

Opinion **US foreign policy**

Trump's angry unilateralism is a cry of pain

America's unipolar moment passed as quickly as it appeared at the end of the cold war

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Philip Stephens YESTERDAY

The hardest thing for a hegemonic power is to see its dominance wane. US president [Donald Trump](#)'s angry unilateralism, whether [his trade war against China](#) or sanctions against Cuba, is supposed to be proof of power. Another way of looking at the president's belligerent tweetstorms is as a cry of pain for a mythologised past.

When Franklin Roosevelt prepared to meet Winston Churchill during the closing stages of the second world war, the US president received some cautionary advice from his secretary of state on handling the British prime minister. Churchill, Edward Stettinius told Roosevelt, would struggle to accept a new, postwar, international order. Having been a leader for so long, the Brits were not accustomed to a secondary role.

Stettinius was right. Britain had been bankrupted by the war. America was booming. The peace marked the formal transfer of western leadership to the US. Washington's ally found the

psychological adjustment long and painful. Even after the humiliation of the Suez expedition in 1956, Britain was loath to own up. Surely, its politicians imagined, it still sat alongside the US and the Soviet Union as one of the “Big Three”? Bizarre as it seems, there remains an echo of this howl of anguish in the “global Britain” fantasies of leading Brexiters.

Now it is America's turn. The truculence of Mr Trump's foreign policy is meant to convey that the US can do as it pleases. Lesser nations may feel the need to submit to a panoply of international rules. But the US can stand alone, free of the multilateral entanglements and costly alliances it established after the end of the second world war.

Parallels with Britain are necessarily far from exact. The US remains the pre-eminent global power — economically, technologically and militarily. The dollar's place as the world's reserve currency provides a unique capacity to apply economic coercion. Russia is a falling power. China's plan to dominate Eurasia is a decades-long project.

For all that, America's unipolar moment has passed as quickly as it appeared at the end of the cold war. US power has been checked and, in relative terms, is in steady decline. Not so long ago, the *hyperpuissance*, as the French called it, imagined a future of effortless ascendancy. In China, the US now faces a rival with its own sense of manifest destiny. As America's position erodes, fewer nations swear unquestioning fealty. Vladimir Putin's Russia, though facing absolute decline, is openly defiant.

Washington has yet to made the psychological shift. Mr Trump's response is not without a crude logic. The postwar decades saw an extraordinary alignment of the American national interest with a rules-based international system. In designing and building the institutions of a liberal global order, the US promoted its own prosperity and security. The adage that what was good for the country was good for General Motors and vice versa was essentially true. When the US underwrote the peace in Europe, East Asia and the Middle East, it did so to its own advantage.

This is the age Mr Trump harks back to. The clue is the “again” in “Make America Great Again”. The president is trapped in a world where economic might was indeed measured by auto sales, trade was essentially about tariffs, and the response to a recalcitrant government in Tehran was for the CIA to organise a coup. The mindset is well described in *Anglo Nostalgia*, a recently-published book by two European scholars, Edoardo Campanella and Marta Dassù. Start with an idealised view of the past, stir in the paranoia beloved of populists everywhere and, hey presto, you have the nostalgic nationalism that is Mr Trump's foreign policy.

Barack Obama's misfortune was that he grasped fairly early on the significance for US interests of these global power shifts. Mr Trump's predecessor drew the right conclusions. If the US could no longer act unilaterally, its interests were best served by leveraging its alliances. If global rules needed changing, the US would deploy its convening authority to shape the new order. For his pains, Mr Obama was lambasted as hesitant and weak.

Mr Trump's answer is that if the system no longer works for the US then he should break it up. It all sounds tough, especially alongside the theatrical attempts at dealmaking. The problem is that it does not work.

The US has been the loser from throwing overboard multilateral trade agreements such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Mexico has yet to stump up a single dollar to pay for a wall on its border with the US. North Korea's Kim Jong Un has secured de facto recognition of his country's nuclear status.

[Iran](#) may be feeling the pain of US sanctions but the odds are the hardliners in Tehran will be the main beneficiaries. Mr Putin operates with impunity in Syria and, more recently, Venezuela. Mr Trump's withdrawal from the Paris climate change accord has handed the moral high ground to Chinese president Xi Jinping. The list goes on.

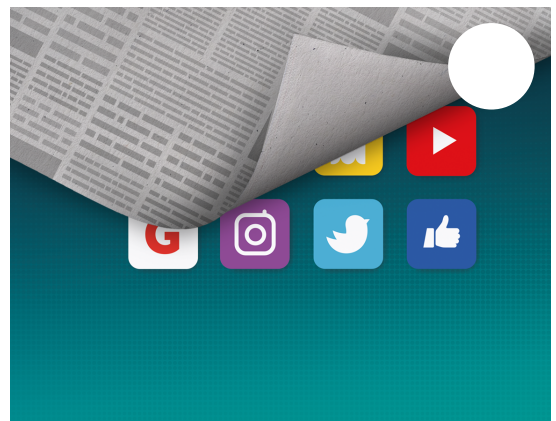
Among allies, whether Japan, the Republic of Korea or European partners in Nato, the US has lost trust. The common denominator in the policies of all these nations is a hope they can simply "[wait out](#)" Mr Trump's presidency. This is probably a mistake. Mr Trump is not alone among Americans in his disillusionment with the old order. But the louder the president shouts the less inclined the rest of the world is to listen.

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