

The End of US Democracy and the Implications for International Relations

Written by Benjamin E. Goldsmith

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BENJAMIN E. GOLDSMITH, MAR 17 2025

Over about a decade of teaching a course on “U.S. Politics and Foreign Policy” at the University of Sydney I posed a question each year to my 200+ undergraduate students: What is the ultimate guarantor of U.S. democracy? In other words, what is the single factor that safeguards US democracy from collapsing into authoritarianism? The answer I was fishing for from them was not “the Constitution” or “the Supreme Court” or even “free and fair elections,” it was “political culture” – a political science term for shared political norms, values, and practices that, while they might not be written down as formal rules, potentially play a fundamental role in explaining behavior. In particular, I asked them to consider what might happen if the (power-seeking, fiercely competing) US political elite no longer considered the liberal-democratic system to be normatively important or no longer held basic democratic values themselves. Without a “culture” that values democracy, the system’s essential laws, rules, norms and processes could be corrupted or ignored, as has happened in many other instances of democratic reversal or backsliding. Elites in pursuit of power in the short-term may undermine democratic institutions for the long-term, in the absence of some fundamental beliefs that make this unthinkable, or at least unacceptable.

With the re-election of Donald Trump, what I believed was a purely hypothetical thought experiment has come to pass. In his first term, Trump seemed to lack both respect for but also understanding of the US democratic system. Perhaps the latter prevented him from acting on the former to dismantle an impediment to his power. In his second term he seems to have learned more about how the US democratic system works, and with the support of allies such as Russell Voight’s Project 2025 and Steven Miller’s America First Legal, to have prepared tactics and strategy to defeat this impediment. During the 2024 presidential election campaign, Democrats, led first by Joseph Biden and then by Kamala Harris, cast Trump as a clear threat to U.S. democracy. This rhetoric always seemed perfectly credible to me.

This article is a personal reflection. I want to draw on my own experience, beliefs and educated guesses, as well as on social science theories and empirical studies, to sketch out one likely future. Aspects of my arguments, especially about the basics of Trump’s threat to democracy, are similar to those of others; and some disagree. As a political scientist, I want to make clear that what I am writing is in the end (careful) speculation rather than a scientific prediction – but I think it is also well-connected to solid logic and evidence, and I believe and fear that I am right.

I feel an urgency to lay out my argument as systematically as possible to contribute to the public discussion as best I can. My main claims are: 1) chances are good that U.S. liberal democracy is doomed, and we are witnessing its last months; 2) Trump will create an illiberal political system that resembles an electoral democracy in form but also preserves his personal power, including beyond 2028 if he lives that long; and 3) this will leave the world with three dominant military powers that are all non-democratic: China, Russia, and the United States of America, which will fundamentally reshape the international system and severely weaken and transform the so-called “rules-based international order.” In the rest of this article I lay out my argument and some evidence for each of these points. The first two sections provide my interpretation of threats to US democracy, pulling together and framing these many facts and arguments based on my perception of their relative gravity. This lays the foundation for the third section, in which I draw out implications for international politics, my major area of expertise.

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Is U.S. Liberal Democracy Doomed?

In this section I focus on the immediate prospects for undermining US democracy and how Trump's opening moves might advance this goal. I intuitively feel the system is doomed, but the social scientist in me will only claim that I believe the most likely outcome over the next 2-5 years is the demise of the US liberal democratic system. The forces arranged against it seem to me overwhelming. Unlike most Americans or most citizens of "Western" democracies today, I have lived in non-democratic states and witnessed the absence, as well as the erosion and disappearance, of true or "liberal" democracy. The main insights I take from these experiences are that a) the dismantling of democracy can be accomplished with a few deft moves that fundamentally undermine the proper functioning of essential democratic institutions, and b) because most of us living in established democracies do not have this lived experience, there is probably less alarm and a higher assessment of the US system's resilience than is warranted at present. Once we realize the democratic system is gone, it's too late – we can't just vote it back in – that's the whole point of authoritarian rule.

As a graduate student focused on the former Soviet Union in the 1990s I spent extended periods living in and travelling between Russia and Ukraine over several years. I experienced the freewheeling and of course very imperfect new democracy of each country. I vividly remember watching TV one night in Kyiv as a leading, hard-hitting investigative TV news show in Ukraine abruptly announced that they were going off the air due to political pressure. From that moment on, I was able to know much less about what was really going on in Ukrainian politics. And so were the vast majority of Ukrainians. Ukraine was at the beginning of its descent into the illiberal rule of Leonid Kuchma and eventually Viktor Yanukovich. Political murders and other repressive activities increased. The opposition was severely harassed and constrained.

But the major lesson for me was Putin's takeover in Russia in the early 2000s. He seemed to need just two fundamental things: 1) control of the mass media that reaches most of the population (the elite, high-brow media was less politically relevant), and 2) the ability to pervert the rule of law towards his political aims. Thus oligarchs like Boris Berezovsky, who owned Channel 1 TV (also known by the abbreviation for Russian Public Television, "ORT"), were put under legal pressure and forced to divest their assets to the state or state-linked "friendly" oligarchs. Berezovsky claimed that he was forced to divest from ORT in 2001 as a result of negative reporting about Putin's handling of the Kursk nuclear submarine disaster the previous year. After transferring his shares to a more pliant oligarch, Roman Abramovich, Channel 1 resumed its overwhelmingly positive coverage of Putin.

What is "democracy"? How do we know when it is degrading or eroding? Political scientist Robert Dahl isolated two essential features of a representative system he termed "polyarchy:" contestation and participation. Potential political leaders must be able to compete for power peacefully and on a relatively level playing field, and the mass public must be able to participate fully and freely in the selection of the leaders. Dahl and many others recognized that certain practices, rules or institutions were needed to facilitate a genuine representative democratic system. In recent decades these essential features of democracy have been distilled and tied to real-world political regimes explicitly by a number of empirical regime-classification projects, including the Polity project and the Varieties of Democracy or "V-Dem" project. While there are many points of distinction and emphasis, in addition to contestation and participation, these projects each emphasize that a full, "consolidated," or "liberal" democracy must constrain executive power and protect basic political and civil rights.

While there are many ways that Donald Trump's presidency might be said to threaten democracy already, after only a couple of months in power, I will focus on two that I see as crucial based on my experience, and crumbling: the free press and the rule of law. If Trump is successful in undermining these, consistent with my observations in Russia and Ukraine (and Singapore in the early 2000s, where I was an Assistant Professor at the National University), I believe he will be able to shape and pervert political participation by biasing the information the vast majority of citizens receive, and he will be able to pervert contestation by effectively hobbling or deterring potential political opponents.

What has he done so far to make me believe we are well on the way to sham "illiberal democracy," or "electoral autocracy"? First, curtail the free press for the mass public: Each time I have travel back to the US from my home in Australia in recent years, I take some time to watch or browse conservative-leaning and Trump-aligned news media

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such as Fox News on TV and the Breitbart website (similar highly partisan outlets exist on the left, such as MSNBC, but their political role has been more diffuse). The high degree to which these are partisan propaganda machines seems beyond dispute, and indeed they remind me in key aspects of Soviet propaganda. Trump and his allies even resurrected the Soviet phrase “enemy of the people” to describe mainstream U.S. media. So there is a model for what Trump would like the news media to look like – absent “fake news” that might be critical of him, and absent any narrative that is not based in his world view.

Now that he has regained power, Trump has the tools at his disposal to cow the press, and limit access to any the mainstream news media, information sources that might be prone to provide critical or contradictory information to his line. In particular, Trump seems to intend to use the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) in this way, has installed his cronies and is working to remove its statutory independence. In addition, Trump has already taken moves to retaliate against “legacy” news media (i.e., the traditional US mainstream television, newswire and newspaper outlets) that irk him, including by banning the Associated Press from White House briefings for their use of the term “Gulf of Mexico,” and declaring his administration will hand-pick the pool of reporters directly covering the White House. Major US news outlets have already shown signs of serious capitulation, including the *Washington Post*, both before and after Trump’s win, and CBS’s “60 Minutes.” Such direct capitulation is only part of the story; self-censorship is the broader effect that is most important. News organizations will fall in line to save their FCC licenses and businesses.

Second, undermine the rule of law with political bias: By marshalling the Justice Department as a tool for political attack, favor, and retribution, Trump is well on the way to being able to use the state’s laws, courts, and law enforcement tools, including the FBI, to bludgeon, intimidate, divide, deter and exhaust political opponents. This serves to suppress political competition directly, and indirectly through deterrent intimidation. It can also facilitate a corrupt oligarchy, as was the case in Russia. Economic elites who will “play ball” with Trump can prosper, but those who might fund the opposition or own and support truly independent news media, will face selective investigation and prosecution. Trump has aggressively moved to make political loyalty the cornerstone of the work and personnel of his Department of Justice, including the FBI and indeed much of the rest of the federal bureaucracy. And he has begun to play politics with the law in a flagrant and obvious way, all the while claiming to be undoing “weaponization” of the law by his opponents.

Trump will Undermine US Elections, and the Rule of Law, Creating “Illiberal” Rule

I have not yet mentioned any impact on free and fair elections. But how will this new non-democratic system work if Trump does not interfere directly in elections? In this section I first discuss how elections can be undermined, and then move on to some emerging features that may further solidify illiberal governance.

For elections to meet the basic democratic standard of “free and fair” they need to be more than free from direct voter fraud or ballot stuffing on election day. A news media (including social media) that provides unvarnished information and reporting to the mass public is essential because, if the information is substantially biased towards one or another side in an election, the public will very likely be swayed positively towards whoever holds sway over the media. Innovative use of new media has been a hallmark of Trump’s success. It has provided him a space free of genuine truth-seeking journalism to effectively spread his narrative. The technology may be new, but the techniques of propaganda are age-old. As president he will want to control this powerful and vast information space to maintain his political support and prevent counter-narratives from gaining wide currency. Oligarchs can help Trump with this, for example Elon Musk’s Twitter, Mark Zuckerberg’s Facebook, and Jeff Bezos’s *Washington Post* can tilt their positive algorithms and reporting towards Republicans and Trump and/or their negative algorithms and reporting towards Democrats in 2026 and 2028.

As I noted, another major tool for tilting the mass media is regulation and licensing. The FCC is a key agency for this, and Trump has already installed his team there and they have already begun selectively pressuring “liberal” news media. The impact will be felt not just on the specific news organizations that are targeted, but on all those that might fear they are next. As mentioned, self-censorship is a major tool of authoritarian control. Mass news media organizations like CNN are first and foremost businesses in the US system. Businesses respond to business

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incentives, and CNN's owner, Warner Brothers Discovery, will most likely understand that it should moderate its coverage in order to stay in business and fulfill its obligations to shareholders.

And as noted Trump seems to have started using the oligarchy to curtail political contestation, weakening the ability of opposition candidates to be heard and delivering an electoral advantage to the incumbent. For example, making it clear that wealthy individuals who support the Democratic Party with donations will suffer consequences for doing so can severely damage the opposition party's ability to campaign, advertise, and get its message (and criticisms of the incumbent) out to voters. Using every avenue available for political retribution, and placing a high priority on it, seems to be a key focus of Trump 2.0. Corrupting the Justice Department, including the FBI, into a politically motivated arm of the Executive is an excellent way to accomplish this. I expect that wealthy donors to the Democrats will be investigated and targeted. Republican donors will not. Deterrence will work – those with wealth who want to keep it will tend to decide to “stay out of politics,” or support the Republicans. Making clear the benefits for oligarchs of collaborating with the Trump administration is also important. If Elon Musk continues to be a close Trump ally, will there be benefits for his companies, such as Starlink, SpaceX, and even Tesla? What will be the role of his xAI in supplying AI technology to replace the large portions of the federal workforce being fired under his direction?

This may all sound implausible, in a “cannot happen here” kind of way. But there are two good reasons to think that Trump will throw the old system out the window with zero regard for precedent and adopt a new illiberal system. First, he and his closest advisors see the old system itself as fundamentally corrupted and in severe violation of the US Constitution (a basic principle of Project 2025; Steve Bannon has also sought to fundamentally re-write the constitution). Second, Trump himself has indicated illiberal democracy is the path he will take by his frequent implicit and sometimes overt expressions of admiration and intention to emulate leaders such as Victor Orban. His recent assertion that “He who saves his Country does not violate any Law,” echoes an (apocryphal) quote from Napoleon Bonaparte, and succinctly justifies an illiberal path forward as a necessity.

In addition, we have clear evidence that Trump will readily engage in direct election manipulation if he can, such as his 2020 call asking Georgia's Secretary of State to “find” enough votes to give him a win. All he needs for the next attempt is more compliant accomplices, who I believe are much more likely to be found now that the Republican Party has essentially become a Trump personality cult and seems to now see election denial and reversal as a standard part of their playbook.

The personalist nature of Trump's leadership is a potential tool for undermining democracy in several ways. Not only is he seeking to expand US executive power beyond previous bounds, but he also has personalized that power through nepotism, an ethos of personal loyalty among elites, and (I claim in some research) a personality cult of followers as shock troops (for example, highly motivated voters who turn out for party primaries) to maintain party discipline. Within the Republican Party, the constant threat of a primary challenge to those who do not toe the Trump line on matters such as important legislation or personnel confirmations has so far been an effective tool for controlling the legislative branch.

Personalized nepotism and self-dealing corruption also undermine the rule of law and thus democracy. The Trump family business gained a new subsidiary in 2025: the United States of America. There is substantial evidence of Trump's financial benefits from his first term and emerging evidence already of a ramped up effort for the second. There are few if any guardrails. The combination of the lack of any ethics or financial disclosure code that applies to the US president, and the constitutional pardon power, facilitate this corruption for a president who is completely disconnected from democratic political culture and seems to believe: *L'État, c'est moi!* There are two ways this incentivizes Trump to retain power as long as possible: more profits, and the fear of being prosecuted for corruption if he loses power.

The possibility of political violence to repress opposition or retain power is also more proximate than it might seem. We should keep in mind that there are now in the US armed militias (which could be termed paramilitary groups) that have demonstrated a willingness to fight to make sure he stays in power. In fact, their leaders and many members owe their freedom to Trump personally after he pardoned their crimes associated with the January 2021 failed insurrection; and Trump retains the power to hold them above the law for any new action they might take.

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Specifically, these are the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers. Although their organizations were degraded and fractured by post-insurrection investigations and prosecutions, they may be capable of re-grouping. Will they be inactive and not play a threatening or kinetic role in the 2026 midterms or the 2028 general election? I think it is naïve to expect that. Proud Boys leader Enrique Tarrio, pardoned from a 22-year prison term, recently promised the group will repeat past behavior: “You can look back at the things we’ve done in the previous eight years, and that will tell you what is up for the future of the Proud Boys.”

In addition, by stacking the civilian and uniformed leadership of the military with loyalists, Trump increases the chance that his orders to use the military for political purposes will be followed. It is clear that he does not want a Secretary of Defense or generals who will say “no sir” when he instructs them to shoot protesters in the knees. Because events like the January 2021 insurrection or use of the military for domestic political repression are highly unusual in US politics, I believe we are not as alarmed as we should be by Trump’s blanket pardons of the insurrectionists and installation of loyalists in the Pentagon. If we consider the pardon power in combination with the Supreme Court’s recent ruling on the wide scope of Presidential immunity, it seems entirely plausible that the president and armed accomplices might use political violence under some pretence without legal consequence.

Trump frequently suggests, often in a joking manner, that he intends to serve a third (constitutionally proscribed) term as president. What might happen in 2028? Won’t Trump have to cede power? Not necessarily. Even Putin had to acknowledge the formal rules of the Russian constitution. He served a term as Prime Minister, but never lost his grip on power. Trump could run for Vice President in 2028 – would his “president” (say, perhaps, JD Vance or Donald Trump, Jr.) actually wield real power? I would doubt it. He could become Chair of the Republican Party and use informal power, not unlike Lee Kuan Yew did as “Senior Minister” or “Minister Mentor” in Singapore. Or, he could engineer an end to presidential term limits in a more dramatic act of autocratic take-over, perhaps invoking the insurrection act after inciting instability, although this seems less plausible. But we already have evidence that he is happy to try to undo a constitutional provision such as birthright citizenship with an executive order. Legally, this is ridiculous, but the more he is able to undermine genuine rule of law, the more his ability to subvert the Constitution becomes a political question.

Or, he could die or retire. But the new system he will have created would allow his party and its leaders to retain power indefinitely by keeping a grip on the levers of the state in an electoral authoritarian regime similar to today’s Turkey, Hungary, Venezuela or Russia. While it was the charismatic Hugo Chavez who undermined Venezuelan democracy, the lack-lustre but brutal Nicolás Maduro proved highly capable of perpetuating the system and retaining power. JD Vance is no less capable, I’d argue. It is perhaps an open question whether “Trumpism” as an ideology or set of governing principles is widely popular with the American people, or whether Trump’s appeal is mainly that of a charismatic populist. For example, Ron Desantis gained little traction during the 2024 Republican primaries, despite presenting himself as a more stable and balanced vessel of Trump’s ideas. This potential lack of mass policy appeal provides Trump and especially his successors with extra incentive to avoid the vagaries of free and fair elections in the future. The high-water mark of Trump’s appeal might be the 2024 election result, which was only 49.8%.

The New International System

What might all this mean for the near- and mid-term future of international relations? The fundamental change will be that there will no longer be a superpower that is also a democracy. Democracy will likely cease to be a foreign policy value in and of itself for the states with the greatest military power. The strongest advocates among the major powers for liberal democratic principles in international affairs are likely to be the European Union and its leading states Germany and France, and the United Kingdom, as well as Japan. India, a significant rising power, may also play this role to some extent, although it is also a severely backsliding democracy under Narendra Modi’s BJP. What might this look like? I suggest there are seven key elements of the emerging international order.

First, the dominant ideology of great powers will be nationalism. This is the legitimating idea of China, Russia, and now the United States. Second, given the lack of any genuine normative or moral “mission” for the US, international politics will more resemble the realist vision of great powers balancing power, carving out spheres of influence. Third, with the continuing strength of liberal states in Europe and elsewhere, and the hold of liberal ideas on at least a large

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minority of people around the world, it will make sense for the illiberal great powers to cooperate in some way to thwart liberalism – a sort of new “Holy Alliance” and “Concert” type system could emerge. Fourth, the existing institutional infrastructure of international relations will move towards a state-centric bias, away from a human-rights, liberal bias, promoting and protecting “states’ rights” rather than individual rights. Fifth, international economic interdependence, although curtailed since the days of high “globalization,” will continue to play an important role in tempering great-power behavior. Sixth, democracy itself will be under greater pressure globally, with no great-power backing and perhaps active US encouragement of far-right illiberal parties in established and new democracies. And seventh, mass politics will still matter, including soft-power as a method of transnational influence, but the post-truth aspect of public opinion in foreign policy will be enlarged. Trump and Putin have shown the utility of false narratives for success in international relations: Putin invaded Ukraine in 2021 on the totally concocted pretext of genocide against ethnic Russians; and then Trump normalized relations with Russia based on the false narrative of Ukrainian blame for being invaded. We cannot ignore the Orwellian sheen given to major foreign policy moves that seems nevertheless to be convincing enough for many or most American and Russian voters.

I will elaborate on a few features of this anticipated new order. First, the new legitimating ideology among the greatest military powers will be nationalism. This is already true for China and Russia, and now the US will join its fellow authoritarian regimes in defining its core mission as defense and promotion of the national interest defined in terms of some claim to a unique national identity rooted in “the blood of our nation,” to quote Trump echoing Nazi rhetoric. This is consistent with a retrenchment of international cooperation, decreased concern for universal human rights, and a greater emphasis on national territory. All this potentially increases the chances of great-power war, for example because territory is the most common issue at stake in interstate disagreements and the most likely to escalate to war. Before he had even formally taken the reins as President, Trump had expressed territorial ambitions towards Denmark (Greenland) and Panama (the canal) and declared his intention to rename the Gulf of Mexico to the Gulf of America. His imperial ambitions have now extended to making Canada the 51st state. These seem relatively preposterous moves in the 21st century, but only if we think the 21st century really will not be like the 19th and first half of the 20th. We need to find some justification for thinking so, or we might have to acknowledge that the post-World War II era has been the exception.

Second, there is also likely to be a turn towards the rights of sovereign states and away from those of individuals in the international governance architecture from the UN to the WHO and other bodies. China has been advocating this for years for the UN. Now the US will likely agree, and want to lead the way in re-shaping these institutions to do away with ideas such as the “Responsibility to Protect,” indigenous rights, or “national self-determination” for minority groups. Indeed the very idea of “human rights” will be demoted, although rhetorically retained, as in the case of China’s “Human Rights for all” position, in line with the interests of the great powers.

Third, along with this de-emphasis on the rules-based order will come a new emphasis on a much older sort of order – spheres of influence. This will suit the non-democratic great military powers well. Trump, as the strong man with the strongest state, will be chest-thumping proud to cut deals that allot the largest share to the US. Xi and Putin may easily see the logic of both pleasing Trump by handing him some wins to boast about while greatly securing their positions and strategic ambitions through a stable division of spheres.

A key question in this is whether Trump will cut a deal with Xi to relinquish a commitment to the defense of Taiwan. I can see reasons why Trump would not give up on such a valuable bargaining chip, but also how he could be convinced to cut a deal for something “beautiful” in exchange. What will no longer matter is the principle of self-determination for democratic Taiwan.

What are the chances of avoiding great-power war if this new system takes shape?

There are still reasons to think that the most destructive types of international wars can be avoided. Nuclear deterrence will likely check all-out hegemonic ambitions. However, the incentive for nuclear proliferation for vulnerable but capable countries like Poland, South Korea, or Taiwan will increase, potentially increasing the incentive for the great powers to cooperate to manage the international system and avoid instability. With no special liberal mission, the US will not be seen as a threat to the domestic order of autocracies like Russia or China. In the

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interest of system stability, there may emerge a new “Concert” system of power-balancing among autocrats along the lines of the Concert of Europe. A system of semi-formal consultations and meetings among leaders of the most powerful states could replace the more formal institutional networks of organizations like the G7, G20, UN, WTO. With some historical irony, the shared interest driving this system would be to contain and diminish political liberalism in the name of conservative nationalism.

Although the term “globalization” is not used positively much any more, it is still true that the unprecedented and in many ways hugely beneficial period of globalization that began after World War II and reached historically high levels from the 1990s remains with us. Economic interdependence, especially between China and the US, is a crucial fact of international life today.

Given the general understanding in social science that it is miscalculation that leads to war, especially under the “bargaining model of war,” I would place the most stock in economic interdependence. In this rational-bargaining understanding of the causes of war, states are seen as having an incentive to avoid war because of the high costs it imposes on both winners and losers, both in human and financial terms. Given these costs, states should be able to reach bargains to avoid war if they understand both the likely costs and the likely outcome of any particular war. The key to avoiding war is enabling credible communication of capabilities and resolve between the potential combatants. They can then reach an agreement that leaves the stronger party no worse off than if it had fought and won the war, but also benefits the weaker party by avoiding the horrible costs of war. But when states miscalculate because they cannot accurately estimate their chances of winning or the likely costs of war, such bargains can easily fail. Having large volumes of trade in a range of goods can make it easier for states to bargain with costly, credible signals, and thus avoid war.

Research over many decades (including in small part my own), suggests that economic interdependence restrains states from serious military conflict through various mechanisms, including providing them with economically valuable tools for credibly signalling resolve in military standoffs, to avoid miscalculation. The ability to send credible signals to a potential adversary under conditions of uncertainty, when all sides have incentives to bluff, is crucial to avoiding war. It is possible that there will be a revival and renegotiation of the rules of international trade embodied in the WTO. This would be the result of the mutual damage inflicted by the Trump-initiated trade war and the (re-)discovery by the US of the benefits of trade and economic openness and the costs of protection. We might expect a new, re-engineered WTO that is somewhat more mercantilist, and somewhat more tilted towards the biggest players.

Another feature of states that facilitates open and sincere bargaining is democracy, and many scholars (including a few contributions by me) have shown the existence of a “democratic peace” in which democracies do not fight each other, and also tend to win the wars they do fight. The US will be removing itself from this circle of states more able to credibly communicate resolve and capabilities to each other, and to more carefully choose the wars they do fight. But the other great military powers in the world are not democracies, so it is not clear that this will increase the chances of great-power war in particular. The chances of war between the US and its erstwhile democratic allies will increase, however, as implausible as that may have seemed before 2025. It cannot be ruled out, given Trump’s open territorial ambitions towards several democracies already.

I think the end of US democracy as well as Trump’s particular brand of foreign policy will have significant implications for US standing in the world and its soft power. Trump’s “American First” approach has perhaps self-evident disadvantages for soft power as conceived by Joseph Nye, convincing others to want what you want. Even the most pro-US societies are aware that their interests are not coterminous with those of the US. If liberal values including democracy are a “currency” of soft power, US democratic backsliding has clear reputational costs, as some of my research with co-authors has shown. However, Trump’s foreign policies can provide additional hits to America’s reputation, for example his cancellation of foreign aid projects.

This is the end of an era in international politics. The post-World War II era of liberal institutionalism seems to be coming to a fairly abrupt conclusion. In the future, these eight decades, 1946-2025, might be looked back upon as an anomaly, a blip of liberal “progress” towards international rules-based governance and towards the diffusion of

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democracy in domestic political systems around the world. For the US also the Cold War consensus engaging both left and right in liberal democracy, anti-communism and market-based progress, might come to be recognized as a relatively brief interlude in an otherwise polarized and more contentious political history. The Trumpian political culture that I discussed, which simply seems to place no value, or even a negative value, on liberal democracy, might however be a new element in the US system: a genuinely pro-authoritarian streak that seeks to challenge the US creed as never before. Or it may simply be a return to more common strands of White nationalism and Christian nationalism, favoring social conservatism that in effect, if not in overt creed, infringes US democracy. Of course, US democracy has seen serious threats before, but the present moment may be historically unique.

This brings us back to my contention about US “political culture” at the start of this article. Many types of US elites today (especially in the Republican Party, the US economic oligarchy, and opinion leaders in right wing news media) generally seem to have lost or not to have ever had high value for democracy. In addition, despite events like the January 6th 2021 insurrection, Trump is more popular in his second term than first (though still below 50%). Trump’s voters either do not see him as a threat to democracy, or prefer his leadership to democracy. His style of rule is at times acceptable to just barely less than half the US electorate, but perhaps not to any clear and reliable majority of voters. This lack of clear majority support might be seen as undermining his ability to get things done, but it also highlights his likely aversion to democratic accountability. He has consistently greater unfavorable ratings than favorable ones among the public. To retain power, Trump is incentivized to tilt the electoral playing field to his advantage through illiberal means. Among the current ruling elite and their large coalition of supporters in the mass public, there is scant evidence that democratic norms or values have any role as guardrails for US democracy.

At the outset of this article I wrote “I believe and fear that I am right.” But I want to be clear that the purpose of this article is to push myself and others who are concerned to carefully consider what is happening to US democracy and the degree of risk it faces. I believe the degree of risk is fatal. But I recognize I could be wrong. Trump could fail to wreck US democracy either because that is not his intent, or because his efforts themselves are again (as in the January 6th 2021 insurrection) insufficient, or because some actors and institutions like the judiciary, Democratic Party, “disloyal” Republicans, and civil society actively prevent him from doing so. In spite of these possibilities, I think the survival of US democracy is the least likely outcome of the next 2–5 years. I also hope I am wrong and invite others to find the flaws in my arguments.

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