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Trump is emulating Putin and Xi.

Watch it end in an ‘own goal.’

**The president’s approach to foreign policy helps Russia
and China supersede America.**

By Rahm Emanuel

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The genius of prizefighter Muhammad Ali’s [“rope-a-dope” strategy](#) during the Rumble in the Jungle was that it tilted the boxing ring to his advantage. He could defeat a younger and stronger man like George Foreman because Foreman was compelled to fight on Ali’s terms. This is a tactic the United States has adopted in its approach to international affairs. Playing to our strengths, we defeated the Soviet Union during the Cold War and, more recently, pursued a strategy to isolate an imperious China.

Now, President Donald Trump and his appointed officials are taking the opposite tack, *helping* Moscow’s and Beijing’s explicit intentions to replace the U.S.-led international order. If they are successful, China will emerge as the globe’s dominant superpower. To understand why Trump’s policy is sure to turn into an American “own goal,” you first need to appreciate two principles underlying Moscow’s and Beijing’s strategic approaches.

First, they both believe in spheres of influence. As a revanchist ruler, Vladimir Putin [plays the role of Peter the Great](#); Xi Jinping views himself as the leader of a “middle kingdom” at the center of the world. In both cases, geography defines empire. That approach is in fundamental contrast to the U.S. notion that freedom and individual self-determination are universal — ideals that transcend borders and geographic boundaries. Our principles are the adhesive tissue that binds European and Asian nations to U.S. leadership.



Second, both Russia and China venerate the idea that “might makes right.” From Georgia to Ukraine, and from the Taiwan Strait to the South China Sea, Moscow and Beijing have no compunction about employing military, economic and diplomatic aggression against sovereign nations. By contrast, the United States applies the animating ethos of its domestic sphere — “e pluribus unum” — to international affairs as well: from many, one. Both at home and around the world, we believe that prosperity and security come from working in concert with allies. In the wake of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Sweden and Finland [joined NATO](#). To thwart Beijing, we strengthened ties with the Quad countries Australia, India and Japan, and created new alliances with Japan, South Korea and the Philippines.

Determined to expand their spheres of influence with sheer might, Moscow and Beijing rely on three broad tools: economic coercion, aggressive diplomacy and kinetic attacks (some naked, others in the gray zone). Washington has countered these tactics not by matching them, but by exploiting their inherent weaknesses. After Russia invaded Ukraine, Moscow cut off energy exports to Europe with coercive intent. The United States kept the lights on across the continent by exporting liquefied natural gas, thereby expanding markets for American-produced energy. When the Chinese sought to economically coerce South Korea for deploying the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile system, South Korea's investment in the United States [increased dramatically](#).

To be clear, American multilateralism is not a talking point designed to impress at an Aspen Institute symposium. It enabled us to use Moscow's and Beijing's aggression to our advantage. The Trump administration is now throwing away that leverage by not only embracing the tactics Putin and Xi deploy but also adopting their underlying philosophy.

Like Putin and Xi, Trump believes in geographic spheres of influence rather than universal values. Like Putin and Xi, Trump believes in might makes right rather than multilateral alliances. It follows that he's making moves to empower our adversaries and endanger our allies. He wants to be like Putin and Xi.

This is a turn that many in Washington have yet to fully appreciate. Trump doesn't simply hero-worship autocrats — he shares their worldview. That's the thread that explains his quixotic statements about Greenland, Panama, Canada and the "Gulf of America." That's why he's threatening tariffs on Canada, Colombia and Mexico. Trump's team is [negotiating with Russia](#) in Saudi Arabia over Ukraine's and Europe's fates *without our allies at the table*. His behavior is consistent with China's foreign minister telling countries in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations that because [China is big and they are small](#), their voices don't matter.

For the United States, this is a loser's bet. First, it means giving up on the very policy that has brought credibility to our deterrence. Today, when Washington wants to impose export controls on semiconductors to prevent the Chinese military from gaining a technological advantage, our approach works because we act in concert with the South Koreans, Japanese, Taiwanese and Dutch. When the Chinese consider whether to further intimidate the Philippines, they weigh their plans against the possibility of a kinetic response from an American-led alliance that includes Japan, Australia and our European allies.

But Trump's first steps on the world stage mean China won't have to think twice.

There's nothing to gain with Trump's approach — but a lot to lose. Denmark is not going to sell us Greenland. Panama will not return the canal to the United States. Canada will not become our 51st state. And yet we're eliminating the credibility and durability of our alliances to achieve goals that aren't even worth pursuing.

Putin and Xi must be delighted. As Washington alienates its allies and squanders 80 years of international credibility, Trump is helping Russia and China achieve their explicit mission of replacing the United States as the world's preeminent superpower. Moscow's goal has long been to break up the North Atlantic alliance. Who would have thought that an American president would do its dirty work?

More than a century ago, Theodore Roosevelt articulated what proved to be a remarkably successful foreign policy axiom: "Speak softly, and carry a big stick." Ronald Reagan understood that the strength we used to deter aggression came from a mix of military, economic and soft power. His "shining city upon a hill" embodied values that Trump is degrading. Russia today is a global pariah; China has [no codified alliances](#) except with North Korea. America needs to lean into *our* strengths and force our adversaries to fight on *our* terms. If we are conned into becoming some cheap version of Russia or China, nations will choose the real thing over a knockoff.

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