

HARVARD VS TRUMP

‘Limiting international participation would impoverish our academic mission’

Dr Fernando M. Reimers, the Ford Foundation Professor of the Practice in International Education at Harvard University, speaks with Sarzah Yeasmin, contributor to The Daily Star, about the battle between Harvard and US President Donald Trump, and the repercussions for global education and democracy in the interconnected world today.

On May 22, 2025, the US Department of Homeland Security revoked Harvard University’s certification to enrol international students, which threatened the legal status of nearly 6,800 international students—about 27 percent of the university’s student body—and placed many global academic partnerships in jeopardy.

**How do you believe the removal of international enrolment would affect not just Harvard, but the broader landscape of higher education in the US?**

The removal of international enrolment would have devastating consequences not just for Harvard but for American higher education as a whole. International students and scholars are essential to the vitality, innovation, and relevance of our universities. Without their contributions, our higher education system would become more insular and parochial, undermining America’s long-standing leadership in global knowledge creation and problem solving. Ultimately, it weakens the openness and excellence that attract the world’s brightest minds.

In truth, universities do not exist in a vacuum. Their legitimacy and excellence depend on their ability to serve as meeting grounds for diverse experiences, cultures, and perspectives. Removing international students means removing a central pillar of our academic ecosystem—one that enables our institutions to educate global citizens and produce knowledge that reflects the complexities of our shared world.

This policy would deprive Harvard of a resource essential to its mission. The advancement of knowledge and the improvement of the human condition through education are possible only when ideas cross borders and diverse minds collaborate. The presence of international students and scholars is not an accessory to the academic mission; it is central to it.

**In what ways does Harvard’s history of international engagement serve as a model for the role that universities should**

**play in geopolitics?**

Harvard’s commitment to international engagement and vision for global engagement dates back to Charles William Eliot, Harvard’s 22nd president, who transformed the university into a global institution by expanding international faculty and graduate programmes. Eliot’s efforts demonstrate how Harvard’s identity and excellence are historically tied to looking beyond national borders. This openness has enabled Harvard to address global challenges and improve the human condition through education and research. In today’s interconnected world, universities must model this spirit of dialogue and partnership if they are to serve as engines of progress and innovation.

There is an ethical imperative for universities to participate in shaping a peaceful and just world, and that requires meaningful collaboration across national boundaries. Harvard’s ability to support inclusive global development has always been linked to its willingness to be shaped by voices beyond its borders. This example—of intellectual humility and shared problem-solving—should be emulated widely.

**How would limiting international student and scholar participation specifically undermine any university’s academic mission and research capabilities?**

Limiting international participation would fundamentally impoverish our academic mission. The very advancement of knowledge relies on the free exchange of ideas across borders. International students and scholars bring essential perspectives, expertise, and creativity, enriching teaching, learning, and research. Excluding them weakens our ability to tackle global challenges and limits the university’s capacity for innovation and excellence.

It is in the presence of cultural and disciplinary diversity that ideas mature. The global academy thrives on constructive tension and collective inquiry. Curtailing participation from beyond our borders



Dr Fernando M. Reimers

**What do you see as the long-term risks to higher education institutions when government actions are used to exert political pressure on curriculum, admissions or faculty decisions?**

The long-term risks are severe. When governments attempt to dictate curriculum, admissions or hiring for political purposes, they erode the autonomy that is central to universities’ roles in a democracy. This stifles academic freedom, undermines trust in institutions, and leads to intellectual stagnation. Over time, such interference could irreparably damage the integrity, credibility, and global reputation of American higher education.

Such pressures do not just threaten

governance; they threaten purpose. Universities that become captive to political directives cease to serve the common good. They risk becoming provincial institutions, incapable of helping societies navigate the moral and technological dilemmas of our time. The erosion of institutional autonomy threatens not just academic freedom, but the university’s democratic purpose.

**How should universities protect their autonomy while continuing to engage with governments and policymakers?**

Universities must remain steadfast in defending their mission and core principles while constructively engaging with policymakers. This requires clear legal and policy protections for academic freedom and institutional independence. At the same time, universities should foster transparent, principled dialogue with governments, advocating for the critical societal role that education plays while refusing to accept undue political interference.

Engagement must always be grounded in integrity. Universities can and should work with governments, but only in ways that preserve their moral compass and their primary allegiance—to truth, to inclusion, and to the long-term public interest. Autonomy of universities is essential to a functioning democracy. Universities serve as spaces to envision a better future and to bring people together to realise that vision. Political interference compromises this mission at its root.

**What concrete steps should the academic community and the public take to defend global academic collaboration and institutional independence in the face of political interference?**

The academic community and the public must mobilise to challenge any encroachments on academic freedom and diversity. This entails legal challenges to unlawful government actions, robust advocacy for the value of openness and international collaboration and forming alliances with civil society and

political leaders who support institutional independence. It also means educating the public about the essential role global engagement and academic autonomy play in addressing humanity’s greatest challenges.

There is a civic duty here: to defend the university not as a sanctuary for the elite, but as a platform for solving global problems. By building coalitions, protecting institutional independence, and reinforcing public trust, universities can serve not just national interests but a global future. Protecting international engagement is about protecting the spirit of inquiry and collaboration that defines a free society.

**What are the broader implications of this moment for higher education in the US and its global role?**

The current confrontation extends well beyond administrative policy—it touches the core of what a university is and whom it serves. At stake is not merely the continuity of international enrolment, but the philosophical and civic foundations of higher education itself. In an era defined by geopolitical fragmentation and rising authoritarianism, the university must remain a space of principled openness, intellectual pluralism, and global responsibility. Defending academic freedom and cross-border engagement is not a defensive act; it is an affirmation of higher education’s most enduring values.

This moment also calls for a wider reckoning within the education landscape of the US. The policies and precedents set in institutions like Harvard will ripple across the entire higher education system, affecting community colleges, state universities, and liberal arts colleges alike. If the US chooses to retreat from global intellectual exchange, it risks ceding leadership in research, innovation, and the moral project of higher education. The health of American democracy, and its place in the world, will be shaped by whether its universities remain open, independent, and truly global.

Is Trump’s approach to the Russia-Ukraine war a geopolitical gamble or a strategic withdrawal?



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When Donald Trump returned to the White House in January 2025, he vowed to end the Russia-Ukraine war, saying that he would end the war in Ukraine in 24 hours. This aptitude, repeated relentlessly during his campaign, hinged on his self-proclaimed prodigy for dealmaking and personal rapport with Vladimir Putin. Yet over 100 days into his presidency, the war rages on, as well as Russian strikes on Ukrainian cities have intensified. Trump’s strategy has devolved into a pattern of contradictions and disengagement. The US president’s initial bravado has collided with the grim realities of a war now in its fourth year, with escalating drone warfare and a large number of casualties on both sides. Trump’s policy reversals—abandoning sanctions threats to Russia by lowering them, downplaying the US leadership, prioritising rare-earth mineral deals with Ukraine—have left the Kremlin emboldened and strained transatlantic unity.

However, the roots of this shift lie in Trump’s transactional worldview. His administration inherited a war that had settled into a brutal attritional grind under President Joe Biden, with Ukraine relying on Western arms to thwart Russian advances. However, where Biden’s approach marked the war as a struggle for “democratic sovereignty,” Trump has treated it as a nuisance—an obstacle to his vision of a grand bargain with Moscow. Since Trump’s win, US direct involvement has decreased. Meanwhile, enforcement of sanctions has ground to a halt and ceasefire plans have only advanced demands favourable to Russia. Yet in May 2025 alone, Russia carried out its largest aerial bombardment in the war. In this respect, Trump’s recent calling of Putin “absolutely crazy” has been notable, but how much impact it will pose on the US approach remains a critical question.

The surge of Russian attacks coincided with Trump’s diplomatic inertia. His sole tangible intervention—a two-hour call with Putin in mid-May—yielded little beyond vague Russian commitments to draft a “memorandum” on peace. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky slammed Russia for the delay,

while some other officials dismissed the “document” as a stalling tactic. Also, the US president’s criticism of Putin contrasted sharply with his reproach of Zelensky, whom he accused of “causing problems,” demanding that he “better stop.”

The administration’s failure to act decisively has had dire consequences. While Trump’s Defense Intelligence Agency warned that Russia planned to fight through 2025, Trump at first kept pressuring Kyiv to make concessions without visible pressure on Russia to halt its attacks. Civilian casualties soared, with over 664 civilians killed and 3,425 injured, reported in the first four months of 2025, as reported by Kyiv Independent. All the

**Trump’s policy has been marked by a reluctance to leverage sanctions against Russia, a departure from the Biden-era consensus. Biden used to believe that economic pressure could curb Moscow’s aggression. Where the European Union (EU) imposed 17 rounds of sanctions targeting Russian energy, finance, and technology sectors, Trump deemed such measures as obstacles to maximising opportunities for Americans.**

while, the US president emboldened Russian President Vladimir Putin by declining to impose pressure for an immediate ceasefire—backed by Europe—of meaningful sanctions. After Trump’s two-hour phone call with Putin, he told reporters on May 19 that the call was “meaningful and frank” while the Russian leader declined to support the 30-day ceasefire plan. Putin instead ordered a “security buffer zone” along Ukraine’s Eastern borders, and strikes on Ukraine’s civilian

buildings escalated to the heaviest bombings on May 10, with 70 missiles and almost 300 drones. Russian air raids continued on May 25, and Trump remained silent until May 27, when he finally addressed the massive aerial attacks on Ukraine. Posting on TruthSocial, Trump referring to the Russian President, said, “Something has happened to him. He has gone absolutely CRAZY!” On the same day, sources interviewed by *The Wall Street*



An explosion of a drone lights up the sky over the city during a Russian drone strike, amid Russia’s attack on Ukraine, in Kyiv, Ukraine on May 24, 2025. PHOTO: REUTERS

*Journal* said Trump is considering renewed sanctions, but he could also decide to not impose sanctions at all. One of Trump’s key considerations, according to US officials interview by *The Wall Street Journal*, was his belief that he knew Putin well and that the Russian leader would end the war as a favour.

Trump’s dynamic of bluster and retreat has undermined US credibility. It left Kyiv to face intensified attacks and fractured Europe’s trust. Critics argue that Trump’s approach has been less about diplomacy than coercion, pressuring Ukraine to comply with the territorial concessions. It became explicit in May, when the US declined to join the European-led sanctions, instead suggesting that Kyiv and Moscow resolve the conflict “independently.” For Ukraine, already strained by dwindling Western aid, the lack of US leadership has been critical.

**Biden’s stalemate vs Trump’s concessions**

The differing approaches of the Biden and Trump administrations divulge a dichotomy. Biden considered the war as “a defense of democratic values,” rallying NATO allies to supply tanks, artillery, and air defence systems. His strategy reached a fragile stalemate, suggesting the preservation of Ukraine’s territory while avoiding direct

confrontation between NATO and Russia. On the other hand, Trump has been considering the war through a transactional viewpoint. His early moves—halting arms shipments to pressure Kyiv into ceasefire talks—allowed Russian forces to regain momentum in eastern Ukraine. Diplomatically, Trump sidelined European partners, insisting Ukraine and Russia negotiate bilaterally. This approach became more apparent when Vice

meantime, the lack of US enforcement diluted EU efforts to isolate Moscow. One EU diplomat remarked, “We cannot deter Putin if America prioritises trade over security.”

Putin’s chess game is complex. On May 27, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan went on a two-day visit to Moscow, and Russian stressed on bilateral relations rather than Ukraine. Russian sources have said they viewed Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Oman as potentially suitable venues for direct talks with Ukraine in a direct blow to Trump who posed himself as the chief negotiator to end the war. The Kremlin’s state media in February, framed Trump’s deference as a victory. For Putin, Trump’s isolationism validates a long-standing assumption: that Western resolve would fracture under economic and political pressure.

**A strategic dilemma for Europe?**

In March, the EU unveiled an 800-billion-euro defence plan with a view to bolstering arms production and making a joint rapid-response force. However, internal divisions persist. Poland and the Baltics advocate for unserving military aid to Ukraine, while Hungary’s Viktor Orbán—echoing Trump’s rhetoric—calls for pragmatic engagement with Moscow. The EU’s May 2025 sanctions package, targeting Russian LNG and shadow tankers, marks progress but highlights lacunae. Europe lacks the capacity to replace US intelligence sharing or advanced air defences. It leaves Ukraine vulnerable to missile strikes. At the same time, Trump’s threats to withdraw US troops from NATO’s eastern flank have given rise to concerns. If the US does not ensure its commitments, Europe cannot help but prepare to defend itself. For Ukraine, Europe’s resolve is a lifeline, but doubts linger. Although the EU amplified aid, Kyiv’s battlefield prospects depend on sustained Western unity—a unity questioned and puzzled by Trump’s ambivalence.

Trump’s approach to Ukraine raises questions regarding transatlantic ties (with NATO and the EU) as it has insofar left Kyiv fighting for survival with waning support. For Europe, the lesson should be clear. The EU’s push for strategic autonomy faces immense hurdles—from internal divisions to military inadequacies. For the US, the cost of winning a trade deal with Russia may be the loss of its role as the self-proclaimed anchor of global stability. The war in Ukraine has become a referendum on something far larger: whether a world order built on rules and alliances can withstand the rise of transactional nationalism. In the era of a geopolitical and geo-economic crux, ambiguity is the only certainty.