SHUTTERSTOCK



AMERICA FIRST

Disrupting global governance

KLAUS DODDS

SPECIFICATION RELEVANCE
All specifications: Global Governance, Climate Change
EDEXCEL: Superpowers
OCR: Exploring Oceans

President Trump's second and final term will formally end in January 2029. His administration provides an important case study of how global governance can be reshaped by the actions of a great power such as the United States.

Historically, US influence rested on its stewardship of the global rules-based order (GRBO) and its dominant position within the international financial system. After 1945, the US assumed a leadership role in establishing the United Nations (based in New York) and a range of other intergovernmental organisations and legal frameworks that shaped the GRBO. The US dollar also became the world's principal reserve currency, allowing Washington to borrow cheaply, run large trade deficits and enforce global financial sanctions. During the Cold War, this ability to shape the GRBO was central to the United States' ideological rivalry with the Soviet Union and enabled successive Democrat and Republican presidents to present their country as the leader of the 'free world'.

● *Figure 1 – President Trump signs an executive order announcing the US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement on 20 January 2025*

President Trump has challenged that post-war consensus. His argument is that global governance, with its emphasis on multilateralism and rules-based cooperation, constrains the United States. A long-standing refrain of the President is that these arrangements are 'unfair'. The America First doctrine is therefore rooted in the belief that Washington should prioritise unilateral action over multilateral cooperation, treating international treaties, organisations and agreements as constraints rather than opportunities.

This approach was evident during Trump's first administration but has intensified during his second. The United States has withdrawn from

SHUTTERSTOCK



organisations such as the World Health Organization and international agreements including the Paris Agreement on climate change (*Figure 1*). During the first half of 2026 alone, the US stepped back from more than 60 international organisations, including both UN and non-UN bodies such as the International Renewable Energy Agency, the International Solar Alliance and the Global Counterterrorism Forum.

● *Figure 2 – National flags outside the United Nations Headquarters in New York*

The America First approach reveals a multi-pronged strategy towards global governance. First, the United States has made extensive use of tariffs, financial sanctions and coercive diplomacy to pressure both allies and rivals. Tariffs increase the costs faced by exporters seeking access to the US market of around 350 million consumers and, depending on a country's export profile, can have severe economic consequences. Financial sanctions have long been used to pressure states such as Iran, as well as companies and individuals that engage with sanctioned governments.

Second, the approach is sceptical of collective problem-solving, making international cooperation on issues such as climate change, pandemics, trade and the governance of global commons, including the oceans and polar regions, more difficult. Third, initiatives such as the Board of Peace suggest a president more comfortable with summit diplomacy and direct leader-to-leader negotiation. The consequence is a more personalised form of deal-making that is often harder to scrutinise.

Finally, America First has a corrosive effect on the resilience of international institutions because other countries begin to respond in kind. If the United States is no longer perceived as underpinning the GRBO, smaller states are more likely to seek new regional partnerships and contingency arrangements outside existing global frameworks. As a result, global governance becomes less grounded in shared rules, norms and values, and increasingly transactional and unpredictable.

President Trump's approach to geopolitics has often been compared with that of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century presidents such as Theodore Roosevelt and William McKinley. During the Spanish-American War of 1898, the United States defeated Spain and acquired territories including the Philippines, while extending its influence over Cuba. It also strengthened its presence in the Pacific through the annexation of Hawaii and acquisition of Guam.

President Roosevelt famously advocated carrying a 'big stick' and being prepared to use military force when necessary. Both Roosevelt and McKinley, like earlier presidents such as James Monroe, believed that the United States should be the dominant power in the Americas. Trump's geopolitical outlook has frequently been linked to these nineteenth-century precedents, with executive orders emphasising the restoration of American power and influence.

In 2025, one executive order declared that the Gulf of Mexico should be renamed the Gulf of America, while Mount Denali in Alaska reverted to its former name of Mount McKinley. Given Trump's reported fascination with maps, these geographical interventions form part of a broader project to reinforce the United States as the dominant power in the Western Hemisphere.

If, as Trump argues, China is the United States' principal strategic competitor, then countering that challenge requires comprehensive hemispheric security. In 2025, Trump threatened direct action against Panama unless it addressed what he described as Chinese influence over the Panama Canal. As a consequence, Hong Kong-based companies operating in the Canal Zone were required to relinquish their interests. In this respect, Trump's geopolitical project has clear parallels with nineteenth-century predecessors who sought to counter European imperial influence in the Americas.

The Arctic is both a circumpolar region under the sovereign control of eight Arctic states and a global commons because of the international waters of the Central Arctic Ocean (CAO). It is primarily a semi-enclosed ocean surrounded by the landmasses of Europe, Asia and North America. Around four million people live in the Arctic, approximately 10 per cent of whom are Indigenous.

Greenland (*Figure 3*), with a population of around 57,000, is predominantly Inuit, although many residents also have Danish family heritage. Elsewhere in the Arctic, particularly the Russian North, large settler populations were established during the Soviet period. Today, Indigenous communities in Russia remain especially vulnerable to unilateral state action.

Trump's interest in the Arctic was relatively limited during his first administration. His priorities focused largely on Alaska as an energy-producing state, while he showed little enthusiasm for climate science or international cooperation on Arctic environmental issues. However, in 2019 he proposed purchasing Greenland from Denmark, an offer rejected by both the Danish and Greenlandic governments.

SHUTTERSTOCK



● *Figure 3 – Colourful houses in Nuuk, the capital of Greenland*

Following President Biden's inauguration in January 2021, the United States rejoined the Paris Agreement and reaffirmed its commitment to international forums such as the Arctic Council, which since 1996 had played a central role in promoting cooperation across the region. This was significant because, at the Arctic Council ministerial meeting in 2019, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had adopted a far more confrontational tone, criticising both Russia and China. Pompeo dismissed China's claim to be a 'near-Arctic state' and argued that protecting US homeland security should be the overriding priority.

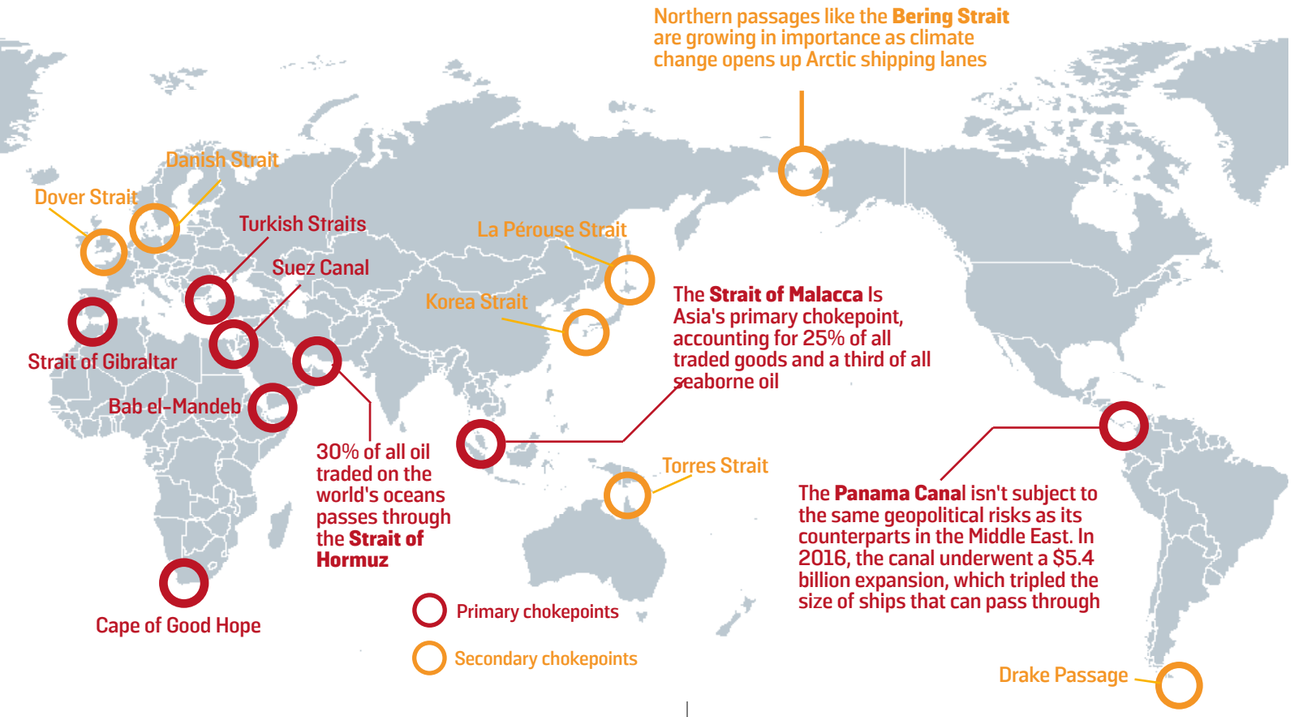
On the eve of returning to office in January 2025, President-elect Trump wrote on social media that the United States should acquire both Greenland and Canada. He also highlighted the strategic importance of the Panama Canal and other maritime chokepoints, such as the Strait of Hormuz, to global trade. In the months that followed, his State of the Union address went beyond purchasing Greenland, instead suggesting that the territory should be annexed.

Threatening the territorial integrity of the Kingdom of Denmark runs directly counter to the UN Charter. Had such a policy been pursued, it would have placed the United States alongside Russia as a state challenging the sovereign rights and territorial integrity of another country. Trump's statements unsettled both Greenland and Canada, prompting Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney to describe the situation at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2026 as one of 'rupture'. Although he did not refer to the United States directly, Carney argued that the global rules-based order was being fundamentally undermined.

The implications for Arctic governance are considerable. First, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has extended conflict into Russia's north-west and returned war to the Arctic for the first time since the Second World War. Second, Finland and Sweden joined NATO in 2023 and 2024 respectively, creating a new security landscape in which seven of the eight Arctic states are now NATO members.

Third, the Arctic has become increasingly divided economically between a Russian Arctic oriented towards Chinese, Indian and Middle Eastern markets, and a Euro-American Arctic whose political and economic relationships are being tested by Trump's interventions. Since 2022, the political work of the Arctic Council has remained suspended, while its scientific activities have been significantly reduced, particularly those involving Russia.

Finally, sanctions imposed on Russia have prompted a range of countermeasures, including suspected subsea sabotage, interference along the borders with Norway and Finland, and increased reliance on the sanctions-busting 'shadow fleet'. NATO countries now judge Russia's military posture to be more aggressive, and the North Atlantic–Arctic region has become increasingly militarised. Military



exercises involving NATO are now routine across the North Atlantic, the European Arctic and the Baltic Sea.

President Trump has consistently argued that Russia is Europe's responsibility, while the United States should focus primarily on its own hemispheric security. Nevertheless, Washington retains a strong interest in deterring both Russia and China from expanding their influence in those parts of the Arctic it considers to fall within the US sphere of influence.

The relationship between China and Russia could yet weaken if Washington succeeds in resetting relations with Moscow following a settlement in Ukraine. Whatever happens, China, Russia and the United States are likely to engage selectively with the global rules-based order. Some international agreements, such as the Central Arctic Ocean (CAO) fisheries agreement, may survive because they serve the interests of all parties. Signed by ten participants, including the United States, Russia, China and the European Union, the agreement established a moratorium on commercial fishing in the Central Arctic Ocean until 2037.

In the longer term, China is expected to seek a new shipping route through the Central Arctic Ocean, reducing its reliance on both Russia and the Northern Sea Route linking Europe and Asia. Like the United States, China is increasingly interested in controlling strategic chokepoints—geographical locations, such as narrow maritime passages, through which trade, shipping and resources are funnelled (*Figure 4*).

These chokepoints can also become flashpoints: places where conflict, crisis or political instability are most likely to occur. In the Arctic, this includes the waters around Greenland and the Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard. Rival powers, increasingly supported by autonomous and drone-based technologies, may compete to detect and deter one another beneath the sea, on the surface, in the air and in space.

Figure 4 – Key maritime chokepoints around the world.
(Source: Visual Capitalist)

The growing strategic and economic importance of the Arctic means that the interests of Indigenous Peoples, Arctic states, non-Arctic states and global civil society increasingly intersect. Environmental organisations, scientists and Indigenous communities are concerned that environmental protection, climate change and social wellbeing are being marginalised in favour of energy security and military competition.

Whether we focus on the Arctic or the Strait of Hormuz, President Trump's America First approach is fundamentally at odds with the global rules-based order. Global governance is becoming increasingly fragmented, and we may be entering an era of multiple competing orders in which great powers seek to establish their own spheres of influence. In that emerging geopolitical landscape, Indigenous Peoples, together with small and medium-sized states, risk becoming caught in the crosshairs of great-power competition. Prime Minister Carney's description of a 'rupture' in January 2026 may prove to be an accurate assessment.

BOX OUT

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How does the America First agenda redefine the United States as a promoter—or opponent—of global governance?
- Why has Greenland become strategically important to President Trump?
- Does the weakening of the global rules-based order make future geopolitical flashpoints more likely?

KEY POINTS

- Global governance addresses collective challenges, such as climate change, that cut across national boundaries and regions.
- Since 1945, US leadership has played a central role in shaping the global rules-based order.
- President Trump's America First agenda prioritises unilateral action over multilateral cooperation.
- The Arctic is becoming an increasingly important geopolitical flashpoint, reflecting wider changes in global governance.

FURTHER READING

- From erosion to renewal: Global governance in the age of Trump II (2026) *European University Institute* (**bit.ly/3Stjd1g**).
- Trump's Greenland ambitions could wreck 20th-century alliances that helped build the modern world order. (2025) Dodds, K. *The Conversation* (**bit.ly/4g5MAic**).
- Trump, Greenland and Western Hemisphere dominance (2026) *London School of Economics* (**bit.ly/4g3yzS6**).



AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Klaus Dodds is Professor of Geopolitics and Dean of the Faculty of Science and Technology at Middlesex University London. He is co-author of Unfrozen: The Fight for the Future of the Arctic (Yale University Press, 2025, with Mia Bennett) and The Arctic: A Very Short Introduction (Oxford University Press, 2021, with Jamie Woodward).

