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## ***In Trump's second term, the MAGA vs neocons battle heats up***

The nationalist MAGA wave is rewriting US foreign policy, but Washington's neocons and neoliberals will do whatever it takes to protect their US global dominance project. Who will win this epic battle fought inside the heart of empire?



Photo Credit: The Cradle

On 13 May, US President Donald Trump took the stage in Riyadh and launched a direct attack on his opponents in Washington. Speaking to [Persian Gulf leaders](#), he denounced the meddling “[nation-builders](#)” of the neoconservative order who “wrecked far more nations than

they built," and declared that these "interventionists were intervening in complex societies that they did not even understand themselves."

On a furious roll, Trump also condemned the ruinous wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and [shook hands](#) with Syria's new self-declared, Al Qaeda-linked president as he lifted all US sanctions on Damascus. MAGA, he declared, would rewrite the rules of global power and bury the era of foreign entanglements.

Days later, Washington answered back. Former FBI Director James Comey posted a photo of the numbers "[86 47](#)" carved into the sand. For Trump supporters, it was a death threat: "86" meant elimination, "47" marked Trump as the 47th president. Comey deleted the image and denied any ill intent, but the signal was clear. The Secret Service launched an investigation, and MAGA loyalists accused the deep state of inciting assassination against the US president. From a gold-trimmed platform in the Persian Gulf to a cryptic beach message in America, the dividing lines inside Trump's own White House snapped into focus: a bitter fight between an insular nationalist movement and the old imperial establishment. This internal war is already reshaping US power at home and abroad.

### **MAGA vs the imperial machine**

Trump's 2024 re-election has brought the clash into the open. On one side is the America-First MAGA camp, where the president placed loyalists in every node of power. Vice President J.D. Vance leads the charge for economic retreat.

Elon Musk runs the new Ministry of Government Efficiency, ostensibly slashing billions in federal spending. Stephen Miller floods the White House with executive orders to consolidate presidential control. Former National Guard officer and Fox News commentator Pete Hegseth, now secretary of defense, pushes a military doctrine of withdrawal. Kash Patel heads the FBI, purging what he calls anti-Trump factions.

Their worldview is clear: NATO, foreign aid, and democracy projects are costly illusions. As [White House spokeswoman Karoline Leavitt](#) put it: "America does not need other countries as much as other countries need us."

But opposing them in every quiet corner of the US capital is a bloc of neoconservatives and neoliberals – the globalists of Washington's security class. Secretary of State [Marco Rubio](#) leads the charge, assuring Congress that his intent is "not to dismantle American foreign policy, and it is not to withdraw us from the world." His deputy, Christopher Landau, stays close.

In Brussels, [Matthew Whitaker](#) promises NATO allies full support. At Langley, John Ratcliffe speaks of China and Russia as existential threats. [Former national security advisor](#)

[Mike Waltz](#), although now marginalized, still lobbies Congress to arm Ukraine “until victory.”

From the sidelines, war hawk John Bolton warned against “appeasing the Kremlin,” while [Liz Cheney](#) led a centrist Republican push to challenge the MAGA bloc’s isolationism. Neoconservative stalwarts [Bill Kristol and Robert Kagan](#) revived Cold War talking points. For them, the US must remain the enforcer of global order. To retreat is to fall. The battlefield is set: a populist uprising inside the halls of empire.

### **Two foreign policies, one empire**

Every domain of foreign policy now reflects this ideological rift. Trump’s bloc sees alliances and institutions as chains. He re-exited the Paris Agreement, quit the World Health Organization (WHO), questioned the rationale behind NATO and the UN, and in February, cut ties with the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and froze UNRWA funding.

Imperial traditionalists argue that these structures are critical to upholding Washington’s global dominance.

On military power, MAGA wants to end what it calls “stupid wars” as those waged before in Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet Trump, branding himself the “peace president,” announced an unprecedented \$1 trillion defense budget in April – a [record-breaking increase](#) – launched an albeit short war against Yemen, threatened to attack Iran, and armed Israel’s genocide in Gaza.

It signals his preferred model: dominance without responsibility. Neoliberals argue for limited humanitarian missions; neocons want overt force against enemies like Iran. However, both orbit Trump’s erratic mix of [threats](#) and [diplomatic overtures](#).

Trump has flipped friend and foe: punishing allies with tariffs and defense cost demands, while courting leaders like Russia’s Vladimir Putin and North Korea’s Kim Jong Un. Critics say this saps trust and dismantles Pax Americana.

Foreign aid became ground zero. Trump froze development programs for 90 days, then axed billions in humanitarian funding. On 10 March, [Rubio announced](#) the termination of 80 percent of USAID contracts – 5,000 in six weeks. MAGA hardliners celebrated. Globalists warned it would kill people and shatter US soft power.

It is a rupture between those defending the 1945 imperial consensus and those dismantling it for raw sovereignty and dealmaking.

### **West Asia: where the split gets real**

Though waged in Washington, this civil war finds its most dangerous expression in West Asia. Trump's second term is torn between isolationist pragmatism and imperial assertiveness. Capitals from Tehran to Tel Aviv are watching.

The MAGA agenda is transactional. End wars. Cut aid. Sign deals. Make money. Washington agreed to a ceasefire in Yemen and pivoted in Syria: lifting sanctions after Assad's fall and embracing “[reformed](#)” terrorist Ahmad al-Sharaa, a former US-wanted Al-Qaeda affiliated militant, who is now the de facto president of Syria. Trump framed it as interests over ideology.

After the initial verbal threats, talks with Iran resumed via Oman. April's round in Muscat was the most serious in years.

Trump's recent visit to the Persian Gulf exposed further frictions, this time over US defense guarantees. Former US president Joe Biden had promoted a grand bargain: a defense treaty with Saudi Arabia and assistance in the field of civilian nuclear technology in exchange for the kingdom's normalization of relations with Israel.

This deal is now frozen. Indeed, [leaks have revealed that Washington](#) has dropped the requirement to recognize Israel from civil nuclear cooperation negotiations with Saudi Arabia, preferring unilateral deals to open defense agreements. The neoconservatives considered that Trump's approach squanders the opportunity to form a solid front against Iran.

In contrast, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) is exploiting Trump's dealings: massive investments, advanced weapons, and progress on a nuclear project that is not matched by major political concessions.

Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have arguably managed to align themselves with the administration's bargaining mood: significant investments, a luxurious reception, and deep defense cooperation. Israel responds by unilaterally accelerating its military operations and intensifying its lobbying in Congress to ensure continued military superiority and defuse any bargain for its security.

In the end, Trump got what he came for, signing \$142 billion in arms deals with Saudi Arabia, and securing pledges for staggering [investments](#) in the US economy: Riyadh committed [\\$600 billion](#), Doha [\\$243.5 billion](#), and Abu Dhabi [\\$1.4 trillion](#) over the next decade – promising that the wealthy Gulf kingdoms would now pay for partnerships. In return, he catered to his hosts by downplaying the war option with Iran and embracing the new government in Syria.

The globalists saw betrayal. Their mission remains power change in Iran. Netanyahu flew to Washington seeking a green light for war, but Trump insisted on diplomacy. National security hawks want “zero enrichment, total dismantlement,” and accuse negotiators of backdoor concessions.

Israel's war on Gaza continues. Trump promised a ceasefire during the campaign, but the death toll has surpassed 53,000 Palestinians. His pragmatists call it a strategic burden; the neocons want the occupation state to finish the job. Despite ongoing arms flows, Trump skipped Tel Aviv during his Gulf tour, and mild US [complaints](#) about Netanyahu's defiance have leaked.

Even the special relationship looks fractured.

Trump's second term is no longer a presidency – it is a full-scale fight between the MAGA insurgency and the national security state. At stake is whether the US doubles down on its postwar empire or retreats into an isolationist shell.

But whichever side wins, the world should remember one truth: both camps view West Asia through the same lens of American interests. Neither cares about the region's people. Had the Resistance Axis not [raised the cost](#) of US intervention, this split would never have surfaced.

The American elite's fracture is the result of two decades of blowback. And so long as Washington treats the region as a testing ground for internal power struggles, its people will continue to pay the price.

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