

The Emerging Trump Doctrine in the Middle East

by [Grant Rumley \(/experts/grant-rumley\)](/experts/grant-rumley), [Claudia Groeling \(/experts/claudia-groeling\)](/experts/claudia-groeling)

Jun 11, 2025

Also published in Korea On Point

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Grant Rumley \(/experts/grant-rumley\)](/experts/grant-rumley)

Grant Rumley is the Meisel-Goldberger Senior Fellow and Director of the Diane and Guilford Glazer Foundation Program on Great Power Competition and the Middle East at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

[Claudia Groeling \(/experts/claudia-groeling\)](/experts/claudia-groeling)

Claudia Groeling is a research assistant in The Washington Institute's Diane and Guilford Glazer Foundation Program on Great Power Competition and the Middle East.



Articles & Testimony

The administration's future approach to the region seems destined to echo its tendencies since January, including an emphasis on negotiated deals (as with Gaza and Iran), limited use of military force (as with the Houthis), and massive economic agreements in the name of countering China's influence.

For many American presidencies, the second term is a chance to cement their legacy. The president, unburdened by the constraints of having to face elections again, is thus able to pursue foreign and domestic policies of choice. Historically, the president's staff largely stayed the same between the first and second terms in office, providing continuity of thought and process. And world events are generally consistent with the themes of the president's first time in office. Yet in the case of the Second Trump Administration, this is not exactly the case. President Trump has an entirely new cabinet and inherits a world decidedly changed since he was last in office. Not for over a hundred years has an American president served two non-consecutive terms in office, and the similarities and differences between the first and second Trump terms are crystallizing.

On the one hand, many of the focal points of the first Trump administration remain in the second. The prioritization of immigration, border security, and the competition with China span both terms. On the other, the aspirations of territorial expansion (see: Greenland), friction with traditional U.S. partners and allies (see: NATO), and chafing at America's vast overseas military commitments (see: the Houthi campaign) are heightened variations on a similar theme. The world the second Trump administration inherited is dramatically different as well: the U.S. no longer has

a military presence in Afghanistan, the wars in Ukraine, Gaza, and Sudan continue, and the competition with China has only intensified.

Yet the Middle East has remained a priority for Trump. In May, he visited Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) for the first official overseas travel of his second term in office. What emerged during this trip is the formation of a new foreign policy doctrine, one that starts with the Middle East but has repercussions for America's relationships around the world.

The Trump View of the World

Several themes are apparent in the foreign policy outlook of the second Trump administration. One is the president's own reticence to engage in sustained military operations overseas. "We will measure our success not only by the battles we win but also by the wars that we end," Trump **declared** (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/remarks/2025/01/the-inaugural-address/>) in his second inaugural address, "and perhaps most importantly, [by] the wars we never get into." This theme reinforces the president's preference for ending wars, such as in Ukraine, as well as his own relationship with the application of military force. The first Trump administration showed the president is not averse to select military actions—the 2017 and 2018 Syria strikes and the 2020 Qassem Soleimani operation being noteworthy examples—but his support for long-term, sustained military operations is rare.

This viewpoint is reinforced by another foreign policy theme in this administration: a belief that the costs to American military adventurism abroad far outweigh any potential benefits. The recent trip to the Middle East offered the president and his team an opportunity to underscore this belief. Praising the region's economic ambitions, Trump **noted** (<https://rollcall.com/factbase/trump/transcript/donald-trump-speech-saudi-investment-forum-riyadh-saudi-arabia-may-13-2025/>): "This great transformation has not come from Western intervention noise or flying people in beautiful planes giving you lectures on how to live and govern your own affairs." He then went on to criticize the historic American approach to the region in the Global War on Terror era: "In the end, the so-called nation builders wrecked far more nations than they built, and the interventionists were intervening in complex societies that they did not even understand themselves."

A few weeks after the trip, Vice President Vance further underscored this perspective. In an address at the U.S. Naval Academy, he **noted** (<https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/4196829/vance-tells-midshipmen-their-service-will-not-be-squandered-on-rudderless-missi/>) "a generational shift" was taking place in foreign policy, one "grounded in realism and protecting our core national interests." The Middle East trip signified "the end of a decades-long approach in foreign policy that I think was a break from the precedent set by our founding fathers." And he further emphasized: "we had a long experiment in our foreign policy that traded national defense and the maintenance of our alliances for nation building and meddling in foreign countries' affairs, even when those foreign countries had very little to do with core American interests."

Days later, the U.S. Ambassador to Turkey and close advisor to the president, Tom Barrack, further elaborated on this view: "A century ago, the West imposed maps, mandates, penciled borders, and foreign rule. Sykes-Picot divided Syria and the broader region for imperial gain—not peace. That mistake cost generations. We will not make it again. The era of Western interference is over. The future belongs to regional solutions...and a diplomacy grounded in respect. As President Trump emphasized in his May 13th address in Riyadh, gone are the days when Western interventionists would fly to the Middle East to give lectures on how to live, and how to govern your own affairs."

Taken together, the statements by the president and his close advisors suggest an emerging foreign policy doctrine. This doctrine appears to emphasize minimizing or ending conflicts, limiting American military commitments, and maximizing America's economic benefits abroad. And the Middle East is, once again, the proving ground for this

approach.

The Trump Doctrine in Practice

In the Middle East, the application of this emerging foreign policy doctrine is clear. On the diplomatic front, Trump has repeatedly called for ending conflicts. Like Ukraine, he has placed a premium on ending the conflict in Gaza, in both cases applying considerable pressure to traditional American partners. He has also expressed a **desire** (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/trump-to-saudi-arabia-youll-join-abraham-accords-in-your-own-time/>) to build off the first-term success of his Abraham Accords normalization agreements between Israel and its neighbors by facilitating further agreements in the region. And he has prioritized a deal with Iran regarding its nuclear program. The contours and feasibility of achieving any such deal remain a point of debate, but the president's prioritization of a negotiated settlement over military action is clear. "I would prefer that to bombing the hell out of it," Trump recently **told** (<https://nypost.com/2025/02/08/us-news/trump-and-putin-in-talks-to-end-the-russia-ukraine-war/>) reporters when asked about negotiating a nuclear agreement with Iran. "They don't want to die. Nobody wants to die."

On the military front, the president has likewise demonstrated a willingness to utilize military force in a limited fashion. Like his first term in office, Trump remains averse to sustained periods of military operations. The most notable example was the military campaign against the Houthis in Yemen, which lasted several weeks before the administration halted operations and pursued a diplomatic arrangement with the group. In both instances, the belief in negotiated outcomes that minimize extended American military commitments was reinforced. "We went in with a clear diplomatic goal," Vice President Vance **declared** (<https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/4196829/vance-tells-midshipmen-their-service-will-not-be-squandered-on-rudderless-missi/>), "not to enmesh our service members in a prolonged conflict with a non-state actor, but to secure American freedom of navigation."

And on the economic front, it is clear this is where Trump remains the most comfortable. His belief in the power of mutually beneficial economic arrangements in preserving peace and stability has rarely been more in evidence than in the Middle East. His recent trip led to the **commitment** (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/articles/2025/05/what-they-are-saying-trillions-in-great-deals-secured-for-america-thanks-to-president-trump/>) of trillions of dollars in deals with Gulf partners that spanned various domains. Notably, the competition with China was also on Trump's mind during the trip. Administration officials were quick to point out the disparity between the trillions announced during this visit and the **approximately** (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-12-11/saudi-arabia-says-50-billion-investments-agreed-at-china-summit?leadSource=verify%20wall&embedded-checkout=true>) \$50 billion signed during President Xi Jinping's 2022 visit. Many of the deals in the technological realm—including over the acquisition of advanced chips—were framed as limiting China's influence. "They were going to China, China was going to be their parent," Trump **told** (<https://rollcall.com/factbase/trump/transcript/donald-trump-interview-bret-baier-fox-news-may-16-2025/>) a reporter during the trip. "That's not happening anymore."

Conclusion

The foreign policy doctrine emerging in the second Trump administration appears to be centered on negotiating peace deals, strengthening America's position vis a vis China, avoiding costly military entanglements, and pressuring partners and allies to step up. This doctrine is fueled by a world-view that is highly critical of previous U.S. foreign policies, most notably in the Middle East, where this doctrine is most evident for the moment. The question for international observers, of course, is whether this doctrine will eventually extend beyond the Middle East.

Grant Rumley is the Meisel-Goldberger Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute, director of its Diane and Guilford

Glazer Foundation Program on Great Power Competition and the Middle East, and a former Middle East policy advisor at the Pentagon during the first Trump administration. Claudia Groeling is a research assistant in the Glazer Program. This article was originally published by *Korea On Point* (https://koreaonpoint.org/articles/article_detail.php?idx=426). ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iraq Pledges Nuclear Cooperation with Russia and China](#)

Jun 11, 2025

◆
Michael Knights

(/policy-analysis/iraq-pledges-nuclear-cooperation-russia-and-china)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Why the Right Hates the National Security State: The Historical Roots of Trump's Assault on the NSC](#)

Jun 11, 2025

◆
Michael Singh

(/policy-analysis/why-right-hates-national-security-state-historical-roots-trumps-assault-nsc)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[New Evidence of Real-World Attacks by Uli al-Baas](#)

Jun 10, 2025

◆
Hamdi Malik
(/policy-analysis/new-evidence-real-world-attacks-uli-al-baas)

TOPICS

Great Power Competition (/policy-analysis/great-power-competition)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)