

How America's friends and enemies have adjusted to the age of Trump

As US allies wrestle with what to do next, China hopes to benefit from a world in flux

by: Edward Luce

Several US presidents have proclaimed a new world order. Today most of us remember only the one that George HW Bush called for at the end of the cold war. "That new world order is struggling to be born — a world quite different to the one we've known," said Bush Senior in 1990. Minus the Soviet Union, it was in fact roughly the same one we had known for the previous half-century. With a few ups and downs, Pax Americana held for about another decade.

Since the attacks of 9/11, however, the fissures have begun to show. In the past few months, it has become possible to imagine a crack-up. For obvious reasons, not even Donald Trump would dream of boasting about ushering in a new world disorder. Yet Bush's words may inadvertently have foreshadowed what is happening today. "America has always led by example," he said. "So, who among us will set the example? Which of our citizens will lead us in this next American century?" He could not possibly have guessed the answer to that.

History, as they say, is lived forwards but written backwards. Two decades before Bush Senior's declaration, Dean Acheson, the former US secretary of state, wrote his classic, *Present at the Creation*. It set out in epochal detail how America had created the postwar system that Bush rebranded the new world order. Bodies that today seem to be in the natural scheme of things — the United Nations, Nato, the International Monetary Fund and the forerunner to the World Trade Organization — were assembled against the odds by the Truman administration in which Acheson served. It was a unique historical flurry of global institution-building that could only have been undertaken by America. No other country had the self-belief — or wherewithal — to remake the world in its own image.

Today, in the era of Donald Trump, it feels as though we may be living history backwards. America has a president who disdains his country's handiwork. For most of the past seven decades, it was America's enemies, led by the Soviet Union, that attacked the liberal order. Much of the world saw the UN Security Council and other bodies as neo-imperial instruments of US power. Every now and then, US presidents complained that others were not paying sufficient dues. None ever questioned their existence. America's detractors could carp at the global order secure in the knowledge that it wasn't in any danger. Since January 20, that assumption no longer feels safe. "We forget how unnatural the US-created liberal world order always was," says Robert Kagan, a trenchant conservative critic of Trump. "It is hard to imagine who will sustain it when the US president himself is actively undermining it."

In one way or another, all of America's closest allies are now wrestling with that quandary. Even those who have traditionally been reluctant to voice their misgivings in public are speaking out. Last month, Angela Merkel said it was time for Germany and Europe to take their "fate into their own hands". She said this shortly after Trump had declined to offer his support for Nato's Article 5 mutual defence clause, despite his recent unveiling of a plaque to the victims of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the only time America's allies had invoked the clause. "The times in which we could rely on others — they are somewhat over," said Merkel with her trademark understatement.

Earlier this month, Chrystia Freeland, Canada's foreign minister, gave a speech in which she asked what Canada should do in **a world in which the US was no longer reliable**. Thanking America for decades of global leadership, Freeland (a former colleague at the Financial Times), said it was time to act as though that age was passing. "The fact that our friend and ally has come to question the very worth of its mantle of global leadership puts into sharper focus the need for the rest of us to set our own clear and sovereign course," Freeland told Canada's House of Commons.

Her speech elicited no reaction from the Trump administration. Plenty of other US figures approved of what she said. "If I were advising on national security in any other country, I would be asking exactly the same questions," said Richard Haass, head of the Council on Foreign Relations and a former senior official in several Republican administrations. "Something fundamental seems to be breaking. If America can do it once [under Trump], why can't it happen again?"

Then there are America's potential adversaries, chief among them China and Russia, who are a bit like the proverbial dog that caught the car. Having railed against the so-called "unipolar moment" that followed the cold war, they find it has ended far quicker than they expected. For both China and Russia, Trump's presidency is an unimagined geopolitical windfall.

The response from Trump's shrinking circle of apologists is to point to the acknowledged "globalists" he has put in the biggest roles. The shorthand for these is **"MMT" — James Mattis, US secretary of defence, HR McMaster, national security adviser, and Rex Tillerson**, secretary of state. This so-called "axis of adults" will keep Trump honest, they say, and prevent him from taking steps to detonate the global order. There are two glaring problems with this Panglossian account. The first is that Trump keeps ignoring their advice. His decision to undercut Nato last month reportedly caught most of his advisers by surprise. The fact that he casually uttered that missing Nato pledge a few days later was only mildly reassuring. He has done so before, only to reverse himself. "When Trump says the right thing, it's like one of those Snapchat images," says the Washington ambassador of a US ally. "It seems to vanish straight after you've seen it."

Trump also spurned MMT's unanimous counsel not to pull out of the Paris agreement on global warming. The same willingness to overrule those around him is evident in Trump's loud support for the Persian Gulf states' decision to sever ties with Qatar — a measure just short of war — even though Qatar plays host to 11,000 US troops. While Tillerson was trying to mediate, Trump was goading the Saudis and its allies to go further. Whom should

the world take seriously? Tillerson or Trump? “I don’t buy this theory about the axis of adults,” says Kagan. “Even Obama was able to overrule his senior generals. We have no evidence to show that the so-called adults can stop Trump from being Trump.”

The second drawback is that Trump’s world view is deeply at odds with most of his senior officials (Stephen Bannon, the anti-globalist White House chief strategist, is the big exception). For more than 40 years, Trump has consistently seen the rest of the world as a hostile place — foes and allies alike. Phrases such as “They are laughing at us” and “We are being ripped off” have tripped off his tongue since the 1980s. At 71, it seems unlikely he will change his instincts. On his first trip abroad last month, Trump again berated Germany for paying less than its fair share to Nato, and for its alleged cheating on trade. “Trump believes all foreigners are playing us for suckers — he sees the world as a dark place,” says Ivo Daalder, a former US ambassador to Nato. “How can you lead alliances when you keep telling your allies they are ripping you off?”

Some insist Trump is a “realist” — a refreshing contrast to the neoconservatives around George W Bush. But such an approach only works with a nuanced grasp of what motivates other countries. Trump makes no effort to seek out their opinion. America’s allies were particularly shocked last month when HR McMaster and Gary Cohn, the president’s senior economic adviser, wrote a Wall Street Journal column setting out Trump’s diplomatic principles. “The world is not a ‘global community’ but an arena where nations, non-governmental actors and businesses engage and compete for advantage,” they wrote. “Rather than deny this elemental nature of international affairs, we embrace it.”

So much for realism. What McMaster and Cohn depicted was a brutalist world in which there were no shared values. The fact that it was a carefully penned message delivered by two of Trump’s more seasoned advisers, rather than a casual tweet by the president himself, was particularly striking. “These are the people who are supposed to be moderating Trump,” says one European diplomat. “The message we took was, ‘You’re on your own now.’”

An added complication is that it is by no means clear Trump’s top three cabinet officials even agree with each other. Mattis and McMaster are widely rumoured not to get along, while Tillerson’s world view is still largely unknown. Of the three, outsiders place most faith in Mattis, who has found it increasingly hard to justify Trump’s stances in public. “It would be a big surprise to me if Mattis is still in his job a year or two from now,” says Javier Solana, the former top diplomatic envoy for the EU.

Trump’s next big test will come in early July when for the first time he will meet his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, at the G20 summit in Hamburg, Germany. The visual takeaways from such confabulations often speak louder than the statements. At the G20 in Australia in November 2014, shortly after Russia had annexed Crimea, Putin was photographed alone, shunned by his fellow leaders. He left the meeting early. His departure symbolised Russia’s isolation. Trump’s decision to take a golf cart rather than join the other six leaders on foot at the G7 summit in Taormina, Sicily, last month also spoke volumes, prefiguring his withdrawal from the Paris agreement a few days later. “He could not even be bothered to walk for a few minutes with his fellow leaders,” says Solana. “It said so much about him.”

Will Trump be pictured chatting happily with Putin in Hamburg? Or will he be alone? “The more Trump emphasises America First, the more it turns into America Alone,” says Daalder. Those who know Putin say he will use the meeting to do a forensic probe of Trump’s strengths and weaknesses. How the former KGB officer reads the US president will shape Russia’s actions in the coming months.

But the highest-stakes Trump mind-reading is taking place in China. Russia may present an immediate threat to America’s allies in Europe. Beijing poses the transcendent challenge. Those who made the case that Trump was “normalising” pointed to his meeting in April with Xi Jinping, China’s president, at Mar-a-Lago. In contrast to the election campaign, in which he accused China of “raping” America, Trump struck a convivial tone at this first meeting with his Chinese counterpart and discarded all talk of launching a trade war. In exchange he enlisted Xi’s help in supposedly rolling back North Korea’s nuclear programme. In practice, China has done little more than it was already doing — not very much — to rein in North Korea’s Kim Jong Un. But Xi’s charm offensive was well judged.

Not only did he travel to Trump’s Florida club, which is where the US president feels most at home but China also approved dozens of pending Trump trademarks. His visit also coincided with a flurry of approvals for Ivanka Trump’s line of accessories. Xi, in other words, came bearing gifts for the president and his family. Kagan describes this as “bringing fruits to the volcano”. It worked. Trump duly sang Xi’s praises — and has done so ever since.

Others of whom Trump has spoken glowingly include the leaders of Saudi Arabia, Russia, Egypt, Turkey and the Philippines. Barring the last, which is run by the pugilistic Rodrigo Duterte, each is an autocracy. Trump rarely has a good word to say about his fellow democratically elected leaders.

It is not only Canada and Germany that are seeking insurance against a wayward US. Others re-evaluating their place in the world include France, Australia and Mexico. Meanwhile, the clutch of smaller allies that play host to US military bases, such as Singapore and Djibouti, will be watching Qatar’s fate with interest. Does hosting US troops buy you any loyalty in Washington? “In every interaction with a foreign power, especially an ally, you have a US president asking: ‘What’s in it for us?’” says Haass. “It is only natural that allies will follow suit and drift into Japan First, France First, Canada First — and so on.”

Long before Trump’s victory, Australians were also debating whether their country should distance itself from the US to accommodate a rising China — a more important economic partner than the US. Now such arguments have gone mainstream. Former prime ministers, such as Paul Keating, make the case that Australia should hedge its bets. “The ‘equidistance’ argument used to be made on the fringes of academia and the media,” says Andrew Shearer, who was national security adviser to Tony Abbott, Australia’s last prime minister. “Trump has made their case so much more respectable.”

Meanwhile, the UK, which is likely to be absorbed in Brexit deliberations for years to come, is no longer an active player. America’s circle of reliable allies is dwindling. Even before Brexit, the UK was scaling back. The British army is now smaller than the US marine corps. “For the foreseeable future, the US-UK special relationship is irrelevant,” says Thomas

Wright, a Brookings scholar of foreign policy. “Britain has decided to remove itself completely from the chessboard.”

America’s friends would be more sanguine about the health of the world order if they saw Trump as an aberration. But he is more of a symptom — albeit an alarming one — than a cause of America’s retreat from its postwar role. With some reason, US leaders have for years beseeched their allies to spend more on defence. To little avail. Since the end of the cold war, it has become ever harder for US leaders to convince voters of the old Kennedy exhortation to “pay any price, bear any burden”. The very notion that an aspiring US president could urge Americans to sacrifice on behalf of other countries seems fanciful. Perhaps they are on to something. If the world order collapsed, Americans would probably be the last to feel it. “We would pay the lowest price,” says Kagan.

In reality, America’s global retrenchment began to really take hold under Barack Obama — albeit in a highly different style to Trump. It was during Obama’s second term that China overtook the US as the world’s largest economy on a purchasing power parity basis. It is likely to overtake the US in dollar terms within the next presidential term, regardless of who is in office.

The world was already making adjustments before Trump announced his candidacy. Almost two years before the UK’s Brexit referendum, David Cameron, Britain’s then prime minister, rolled out the red carpet for Xi Jinping on a state visit to the UK. Britain also enraged Obama’s White House by rushing to join China’s Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank, which was set up as an explicit rival to the US-created Bretton Woods system. Others, such as Australia and Germany, hesitated but then followed suit. Almost every western power sent delegations, among them 29 heads of state, to China’s recent “One Belt, One Road” summit in Beijing. When China speaks, foreign governments listen. When Trump tweets, they find a senior US official to check whether he really meant it. “You could ask whether the UK was an outlier, or whether it was an early adopter,” says Wright. “It is not yet clear which.”

The big imponderable is whether Trump will inflict irreparable damage on the world order before he leaves office. He has been in power for just over 150 days, which is barely 10 per cent of his allotted first term. The world could respond in two different ways. The troubling scenario is that we are indeed present at the early stages of the destruction. One of the reasons Xi played nice with Trump in April was to keep things calm until the next Communist Party Congress, which takes place in September. Once Xi has cemented his hold on the presidency for another five years, he will be freer to pursue his foreign policy goals. Chief among these is consolidating China’s control of the disputed South China Sea islands. Taiwan is also in Xi’s sights. “It is a fair bet that US-China relations will get a lot more testy after September,” says Wright. “Next year is likely to be a year of US-China tensions.”

It is an open secret that China now has the capacity to threaten America’s battle groups with its anti-ship missiles and submarines, which means the US can no longer intimidate in the way it once did. Indeed, some see the aircraft carriers as sitting ducks. The scope for accident, and miscalculation, is high. Will Xi call Trump’s bluff? Does he, like Putin, see Trump as a paper tiger? Worse, could they misread Trump as a paper tiger when in fact he would prove trigger-happy in a showdown? There is no way of telling. Therein lies the rub.

In his book, Acheson set out how a global leader should above all be predictable and uphold the rules. Whatever happens during Trump's watch, we can be sure those precepts are off the table.

The rosier path is one in which other nations step into the breach vacated by Trump's America: the rest of the world, in other words, might finally take ownership of Acheson's creation. The strongest sign of that came from Xi in January, when he told the Davos gathering of global elites that China was prepared to uphold the world economic order in the teeth of US protectionist rhetoric. "Some people blame economic globalisation for the chaos in our world," said Xi. "We should not retreat into a harbour whenever we encounter a storm; otherwise we will never reach the other side."

Likewise, China and India showed restraint in response to Trump's decision to quit the Paris deal last month. Both Li Keqiang, China's prime minister, and Narendra Modi, India's prime minister, visited European capitals in the same week and agreed with EU counterparts that they would stick to their Paris carbon pledges. "It is striking how often European leaders and China seem to agree with each other nowadays," says Solana.

Another hopeful sign is the warm relationship between French president Emmanuel Macron and Merkel. If they can rekindle the Franco-German motor, Europe could take on greater responsibility for its own defence. Ironically, this is just what Trump and his predecessors have been urging. There is even talk of an independent European nuclear deterrent, though many still see that as far-fetched. Likewise, Freeland's speech to

Canada's parliament included a pledge to step up the country's defence spending. If the universe has a sense of humour, Trump's accidental legacy could be to convince the rest of the world to step into America's shoes.