# The autocrat club

## The perils of a few powerful men carving up the world among themselves

*"If I had to choose between justice and disorder, on the one hand, and injustice and order, on the other, I would always choose the latter." Henry Kissinger*

When European politicians deal with Donald Trump, they mainly focus on cost sharing in NATO, safeguarding free trade, the relationship with Russia and the many global crises from North Korea to Syria. But beneath the surface lies a far greater concern: the future of the international liberal order.

After some four months of Donald Trump in office, the oft-repeated maxim that "things won't be so bad after all" has proved wishful thinking. True, Trump has made a series of screeching U-turns: NATO is no longer "obsolete", the USA should stick with NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement) after all, and America has opted for an interventionist policy in Syria and North Korea, rather than the isolationism Trump preached before his election. But there is no clear long-term political strategy behind all this. A few days or weeks from now he could well be advocating an entirely new set of policies.

## Global power turned global laughing stock

The world's most powerful country is in the hands of an irrational narcissist, gnawed by self-pity and a deep-seated hatred of the "liberal" media. Trump holds the rule of law – part and parcel of a successful democracy – in contempt, and he doesn't exactly have a high regard for truthfulness. In firing FBI Director James Comey he once again appears to be putting himself above the law.

That said, America's system of checks and balances has managed to shield the country from the White House's most brazen assaults on a democratic system dating back two and a half centuries. Most of Trump's

initiatives (the immigration ban, healthcare reform, a drastic defence budget increase) have been brought crashing down by federal judges or Congress. It is still not clear whether he will actually implement any of his campaign promises, and when.

Under Trump, the US risks going from a world-leading power to a country of nationalism and isolationism, from a "benevolent hegemon" to just one unpredictable major power among other major powers. The beginning of the end of Pax Americana is being ushered in not by an opponent, but by the US itself. The resulting power vacuum beckons other powers to fill it. China sees new opportunities in Trump's withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), negotiated by Obama – a treaty that was meant in part to limit China's own ambitions for regional dominance.

## International disorder

As the international order currently stands, it is more accurate to speak of a distribution rather than a concentration of power. Russia is still able only to disturb the international order, and China lacks the power and will to shape it. The USA does have that power, but is clearly no longer willing to act as guarantor and enforcer of world order. Whether the European Union, together with other liberal democracies (Australia, Brazil, Japan, Canada, Mexico), will be able to fill this power vacuum, remains to be seen.

We seem to be witnessing the emergence of a new global power structure. Russia and China are increasingly calling into question the values that have underpinned international relations over the last 70 years, and the way international treaties are implemented. The historian Niall Ferguson suggests that America, China and Russia could divide the world into spheres of influence – and this may be an attractive prospect for Trump.

Are we looking at a future alliance of strong men (Trump, Xi Jinping, Putin) who will carve out their own spheres of influence without consulting the rest of the world? All three have shown that rules and international law are only applicable so long as they do not obstruct their own interests: Putin with his annexation of Crimea, illegal under international law, and his military intervention in eastern Ukraine and the Syrian war; Xi with his territorial claims and military provocations in the South China Sea, also illegal under international law; and Trump with his promises to scrap or renegotiate the USA's contractual obligations such as TPP, the WTO, NATO and NAFTA.

This emerging "oligarchy of autocrats" seems primarily to favour

bilateral, country-to-country relationships over complex multilateral negotiations. Bilateral treaties require fewer compromises. In Moscow – and now in Washington – foreign policy is increasingly seen as a zero-sum game, in which national military strength and spheres of influence always take precedence over treaty-based, cooperative security.

It's not clear whether the US bombing of a Syrian air base in April indicates a shift back to America's role of "global policemen", or whether it was motivated primarily by domestic concerns. At home, Trump's historically record low popularity ratings went up for the first time, and the war-crazed US press praised his "decisiveness". He also distinguished himself from Obama who promised – and failed – to act when the Assad regime carried out a chemical weapons attack on its own people in 2013. And the attack earned the president some respite from rumours of Russian interference in the US presidential election campaign.

## "Economic war"

It will hardly come as a surprise that the US president sees in world trade not a rise in prosperity for everyone but an economic war between nations, in which one country's gain is another's loss. Trump is convinced his protectionist path will lead America to greater prosperity and strength. Trump paints a picture of the US as a country constantly fleeced by its allies, and now on the brink of collapse. The figures tell a very different story. Obama left his successor a country with predominantly positive economic data.

But Trump's plans, including huge tax cuts, healthcare reform and upgrades to military equipment will only increase the US national debt. A planned 10 percent increase in US defence spending ($54 billion) in the coming fiscal year is around a third more than Germany's entire defence budget. Meanwhile, Trump wants to slash funding for "soft power" – diplomacy and foreign aid – by almost a third.

NATO members already spend three times as much on their armed forces, a total of some $900 billion, as Russia and China combined. Last year the US spent 3.3 percent of GDP, $611 billion, on armaments. If all 28 NATO countries hit their 2 percent spending target, the alliance would shell out $962 billion this year, versus the $881 billion it spent in 2016. That would be a higher level of defence spending than the rest of the world put together, comprising 57 percent of global military spending. In this scenario Germany would be the fourth largest military investor in the world with defence spending of $69 billion; it currently ranks ninth, with $41 billion. The last thing the world needs is a global arms race.

# Democrats of the world, unite!

If someone had predicted a year ago that the UK would leave the EU, Donald Trump would be president of the United States and Turkey was on its way to becoming an Islamic presidential autocracy, they would have been called a madman.

Yet the shock seems to be waking Europeans from their slumber. Brexit and Donald Trump have sparked the pro-European Pulse of Europe movement. With the victory of Alexander van Bellen in the Austrian presidential elections, the muzzling of Geert Wilders in the Dutch parliamentary elections and Emmanual Macron's win in the run-off on 14 May, it seems the populists' advance has been halted, for now. We can only hope this trend will continue in the German federal elections. Democrats need to join forces with NGOs and civil rights movements to defend international organisations based on values and rules against their authoritarian counterparts. It is not only the OSCE, the EU and NATO that need to be secured to weather the storm, but also the G20, the WTO and all multilateral trade, environmental, climate and arms control regimes – in other words, the whole United Nations system.

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