

Goodbye West: Long Live World Order

Written by Amitav Acharya

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AMITAV ACHARYA, MAR 13 2025

The most enduring consequence of Donald Trump's second coming could be the end of the idea of the West, at least in its contemporary, geopolitical and geo-economic sense, caused by an irrevocable fracture of the relationship of mutual trust and benefit between the US and its closest allies, Canada and the NATO/EU members. From the outset, America's European allies saw Trump's return to office with trepidation.

A poll conducted by the European Council for Foreign Relations, asking "Do you think the election of Donald Trump as US president is a good or a bad thing for your country?" showed that of all parts of the world, the EU members that were part of the poll (Bulgaria, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain) dominated the "bad thing" response, with 38 per cent replying bad, 22 per cent good, and 40 per cent "neither" or "don't know." Among respondents in the UK, which remains America's closest ally, the "bad" response was more than 3 and half times the "good." Only South Koreans were more negative about Trump's return, with six times more saying Trump is bad for them than good. These responses among America's friends is in contrast to Russia and China, where "good" outnumbered "bad" by substantial margins; 49 to 8 per cent for Russia and 46 to 18 per cent for China.

Since then, transatlantic relations have worsened considerably. The divide within the West is no longer over defense spending only – or the demand that European do more for their own security rather than rely on the US – or over trade issues, such as Europe's subsidies, but much broader: it extends clashes over values and institutions. As Vance's fiery rhetoric insults and half-truths at Munich made clear, the Trump and his lieutenants see European culture as having gone astray, degraded by tolerance for immigration, departure from religious orthodoxy, and seeking to do good for the whole world instead of focusing on family and country.

In his crosshairs is a key pillar of transatlantic solidarity – NATO. For Trump, America's European allies are national-security free riders and abusers of trade privileges given to them by the US. Before his re-election, Trump threatened to let Russia "do whatever the hell they want to" to NATO members who don't meet the defense spending targets set by NATO. But the animosity is broader than an argument about defense spending. In a video to promote his campaign's "Agenda 47" platform in March 2024 Trump also pledged: "We have to finish the process we began under my administration of fundamentally re-evaluating NATO's purpose and NATO's mission."

On the crucial issue of the Russia-Ukraine war, Trump administration does not want to give Europe a seat at the table in negotiations to settle Ukraine's future, and that insists that Ukraine can hope neither to regain its lands seized by Russia nor expect NATO membership. Then there is Trump's suggestion that Russia should be invited back to the G7 from which it had been ousted since 2014 over its takeover of Crimea. In short, it looks like the West will not survive Trump 2.

Add to these the Trump administration's tariff aggression against Canada and the EU, and his threat to take Greenland from Denmark (which, like Canada, is a founding member of NATO) in "one way or the other." Wither, then, goes the West? Over the ages, the West has been a Christian notion, an imperial notion, and a white racial notion, but it really became a "thing" during the Cold War, during which the West came to be synonymous with the United States and its European NATO allies, plus Japan and a few former European colonies, Australia, New Zealand and Canada. This "West," united by liberal-democratic values, had a very concrete purpose, collectively to

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prevent the takeover of the world by the East, meaning the Soviet Union and its socialist allies, joined together in the Warsaw Pact.

But once that purpose was achieved and the Cold War ended in victory, the West didn't go out of business—indeed it was strengthened. No one put it more eloquently than Francis Fukuyama in his famous 1989 essay in *The National Interest*: “The triumph of the West, of the Western *idea*, is evident first of all in the total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism.” Fukuyama repeated this claim after the shocking terrorist attacks of 9/11, affirming that history was still moving toward the “liberal-democratic West,” but he added a caveat, acknowledging that the threat to liberal democracy hadn't withered away. If the US and its Western allies failed to counter Russia in Ukraine and China in Taiwan, “then that really is the end of the end of history.”

Ironically perhaps, the Russian invasion of Ukraine actually gave the idea of the West a new validating purpose and unity, and it added two important new members, Sweden and Finland. The war provided what the commentator Lili Loofbourow called “a category of identification that hasn't enjoyed real, popular international relevance in a good long while.” But now, three years into the Russian invasion, it is clear that the revival of the West is not happening – the reverse is. Trump may indeed be on the verge of accomplishing what the former Soviet Union in all its power could not: bring about an inglorious end to the idea of the West. Even if Trump statements are negotiating positions, and even if he does not carry through on his threat to sanction European allies and Canada, his rhetoric has already shaken confidence about American reliability in the Rest of the West.

The main result of the transatlantic rift is Europe's fairly rapid move towards defense self-reliance, which has until now appeared half-hearted to say the least. Now European have committed to more investment on defence, even an “Army of Europe,” a more far-fetched idea mooted by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy after his public humiliation by Trump and Vance in the White House in February. Europe is mobilizing hundreds of billions of dollars of Euros to help Ukraine and rebuild its military capacity. This does not mean the end of NATO although that is not as unimaginable as it seemed less than three years ago. But there would be a psychological shift, a broad European reassessment of its interests in a post-Pax Americana world, that renders NATO a shadow of its former self, a geopolitical rump. Can the humpty-dumpty be put back together again?

Moreover, Trump's threats could lead not just a divide between Europe and America, but also divisions among the Europeans themselves. While few EU or NATO leaders are as openly welcoming of Trump as Hungary's Victor Orban, others among NATO's newer members such as Poland and the Baltics states and those in the EU's southeastern flank, which have most to lose from US abandonment, will simply put up with Trump, including his demands for higher defense spending, but they will do so out of fear and coercion rather than from a sense of shared interests. Some in that situation would be tempted to make deals with Russia on their own to reduce the threat they perceive from Moscow. As the ECFR put it, “It may no longer be possible to speak of ‘the West’ as a single geopolitical actor.”

Consequences for World Order

What about the world at large? It is quite clear now that “make America great again” (MAGA) does not mean Trump wants to restore the world order of the post-WWII period. Trump objects to the core principle behind that order, as developed by international relations scholars from Charles Kindleberger to John Ikenberry: the notion of hegemonic stability, whereby a leading state accepts some sacrifices (such as a trade deficit) to provide global public goods such as free trade and security. This was at the heart of the US-led liberal international order which in Trump's view has led the United States to be “ripped off by virtually every country in the world.”

Many scholars and leaders see multipolarity as the likely outcome of the collapse of the US-led liberal international order, that is a system wherein several great powers view each other as more or less equals and cooperate through some mechanism like the European concert of powers that emerged after the defeat of Napoleon. But it is not clear that Trump would want or tolerate such an arrangement. Trump wants to coerce rather than cooperate with other great powers, such as China or the European Union, while developing some sort of a sphere of influence, an expanded Monroe Doctrine that would coerce not only central America, but also Western allies such as Canada and

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Denmark, to submit to America's will. This sort of order, if it emerges, will be highly contested and unstable.

However, the rest of the world is not going to follow Trump in ditching multilateralism. It is possible that other major powers, not just China and Russia but also moderate nations like France, India, Saudi Arabia and Canada will step up engagement with existing multilateral mechanisms. Even the BRICS, regarded as rivals to the West, are becoming less so with new moderate members such as Egypt, the UAE, and Indonesia, in addition to original member India.

One might see the emergence of cooperation and affiliations that cut across the West and the Rest divide. The EU – the largest provider of international aid in the world, which enjoys more trust around the world than any other multinational entity (according to surveys in Europe and Southeast Asia) could become a key player here, partnering with emerging countries. It is noteworthy that the EU's attitudes towards China increasingly diverge from that of the US, and EU members have stepped up cooperation with China, Turkey and India. America's non-European US allies such as Australia, Canada and Japan, could feel the same way.

To be sure, faced with the amplitude of the Trumpian challenge, the nations that still call themselves Western will be tempted simply to wait him out and go back to business as usual when he is gone. But this will be a mistake. Unlike Trump 1, Trump 2 seems intent not only on disengaging from the international order, but also disrupting it, and doing so in ways that may not be reversible. And this actually creates an opportunity for building a new order that may better reflect the distribution of power in the world today and that could still provide plenty of opportunity for cooperation, which leaves the door open to the US joining in after Trump's exit.

Hence, some international cooperation could take the form of "world minus X", whereby countries – including US allies – cooperate on specific issues while the US stays out. This is by no means novel or inconsequential. This is how the International Criminal Court, the Kyoto Protocol, and the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea have functioned. The refusal of the US to join these multi-lateral organizations has not rendered them insignificant. Regional cooperation mechanisms not involving US allies will also play a role here. ASEAN has developed the "ASEAN Minus X" formula whereby initiatives move ahead despite the non-participation of one or more members. The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership in Asia-Pacific does not include the US, but its allies, Australia, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore, are actively engaged. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) brings together China with India, Britain, Germany and Italy, without the US being present, despite exaggerated concerns over Chinese manipulation of the Bank.

Ending West-versus-the Rest

Trump's disruption of the West may help to get rid of the West-versus-the Rest mindset. And this need not be a bad thing for world order. For a majority of people in the world, the term West has a dark history and meaning. What was originally a geographic or cultural notion, acquired an imperialist and racist meaning through the 19th and 20th centuries as a result of European colonization which the US, itself a product of colonization of indigenous people and slavery, helped to prolong or even strengthen. The West sees itself as liberal, tolerant, democratic and progressive, and this self-image has some truth, but for the states and societies in the rest of the world the concept "the West" carries notions of cultural, political, moral, intellectual and racial superiority. As this fact of global history becomes more known, the idea of the West becomes more divisive than unifying.

Confronting Trump 2, the nations that still call themselves Western may be tempted him out and go back to business as usual. But this will be a mistake. Trump may be a catalyst of Western disunity, but he is not the reason, for the West's decline. And his destruction of the old liberal order creates an opportunity to create an inclusive world.

A major lesson of history is that the West never had the monopoly of creating or managing world order: meaning institutions and norms that underpin the basic stability of the world, or a big part of it, at a given period of time. No world order in history (including the British empire or the US-led Liberal Order) has been truly global; none has been permanent, and none has been free from conflict. It's not that and institutions and values the West cherished are wrong, what is wrong is to regard them as uniquely Western. As my study of 5000 years history shows, the core

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elements of world order – independence of state, diplomacy, peace treaties, economic interdependence, the notion of collective goods, freedom of the seas, protecting the environment, humanitarian values, and much more – emerged in early foundational forms from multiple locations, before the rise of West. It's time to acknowledge these and promote them so as to get rid of West vs rest mindset, which has been a force for distrust and division in the world.

This of course does not mean wishing ill of Western civilization or the well-being of its nations. Rather, it means taking advantage of a historic opportunity provided by Trump for ending the West-Rest divide. While not removing sources of conflict – no previous world order has done that- the emerging Global Multiplex will create an opportunity for cooperation among civilizations and nations. Saying goodbye to the West should not be bemoaned. Rather, it might accelerate the arrival of what I have called a multiplex world, or a Global Multiplex where there is no single hegemon or a select group of powers (as in a multipolar world) calling all the shots, nor is there any rigid division of the world into a Global West, Global East and Global South, yet, where consequential cooperation occurs across regions and civilizations, as it has for much of history.

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