

How to Contain Trump

by Fernando Mora¹

After his first year back in the White House, the 47th President of the United States, Donald Trump, has confirmed what many *expected* from his historic second term: the United States—and the world—have entered a new geopolitical era.

This era was not initiated by Washington, but by the assertive alignment of Russia, China, and Iran—three states that, while different in ideology and geography, have converged strategically to exert unprecedented and often disruptive influence across multiple regions.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, China's expanding geopolitical control in Asia and far beyond, and Iran's sponsorship of Hezbollah and Hamas—exporting instability and terrorism as far as Lebanon, Venezuela and Colombia—are not isolated events. They are coordinated signals of a *shifting* global order.

Meanwhile, the European Union has too often acted late—or not at all—frequently relegating itself to the role of observer despite its global presence and economic power. At the same time, the United Nations has increasingly prioritized symbolic messaging and social-media diplomacy over decisive action, failing to mobilize its full capacity in defense of peace, security, and international law.

This moment demands clarity, leadership, and policy realism. The challenges confronting the international system are structural, not rhetorical. Addressing them requires strength, strategic coordination among allies, and institutions willing to act—not merely comment—in the face of rising authoritarian influence.

Containment Reimagined: Lessons and Limits

The question confronting policymakers is not whether Donald Trump can be “managed” through norms, institutions, or persuasion—experience has already answered that. The question is no longer whether Trump's approach to foreign policy is

destabilizing, but whether democratic institutional constraints can effectively limit the systemic damage caused by a presidency that prioritizes *transactionalism* over strategy, loyalty tests over alliances, and expediency over international law.

Containment, in this context, does not mean obstruction or paralysis. Rather, it requires the strategic insulation of core democratic and security interests from impulsive executive decision-making. Ironically, the intellectual roots of this approach lie in Cold War strategy. George Kennan's doctrine of containment was not based on confrontation alone, but on institutional resilience, alliance cohesion, and long-term strategic patience. Those same principles must now be adapted inward-to manage volatility emanating from the Oval Office itself.

Rebuilding Alliance Autonomy

One of the most effective ways to contain Trump-era disruption is for U.S. allies to reduce their dependency on American political continuity. NATO, the European Union, and key Indo-Pacific partners must operate on the assumption that U.S. commitments may fluctuate dramatically from one election cycle to the next.

This does not imply abandoning the United States, but rather deepening intra-allied coordination independent of Washington's day-to-day signaling. Europe [and another's regions] must finally convert its economic power into credible strategic autonomy—through defense integration, intelligence-sharing mechanisms, and rapid-response capabilities. An alliance that collapses without constant American reassurance is not an alliance; it is a liability.

Paradoxically, such autonomy would ultimately stabilize transatlantic relations. A Europe capable of acting decisively reduces the incentives for a transactional U.S. president to coerce allies through threats of withdrawal or conditional security guarantees.

Deterrence Without Escalation

A central pillar of effective containment is the restoration of credible deterrence unencumbered

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by rhetorical maximalism. Trump's preference for public threats, performative summits, and leader-centric diplomacy has steadily degraded U.S. leverage by displacing strategy with spectacle.

Deterrence endures only when it is disciplined, credible, and embedded in collective enforcement. Applied in practice, this principle demands tailored but consistent approaches across key theaters. Against Russia, it requires sustained military support for Ukraine combined with clearly defined red lines that are enforced—not theatrically announced on social media.

Against China, effective deterrence depends on coordinated economic statecraft among democracies to protect critical technologies while avoiding decoupling rhetoric that accelerates rigid bloc formation. And against Iran, deterrence must prioritize constraining proxy networks through durable regional partnerships rather than symbolic strikes or abrupt policy reversals. In each case, containment is less about confrontation than about denying adversaries the strategic benefits of chaos.

The Role of Institutions: Reform or Irrelevance
Trump's second term has further exposed the fragility of international institutions that rely on U.S. leadership without mechanisms for continuity. The United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and even informal groupings like the G7 face a stark choice: *reform or irrelevance*.

Effective containment requires institutions that can act *despite U.S. disengagement*, not collapse because of it. This means empowering professional bureaucracies, insulating key functions from political pressure, and—where necessary—creating parallel mechanisms among *like-minded states* to uphold international norms.

The alternative is an international system where authoritarian coordination outpaces democratic deliberation.

Containment Is Not Resistance

It is essential to distinguish containment from resistance. The objective is neither to defeat Trump politically nor to weaken the presidency as an institution, but to constrain the systemic

damage produced by governance driven by impulse rather than strategy.

Democracies cannot afford to personalize global stability around any single leader—especially one who views unpredictability as strength. Containment accepts political reality while refusing to surrender institutional integrity.

Conclusion: Stability Through Resilience

Trump's return to power did not create the fractures now visible in the international system, but it has widened and exposed them. The convergence of authoritarian powers, the erosion of multilateralism, and the gradual retreat of institutional leadership were already underway. What has changed is the margin for error: in an environment defined by strategic competition and systemic fragility, improvisation is no longer merely risky—it is destabilizing.

Containing Trump, therefore, is not about containing a man, but about containing vulnerability itself: vulnerability to disinformation and coercion, to alliance erosion, to strategic surprise. The response cannot be rooted in nostalgia for a vanished liberal order, nor in faith that norms alone will restrain power. It must instead rest on institutional resilience, alliance maturity, and the disciplined exercise of strategy over impulse.

If policymakers succeed, Trump's second term will not be remembered as the moment the international system failed, but as the stress test that compelled it to evolve. In that sense, containment becomes not an act of resistance, but an act of preservation.

For states large and small alike, this moment demands strategic reinvention. It requires rethinking international roles, recalibrating alliances, and reengaging regional and global institutions not as passive participants, but as equal stakeholders in the maintenance of order. Stability in the coming era will not be guaranteed by power alone, but by the collective capacity of states to adapt, endure, and act with purpose.