’s why regional conflicts like the

Vietnam War and Soviet invasion of Afghanistan kept from escalating into direct superpower conflicts. The fierce competition between East and West, Communism versus Capitalism, also served to suppress simmering ethnic animosities that threatened to explode into civil wars.

All of that changed with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, leaving the United States as the world’s sole superpower and *de facto* global policeman. Without any check on its military and economic power,

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the United States could push its international liberal agenda of democracy, free markets, and human rights, either through diplomatic persuasion and financial support or military intervention.

President George H.W. Bush showed the world that a global coalition could unite against unprovoked aggression, as in 1991, when a U.S.-led campaign drove Iraqi forces out of Kuwait. There also were so-called “humanitarian” military missions orchestrated by the United States to aid people facing genocide in places that included Somalia, Bosnia, and Kosovo. Meanwhile, newly liberated nations that had been suppressed by the Soviet Union welcomed U.S. companies, made the dollar even more dominant, and in many cases joined NATO to bolster their defenses. (Sadly, that NATO expansion to include former Warsaw Pact nations has become a source of aggrievement for Russia and an explanation for its hostility toward the West.)

Separately, the United States expanded trade with China in the belief

that integrating it into the global economy would convert the communist government into something closer to the Western liberal model. So much for that wishful thinking.

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Afghanistan and then Iraq stretched U.S. resources and triggered sagging international support. The 2007–2009 financial crisis undercut global beliefs in the superiority of the U.S. economic system, and as U.S. prestige abroad declined, China emerged as an economic juggernaut, Russia sought to regain its superpower status under Vladimir Putin, and emerging powers such as India and Brazil became more influential in a new “multipolar” global order.

Today, the world is operating in a free-for-all. The most powerful nations are strengthening their spheres of influence, confident that no single superpower will act on its own to rein them in. Liberal democracy is no longer seen as the ideal system among many nations in the world, and the United Nations has shown itself to be powerless when it comes to ending conflicts. The reigning superpowers could unite to maintain global discipline but they don’t trust one another, although

Trump has a soft spot for both Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping, whose immense power over their respective countries is surely a source of Trump’s admiration and envy.

“We’ve been living in a period of global turbulence for quite some time,” Fiona Hill, a senior adviser on the White House National Security Council during Trump’s first term, said in an April 3 commentary for the Brookings Institution, where she is a senior fellow. “This is not exactly new. But 2026 does seem particularly filled with peril and possibility.” Her concerns about global disorder are echoed in reports about global risks issued by the World Economic Forum, the International Monetary Fund, and the Eurasia Group.

Such warnings don’t seem to be registering with Trump, who relishes his ability to make outlandish threats (like ending Iranian civilization) and wage conflicts without blowback from other powers—at least as of now. If there will be a brake on his willingness to wage war, it will be in the form of domestic political opposition, such as an anti-Republican landslide in the midterm elections. Or he could be deterred by watching his planned quick strike on Iran turn into the kind of lengthy quagmire George W. Bush encountered when he launched what he thought would be a lightning move to oust Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq in 2003.

Of course, it’s always possible that Trump will suddenly change course without any advance warning, as he often does, and decide he really, really wants that elusive Nobel Peace Prize, something he hasn’t stopped talking about. After meeting the 2025 winner, Venezuela opposition leader María Corina Machado, at the White House on January 15, Trump posted on Truth Social that she had presented him with her Nobel medal as a “wonderful gesture of mutual respect” for his work. After he accepted the medal, the Nobel

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Peace Center reaffirmed that the title of laureate cannot be transferred.

In February, Trump griped about being “screwed” by the Nobel Committee, after accepting in December 2025 a newly created peace prize from FIFA, the governing board of the World Cup, which is playing this year’s games in the United States.

Perhaps Trump will tire of playing warlord and become the Peace President again, letting Greenland live in peace as a Danish protectorate, giving up dreams of annexing Canada, making accommodations with Cuba—and ordering the State Department to create a new World Peace Medal awarded to him as the first recipient during celebrations of the nation’s 250th birthday.

Or maybe Iran’s leaders, sapped by withering U.S. bombings, will ultimately agree to give up all of the country’s enriched uranium, end its nuclear weapons program for good, and discontinue its support for terrorist proxies. Were that to happen, even a reluctant Nobel Committee might feel obliged to thank Trump for making the world safer.

That’s surely something to hope for. ♦

Tedious Work of Peacemaking

In early 2025, President Donald Trump shut down the U.S. Institute of Peace, which was created by Congress in 1984 as a conflict-resolution agency. Late last year, he renamed it as the Trump Institute of Peace, yet it remains dormant. Likewise, he created a new Board of Peace that officially opened in early 2026 to spearhead the reconstruction of Gaza, but it, too, has accomplished little—another example of Trump’s waning interest in the tedious work of peacemaking.

—O. Ullmann