



By: The Editorial Board

Would you go to a meeting with a convicted felon?



The majority of US citizens will not object to a convicted felon running their country if Donald Trump wins the US presidency on November 5.

This would be a perfectly legal situation, given that the American constitution and laws do not prevent accused or even convicted persons from running for office or even fulfilling the duties of a statesman.

However, the US will then find itself in a major conflict between the law and the political will of the majority of citizens, from which the latter will emerge victorious.

Donald Trump's election triumph and new presidential mandate will allow him to hold the most important position in the USA, despite the court verdict that found him guilty of being a criminal.

Will this be an obstacle to his presidential authority outside the USA?

Certainly not, because he will be the democratically elected head of a great democratic state. There is no reason, nor is it possible, that anyone on the international stage will shy away from communicating with Trump because he is a convicted felon. His status as the democratically elected leader of the United States will be more important.

Distrust in Trump

However, Trump, following his conviction by the New York court, will not be the same person in international affairs as he was during his previous term of office.

Even the then "pure" Trump enjoyed virtually no confidence from the rest of the world that he was capable of doing the right things regarding world politics.

A poll at the beginning of his last year in the White House (2020) **showed** that the vast majority of citizens in the countries closest to US—Canada and the European NATO members—on average, two-thirds of them, did

not believe that he could make the right decisions at the international level.

The American partners from the Indo-Pacific region (Australia, Japan, and South Korea) shared a similar distrust at the time, and particularly negative assessments came from Latin America.

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Four years later, it is difficult to expect a different opinion from the global public, as Trump has given no indication in the meantime that he would change anything about his foreign policy, especially the style in which he would conduct it.

Even then, he saw international affairs as business negotiations, and agreements between states as business deals.

Trump's previous stay in the White House was characterised by a strong personalisation of diplomacy, the subordination of multilateralism to direct bilateral deals, and the absence of decision-making in consultation with allies, even with American institutions that are obliged to do so.

Trump is not Mandela

If Trump is re-elected, all of these shortcomings will be back on the agenda, but the element of his criminal conviction in a US court will be added.

Today, regarding Trump's conviction, America faces the unprecedented possibility of a convict becoming its president. But this is nothing new for the international arena.

Among world leaders, there have been and still are a number of convicts and ex-convicts accused of corruption and crime. These

verdicts have propelled numerous individuals to the pinnacle of politics as victims of the political terror they endured in their homelands.

This is where Trump's strategy comes from—the indictments brought against him come from a corrupt and arbitrary government, of which he is a victim.

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However, it will be difficult for Trump to impose himself on his international dialogue partners as the American Nelson Mandela or one of the former Eastern European leaders, Vaclav Havel and Lech Walesa.

He will find it easy with the majority of Republican voters in the USA, but for most of the USA's international partners, this will be unconvincing, perhaps even risky.

It is easy to imagine NATO or EU-US summits at which the most important dialogue partners would be Mr Trump and the recent Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte (as Secretary General of NATO) or Ursula von der Leyen in her new role as President of the European Commission.

Mr Rutte and Mrs von der Leyen (if they receive new posts) will undoubtedly be unable to avoid these meetings. Furthermore, these meetings will be significant for them, particularly in terms of their relationships with their most important partner and its democratically elected leader.

But the Europeans will have a political responsibility to their own people and voters. Liberal Rutte voters in the Netherlands and conservative CDU Von der Leyen voters have much greater respect for the rule of law and judicial decisions than Trump voters in the US.

A negotiator with a bad reputation

Donald Trump's political legitimacy as US president will not be convincing enough for a large proportion of European voters who support democracy and the rule of law to accept him as a partner. For them, he is first and foremost a criminal, and only then is he the President of the USA.

This stamp that Trump will put on the international arena if he becomes president again will further strain his already diminished ability (and desire) to solve international problems.

The foundation of all negotiations, especially those over international crises, is trust between the players, even if it is minimal, in order to reach a compromise.



The leaders of allied countries will be among the very few who could speak truthfully to Trump - Malcolm Turnbull

For many of the leading politicians on the global stage, Trump's criminal conviction will not be a problem when it comes to negotiating trust and credibility. After all, they come from countries where the rule of law is only a façade or does not exist at all.

However, Trump will not have the flexibility to talk only to autocrats and leaders of non-democratic regimes, regardless of the fact that these will be important dialogue partners for the Middle East, Ukraine, the Indo-Pacific, and other neuralgic points.

Most of his future interlocutors will come from

developed democracies where laws prevail, not political leaders. They will have to talk to Trump because of the legitimacy of a democratic election, but having a convicted felon as a partner will also define their political relationship with him.

The former Australian PM Malcolm Turnbull (2015–2018), based on his statesmanship experience with Trump, **said** that the leaders of allied countries will be "among the very few who could speak truthfully to Trump."

"He can shout at them, embarrass them, even threaten them. But he cannot fire them. Their character, courage, and candour may be the most important aid they can render to the United States in a second age of Trump," said Turnbull.