

March 27, 2025

Shape of Things to Come

By: Itty Abraham

History is not always a perfect guide, but we should recall that the 'polycrisis' of the 1930s led to global devastation. We are at that moment when the US is showing that laws, norms, and institutional promises can turn out to be hollow words that can be abandoned with the stroke of a pen.

Analysts of world affairs are struggling to separate what should be attributed to the personal predilections of the current US president – and there are many – from more enduring actions that will shape the world for years to come. Setting aside for now the scale of ongoing damage and cruelty, which is considerable, the latter is what counts. Optimistically, the rest may change or be restored by the next administration, four long years away. What follows is a premature effort to come to grips with more enduring changes now set into motion.

Polyopportunity in the polycrisis

For the last two months, the Trump administration has been a whirlwind of activity, mostly destructive from the standpoint of domestic and foreign stability. For some, Trump's personality – expressed as transactional mercantilism, i.e., what's in it for me/the USA – is the most obvious symptom of what has changed in foreign affairs. For others, it is threats against close allies and friends, most obviously Canada, Mexico, Denmark, and Panama. These threats intersperse (and encourage) Trump's all-too-obvious approval of sycophantic attention from foreign leaders, the gilded joining of what Yuen Foong Khong (2007) has called the US tributary system and the "imperial presidency" (historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s influential book written in 1973).

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Still others focus on the contradictions rampant in Trump's many actions, giving additional weight to what economic historian Adam Tooze has popularised as a "polycrisis," a portmanteau word reflecting the uncertainties that become endemic when multiple crises are underway simultaneously, feeding off each other in ways that few can determine. Most vexed of all are those who turn over unlikely stones to uncover a coherent grand strategy underlying the chaos emanating from the aptly named White House. The most obvious plan lies in plain sight, namely, the pecuniary and empowering opportunities inherent in chaos itself. Poly-opportunity follows polycrisis, as Naomi Klein (2007) almost said in *The Shock Doctrine*.

To make sense of this moment, historical analogies are booming, from McKinley to Mussolini (I will add my own below). Some of the better ones include comparing Elon Musk's current efforts to disembowel US government agencies with the flood of inexperienced and arrogant young Americans spilling into Baghdad after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein (described in Rajeev Chandrasekaran's fine *Imperial Life in the Emerald City*). Or, my own personal favourite, from my Brazilian colleague Monica Hirst, that the American public is finally facing what has long been termed in the rest of the world as the Washington Consensus, the simultaneous abandonment and looting of the public sector under the ostensible alibi of macroeconomic economic stabilisation. The common purpose is to destroy the public's faith in government.

International disorder

Establishment political scientists refer to the post-second world war international system as the liberal international order. This complex arrangement, spanning economic and political institutions, was set up, maintained, and financed by the US for the purpose of ensuring international dominance. This order, which has been sustained since the 1970s through trade deficits with the rest of the world, may now have reached the end of its shelf-life. The Trump administration appears no longer willing to support this arrangement, notwithstanding the multi-sector dominance it afforded the US for decades. Soft power and behind-the-scenes influence have been replaced by overt threats, tariff walls, and simplistic cost-benefit metrics, especially the balance of trade.

This remarkable turnaround drags the US self-image down to conformity with the rest of the world, eschewing its long-standing claim to exceptionalism. It signals the end of the “indispensable nation,” to use Madeleine Albright’s description of America at the height of its post-Cold War, pre 9/11 power. Hubris, as classical scholars remind us, is followed by Nemesis. Today, deep malaise at home is joined by intense distrust abroad, prompting other countries into actions that will be hard if not impossible to reverse. Nowhere is this more visible than among America’s once-closest allies, the rich countries of western Europe.

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With the credibility of NATO in question and Russia emerging to take its place as America’s most-favoured, a divided Europe is forced into rearming. (Not surprisingly, the share price of Germany’s largest defence contractor, Rheinmetall AG, is now included in the DAX 40, a stock market index of leading German stocks). With this fallout of the regional conflict in the Ukraine, the international order appears to be morphing into a version of what George Orwell imagined in his famous dystopia, 1984, namely, a three-way division of the world into Oceania (the Americas and Airstrip One, aka the UK), continental Eurasia, and Eastasia, denoting the Chinese sphere of influence.

Notably missing from Orwell’s geopolitical map was what we might call 'Westasia', which may not have mattered as much in 1948 as it does now. For decades, the region was effectively an Anglo-American “trust territory” due to the incalculable value of its oil reserves in a carbon-dependent economy. That is no longer the case. Whether we consider the material weight of oil royalties invested at home and in global centres, or al Jazeera’s global influence coupled with Dubai as an international urban benchmark and financial safe haven, the region is impossible to ignore.

Indeed, the transformation of the Gulf has become a case study reflecting the decline of US hegemony. Its dramatic transformation is captured by novel partnerships that reverberate well beyond the region, including the first-ever winter football World Cup and the offshoring of world-class museums: partnerships that, not coincidentally, exclude the US. Perhaps most important of all from a geopolitical standpoint are Korean-built nuclear reactors supplying electric power to the Emirates and China’s brokerage of a once hard-to-imagine diplomatic rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran. How long will it be before this region has another nuclear weapons state, an unintended consequence of long-standing and bipartisan American support for Israel? The ongoing illegal devastation of Palestinian territories and people may well turn out to be a Pyrrhic victory for the Zionist state.

China

The gradual withdrawal of the United States to its Monroe Doctrine boundaries can only rebound to China’s advantage. Even in the American 'backyard', no less than 22 countries have signed up to China’s project of global influence, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). For all that the BRI has encountered serious setbacks and charges of a 'new imperialism' through debt and heavy-handed influence, it remains the case that Chinese foreign investment is almost always well received around the world, especially in its poorest quarters. China’s success in lifting hundreds of millions out of poverty and its futuristic domestic infrastructure have made it a global marvel, a technological sublime with Chinese characters. Even so, in the battle for global dominance, China can still only make substantial inroads when the US shows indifference, steps back or away.

'What China wants' is too complicated to get into here (even if I knew), but the future of 'Eastasia' may not be only about Taiwan. From everything I read, China’s leadership will never let go its obsession with Taiwan’s 'return', no matter how long that may take. It does not necessarily mean a military invasion, as many expect. China would much prefer Taiwan find itself with no options but to return itself to the mainland, however unhappily. Rather than Taiwan, the US-China flashpoint might come about over the Philippines, a former colony which signed a mutual defence treaty with the US in 1951. Chinese maritime expansion in the South China Sea and covert influence within the country are reducing the space for mutual tolerance. While it may be impossible to predict the trigger, this may be the place where the US commitment to its military alliances is tested again.

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How the US responds will be the answer we are both waiting for and increasingly dread. If it meets its bilateral treaty obligations, a terrible war ensues, with major losses on all sides and a further hardening of regional boundaries. If it does not, East Asia’s security

alliances with the US will go the way of NATO, a collection of dead letters. Then, if not earlier, at least two more nuclear weapons states will emerge, possibly three, if a still-independent Taiwan revives its advanced covert weapons programme. Either way, 'Eastasia' will descend into conflict and the world's most vibrant and technologically sophisticated economies will decline for at least a generation. Is this the nightmare we should expect? I have never wanted more to be wrong.

India's dilemma

These scenarios make evident the profound dilemma India finds itself in. On the economic front, beyond the shock to global trade, consider the implications of a sudden decline of Korean and Japanese foreign direct investment, especially for the domestic manufacturing sector. Again, as during the Cold War, if the world becomes partitioned into competing blocs, India will find itself travelling a complex alignment-non-alignment path to sustain its claims to strategic autonomy. India may fear China for reasons both good and bad, but it remains hugely dependent on Chinese imports, a situation that is unlikely to change in the near term no matter how many its billionaires or avowed industrial policy. Modi's warm embrace of the US as a countervailing force to China is a logical reaction, however, it depends on a non-transactional relationship for long-term stability and security. Trump's universal tariffs and immigration policy demonstrate the limits of hugging in the short term.

Regardless of how future American administrations consider India, there are few obvious options for improving the structural conditions it finds itself in beyond digging deep within. A resurgent Europe may well be its best bet, provided improved relations don't upset India's most reliable arms supplier, Russia. Closer to home, India's Look Elsewhere policy has not helped it improve relations with its immediate neighbours, two of which are going through major domestic changes that will affect bilateral relations. This is the easiest relationship to fix, if there is the will to do so.

Institutional decline

Finally...

The Trump administration has shown, in a few short weeks, how easy it is to dismiss the norms and tear down the international institutions that have kept much of the world more or less stable, if deeply unfair, for decades. Institutions are the socio-political equivalent of physical infrastructure systems such as power grids, sewage systems, and water supply. They are social and political promises that allow us to take things for granted, giving us faith that the future will not be unfamiliar to the present, even if different. They permit reasonable and confidence-inducing expectations about what will be, reducing insecurities and helping manage risk.

What we are seeing in the US today is what happens when laws, norms, and institutional promises are shown to be hollow words that can be overturned with the stroke of a pen, all too often following 280 characters on a touchscreen keyboard.

Without question, historical analogies can be misleading, but they can also serve the purpose of reminding us how past polycrises have led to global devastation. At home and abroad, it is hard not to be reminded of the 1930s, with the revival and endorsement of territorial expansion, the global rise of right-wing movements and illiberal populisms, supine legislatures, and irrational financial exuberance coupled with tariff wars. It hardly needs reminding that that decade ended badly. These disruptions are accompanied by the celebration of isolation and rejection of immigrants amidst concerted attacks on judges, universities, and journalists in a domestic context of never-before-seen economic inequality additionally suffering the disorder caused by new technologies.

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Trump and his administration did not begin this process but have accelerated it beyond what most could have feared or imagined. The present moment of institutional decline began with the hubris of victory in the Cold War. But history, as we discover daily, did not end at that moment. The occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq demonstrated what was possible when a vanguard of reactionary ideologues and opportunists successfully controlled the state apparatus. What these developments exposed, beyond the turmoil the world is facing, is the self-inflicted weakness of the American political system. Increasingly modelling itself on and taking cues from authoritarian friends and illiberal partners, Trump has demonstrated that internal checks and balances need constant updating and reinforcement, acting on lessons learned from lived political experience. It turns out that individuals still matter, perhaps most of all where a political system has convinced itself of its inherent superiority and resilience.

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These are the personal views of the author.

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