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The Rise of Techno- Authoritarianism and its Impact on US Foreign Policy

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Abstract:

The intersection of wealth, technology, and political power has reached a new and dangerous frontier in the United States, threatening not only American democracy but also reshaping global power dynamics. As Silicon Valley elites consolidate influence over governance, deregulation, and even U.S. foreign policy, their alignment with an increasingly illiberal Trump administration raises profound concerns for democratic institutions worldwide. With campaign finance laws eroded and state functions increasingly outsourced to private tech firms, a new oligarchic order is emerging—one in which unaccountable billionaires leverage AI, social media, and cryptocurrency to entrench their dominance.

This policy analysis examines the structural drivers behind this shift, the ideological foundations linking techno-libertarianism with authoritarian tendencies, and the global implications of a U.S. political system increasingly steered by corporate elites. Particular attention is given to Europe, where tech billionaires and U.S. policymakers are already exerting pressure on regulatory frameworks and electoral integrity. The EU cannot afford to remain passive. Beyond defending itself from digital interference and political manipulation, it must recognize its growing responsibility as a counterweight to illiberalism and corporate capture of governance. With democracy at an inflection point, Europe's response will not only shape its own future but could also determine whether liberal democracy remains a viable global model in the years to come.

Keywords: Illiberalism, Techno-Authoritarianism, U.S. foreign policy, deregulation, cryptocurrency.

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1 Introduction

In his final address to the nation, outgoing US President Joe Biden ended his presidency with an ominous warning. In the style of Dwight Eisenhower's farewell address, Joe Biden warned of the tech-industrial complex: "Today an oligarchy is taking shape in America of extreme wealth, power and influence that literally threatens our entire democracy, our basic rights and freedoms, and a fair shot for everyone to get ahead" (Biden 2025). Only five days later the pictures of Donald Trump's inauguration with the world's three richest men, Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos and Mark Zuckerberg (Forbes 2025), having front row seats went around the world. In total the attendees' net worth extended well over a trillion dollars with Apple's CEO Tim Cook, Google chief executive Sundar Pichai, OpenAI founder Sam Altman, Media mogul Rupert Murdoch and Louis Vuitton founder Bernard Arnault all present at the inauguration ceremony. In reference to the all-male cast of this somewhat bizarre political play, the term "broligarchy" has been coined to describe the newly formed alliance between Silicon Valley's extremely wealthy and influential business leaders and the Republican Party under Donald Trump.

Yet, framing this development as a sudden break with the past would be overlooking reality. The influence of wealth in American politics is nothing new—campaigns have been awash in corporate money for decades, and both parties have courted billionaires with equal enthusiasm. Joe Biden, who now warns of an emerging oligarchy, presided over an administration that did little to curb the financial entrenchment of political power. The fact that presidential candidate Kamala Harris was very recently celebrated for breaking fundraising records underscores the bipartisan embrace of big money.

And yet, there is something different this time. The convergence of extreme wealth, technological power that can be used to survey and manipulate the preferences of voters, and political influence is reaching a scale that challenges not just democratic ideals, but the very mechanics of governance and U.S. foreign policy itself. This policy analysis dives into the drivers and incentive structures behind this newly formed alliance, the ideological foundation informing its policy preferences as well as its likely impact on U.S. governance and foreign policy and the future of transatlantic relations. Given the evolving nature of this alliance, these findings are preliminary and intended to raise key questions for further scrutiny as developments unfold.

2 Pay to win

The now infamous 2010 Supreme Court decision *Citizens United v. FEC* opened the floodgates for corporate cash in U.S. elections by equating campaign donations with free speech by corporations. This decision is only the peak of the iceberg that constitutes the decade-long assault by wealthy individuals on campaign finance laws in the U.S. (Mayer 2016). This has resulted in a system in which individuals and companies face very few restrictions when it comes to funding campaigns. Essentially, the affluent can contribute to a campaign as much as they see fit, even anonymously through the vehicle of so-called dark money. Hardly surprising for a country with extreme economic inequality, the hollowing out of campaign finance laws has distorted the political processes in the U.S. to heavily favor the interests of the ultra-rich over those of the rest of the country (Gillens and Page 2014, Barber 2016, Späth 2024). Money has become the deciding factor in American elections. In 2024, the candidate who spent the most money won 94% of House races and 88% of Senate races, creating a clear pay-to-win dynamic in politics (Open Secrets 2025). Thus, the structural realities of modern electoral competition leave both Democrats and Republicans with little choice but to chase as much capital as possible, always fearing that the other side might outspend them. In the 2024 presidential election both parties aggressively courted financial backers, despite their rhetorical commitments to campaign finance reform and to reducing the influence of money in politics (Levinthal 2018, Vogel & Goldmacher 2022).

In particular, the role of individual donors grew rapidly. In 2008, contributions from the top 100 individual donors accounted for just 1.5% of the total cost of federal elections, compared to 14.8% in 2024 (Meyers & Mayersohn 2025). While both parties rely on the billionaire class for significant portions of their campaign funding, Democrats tend to have a broader, grassroots funding base compared to Republicans. As such, Donald Trump was particularly reliant on the wealthy in the 2024 presidential election, with approximately one-third of all his funding coming directly from billionaires, around a quarter of which was coming from Elon Musk alone (Rogers, Xiao & Learner 2024).

In essence, plutocratic or oligarchic elements have long been present in the U.S. system, and Donald Trump's courting of billionaires is the norm rather than the exception. What stands out in this election cycle, however, is not just the influence of wealth, but its *visibility*. Billionaires, who once preferred to shape policy from behind closed doors, now play an active role in the political theater itself. Even more striking is the realignment within Silicon Valley: figures like Elon Musk (founder of Tesla and SpaceX), Marc Andreessen (founder of venture capital firm Andreessen Horowitz), and Jan Koum (founder of WhatsApp)—all of whom might previously have been expected to support Democrats—this time lent their backing to Republicans. This shift suggests not only a partisan realignment among tech elites but a broader transformation in the intersection of capital, technology, and political power. This realignment didn't happen

in a vacuum—there were clear incentives driving it. To understand the motivations behind this shift, we must first examine what was at stake for tech billionaires financially.

3 Return of Investment

As in any crony system, powerful business elites and political leaders engage in a cycle of mutual favor-trading, reinforcing each other's influence and entrenching their mutual hold on power. Political leaders benefit from the financial clout of affluent backers in the political process and enjoy preferential treatment in the media companies associated with their cronies, be it traditional or social media. The ultra-rich on the other hand profit from access to government contracts, influence over policy decisions, deregulation of their business practices, and tax-breaks aimed at the upper echelon. However, especially in the context of the 2024 federal elections, campaign contributions have proven their effectiveness beyond traditional cronyism to also serve as a powerful tool for direct and immediate wealth accumulation, using the visibility of crony activity to shape market sentiment.

Elon Musk alone splashed an eye-watering \$290 million on Donald Trump's re-election effort (Wright & Leeds-Matthews 2025). However, this sum pales in comparison to the \$170 billion that his overall net worth increased since Donald Trump's electoral victory (Siddiqui & Thadani 2024). This increase is mostly tied to the rise of market capitalization of his associated businesses. For instance, since Trump's election win, the Telsa stock has soared 74.5% to add \$601.3 billion to Tesla's market cap (Kilgore 2025). As investors anticipate the return of investment on the side of Musk's campaign contributions, the confidence in these companies' profitability rises, flooding his pockets with cash. For tax reasons, the ultra-wealthy tend to live on lines of credit borrowed against their shareholdings. This has two implications. First, an increase in net worth is not merely a theoretical gain on paper; it directly enhances a donor's financial leverage by improving borrowing conditions and access to capital. Second, the visibility of campaign contributions plays a crucial role in shaping market expectations. The more publicized the contribution, the more investors expect political favoritism to translate into financial gains if the supported candidate wins. This expectation alone can drive up the market capitalization of the donor's businesses, creating a self-reinforcing cycle where political spending yields tangible financial returns. Hence, there is a direct financial incentive to contribute to a campaign as prominently or visibly as possible. In this sense, contributing to a campaign—especially in a highly visible manner—becomes not just a show of support but a strategic investment in future market performance. This is especially true for a candidate as transactional as Donald Trump.

This dynamic is not unique to Musk or Tesla; a similar pattern played out in the cryptocurrency sector, which used their campaign contributions essentially as agenda setting and market manipulation. The fact that the industry was one of the single biggest contributors to the overall electoral contest (Yaffe-Bellany 2024), raised public awareness and interest in the topic, already expanding the potential investor base, leading to price increases for crypto currencies. With the election victory of Trump, who declared himself a "pro-crypto president", the expected return on investment nearly doubled the price of bitcoin overnight, and major investors in the field, such as venture capitalists Marc Andreessen and Ben Horowitz, and billionaire twins Tyler and Cameron Winklevoss, reaped huge rewards for their combined campaign contributions of around \$10 million, adding billions to their net worth (Li, Pacheco & Weeks 2024).

In both the tech and crypto industries, then, political donations are not mere expressions of ideology or indirect bets on policy changes that will reap benefits in the long term. Rather, they are calculated investments designed to shape market narratives, investor sentiment, and ultimately, capital accumulation. Under the current conditions, political donations have become one of the highest-yielding investments available to ultra-wealthy individuals, particularly in the tech and crypto sector. When political contributions yield higher returns than any traditional investment, democracy itself risks becoming just another asset in the portfolios of the ultra-rich.

4 Let the fox guard the henhouse

Naturally, we can also observe more traditional benefits from campaign contributions being reaped. The Trump administration has gone on a deregulation spree of key industries that have supported his campaign, such as oil and gas, the financial sector and cryptocurrencies. This is already reflected in the personnel choices running federal agencies that are supposed to monitor businesses and enforce regulatory frameworks. For instance, billionaire Scott Bessent has been appointed Secretary of the Treasury of the United States. In one of his first official actions Bessent gave representatives of the so-called Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) access to the federal payment system that controls the flow of trillions of dollars in funds every year and includes sensitive information of millions of Americans (Epstein 2025). DOGE is also the name of the first viral "meme coin" – a nod to the cryptocurrency industry. DOGE is, despite its name, not an official department of the U.S. government but an agency created by the Trump administration under the leadership of Elon Musk with the mandate of cutting perceived government waste. As of this writing, the Trump administration is currently being sued over this unprecedented granting of access to sensitive government records to non-government officials (Gedeon 2025). The edge in competition a billionaire with multiple companies in the US-market, ranging from Artificial Intelligence (AI) development, car manufacturing to robotics and brain implants can leverage from access to this kind of data and operational control is hard

to fathom in its totality. As of this writing, DOGE currently has access to at least 14 key government agencies (Baio 2025). Arguably, this marks a qualitative shift in American cronyism, where campaign contributions no longer merely secure government access but grant corporate elites direct operational control over the machinery of the state itself—blurring the line between public governance and private enterprise in an unprecedented manner.

The crypto industry also already profits from deregulatory measures as a result of lobbying and campaign contributions. For example, the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) rescinded an accounting rule that forced banks to treat Bitcoin and other tokens as a liability, after years of lobbying by the crypto industry (Sigalos 2025). The nominated new head of the agency, Paul Atkins, is broadly viewed as much more lenient on crypto-regulation as his predecessor, Gary Gensler, was. Republicans are also trying to repeal a tax-compliance rule that would give the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) more information about digital asset transactions (Rubin 2025). Meanwhile the IRS is itself under pressure from the White House to sign a memorandum of understanding that would give officials from DOGE broad access to tax-agency systems, property and datasets (Bogage & Stein 2025).

Donald Trump's newfound enthusiasm for cryptocurrencies may have less to do with campaign contributions from the industry and more with personal financial gain. Having dismissed Bitcoin as a "scam" just a few years ago (Trump 2021), he launched his own cryptocurrency mere days before his inauguration, reportedly raking in over \$100 million in trading fees alone (Wilson & Conlin 2025). While the exact profits remain difficult to quantify due to various factors, reasonable estimates suggest earnings anywhere from tens to hundreds of millions of dollars. Regardless of the precise figure, two things are clear. First, Trump has prominently shattered the traditional—if often loosely observed—taboo against personal enrichment while in office. Second, his coin now offers a direct and discreet way for individuals and entities to curry favor with him. Heavy investment in Trump's meme coin, facilitated by the anonymity of cryptocurrency transactions, provides a financial pipeline that is all but certain to benefit him personally and open some doors in Washington.

Moreover, the anticipated deregulation of the artificial intelligence (AI) sector is already underway, marked by Donald Trump's repeal of his predecessor's executive order on AI safety (O'Brien 2025). While Republican politicians are generally more receptive to deregulation and corporate tax cuts than their Democratic counterparts, this alignment alone does not fully explain why many Silicon Valley elites have switched their political allegiances. The financial incentives tied to shaping market sentiment would apply regardless of party affiliation, though they are arguably stronger with a candidate as openly transactional as Donald Trump. However, openly backing Republicans—especially Trump—comes with social costs, as it risks consumer backlash and reputational damage. This suggests that beyond financial and regulatory interests, a

deeper ideological shift is at play—one in which the political philosophy and world view of the Silicon Valley increasingly converges with Make America Great Again (MAGA) convictions.

5 The mafia in the White House

Although Silicon Valley, situated in the liberal stronghold of San Francisco, has traditionally leaned Democratic, a contrarian circle has long existed—though it was largely overshadowed by the dominant liberal mainstream. The central figure of this contrarian network is PayPal co-founder Peter Thiel. A longtime political activist, Thiel was the only major Silicon Valley figure to openly support Donald Trump's 2016 campaign. His extended network includes key figures such as DOGE head Elon Musk and Trump's newly appointed crypto and AI czar, David Sacks. Both are part of the so-called "PayPal Mafia"—a loosely connected group of PayPal alumni who have become some of the most influential players in Silicon Valley since the company's early days.

Thiel, Musk, and Sacks all share an upbringing in apartheid-era South Africa, an experience some analysts link to their skepticism of egalitarian ideals and preference for hierarchical systems (Mc Greal 2025). Alongside influential venture capitalist Marc Andreessen and Amazon's Jeff Bezos they promote a techno-optimist worldview. Within this broad ideological spectrum, there is a shared belief that technological advancement is among the most virtuous pursuits, and some, like Andreessen, go so far as to equate AI regulation with murder: "[...] any deceleration of AI will cost lives. Deaths that were preventable by the AI that was prevented from existing is a form of murder" (Andreessen 2023).

The political arm of this network is embodied by J.D. Vance, whose rise from Thiel-funded author to Trump's vice president underscores the movement's growing influence. Vance first crossed paths with Thiel in 2011 after attending a talk the venture capitalist gave at Yale Law School—an event Vance later described as "the most significant moment of my time" at the university (Pequeño 2024). Their connection deepened over the years, eventually leading to a close political and financial alliance.

After a short career in law, Vance relocated to San Francisco, where he eventually joined Mithril Capital, a firm co-founded by Peter Thiel. Later, when Vance returned to Ohio to launch his own investment fund, Narya Capital, both Thiel and Marc Andreessen became key backers (Duran 2024). Thiel supported Vance's run for Senator of Ohio in 2022 with \$15 Million – at the time the largest amount ever given to boost a single Senate candidate (Isenstadt 2022). Their alliance persisted and Sacks and Thiel played a crucial role in introducing Trump to Vance and later in persuading Trump to select Vance as his running mate (Mac & Schleifer 2024, Robins-Early 2024, Pequeño 2024). Although Vance frequently criticizes the monopolistic practices of Big

Tech, his stance remains closely aligned with Thiel's influence. Rather than fundamentally challenging Silicon Valley's dominance, his critiques are primarily directed at the industry's perceived liberal bias regarding company-internal policies. As Peter Thiel was the first major investor in Facebook, he also grew to be a mentor figure for Mark Zuckerberg, who according to Facebook employees, seemed to rely heavily on his advice (Cucci 2022). While these individuals do not share a uniform ideology, they exhibit significant overlaps in their libertarian to neo-reactionary leanings and in their views on technology's role in shaping the future and humankind's destiny.

6 The dark enlightenment and the rise of techno-authoritarianism

The ideological underpinnings of this movement can be traced to what has been termed the "Dark Enlightenment" concept, initially developed by philosopher Nick Land and later expanded by Curtis Yarvin, the "house philosopher" (Lanard 2022) of Peter Thiel who has published under his blogger name "Mencius Moldbug". The Dark Enlightenment reframes the Enlightenment not as the dawn of reason and human progress, but as a catastrophic error—an illusion that democracy, equality, and rationalism lead to a better society, when in reality, they accelerate decay, chaos, and civilizational decline, revealing that order and hierarchy, not freedom, are the true foundations of stability. Or as Peter Thiel puts it: "Most importantly, I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible" (Thiel 2009).

Curtis Yarvin critiques democracy as a slow, irrational system prone to corruption and inefficiency. In his view, American democracy has denigrated into a corrupt oligarchy, serving the liberal elites in charge rather than the public good. His solution: a monarchical leader styled after a start-up CEO who can rid the U.S. system from (liberal) elitist capture (Pogue 2022). This worldview has found a receptive audience among Silicon Valley elites who view democracy as an obstacle to technological acceleration and seemingly like the idea of themselves constituting the ruling class.

The techno-authoritarian vision takes these ideas further, applying the tools of surveillance, artificial intelligence, and digital governance to streamline decision-making and consolidate elite control. Peter Thiel has repeatedly expressed skepticism toward democracy, favoring strong, visionary leaders who can cut through bureaucratic red tape. His investments in surveillance firms like Palantir, which provides AI-driven data analytics for intelligence agencies, reflect this ethos.

Importantly, these ideas do not just exist on paper or in some fringe right-wing podcasts, in many ways they are already U.S. policy. "Running the government like a business" has been the motto of Trump and his MAGA base since his first campaign in 2015/16 (Fortune 2016). This vision is materializing through initiatives like federal

retirement incentives, which mirror Curtis Yarvin's RAGE (Retire All Government Employees) strategy. Yarvin specifically recommends RAGE as a first step to dismantle liberal democracy and install an American monarch. This policy is also a key recommendation in the now-infamous *Project 2025*, the Heritage Foundation's policy blueprint for a second Trump administration.

By systematically clearing out career bureaucrats who might resist executive overreach, these policies are actively reshaping the federal government into a streamlined, loyalty-based apparatus—one step closer to the centralized, monarchical-style rule that neo-reactionary thinkers advocate. Yarvin's influence can also be tracked in Donald Trump's assault on universities and media. The former argues that liberal media and the universities uphold the dominance of liberal elites and hence need to be purged in order to bring the system down (Burgis 2022). Vice President Vance explicitly acknowledged that he was inspired by Yarvin, a monarchist, when he argued that "[...] we should seize the institutions of the left and turn them against the left. We need like a de-Baathification program, a de-woke-ification program in the United States" (Vance 2021).

Donald Trump's crackdown on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) measures in the United States, and particularly in universities needs to be seen in this light. The same is true for Trump's proposed cuts to federal funding for universities, particularly those perceived as liberal strongholds (McFarling, Molteni & Wosen 2025). Also in this context J.D. Vance echoes neo-reactionary thoughts: "There is no way for a conservative to accomplish our vision of society unless we're willing to strike at the heart of the beast. That's the universities" (Wilson 2024).

Moreover, Trump installed Brendan Carr as head of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) who immediately reinstated complaints against the three major networks in the United States – NBC, CBS, and ABC. Trump has also threatened to revoke broadcast licenses from disagreeable media outlets, to jail journalists and has installed far-right publications in the Pentagon, replacing traditional media outlets as well as engaged in unfounded conspiracy theories, that U.S. agencies were illicitly funding prominent media outlets such as Politico (Berger 2024, Hirschfeld 2025, Myers & Thompson 2025). The Associated Press is banned from the Oval Office and Air Force One indefinitely for refusing to adopt Donald Trump's renaming of the Gulf of Mexico (Stelter 2025). Moreover, the Trump administration announced that it would be handpicking which media outlets were allowed to relay the president's day-to-day activities to the public, breaking decades of precedent (Grynbaum 2025).

However, just as Donald Trump managed to capture the Republican Party and assert the dominance of his movement within it, MAGA now runs the risk of being captured by the techno-plutocrats. The frontal assault on the regulatory state in the US, enabled by MAGA's revenge fantasies of "draining the swamp" and the strong libertarian wing

in the Republican Party, dovetails nicely with the primary aim of the techno-elite: de-facto rule over the United States by becoming indispensable. In this dynamic, Trumpism functions as the battering ram, but it is the techno-plutocrats who may ultimately walk through the gates—consolidating power not through elections, but through structural entrenchment in a state hollowed out by its own supposed saviors.

It also highlights an internal contradiction within MAGA: while it presents itself as an anti-elite, populist movement, it is increasingly serving the interests of a new ruling class—the techno-plutocrats—who see government not as an enemy to be fought, but as an obstacle to be erased or co-opted. The irony, of course, is that the rank-and-file of MAGA might end up even more powerless under the rule of unelected billionaires than they ever could have possibly been under the so-called "deep state".

7 A silent coup

Both crypto currencies and AI serve as powerful vehicles for the techno-authoritarian vision of shifting power away from the state and its regulatory frameworks to private, unaccountable techno-plutocrats. Crypto, with its decentralized ethos, promises to dismantle traditional financial systems and state-controlled currencies, creating a parallel economy governed by algorithms and private actors rather than democratic institutions and its regulatory frameworks. Similarly, AI, particularly in its unregulated form, offers the allure of technological supremacy and efficiency, bypassing bureaucratic oversight and enabling elite control over decision-making processes. The assault on the American regulatory state—whether through deregulation, the defunding and downsizing of agencies, or the promotion of anti-regulatory rhetoric—forms a cohesive pattern with the rise of crypto and AI. Together, they embody a broader ideological project: the erosion of democratic governance in favor of a privatized, technocratic future where power is concentrated in the hands of a few unelected, tech-driven elites. This convergence of crypto, AI, and anti-state ideology isn't just a coincidence—it's a deliberate reimagining of power structures, one that aligns seamlessly with the neo-reactionary and libertarian leanings of Silicon Valley's contrarian vanguard.

It is important to note that the AI models that the U.S. government is increasingly using for everything from intelligence analysis to streamlining bureaucracy to strategic planning to warfare are all privately owned by a handful of individuals, not the state. Thus, the more the state is hollowed out, and the more government contracts end up in the hands of tech elites in return for their campaign contributions, the more state functions will be performed by private, unelected billionaires who happen to control these vital companies. In this fashion, Elon Musk's Space X has already effectively replaced NASA as the primary agency for U.S. space exploration and the provision of satellite-related services (Page 2024). Space X together with Peter Thiel's Palantir and

Sam Altman's Open AI are already providing vital services worth billions of U.S. Dollars in Defense contracts to the Pentagon, without which its operational capacity would be severely weakened (Nover 2024, Reuters 2025). And the real transfer of power has only just begun. The ultimate goal of the techno-plutocrats is not just influence, but entrenchment - to become so deeply embedded in the machinery of governance that their rule can no longer be challenged. Musk's vision for X as an "everything app" (Mac 2023) follows the same logic, aiming to centralize financial transactions, communications, news, and even identity verification within a privately controlled digital infrastructure. If successful, such platforms will not merely serve the state, but replace key state functions, creating a reality where governance is mediated through corporate-controlled systems rather than democratic institutions. Tech-leaders are fully aware of this power shift underway. Palantir CEO Alex Karp said Elon Musk's slash-and-burn effort to reshape the federal government would be "very good" for his company. He further elaborated: "There's a revolution. Some people get their heads cut off. We're expecting to see really unexpected things, and to win" (Hurwitz 2025).

In this new order, political power and the state do not need to be seized - they are simply rendered obsolete. This dynamic can be read as a silent coup where, unlike traditional authoritarian takeovers where a strongman seizes power, this transformation is happening quietly and under the guise of efficiency, innovation, and public-private partnerships. If these trends continue unchecked, democratic institutions could be significantly weakened, with policymaking increasingly dictated by private tech interests rather than elected representatives.

This quiet and steady transfer of power does not stop at domestic governance; it is already reshaping U.S. foreign policy as well. As tech oligarchs take over critical state functions, they are also exerting growing influence over international affairs, often operating with greater autonomy than elected officials. We are already seeing this play out in key areas: Elon Musk's Starlink dictating battlefield conditions in Ukraine (Farrow 2023), Peter Thiel's Palantir shaping U.S. intelligence operations and (allied) warfare abroad (Bamford 2024, Newman 2024), and Big Tech companies like Google and Microsoft increasingly determining which nations receive AI and cybersecurity infrastructure (Ferguson 2024). These corporations have hence expanded their role beyond merely being contractors. They are now active geopolitical players, often with interests that do not necessarily align with those of the U.S. government. The question is no longer just how the state is being hollowed out at home, but how foreign policy itself is being outsourced to an unelected techno-elite.

8 Implications for U.S. Foreign policy

The privatization of security and warfare is a broader trend in modern geopolitics with U.S. companies growing increasingly emboldened and unconstrained. Elon Musk's

Starlink has become a de facto strategic asset in Ukraine, dictating battlefield communications and logistics. When Ukrainian forces sought to extend Starlink's coverage over Crimea for a military operation in 2022, Musk personally denied the request, fearing escalation with Russia (Jordan 2023). This unilateral decision, made by a private individual rather than an elected official, directly altered the course of the conflict—illustrating how U.S. foreign policy is no longer solely the domain of the government but increasingly subject to the whims of corporate leaders. Alongside Starlink, several major tech companies have played a crucial role in supporting Ukraine's war effort. Corporations like Microsoft, Amazon and Google have invested hundreds of millions of dollars to bolster the country's defenses, aiding in cybersecurity, migrating essential government data to the cloud, and ensuring stable communications. Meanwhile, the U.S.-based facial recognition firm Clearview AI has supplied its technology to over 1,500 Ukrainian officials, enabling them to identify more than 230,000 Russian individuals within Ukraine, as well as uncover local collaborators (Bergengruen 2024). Peter Thiel's Palantir is also very active in the "AI war-lab" in Ukraine and its software is "responsible for most of the targeting in Ukraine" against Russian tanks or artillery, according to the company's CEO Alex Karp (Dastin 2023). Having become vital to Ukraine's defense efforts, the tech-billionaires will also likely play a key role, officially or not, in future negotiations over a settlement of the war. As they profit from a continuation of the conflict financially as well as via the further improvements of their technologies through real life application and training, they could pose an additional complication for Donald Trump's declared aim of settling the war as quickly as possible.

Palantir has embedded itself deep within U.S. intelligence operations, providing critical data analytics for the Pentagon and intelligence agencies. Governments allied with the U.S. increasingly rely on Palantir's platforms, making the company not just a contractor but a key decision-maker in global security policy. In January 2024, Palantir and the Israeli Ministry of Defense announced a "strategic partnership" aimed at enhancing Israel's military operations in Gaza. Reports suggest that Palantir's software has been instrumental in assisting the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) in generating target lists used for airstrikes (Essa 2024). Given the consistently pro-Israel stance of Peter Thiel and Palantir CEO Alex Karp, the partnership appears to be driven not just by business interests but also by a broader ideological commitment to Israel's defense strategy. Unlike government agencies subject to oversight, Palantir operates under corporate secrecy, raising concerns about accountability and transparency in intelligence operations.

Beyond the battlefield, the influence of Big Tech can also be traced to the Trump administration's stance towards the European Union (EU). The EU is a major market for Silicon Valley but its relatively tight regulatory framework is a thorn in the eye of the Tech-barons. However, these companies now benefit from U.S. geopolitical support in their efforts to resist regulatory constraints. In this context, Vice president Vance

suggested that the U.S. may reconsider its support for NATO if the European Union pursued regulations targeting social media platforms, particularly Elon Musk's X (Rommen 2024). At the most recent AI summit in Paris, Vance also issued a strong warning to the EU, cautioning against obstructing the United States' deregulatory approach to AI development. The influence and ethos ("move fast, break things") of Silicon Valley is clearly reflected in these statements. Vance echoed similar sentiments just days later at the Munich Security Conference, where he suggested that Europe needs to get on board with the MAGA interpretation of free speech if it wants to continue to count on U.S. support, which translates into, among other things, the deregulation of social media. Moreover, the diplomatic spat with South Africa over its alleged discrimination against white Afrikaners has written Elon Musk, who referred to a "genocide" being committed against white farmers in his home country, all over it (Aggarwal 2025).

So far the foreign and security policy of the tech-plutocrats seems broadly aligned with U.S. national strategy under the Trump administration. But for how long? Extrapolating current trends of deregulation of AI development (especially regarding its military applications), outsourcing of government services and capabilities into the private sector and the symbiotic relationship between U.S. politics and capital into the near future, a scenario seems feasible in which the Pentagon becomes overly dependent on the tech-elite and struggles to impose oversight. Of course, the tech-plutocrats are far from a monolithic bloc. Rather, they are competitors. Hence, there is the risk of selective insubordination, where different firms pursue their own geopolitical interests.

9 Quo vadis America?

The ever more connected nature of oligarchic might from the private sector with the power of the federal government in Washington, begs the question of who is actually in charge. For now, Donald Trump seems to be in control as his electoral mandate and loyal following in the populus as well as within the Republican Party are crucial elements, without which this current restructuring of the federal state would not be feasible. Once however, the state has been sufficiently hollowed out and enough power has shifted to the oligarchs and corporate power, there is the real possibility of the United States being effectively ruled by a handful of its richest entrepreneurs.

While this scenario may currently still seem far-fetched, it is the logical extrapolation of current trends and the EU should recognize it as such and prepare accordingly. Trump's well-documented admiration for Putin's Russia raises the question of whether he envisions a similar state-controlled oligarchic model. However, he may be overestimating his ability to maintain control over the very tech billionaires whose wealth and influence now rival that of the state itself. Beyond the possibility of the U.S. turning into a de facto oligarchy with a certain degree of democratic window-dressing,

there is also a much more sinister scenario, in which Washington descends into fascism.

Donald Trump exhibits several characteristics commonly associated with fascism. Fascist movements often center around a hyper-masculine, aggressive vision of leadership, which Trump personifies through his strongman persona— frequently mocking weakness, disability, and feminized traits. He has cultivated a leader cult where personal loyalty supersedes institutional norms or party ideology, with supporters viewing him as a singular savior against a corrupt elite, a common fascist trope.

His rhetoric on immigrants, particularly his claim that they are "poisoning the blood" of the nation, echoes fascist notions of racial purity (Gibson 2023). He frequently praises authoritarian leaders like Putin, Orban, and Xi, admiring their use of power. Trump has called for the mass execution of drug dealers, encouraged police brutality, and suggested military crackdowns on protesters (Jacobs 2024). He has openly threatened to imprison political rivals, including Joe Biden and other officials, without due process.

To delegitimize democracy, he has spread electoral conspiracy theories and attempted to overturn the 2020 election through pressure campaigns and the incitement of the January 6th insurrection—mirroring fascist leaders' use of violence and legal manipulation to retain power. He has also proposed deploying the military domestically to suppress protests and crime. His alignment with armed right-wing groups (Proud Boys) and refusal to condemn political violence (Charlottesville, January 6th) further signals an affinity for paramilitary support.

Moreover, the parallels between Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party's takeover of the Weimar Republic and current developments in the U.S. are striking. Like Trump, Hitler wanted to overturn election results that saw him losing by claiming voter fraud (Ryback 2025b). He also had campaigned on the promise of draining the "parliamentarian swamp"—*den parlamentarischen Sumpf* (Ryback 2025a). He did so by expunging key government officials and filling their positions with loyalists (ibid. 2025a). Hitler also attacked the free media and "the enemy within" (communists, jews), tropes that also Trump and other leading Republicans employed (Rosenfeld 2019, Nichols 2024). Famously, also the close relationship with some of Germany's biggest companies at the time, headed by reactionary figures, was a vital aspect of the rise and power grab of the Nazi-Party (Torres-Spelliscy 2016).

Moreover, the actions of key figures within the Trump administration send a clear message. During his visit to Germany, J.D. Vance met with Alice Weidel, leader of the far-right AfD, while pointedly avoiding Chancellor Olaf Scholz. At the Munich Security Conference, he also suggested that the AfD had the clearest vision for Germany's challenges. Meanwhile, Elon Musk has actively campaigned for the party, calling it "the

last spark of hope" (Hayden 2024) for Germany, and amplified the party's reach on his social media platform X ahead of the German elections (Taylor et al. 2025). His engagement with far-right ideologies is extensive—too much so to list in full. Among other things, he has promoted an interview with Hitler admirer Darryl Cooper (whom Vance follows on X), who describes Winston Churchill as “the chief villain of World War II” (Rashid 2024). He has also amplified anti-Semitic and racist messages (Morrow 2023) and engaged in spreading the far-right “great replacement” theory (Klee 2024). To leave no doubt about his ideological leanings, Musk performed a Nazi salute on national stage at Trump’s inauguration, twice.

Some may argue, with some justification, that comparisons to fascism are overblown. But the reality is that fascism was never a fixed ideology—it adapted to different historical and economic contexts. Today’s version does not need a single-party dictatorship or militarized paramilitaries to function. Instead, it operates through algorithmic governance, financial monopolization, and the erosion of democratic checks.

10 Europe needs to brace itself

In whatever state the hollowing out of the American regulatory state will precisely leave the U.S., one thing is already abundantly clear: the EU and its member states need to brace themselves for an assault against their regulatory frameworks and electoral integrity. We are already observing Elon Musk meddling in elections and government affairs all over Europe, while the Trump administration indicates its willingness to support its tech-allies on their mission to render Europe amicable to Silicon Valley’s interests. Via their control over AI and social media, the tech-elite has powerful soft power tools to sway public opinion in Europe in their favor. Crypto currency theoretically offers an anonymous way to finance political actors with aligned interests, bypassing campaign finance laws.

Europe must act now to shield itself from such illicit influence, by aiming to establish its own social media platforms in order to decrease reliance on U.S. tech billionaires. Meanwhile, the EU needs to ensure strict compliance from major tech firms with regards to the Digital Services Act (DSA) & Digital Markets Act (DMA), particularly regarding election integrity, algorithmic transparency, and content moderation. In this context, the EU should also strive to strengthen independent fact-checking institutions and enhance cooperation with intelligence agencies to track coordinated manipulation efforts. Finally, there is a need of expanding on existing media literacy programs to educate citizens on algorithmic biases, deepfakes, and disinformation tactics.

It is also time for stronger regulations on foreign funding in politics. Loopholes that allow indirect funding of political actors via cryptocurrency or third-party NGOs need to

be tracked down and closed. While these measures can help the EU mitigate foreign interference to some extent, it is also crucial to take a step back and view recent developments in the United States as a cautionary tale. The combination of largely unregulated capitalism, the erosion of campaign finance laws, and extreme economic inequality has, in just over a decade, shifted the U.S. from a stable democracy—the world’s oldest—ever closer towards an oligarchic system with autocratic tendencies. Europe must learn from these missteps and take proactive measures to safeguard its democratic institutions.

Moreover, rather than focusing solely on defense, Europe might also consider the benefits of a more proactive stance—one that not only protects its own democratic integrity but also acknowledges its growing responsibility as the last key bulwark of liberal democracy, should the United States continue its drift toward illiberalism.

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