8 November 2024 / The world Trump inherits

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): The congratulations are pouring in from around the world.

SCORING IN – Birch Tree (Russian folk song, cello, piano, clarinet, timpani, snare, string ensemble)-10

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.tiktok.com/@mrcodydahler/video/7434105639548357920)*> TIKTOK: Congratulations President-elect, Donald Trump. Nah! I can’t do it.*

SEAN: Leaders are offering an olive branch to the next president of the United States.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.tiktok.com/@mrcodydahler/video/7434105639548357920)*> TIKTOK: Our two nations share an unbreakable bond until of course you decide to break that bond for no particular reason.*

SEAN: That wasn’t a world leader. That was a comedian – Mr. Cody Dahler on TikTok. But here’s Trudeau:

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hq2maVyV144)*> Trudeau: I look forward to working with President Trump once again…*

SEAN: And Sheinbaum:

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x6kCJ9sivSM)*> Sheinbaum (IN SPANISH): To all Mexicans, I say there is no reason to worry*

SEAN: And NATO.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Usg0NZrllE)*> You have a president who is experienced, who is extremely clear about what he wants…*

SEAN: And Netanyahu.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://youtube.com/watch?v=oAjRBfAUn7g)*> NEWSCASTER: Calling Trump’s victory history’s greatest comeback….*

SEAN: And BFF Putin:

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FBIowJ6IOiM)*> Saying, quote, he behaved in my opinion, in a very correct way courageously like a real man.*

SEAN: On *Today, Explained* we’re gonna explore the world Trump inherits and what he’s gonna do with it.

[THEME]

JOSH KEATING (Vox reporter): I’m Josh Keating. I write about foreign policy and national security for Vox.

SEAN: Josh, how is the world Donald Trump is stepping into in January different than it was in 2016? Could you just remind us?

JOSH: Well, I think the world is a much more unstable and a much more violent place.

SCORING IN – Embers Bounce Around You On the Way Down (Drum Machine Version)-02

JOSH: And it's sort of funny to say that because definitely in 2016, it didn't feel like we were living through this era of stability and security. y ‘know, there is still the war against ISIS going on in the Middle East.

*<CLIP> CNN: ISIS, described by president obama, as solely a regional threat just over a year ago, is now global, active in eight countries and counting. and it has a growing focus on carrying out attacks in the west.*

JOSH: There were terrorist attacks happening on U.S. soil still.

*<CLIP> A shooting in downtown Orlando at the Pulse night club…*

*<CLIP> 49 people were killed when Omar Mateen opened fire…*

JOSH: North Korea was testing nuclear weapons.

*<CLIP> BLOOMBERG: today the DPRK said it conducted an underground nuclear test amid threats of more sanctions from the U.S. and others.*

JOSH: There were Russian troops on Ukrainian soil.

*<CLIP> Spreading out throughout the strategic crimean peninsula*

JOSH: But fast forward eight years and a lot's changed.

*<CLIP> Ukraine is now a nation at war*

*<CLIP> Fears are growing of a wider conflict in the Middle East*

*<CLIP> War devastating Sudan that echoes the Darfur genocide of 20 years ago*

JOSH: The last three years saw more conflict related deaths than at any time in the last three decades. The number of armed conflicts have increased. And I think, you know, maybe more important than that is the sort of character of those conflicts has changed.

SCORING OUT

JOSH: We're not just talking about wars within states, fights between states and terrorist groups. We're seeing conventional warfare on European soil, we're seeing in the Middle East obviously growing, you know, tension and and violence not just between Israel and Gaza, but, you know, risks of war between Israel and Iran that could draw in the United States. And then the one looming over all these that could be, you know, potentially far more destructive than any of them is the risk of conflict between the U.S. and China, which I'd say you'd have to say has only grown in the last eight years. So the world has gotten more unstable, more dangerous, and the sort of risks of each individual decision that a U.S. president makes have only gotten, you know, more dramatic over the last eight years.

SEAN: Let's talk about the three conflicts that are top of mind for for Donald Trump, but also most of the world now stepping into a new presidency, Ukraine, Gaza and China. It's been two years now and some since Russia invaded Ukraine. Where does the war stand today?

JOSH: Well, the blunt fact of it is Ukraine is losing. Russia is, you know, starting slowly but surely regaining territory. They're doing it at enormous cost to their own forces. Just they've seen untold levels of casualties on the Russian side. But, you know, they they Russia has a larger population than Ukraine and is steadily gaining. The big development we've seen in the last few weeks as North Korean troops have entered the fight on the Russian side. You know, it's not a good position for the Ukrainians right now. And you'd have to say it got worse as a result of the U.S. election.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.clayandbuck.com/president-trump-with-cb-from-mar-a-lago)*> PRESIDENT TRUMP: So Putin is now saying it’s independent, a large section of Ukraine. I said, “How smart is that?” And he’s gonna go in and be a peacekeeper.*

JOSH: Donald Trump has pledged to immediately end the war in Ukraine.

*<CLIP> PRESIDENT TRUMP: I would get him in a room, I’d get Zelensky into a room then I’d bring them together then I’d have a deal worked out.*

JOSH: Presumably, if you look at the statements he has made, the statements that his running mate, J.D. Vance made, this would involve sort of pressuring Ukraine to give up territory,

*<CLIP> SEN J.D. VANCE (R-OH): Ukraine remains its independent sovereignty Russia gets the guarantee of neutrality from Ukraine. It doesn't join NATO it doesn't join you know some of these sort of Allied institutions. And I think that’s ultimately what this looks like …*

JOSH: Basically acceding to many of Russia’s core war aims. Clearly, this is not the result Ukraine was hoping for in the U.S. election. But, you know, I think that war is going to continue at least for some time.

SEAN: Okay. Let's talk about Gaza and Israel, because it's the other war that's top of mind for most people right now.

JOSH: Trump actually didn't talk that much about this conflict on the campaign trail. I think he was very happy to sit back and let the tensions over in Israel and Gaza, you know, divide the Democrats, that that only played to his advantage. But, you know, I don't think we should expect to see Trump put any pressure on Israel that the Biden administration didn't. I think if you look at his record in the first term where he basically acceded to everything the Israelis wanted from …

*<CLIP> TRUMP: … directing the state department to begin preparation to move the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.*

JOSH: … to recognizing Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights, he basically gave the Israelis everything they wanted. And I think we should expect to see that again. I think that maybe the personal relationship between Trump and Netanyahu isn't as close as it once was. Trump has talked several times about how ticked off he was that Netanyahu quickly recognized Joe Biden's electoral victory in 2020 when some other far right leaders around the world sort of didn't do that. So I think we should expect, you know, the Israeli government to get a lot more latitude. I don't think there's going to be as much pressure on them in terms of their targeting, in terms of letting in humanitarian aid. You know, Israel's actually accomplished many of its major war aims in Gaza. And so, you know, there's a chance we could just see sort of a unilateral ceasefire in the coming months just because of things on the ground sort of taking their own course rather than, you know, Trump actually like putting any pressure on the on the Israeli government.

SEAN: Let's talk about China, one of Trump's faves.

*<CLIP> TRUMP: China I love em*

What's changed there since he was last in office?

JOSH: I think that what we've seen is a sort of growing recognition or at least consciousness of China's growing power and concerns about that spiraling into open conflict.

SCORING IN – Richard Goes Skating-02

JOSH: I was just in Taiwan a few weeks ago where that may be the place people are looking to most closely.

*<CLIP> China is launching two days of launching military drills surrounding taiwan just days after the island swore in its new president…*

JOSH: There are U.S. military commanders who say they expect open military conflict in the Taiwan Strait within the next five years. We've seen sort of clashes between, you know, sort of informal Chinese forces and the Philippines. That's tension that's growing.

*<CLIP> The Philippines and China on saturday accused each other of intentionally ramming coast guard ships in disputed waters of the South China Sea.*

JOSH: This is actually an area where there's been a little more continuity between the Trump and then the Biden administrations, they both clearly viewed China as the kind of main competitor to the United States on the world stage. There were differences in how they approached it. With Biden, there was a lot more emphasis on sort of building alliances in the Asia-Pacific region. But, you know, Trump's China policy is a little unpredictable.

SCORING OUT

*<CLIP> TRUMP: I love China people say oh you don't like China no I love them*

Trump talks about how he had a good relationship with Xi Jinping, how they were making good deals until, you know, what he calls the China virus came onto the scene.

*<CLIP> FROMER PRESIDENT TRUMP: he’s a fierce Warrior he's a fierce challenger but I had a very good relationship with him…*

You know Joe Biden. Would talk about, this sort of like good versus evil Cold War framing.

*<CLIP> PRESIDENT BIDEN: we're in competition with china and other countries to win the 21st century. we're at a great inflection point in history.we have to do more than just build back better to build back we have to Build Back Better*

With Trump, it's always a little more transactional. I think he wants to see what kind of deal he can get on trade. One theme that we saw again and again during the first Trump administration was that he and his advisors would often say, like, radically different things on foreign policy. And I would expect to see a little bit of that again.

SEAN: So the world has changed quite significantly since Donald Trump was last in office. He was even running on that fact throughout his campaign. Has the way he sees the world changed at all?

JOSH: I don't really think so. I think he has this idea that his sort of aggressive rhetoric and unpredictable behavior actually led to stability in the world. I mean, there's this idea that goes back to the Cold War, the madman theory that actually like that, if they think you're crazy, they'll they'll be more careful. And I think he sort of runs on that. I think that maybe adversaries are a little more careful because he's more unpredictable. But I also think allies maybe, you know, a little less able to count on U.S. protection. And that changes their behavior, too.

SCORING IN – Hanging Clouds (hang drum, minimal kick, simple organ, vibe drone)-01

JOSH: I’d say it, it doesn't make the world more peaceful necessarily. I think it makes the world more unpredictable.

SCORING BUMP  
  
SEAN: When we’re back on *Today, Explained*, we’re gonna try and understand Trump’s foreign policy because why not? It might help.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

SEAN: *Today, Explained* is back with Josh Keating. Josh, if you had to sum up Donald Trump's approach to the world, to foreign policy, how would you do it?

JOSH: Transactional …  
  
SEAN: Mmmmm.

JOSH: I think is what it is. It's not based on principle. Like, obviously he's not going to talk a lot about human rights and democracy the way that Joe Biden did

<[CLIP](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sYLEt_FkN_o)> PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN: *it’s not just about going after Russia when they violate human rights, it’s about who we are…*

JOSH: Or even the way that, you know, George W. Bush did.

*<CLIP> FORMER PRESIDENT George W. Bush: we must continue to do more to improve the human condition in North Korea…*

JOSH: With Trump, look at how he handled North Korea in his first term:

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1bt4t05m_j0)*>* FORMER PRESIDENT TRUMP: *North Korea best not make any more threats to the United States they will be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen.*

JOSH: Then it was the beautiful friendship, the beautiful romance between him and Kim Jong-un.

<CLIP> FORMER PRESIDENT TRUMP: *And then we fell in love, kay? No really. He wrote me beautiful letters and they’re great letters. We fell in love.*

JOSH: He's able to quickly pivot on a dime if he thinks that there are deals to be had. And I'd say that those deals can often be sort of short-term gains. I mean, he's a real estate guy. He wants to cut deals. And often, I would say he will put short-term gain over sort of long-term stability.

SCORING IN – (dorian) And The Moustache Was His Name-02

JOSH: In the piece I wrote, I looked at sort of a couple of principles that I don't think he puts faith in. One is the kind of nuclear taboo, this idea that the use of nuclear weapons is absolutely unacceptable and we should be doing everything we can to avoid it or even avoid talking about it. He's somebody who sort of openly flirted with it

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dyr1hYfuqJI)*> CNN: The president is tweeting about how his button is bigger and more powerful than Kim Jong Un’s.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dyr1hYfuqJI)*> JIMMY KIMMEL: We have two maniacs with nuclear warheads bragging about who has the bigger button.*

JOSH: Another one's the territorial integrity, this idea that you don't change borders by force. He doesn't seem to have much interest in that. He talked when he was president about how he thought maybe we should just let Russia have Crimea,

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rhZ8J4QHCjA)*> TRUMP: You know, the people of Crimea from what I've heard would rather be with Russia than where they were and you have to look at that also.*

JOSH: And another is the importance of alliances. I mean, this is something that's sort of a key pillar of US foreign policy is the idea that global security benefits through alliances like NATO.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jGP1hJJNstI)*> TRUMP: One of the presidents of a big country stood up said well sir uh if we don't pay and we're attacked by Russia will you protect us I said you didn't pay you're delinquent he said yes let's say that happened no I would not protect you in fact I would encourage them to do whatever the hell they want you got to pay you got to pay your bills CHEERS*

SCORING OUT

JOSH: The reason Russia isn't lobbing missiles at Poland or the Czech Republic or Hungary, even though those countries are helping Ukraine, is because they are members of NATO and they know that an attack on one is an attack on all. Trump sees that as a scam. He sees those countries as just like free riding on US security guarantees. And his idea, and he said this explicitly with respect to Taiwan, that if they expect the U.S. to come to their defense, they should be paying us for it.

SEAN: Okay. Transactional. Proud of his big button. Not proud of our alliances. And not crazy about territorial integrity. So how does that apply to the war in Ukraine, which he says ….

*<CLIP> TRUMP on CNN: If I’m president, I’ll have that war settled in one day. 24 Hours.*

JOSH: Well, what's interesting is we've already seen the Ukrainians kind of, like, adapt their pitch to the new reality. So you've actually seen President Vladimir Zelensky in recent weeks. Talk a little more about the natural resources on his territory and how, you know, they have sort of big deposits of lithium and like things we'll need for, you know, EVs and and you know, how important it is for us to defend Ukraine because we don't want these falling into Russian hands And so under Biden, they would talk about, you know, how we have to stand up for democracy and how, you know, how when we're defending Ukraine were defending the Western led international rules based order. Donald Trump doesn't care about the Western rules based international order. But, you know, he is somebody says that when we invaded Iraq …

*<CLIP> TRUMP: … we should have taken the oil.*

JOSH: I think we're going to hear how it's in in the U.S. is sort of economic interest to sort of keep Ukraine in the U.S. orbit.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_XuJLV2kfcc)*> LINDSEY GRAHAM: they're sitting on 10 to 122 trillion of critical minerals in in Ukraine they could be the richest country in all of Europe I don't want to give that money and those assets to Putin to share with China if we help Ukraine now they can become the best business partner we ever dreamed of*

JOSH: I think we're going to see, like a lot of other countries sort of pivoting the way they they sort of sell themselves to Washington under this new administration.

SEAN: Who do we think is going to be in Donald Trump's ear this time around when it comes to foreign policy? Famously, not a student of, you know, the world, but will he surround himself with some savvy folks?

JOSH: I think that's going to be a big change between, you know, Trump one and Trump two

SCORING IN – Because We Care - Tense Chords Version (minimal, building, layered, synth, pizzicato, piano chords)-02

JOSH: Trump had a thing for a man in uniform the first time around.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/politics/trump-describes-generals-in-his-cabinet-as-central-casting/2017/01/24/a22e0f5a-e20a-11e6-a419-eefe8eff0835_video.html)*> TRUMP: My generals those generals are gonna keep us so safe.*

JOSH: I think he liked having sort of, you know, former generals in his cabinet because, you know, these guys would sort of tough guy reputations like H.R. McMaster and James Mattis. You know, he famously one of the reasons he picked Jim Mattis was because he liked that his nickname was Mad Dog …  
  
SEAN: Mm-hm.  
  
JOSH: … from when he was a general.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xoTIJrkeKb8)*> TRUMP: Mad dog! He is great. He is great …*

JOSH: And I think what he discovered was that these guys actually, you know, they may be tough, but they also have sort of rather traditional views of national security priorities. They're not the kind of guys who wanted to pull the U.S. out of NATO. And so I think this time around, he's not going to rely on generals, my generals, the way he did the last time. I think you're going to see more true believers.

MUSIC BREATHES FOR A SEC

JOSH: A couple of names. I mean, Mike Pompeo, who is his CIA director and then Secretary of State, is somebody who actually does still have a good relationship with Trump, who didn't have a falling out with him. People have talked about him coming back in.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y4FVjVZs_x4)*> POMPEO: i'm especially proud that we made religious freedom a top priority in the United States foreign policy for the first time in america's history*

JOSH: And Robert O'Brien is maybe the only one of Trump's national security advisers who didn't turn on him.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cZXuq7GyV_E)*> ROBERT O’BRIEN: I was privileged and proud to to work for the president and to serve America in multiple administrations and uh if I'm asked I I'll obviously do my part but uh we'll have to wait and see what the President wants to do…*

JOSH: Rick Grenell, who is his former ambassador to Germany, like a really sort of outspoken critic of European countries and of NATO, somebody with like real sharp elbows, not well-liked around Brussels. People have talked about him as taking a senior role.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D2lOC6CLh3I)*> BILD DEPUTY EDITOR PAUL RONZHEIMER: “would you think, German politicians would like you to become Secretary of State under Donald Trump?*

*RICK GRENELL: “I don't care what they think where this is about America.”*

JOSH: Bill Hagerty, the current senator from Tennessee who was Trump's ambassador to Japan, that's a name that's come up a lot.

<CLIP> SENATOR BILL HAGERTY: *I'm not going to speculate on what the future might be. I'll leave that to the speculators, except to say that I'm going to do everything I can to move us forward, bring our economy back, our national security back, and get America moving again.*

JOSH: There’s sort of more of like a MAGA core coming out of the DC foreign policy world than there was eight years ago.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: And what do we think? You know, MAGA core group of true believers implementing Trump's vision, or maybe even lack thereof for American standing in the world means for America's standing in the world, be it our alliances in NATO or just our influence overall?

JOSH: Well, you know, I think a lot of U.S. allies are going. This is a wake up call for them about their own national security. You know, I've had some European diplomats like off the record say like they kind of think Trump had a little bit of a point that, you know, European countries should be spending a greater percentage of their GDP on defense. So we may see more of these countries spending a little more on defense. That could be true in Europe and East Asia as well. One thing I'm keeping an eye on that concerns me is they may decide that rather than doing that, It may be cheaper and simpler rather than sort of building a big standing army that can deter an attack from Russia, China, North Korea. Pick your adversary to just seek your own nuclear weapons. We even heard President Zelensky in Ukraine say that, you know, our Ukraine's future is either in Nato or with a nuclear weapon.

<[CLIP](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i_pEPRhoTMg)> UKRAINIAN PRESIDENT ZELENSKY: *I don't have alternative except NATO that was my signal.*

SEAN: What do you think it is that we get wrong about Donald Trump's foreign policy?

JOSH: People try to characterize him as either a dove or a hawk that is either like a warmonger or like a total isolationist tool, like pull back the U.S. from the world. I don't think either of those is really true. I think that he’s somebody who takes a very kind of transactional approach to foreign policy, puts a lot of faith in personal relationships and is sort of one on one talks with. Guys like Xi Jinping, like Kim Jong un, like Vladimir Putin, and doesn't have a lot of time for sort of talk about alliances or rules based international order. He looks at crises and at U.S. relationships and asks generously speaking, what's in it for the U.S.? Not so generously speaking. What's in it for me? And he's willing to use both hawkish and dovish tools to get there.   
  
 SCORING – Dressing On The Side (footwork, bouncy, high energy).wav

PODCAST:

SEAN: Josh Keating. Vox dot com.

If memory serves, the last time Trump was president there was a lot to explain. Vox is gearing up to help you understand the next four years. You can support our work by joining our membership program today. Go to vox.com/members to sign up. Thank you!

Our show today was produced by Peter Balonon-Rosen, edited by Amina Al-Sadi, fact checked by Laura Bullard and Amanda Lewellyn and Hady Mawajdeh and mixed by Patrick Boyd and Andrea Kristinsdottir.

The rest of us? Miles Bryan, Avishay Artsy, Victoria Chamberlin, Haleema Shah, Rob Byers, Zach Mack, and Eliza Dennis who made a perfectly timed exit this week.

We use music by Breakmaster Cylinder.

Matthew Collette supervises edits.   
Miranda Kennedy executive produces.   
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I’m Sean Rameswaram. And this is *Today, Explained*.

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I’m Sean Rameswaram. *Today, Explained* is distributed by WNYC. The show is a part of Vox.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]