

Think
new things
Make
new connections

Geopolitics & Business

Inevitably, the one about Trump

4-6 April 2025 at Greentree

Summary

The Trump Presidency has begun with a bang, with multiple simultaneous initiatives designed to remake the nation and the international stage. Whether this leads to renewal or chaos will play out in the years to come. One of President Trump's primary aims is to attract yet more business investment in the US and to reindustrialise. This means many opportunities ahead for business but also political, economic and technological dilemmas.

Should business put more of its resources in an American basket or continue to think globally for growth? How far should business embrace the freedom from regulation and responsibility for non-profit objectives (ESG and DEI) that the Trump Administration is offering? How far and fast will an accelerated drive to develop AI and blockchain effect the operations, efficiency and viability of business models and what will be the broader impact on business in society?

Globally, business will have to navigate several economic zones with different advantages, expectations and regulations: a potentially unbound United States with cheap money and energy; a Europe in sharp tension with the US, still set on a model that aims to combine economic success with climate action and liberal social progress; the Global South, including Latin America, India and the Gulf states, which will follow a meandering path, switching between blocs as best suits their interests; and finally China which could mean a trade war but also potentially a grand deal with President Trump's Administration.

How can business best deal with the volatility of the years ahead and decide on long term plans, for example on supply chains and resilience where businesses which derisked China by moving to Mexico will have to think again. What will be the impact on how business defines purpose and success and on its relationship with the workforce?

Building on last year's April conference on changing nature of the corporation, this year's geopolitics and business discussion at Greentree will bring together leaders from business, politics, technology and the public sector to explore the relationship between business and the state and how the role and responsibilities of corporations might continue to evolve.

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Detail

It would be an error to confuse announcements and intentions with facts and achievements but the first days of President Donald Trump's presidency have certainly shaken certainties. As they say about New York real estate: it's all drama until the deal is done. The President has promised a golden age for business in the United States: a pushing back of state intervention; a bonfire of the bureaucracy and regulation; cheaper energy and much less emphasis on the environment; and an insistent effort to force market access abroad and to protect and promote re-industrialisation at home.

Abroad President Trump will pursue an end to the war in Ukraine through a deal with Russia and the withdrawal, gradual or otherwise, of most American forces committed on the ground to NATO. Europe, in crisis mode after the Munich Security Conference laid bare transatlantic divisions will be expected to foot the bill and bear the direct risk with limited coordination. All accept that Europe must spend much more on defence (and privately acknowledge that only extreme pressure will achieve this) but there is concern that the alliance is in jeopardy. Much of business in Europe is eager for a return to pre-war conditions and renewed access to cheaper Russian energy imports. Europe is already also signalling that it cannot afford both to rearm at pace and toe the line on a tougher US approach to China. No one is naïve about China any more but in Europe China is also suddenly seen as a more predictable great power than the US. How will all this play out for business and its transatlantic relationships?

Parts of business are evangelical on President Trump's agenda; some are nervous but excited at the potential for growth; and others are concerned at instability and the risks of inflation. Many technology leaders have embraced the Administration but some are concerned that anti-trust policy could have some continuity with the Biden Administration. For as long as the United States is a divided democracy, there is also the possibility of a brake on the Administration's agenda after the midterm elections and of a sharp change of direction in 2028. The Administration does not have long to show that its programme is increasing economic opportunities whilst keeping inflation under control. To what extent will existing business strategies continue, for example on decarbonisation? How far will business adapt to the new conditions?

Tariff, tax policy and debt

As promised, the Administration has made tariffs and the threat of tariffs a signature approach. The drivers are partly tactical, for example as seen with Colombia's rapid reversal on reception of deported immigrants, but also for revenue and ideologically rooted in a drive to re-industrialise America. There is determination to address the trade imbalance with China and to reduce American reliance on potentially unreliable foreign supply chains. Canada and Mexico are under pressure to do much more on border control. For Europe, the demands will be both greater market access for US firms and more responsibility and spending on defence and deterrence.

What are the implications of this major shift in tariff and tax policy for companies in the US on the one hand and those elsewhere on the other? Will this, combined with deregulation, create incentives for increased industrial investment in the US as the Administration hopes?

Are there risks for American business in protection from global competition, for example reducing innovation and competitiveness? How can trade wars and inflation be contained? Will tariffs accelerate deglobalisation of supply chains and what would that mean for business and growth? How will rising national debts constrain possibilities for governments and in turn the business environment?

What will all this mean for decoupling from China? Will we see American and Chinese trade shrink or continue to expand (as it largely has despite recent efforts at de-risking)? Will Europe and other parts of the world diverge from the US' approach? Despite the many China hawks in his Administration, President Trump may be on the look out for a deal with China: what kind of deal would serve business? Conversely, what impact would a trade war have on business?

Business culture, government efficiency, and reputation

Business leaders are some of President Trump's closest advisers and it seems clear already that they are going to have influence on new initiatives and the broad sweep of policy beyond economics. This is going to be a more unpredictable Administration than in 2017, even for those working deep within it. How can business best manage that unpredictability?

There is close interest on both sides of the Atlantic in the DOGE initiative to slash and burn bureaucracy and to reduce the functions of the federal government. Will the initiative reduce the burden of bureaucracy for business, or reduce clarity on risk, whilst increasing business' ownership of it? Is "move fast and break things" the only way that ever-growing functions of the state can be bounded, or will the methods that might work for a technology platform result in chaos when applied to the complexity of government?

Looking abroad, how will American business working in this environment at home, continue to adapt to different expectations in Europe and beyond? How will European and Asian companies adapt to the new conditions in the US?

From 2008 to about 2022, the role of the modern CEO was defined by the language of Davos: a corporate community across political divides, publicly at least, dedicated to public good and higher purpose. A backlash was already underway during the Biden Administration but the choices for CEOs now feel sharper and to an extent more personal. Will continued presidential favour require endorsement of all the Administration's initiatives? How will businesses that want to retain diversity, inclusion and equity or ESG programmes, for example, fare under the Administration? How far will CEOs and companies' reputations be defined by their response to the Administration?

The AI and crypto frontier

With the appointment of Vice President J D Vance, the even more prominent role of Elon Musk, and endorsements from many other Silicon Valley leaders, big tech's influence is much stronger in this Presidency than the first time around. The crypto community is a more recent addition to the Trump movement. The Administration's drive for cheap energy aims in part to support continued American leadership in AI and other technologies. Defence innovation is likely to be driven faster and harder. Deepseek shocked American confidence

but the most important lesson is not that China has caught up despite constraints but that scaling large language models looks more tractable and less exponential in terms of resources than previously thought. For both strategic competition and the commercial prize of the deployment of AI agents, then the race is on and is likely to accelerate further.

How will this impact corporate plans for the adoption of AI? Will we start to see efficiencies leading to reduction in workforces in certain parts of service and other industries? How will workforces react to the introduction of AI if they fear it will mean job cuts? What will accelerated introduction of AI mean for global competition and cooperation through global supply chains? Could this lead to more protectionism from countries adopting AI at a slower pace? What impact might the Administration's embrace of blockchain and cryptocurrencies have on business?

For the central part of the conference we will split into three working groups so as to be able to look at the issues of above in more detail. We will finalise the themes and questions for each working group when we have a critical mass of confirmed participants (to ensure that we have the right expertise for the themes) and also because a great deal more is likely to have happened by the time we meet.