

Keeping it together

Countries team up to save the liberal order from Donald Trump

As America retreats from global leadership, coalitions of the like-minded try to limit the damage

The Economist

Topics ▾ Current edition More ▾

Subscribe

👤 Welcome ▾

🔍 Search

🟢 You are now logged in



📄 Print edition | International

Aug 2nd 2018

FOR the past four years senior officials from a group of leading democracies, calling themselves the “D10”, have quietly been meeting once or twice a year to discuss how to co-ordinate strategies to advance the liberal world order. Foreign ministry policy-planners and a few think-tank types would discuss responses to Russia, China, North Korea, Iran—but largely below the radar, so as not to be seen as a cabal

of the “old West”. The idea has been to enhance co-operation among “a small number of strategically like-minded and highly capable states”, as Ash Jain, a former member of the State Department’s policy-planning staff, put it in a working paper in 2013.

But, at their next meeting, in Seoul in September, the D10 (America, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Canada, Japan, Australia and South Korea, plus the European Union) will have a new agenda item: America’s global role. Whereas the main threat to the rules-based order used to come from outside the leading democracies, some now fear it comes from within.

Latest stories

Will Japan return to commercial whaling?
THE ECONOMIST EXPLAINS

Joe Biden’s #MeToo problem
DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA

Is virtual reality the future of in-flight entertainment?
GULLIVER

[See more](#)

President Donald Trump’s hostilities on trade, his attacks on the policies of NATO allies and ditching of international agreements, such as the Paris climate accord and the Iran nuclear deal, have led even some of America’s closest partners to conclude that he wants to wreck the American-led world order forged after the second world war. Mr Trump himself has called the EU a “foe” on trade. Donald Tusk, president of the European Council, has spoken bluntly of trans-Atlantic relations: “With friends like that, who needs enemies?”

An overreaction, perhaps. Defenders of Mr Trump’s strategy say he is seeking not to bury the rules-based order but to reinvigorate it, by questioning the role of institutions that have become inefficient or ineffective. As supporting evidence, they can point to the ceasefire declared on July 25th in the trade war with Europe. Others suggest that things might revert to normal when someone new is in the White House.

Yet it would be risky to rely on the hope that Trumpism will pass. American ambivalence about multilateralism is not new. George W. Bush, for example, in his first year as president pulled back from half a dozen international agreements, including the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and the Kyoto protocol on climate change.

Around the world, the view that the change is both deep and lasting is gaining ground. A mere 9% of Germans think America under Mr Trump is a reliable partner for the security of Europe, according to a recent poll by ZDF Politbarometer. In Australia annual polling by the Lowy Institute, a think-tank, shows a 28-point fall since 2011 in the share of people who trust America to act responsibly; at 55%, trust in America is at a historic low, only just ahead of trust in China (52%). “The order

we have known for the past 70 years has ended,” according to Allan Gyngell, a former head of Australia’s Office of National Assessments, Australia’s main intelligence agency. “It’s not changing. It’s over.”

The D10 framework “takes on even greater meaning at this time of uncertainty surrounding America’s global role,” believes Mr Jain, who runs the D10 initiative at the Atlantic Council, an American think-tank, in partnership with a Canadian counterpart, the Centre for International Governance Innovation. The liberal order it stands for has always been an amorphous concept. Now that it is at risk, huddling together both to define and defend it becomes more urgent. The D10 group is part of a broader trend of intensifying efforts to rally the “like-minded” to that end. Mr Trump’s America First approach is prompting policymakers from Canberra to Ottawa to cast around for coalitions to limit the damage of his onslaughts and, eventually perhaps, fill gaps left by an American retreat from its global role.

Crudely, these efforts to rally the like-minded come in four varieties. The first involves appealing to Americans beyond the Trump administration. Diplomats in Washington, DC, say defenders of the liberal order need to build support in Congress and to get on planes to other parts of the country and explain why the system Mr Trump is undermining has served America well. “Europeans need to engage, engage, engage: with Congress, with governors, with America’s business community and civil society,” wrote Wolfgang Ischinger, a former German ambassador who chairs the annual Munich Security Conference, in the *New York Times* on July 22nd.

Canada has been the most energetic in pursuing this strategy. Its ministers, mayors and diplomats have mounted a concerted effort at state and local level to draw attention to the American jobs and industries that depend on trade with Canada. This did not stop Mr Trump from slapping hefty metals tariffs on Canada and calling Justin Trudeau, its prime minister, “dishonest and weak” after the recent G7 summit he hosted. Canada’s “smooth” diplomacy, and the resulting stream of representations on its behalf to the White House, may even have ended up irking Mr Trump. Canadians must hope that in the long term the bottom-up approach will pay off.

But relying on popular support in America for its global role might be too optimistic. So a second approach to convening the like-minded—with a broader, international focus—is also being tried. Like a Davos for the once-powerful, this mission is attracting gaggles of global grandees, as ex-presidents, former prime ministers and retired diplomats lend their weight to the effort to save the world they used to run.

The D10 process has spawned a new, wider enterprise, called the Democratic Order Initiative, that seeks to engage the public behind support for the international rules-based system. Launched on June 23rd in Berlin by the Atlantic Council, with backing from Madeleine Albright (a former secretary of state), Stephen Hadley (a former American national-security adviser), Carl Bildt (a former prime minister

and foreign minister of Sweden) and Yoriko Kawaguchi (a former Japanese foreign minister), it aims to articulate core principles of the rules-based order and mobilise public and official backing for them.

In the same vein, the Alliance of Democracies Foundation was set up last year to “strengthen the spines” of the world’s democracies. A brainchild of Anders Fogh Rasmussen, a former Danish prime minister and NATO secretary-general, it held an inaugural “Democracy Summit” in June and envisages annual winter gatherings in Colorado, as well as summer ones in Copenhagen. In the absence of clear ideological leadership from the White House, says Mr Rasmussen, the rest of the free world needs to advance and defend democracy.

The first initiative of the foundation’s global “campaign for democracy” is a Transatlantic Commission on Election Integrity, to bolster defences against outside interference. It is co-chaired by Mr Rasmussen and Michael Chertoff, a former secretary of homeland security in America; Joe Biden, America’s former vice-president, is among the other 13 commissioners. They have urgent work to do. Mr Rasmussen points out that 20 elections will be held across EU and NATO countries between now and the next American presidential contest in November 2020.

Characteristically, it is France’s “Jupiterian” president, Emmanuel Macron, who has the most ambitious project. His Paris Peace Forum, to be held on November 11th-13th, is envisaged as an annual event bringing together governments and civic groups to discuss the world’s problems. The idea is to show that “there is still a constituency for collective action, among states and civil society...beyond populism and interstate tensions.”



Mr Macron wants ideas from all sorts of organisations, including governments, business associations, NGOs, trade unions, religious groups and think-tanks. The model is COP21, the summit in 2015 that produced the Paris accord on climate change. Mr Trump has decided to pull America out of that agreement, which is itself an example of the third variety of effort behind like-mindedness: keeping international deals alive in America's absence.

No country has followed America in abandoning the Paris accord. All the other 194 signatories are sticking with it, and hope America will one day rejoin the fold. Within America, state governments, cities and businesses have in many cases committed themselves to carbon reductions in the spirit of Paris.

European attempts to keep the Iran nuclear deal alive without America are proving trickier. The Trump administration wants to maximise economic pressure on the Iranian regime, and is threatening sanctions on international companies doing

business with the country. Without the incentive of closer business ties to support its struggling economy, Iran could decide to abandon the nuclear self-restraint at the heart of the deal.

However, the 12-country Trans-Pacific Partnership, a trade deal intended to set free-market rules for the region's trade before China's influence becomes overwhelming, has defied expectations. It has reinvented itself as an 11-country grouping after America, by far the biggest partner, decided to pull out when Mr Trump became president. Renamed the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), it was signed in March in Chile and is expected to come into force around the end of this year, once at least six countries have ratified it. Similarly, some hope that, should Mr Trump's distaste for the multilateral trading system lead to America's quitting the World Trade Organisation, the global body could carry on without it.

Groping for groupings

Japan and Australia led efforts to keep the TPP alive. Both countries are also active in the fourth way of clubbing together: new coalitions between like-minded countries in the pursuit of shared interests, from trade to defence. On July 17th Japan signed a free-trade deal with the European Union, eliminating most tariffs and creating the world's largest open economic area, covering over 600m people and nearly a third of global GDP. Negotiations quickened in response to America's trade threats. Shinzo Abe, Japan's prime minister, said at the signing ceremony in Tokyo that the deal "shows the world the unshaken political will of Japan and the EU to lead the world as the champions of free trade at a time when protectionism has spread."

Australia has historically relied on a culturally similar foreign ally to guarantee regional security: first Britain, then America. China's rise and America's inward turn are concentrating minds. In "Without America: Australia in the new Asia", an essay published last November, Hugh White of Australian National University (ANU) predicts a not-too-distant future in which China is Asia's dominant power. But how to respond? "Our best hope", suggests Michael Wesley, also of ANU, writing in *Australian Foreign Affairs*, "is not for some grand coalition to balance China but for each of China's larger neighbours to assert its interests when they are challenged."

In the absence of a grand coalition, smaller ones may play a role in resisting an over-mighty China. In January when Australia's prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull, visited Japan, the two countries pledged to deepen and broaden defence co-operation. A "reciprocal access agreement" is being concluded to allow joint military exercises. In July Australia, Japan and India held high-level trilateral talks in New Delhi, raising the possibility of joint naval exercises. Another trio involving Australia, includes France as well as India. In a speech at a naval base in Sydney in May, Mr Macron called for a "Paris-Delhi-Canberra axis" to become an established regional structure, with France, India and Australia defining a joint strategy for the

Indo-Pacific. "If we want to be seen and respected by China as an equal partner," he said, "we must organise ourselves." He envisages regular trilateral talks between foreign and defence ministers.

Back in Europe, the French president is also trying to bring the like-minded together on defence. His European Intervention Initiative (EII for short) was signed into existence by nine countries, including Britain and Germany, in June. The idea is to improve strategic co-operation so that coalitions of willing European countries can be ready for joint action in crises, if need be without America.

Such coalitions raise many questions. One concerns their effectiveness. Innovations such as the EII may be good ideas, but the gap between strategic dialogue and coalitions in a military operational sense is a wide one. For that, points out François Heisbourg of the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, you need both interoperability and agility. "You can't just improvise, you have to have it built up."

Does size matter?

Another reservation relates to the groups' scale. Do they really amount to much? Even if they club together, for example, it is hard for other countries to match China's clout in Asia. And there is no real substitute for America's overall influence and power. The country spends more on defence than the next seven countries combined, produces 23% of global GDP (measured at market exchange rates) and has the world's dominant currency. Still, Mr Rasmussen believes that a joint effort can make a difference while Mr Trump is president. "A group of midsized and wealthy democracies could join forces and protect the rules-based world order."

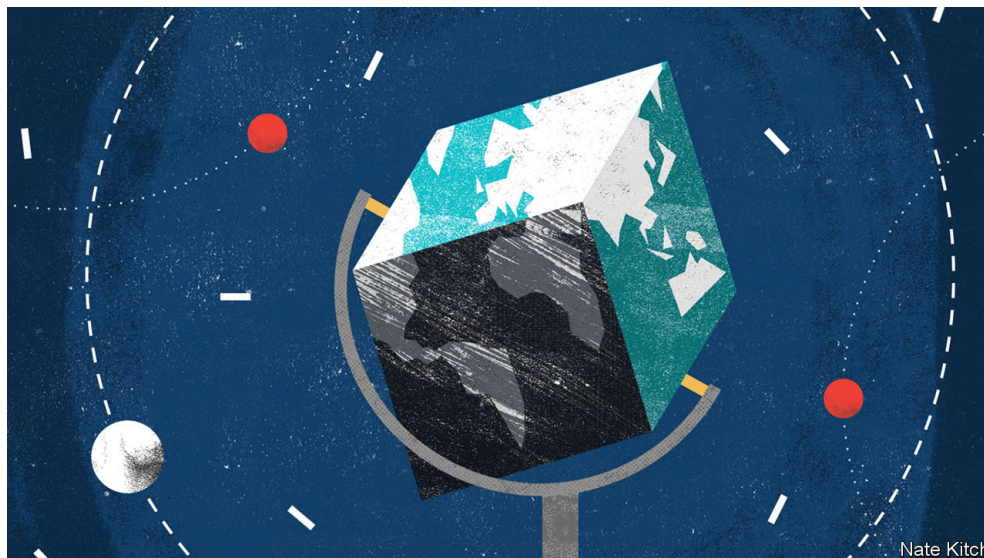
How "like-minded" do countries need to be to work together? Canada and 16 Latin American countries have formed the "Lima Group" backing a restoration of democracy in Venezuela. They have blocked regional recognition of Venezuela's vote for a Constituent Assembly last year and of a sham presidential election in May. Now, however, some wonder whether Mexico will retain its like-mindedness when Andrés Manuel López Obrador takes over as president in December, and whether Brazil will after its election in October.

Even in Europe, despite decades of working towards "ever-closer union", discerning who is really like-minded is becoming harder, as populist forces have gained influence. In Italy, for example, the Five Star Movement that is now the largest party in the country's coalition government has threatened to block the EU's free-trade agreement with Canada. "Before thinking of defending the liberal order globally there's a problem of defending it within the EU," says Marta Dassù, of the Aspen Institute Italia.

In some cases, hard-headedness may be just as important as like-mindedness. A lot depends on what the common approach is trying to achieve. In the words of Donald Rumsfeld, when he was America's defence secretary at the time of the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, "the mission determines the coalition."

Sometimes it may be enough to be only partially like-minded, in pursuit of a common interest. China, for example, is seeking to make common cause with the European Union in defence of the global trading order that has served both well. At a summit meeting with the European Union in Beijing in July President Xi Jinping said they should “join hands to defend multilateralism and a rules-based free-trade system”. The two sides issued a joint communiqué supporting the system, something that had eluded them in their two previous summits. It suits the Europeans to flirt with China, to show America that they should not be taken for granted.

Still, without common values, co-operation is likely to remain limited. The Europeans are far more worried about Mr Xi’s authoritarian ways than about Mr Trump’s tendencies—and they share Mr Trump’s objections to China’s own mercantilist policies. For Europe, “the temptation to enroll China into the like-minded is very dangerous,” warns Ms Dassù.



China shows that not all initiatives of the like-minded involve champions of the liberal order. It has become an institutional entrepreneur in an effort to shape the world to suit its interests. China has founded bodies such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the “16+1” gathering of 16 central and eastern European countries plus China, and the world’s largest regional grouping (in terms of its members’ combined population), the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation (bringing together China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan). And Mr Xi’s flagship project is the Belt and Road Initiative, a sweeping plan to build infrastructure along China’s trade routes.

As America retreats, expect China to cultivate such networks even more energetically. “The world is moving towards multipolarity,” Mr Xi told the recent summit of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) in Johannesburg. He appealed to a shared interest among this group in the evolution of the global governance system, championing the development of emerging markets. “We BRICS countries should...play a constructive role in building a new

type of international relations,” he said.

The next few years are likely to see a boom in what might be called the like-mindedness industry. In the short term this is unlikely to impinge much on Mr Trump’s solipsistic world-view, let alone to alter his America First course. Other countries’ plurilateral initiatives will mostly be beneath his notice. But he might fight back against those that succeed in directly thwarting his intentions. The most obvious danger of a clash is over Iran, should the other parties to the nuclear deal manage to keep it afloat despite his attempt to scuttle it.

Print edition | International

Like startups in the business world, many new coalitions of the like-minded will fail. But some could flourish. Mr Gyngell predicts that the current “hub and spoke” order will give way to a power grid in which “networks and links will be ever more important.” This effervescent, entrepreneurial period in global affairs could help to save the existing world order—or start to shape a new one.

Reuse this content

About The Economist

This article appeared in the International section of the print edition under the headline "Picking up the pieces"

Advertisement

Advertisement

Advertisement





Kava-no

Brett Kavanaugh's own testimony disqualifies him from America's highest court

Whatever the FBI finds he should not be confirmed to the Supreme Court

LEADERS

Geopolitics and investment

China has designs on Europe. Here is how Europe should respond

LEADERS

Catching the Fancy Bears

The West indicts the GRU

Wasteland

The earthquake and tsunami in Indonesia have killed more than 1,400

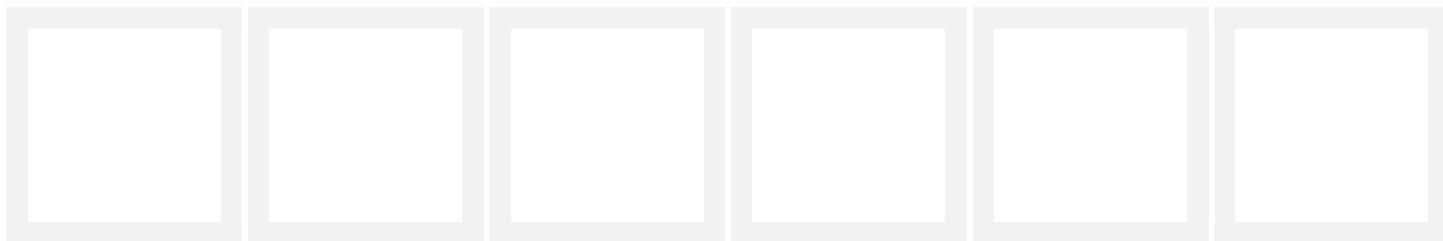
Tell us what you think of Economist.com

[Leave feedback](#)

Need assistance with your subscription?

[Contact us](#)

[Classified ads](#)



[Subscribe](#)

[Group subscriptions](#)

[Contact us](#)

[Help](#)

[Keep updated](#)



Sign up to get more from *The Economist*

Get 3 free articles per week, daily newsletters and more.

Email address

Sign up

[About *The Economist*](#)

[Advertise](#)

[Reprints](#)

[Careers](#)

[Media Centre](#)

Published since September 1843 to take part in
*"a severe contest between intelligence, which presses forward,
and an unworthy, timid ignorance obstructing our progress."*

[Terms of Use](#)

[Privacy](#)

[Cookie Policy](#)

[Manage Cookies](#)

[Accessibility](#)

[Modern Slavery Statement](#)

Copyright © The Economist Newspaper Limited 2018. All rights reserved.