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Institute of South Asian Studies
National University of Singapore
29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
#08-06 (Block B)
Singapore 119620
Tel: (65) 6516 4239 Fax: (65) 6776 7505
www.isas.nus.edu.sg
<http://southasiandiaspora.org>



The ‘New World Disorder’: Learning to live with it

Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury¹

The global world order that was established by a series of diplomatic initiatives after the calamitous Second World War basically set the basic ‘club rules’ for international relations on the basis of near-consensus. It seemed to work well for a few decades, the Cold War notwithstanding. However, the end of the Cold War was accompanied by the combination of excessive power leading to hubris on the part of what has been called the ‘hyper-power’, the United States. Its behaviour appeared to challenge the norms of what had been seen as globally acceptable to date. The phenomenon actually pre-dated the election of President Donald Trump whose seemingly erratic actions accentuated the tendencies. Unfortunately, the pattern is unlikely to change in any radical sense in the post-Trump period. The era of the ‘new world disorder’ is likely to become the new normal, shaping present and future international politics. This will have ramifications for the countries and regions of the world, including South Asia. This paper seeks to analyse these and related developments, and it concludes with the extrapolation that the world has little option but to learn to live with these changes.

¹ Dr Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury is Principal Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He is a former Foreign Advisor (Foreign Minister) of Bangladesh. He can be contacted at isasiac@nus.edu.sg. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.

Post-World War generations, ours included, had taken our lifestyles largely for granted. Nurtured by family at birth and spending the youth in the pursuit of knowledge (of course, many among the poor were unable to access them as other basic amenities, and others chose to fritter away opportunities), we entered careers, raised families, and dabbled in civic issues, often united and divided by ideological and spiritual predilections. We trusted the global leadership, despite the Cold War dichotomies, which led to arsenals of most destructive military power, to fashion a global order that provided the matrix to our existence. It included framing rules for war and peace between nations, attempting to eradicate poverty and empower the poor, liberating women and those under political and social subjugation (though glaring exceptions are still legion!) and creating of multilateral institutions to sustain the norms and values of acceptable international behaviour. The two superpowers, the United States (US) and the Soviet Union, in spite of their rivalries, played along, often actually contributing to the stability (note: bilateral arms control agreements). We sought to remove impediments to trade between us. We broadly believed the planet to be a common inheritance of human kind and sought to devise ways and means to protect it and its environment. Of course, there never was a perfect world. Nevertheless, by the 21st century, we believed that we were on the threshold of one that was closer to it than any ever achieved. Even discarding the rhetorical content of the hyperbole, we found ourselves in empathy with the Kennedy-esque assertion that the forces that united us were deeper than those that divided. We broadly believed there was a world order that defined our lives, and we were happy for it.

However, the dependence on the part of all global actors on the US to maintain that order grew. Even European countries that were so powerful in the past began to rely increasingly on the US for their security. However, gradually, domestic politics became the driver of American foreign policy. American statesman, Henry Kissinger, wrote: “For American foreign policy, ever in quest of the magic, all-purpose formula, the resulting need for ideological subtlety and long range strategy presents a special and as yet unresolved challenge”.² Successive policymakers were not able to surmount the challenges resulting in the road bumps along the path of America’s relationship with the world beyond.

² Henry Kissinger, *Does America Need a Foreign Policy? Towards a Diplomacy for the 21st century*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), p. 27.

The current century began with a challenge to the order. It actually predated Trump. By then, the condominium of the two superpowers had ended with the rise of a single ‘hyper-power’, the US.³ The Soviet Union imploded from its own internal contradictions. Its core, Russia, was a shadow of its past. The Marxist prediction of an ultimate communist victory, born of a skewed analysis of dialectical materialism, was made to stand on its head. Capitalism won out instead. The resultant hubris on the part of some Western leaders, in particular, George Bush of the US and Tony Blair of the United Kingdom (UK), led to horrendous foreign interventions. Take Iraq, whose invasion was based on deceit. That action all but destroyed the moral fabric of international relations and with it, the credibility of the ‘rule of law under the global order’. Since states were not strong enough to take them on conventionally, non-state actors like the ‘Islamist’ reactionary extremists surfaced. They unleashed their inhumane litany of horrors. With Bush-Blair gone, their successors, self-proclaiming themselves as ‘leaders of the free world’ – even if they largely represented only the West (where ‘freedom’ in countries like Hungary, Poland, and Austria is increasingly shrinking) – exercised enormous influence in determining the global club rules. For instance, they saw nothing wrong in arming themselves to the teeth, while demanding that others disarm. There was no room at the table even for rising China and India. Western leaders ruled the roost. Domestic America, much of which was innocent regarding the goings-on in the world beyond, felt that it was paying a price enhancing the rest of the west in power-terms. Many in America saw interactions with the world leading to America’s loss, and gains of the rest. Distinction between traditional friends and foes blurred.

Enter Trump. His arrival on the stage was not as much as a surprise as the inability of much of the world to predict it. He called his own rise a ‘movement’. In many ways, it was a change. Though not a revolution, it was not a linear progression of the ordinary political process. He used the Republican Party as only a platform to catapult himself into the position he sought. He represented white ‘middle-America’ and made it his base. His base saw Washington as a tool of the establishment to perpetuate its domestic control by forging alliances with traditional western ‘allies’. In Trump, intuition proved to be as powerful a guide as the intellect. The lack of the latter was not a cause for worry. America came first. Hence, his conclusion was that, in America’s relationships, there were no pre-ordained

³ ‘Hyperpower’ is a term popularised by Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine of France in the 1990s. Since 2004, the US had a military strength comparable to the combined strengths of the next 17 nation-states. However, other analysts like Samuel Huntington disagreed, asserting that it was still a multipolar world.

friends or foes. No distinction to him, thus, between Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany and President Vladimir Putin of Russia, between Premier Justin Trudeau of Canada and Chairman Kim Jong-un of North Korea, or between UK's Theresa May and President Xi Jinping of China. If the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members are to feel secure against an 'enemy' that Trump does not clearly perceive, then they must spend more on defence. They would be welcome to purchase American arms. If Germany could purchase energy from Russia, could it not buy peace from Putin? Is it not at least worth a try? Furthermore, Trump may see NATO as out-of-date. They are said to be 'allies' but against who. Russia? However, the perception of Russia as an 'enemy' cannot be eternal, just as that of Germany or Japan or Italy as being adversary was not. Following up on his notions, Trump indulged in a behaviour-pattern that was unsurprisingly seen as "erratic".⁴ He tore the rule books of diplomacy and ripped up the forms of traditional etiquette. He felt them to be unnecessarily constraining.

Trump probably does not understand why he should be critiqued for not bowing to Queen Elizabeth of the UK, a far lesser contemporary power well past its imperial glory. Perhaps the Queen herself did not expect it. After all, did not English historians take pride in the fact that Sir Thomas Roe, their first representative to the 17th century Mughal Court of Emperor Jahangir, did not bow to the Asian potentate? Or why should Trump be forced to sign on an all-western G-7 document when he does not want to because it is against his country's perceived interests? Indeed, later he described them as 'foes' in trade! To him, friends and foes were to be chosen on a case-by-case basis. This is not to endorse Trump's behaviour. Far from it! It is merely to explain it. As in a classical Latin expression, first argued by Parmenides, *Ex nihil nihil fit* – 'nothing comes from nothing'! There is a reason for Trump being there.

Trump is not a transient phenomenon. There are those who like to believe that this too shall pass. Someday, we shall all happily return to the pre-Trumpian age. America will, once again, be the global leader maintaining global order and all will be right with the world. That is, alas, unlikely to happen. Trump may be reflecting a burgeoning opinion that is taking root

⁴ There is a large volume of literature on President Donald Trump's unconventional behaviour, the latest among which is Bob Woodward's latest book, entitled 'Fear'. For a commentary on it, see Manuel Roig-Franzia, *Washington Post*, 30 July 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/in-a-new-book-bob-woodward-plans-to-reveal-the-harrowing-life-inside-donald-trumps-white-house/2018/07/30/fe9c6a5c-93fc-11e8-810c-5fa705927d54_story.html?utm_term=.21e21050232e. Accessed on 15 September 2018.

in the American ethos. This is evident from the way the Republican leadership, for which Trump also shows scant respect, is kowtowing to him. It is afraid to annoy Trump's base, for fear that it could be politically suicidal. Hence, a new emerging Republican narrative that is a theoretical explanation, if not a justification, of 'Trumpism'. It is that America is not so much a democracy as it is a constitutional republic, for democracy is a function of numbers (as of votes), whereas the function of a constitutional republic would demand conformity to the kind of rules that brought Trump to office (Electoral College). This is how they explain the peculiarity of the American system putting the Republicans in power despite obtaining fewer votes than the Democrats. Twice in the past two decades, a Republican President has held office without winning popular majority. Some scholars see the Electoral College, doubtless a critical component of the federal system, but originally driven by the interest of the slave-states as lending credibility to American past claims as the most powerful champion of freedom and democracy.⁵ Obviously, even when a populist wave shakes the establishment in Washington, the wealthy elites tend to gain, evidenced in the new tax breaks for them. So, is America sliding into a morass of 'plutocracy', a term that entered the lexicon of political analysis around 1631, denoting a rule by a well-entrenched wealthy few? This has a huge theoretical ramification for contemporary political philosophy. This posture was visible in the line of Republican questioning in the Congressional hearings recently of Peter Strzok, the Federal Bureau of Investigation agent.

Trump was not initially a Republican in the classical American politician sense. He introduced themes in politics, however, which could be only done on a Republican platform. Soon, it became apparent, when an angry America installed him in office that the Republicans needed him more than he did them. Should his nominee for the Supreme Court Judge Brett Kavanaugh receive the nod of the Senate, Trump will have a supreme influence on all three branches of the government – the executive, the legislature and the judiciary. So much for the received wisdom with regard the influence on the American system of theories of the 'separation of powers' and Baron de Montesquieu. Trump is also having an impact on the Democrats. They are at a loss as to how to oppose him effectively. The Democrats and the left liberals are assuming contrarian positions on just about everything that Trump is doing. This includes the reduction of threats from North Korea or Russia. This is unhealthy.

⁵ An example is Akhil Reed Amar, 'The Troubling Reason the Electoral College Exists', *TIME*, 12 December 2016. <http://time.com/4558510/electoral-college-history-slavery/>. Accessed on 15 September 2018.

Such a policy may have a price to pay in due course by painting them into unsustainable corners. Trump says he will run again in 2020 because in his assessment there is no Democrat in sight to challenge him. This may send a shiver down the spines of many. However, sadly for many, it is one that has a modicum of truth in it.

What happened in Helsinki between Trump and Putin is a signal of the changing times. Prior to it, Trump had tweeted that no matter how it went, his critics would say the progress was good enough. Indeed, much of the criticism is that he believed Putin rather than his own intelligence agencies. American analysts clearly see domestic politics as more important than global ones. In an odd way, it was they who were putting America first, risking the stability of the wider world! The critics of Trump who now seem to extol their intelligence agencies tend to forget that it was the same institutions that had reported that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction, which proved to be a lie with unspeakable consequences. Would Bush not have been better advised to believe Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussain, than his own espionage system? Trump came home to a storm of protests for not having been seen to be standing up sufficiently strongly to his Russian counterpart. Yes, he could have. However, that would have robbed the meeting of its positive contents. Trump's critics seemed too jingoistic to consider the benefits of the loosening of tensions to the rest of the world. It is thinking such as this pervading white-collared America that is equally responsible for America's perceived and real decline! Some Republican leaders also joined in the chorus of criticism, but mostly those who were about to retire, and so not having to face the electorate. This would only underscore the fact that as long as Trump carries his base, he would continue to rely on his instincts and guts than on the sophistry of America's posh establishment. This is the tragic reality.

A number of major consequences flowed from Helsinki. One, a good chemistry between the two protagonists, much needed for future world peace and stability. Despite the protestations in the American media to this development, for the rest of the world, it is extremely positive. Strategically and militarily, it is stabilizing. It minimises the possibility of an US-Russia War. Two, Putin has agreed to extend the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) which limits deployable nuclear warheads and bombs to 1,550, deployed intercontinental and submarine launched missiles and nuclear bombers to 700 and non-deployed systems to 800. Signed in 2010, the START expires in 2021, and if Putin had not agreed to the extension, the

two superpowers of the world would have been left without any arms control agreement!⁶ Three, contrary to apprehensions, particularly in Europe, Trump did not put his consent behind the Russian annexation of Crimea, agree to lift sanctions or call off deployments in Eastern Europe or Syria. All in all, these were sufficient accomplishments from a first meeting and a relationship that obviously seemed to promise more!

The criticism Trump faced on his return was so trenchant that he was forced into some retractions. He called a meeting in the Situation Room of the White House, which is normally used to defend America, but this time to defend Trump, the person, and offered explanations like he actually meant to say ‘wouldn’t’ but, through a slip of tongue, said ‘would’. It has to be understood that the essence of his distance from his intelligence community, that Russia interfered in the 2016 polls, is not that he actually disbelieves them, but fears their conclusion may jeopardise the legal status of his Electorate College victory. It is unclear if he himself believed his own retractions; he probably did not, just as the vast majority of others who heard it. The problem is though it conveyed to Russia, and perhaps also noticed in Beijing, Brussels and Pyongyang, that even the President and Commander-in-Chief of the US is no longer accepted in his own country as speaking on its behalf. So can it be that no one really speaks for America anymore? However, earlier, Trump had exercised his formal authority to withdraw from trade and security commitments of his predecessors. This is exacerbated by the shunning of the so-called western values of human rights, democracy, freedom of the press, gender-mainstreaming, and social inclusiveness in favour of global actors whose strong points have never been the espousal of these causes. The combined result is a perfect storm that has called into question America’s reliability and credibility. To many of our generation, bred on these ideals, this will doubtless entail a deep personal loss.

So, is ‘global disorder’ going to be the new normal instead of the global order?

That certainly appears to be the case. America is on the decline, not because any of its powers are eroded, but mainly because current perceived interests by Americans dictate the belief that, by being a global actor (like any other), would enable them to gain better dividend than

⁶ This is the New START Treaty, between the US and Russia, stipulated that the number of missile launchers would be reduced by half, and a new inspection and verification regime would be established. For an analysis at inception, please see, Peter Baker, ‘Twists and turns on the way to Arms Pact with Russia’, *New York Times*, 26 March 2010. www.nytimes.com/2010/03/27/world/europe/27start.html. Accessed on 16 September 2018.

their past role of a leader on whom sacrifices were unduly made incumbent. Even if they choose to continue in the leadership role, rising powers like China would oppose, making conflict inevitable. Also, as per possible predilections of the current disposition, wiser to recognize the strength of countries like Russia with matching nuclear capabilities, and even burgeoning ones like North Korea, than to take them on to please ‘allies’. Trump may have concluded, old ties with ‘allies’ of the past is costing America financially, such as in trade, or raising threats to its security, such as with having the US pick fights on their behalf. Far more comfortable to have ‘new allies’ like Israel and Saudi Arabia, who do not come with that kind of baggage. As far as Trump is concerned, good relations with Putin, Xi and Kim will keep America out of war, leaving it to augment prosperity by the help of rewritten trade rules. Many will claim such extrapolations to be erroneous and short-sighted but Trump and his ilk may see the disagreements as a matter of opinion, and leave the American electorate to decide in late 2018, and later in 2020.

There are lessons to draw from these developments for other regions, South Asia included. For the weaker countries, it is no longer feasible to draw strength from links with key global powers to make up for the power-gap with powerful neighbours.⁷ Pakistan vis-à-vis India comes to mind. The regional pre-eminent power, India, may indeed have to take on a stewardship responsibility. However, it must be earned, not by having a larger ego, but instead a greater heart. As the nations of South Asia head towards elections soon – Afghanistan, Maldives, Bangladesh and India – leaders must take cognisance of the fact that the old global order they had earlier known is changing. At such times, the South Asian nations should strengthen their intra-mural linkages, rather than loosen them; stress commonalities of values rather than differences; treat their minorities with respect, as the same minorities are majorities in their neighbouring states. Multilateral institutions like the United Nations and the World Trade Organization may no longer provide the level-playing field that many may seek. So the regions, including South Asia, should create alternatives. This points to reenergising the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation rather than trashing it. The future in trade and security may entail negotiations with other significant global actors such as Europe, America or China. South Asia would be better placed to conduct them in a united rather than in a divided mode. A world of disorder must not

⁷ The tendency to make up for the power gap with stronger neighbors by building extra-regional linkages is a typical small state behavior pattern. See, Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury, “Small States in UN System: Constraints, Concerns, and Contributions”, ISAS Working Paper No. 160, 24 October 2012.

necessarily be an unruly one. Also, not one in which every state is for itself with God for us all. It is one in which we must be able to discern the positive side of disruptions; just as we know that disruption is the driving force of innovation in technology.

Other regions like Southeast Asia are also seeking to revamp their institutions to handling the new norms. Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, as Chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations for 2018, at the plenary of the regional World Economic Forum on 12 September 2018, laid out his sense of the regional consensus. Stressing the importance of the open and rules-based multilateral system, he said, "It is a system that has underpinned our growth and stability, but is under pressure and even threat."⁸ He also asserted that like-minded states, and there are 16 of them, are doing their best to make progress on the trade deal known as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).⁹

As explained at length in this essay, there is no single cause for the phenomenon we confront today. It is the amalgam of a series of factors. These include changes in the domestic scene of America, as well as in the world beyond. It is not so much that America will disengage from the world. It is just that America will relate to it in different new ways. Its interests will still remain embedded in the international milieu. Trade, security and international politics will still matter. However, America will not come to the table with a priori idealistic considerations. There will be new indices to determine who is a friend and who is a foe. More importantly, who are the important actors either to partner or engage as protagonists. The driving force of America's foreign interactions will be transactional. It will look to where the beef is for it. Some of these may change when Trump leaves office, but much of it will not. If Europe, Japan, Australia or India should turn to buttressing their own security and other interests, it should not be because Trump tells them to; it should be because there are no other alternatives. Nuclear umbrellas are now being furled. The world must learn to come to terms with all this emerging reality. In the ages past when the pristine democracy in Greek city states was overrun by the conquests of Alexander the Great and the rise of imperial Rome, the result was a rethinking of human destiny. Faced with a situation where the individual

⁸ Yasmine Yahya, 'ASEAN must stay open to free trade, says leaders'. *Straits Times* 13 September 2018. www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/asean-must-stay-open-to-free-trade-say-leaders. 16 September 2018.

⁹ The RCEP refers to the proposed free trade agreement (FTA) between the 10 ASEAN-member states (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam) and six Asia Pacific States (Australia, China, India, Japan, South Korea and New Zealand). If it comes to fruition as planned, the RCEP would be the world's largest economic bloc, covering almost half of the global economy.

Athenian, the Spartan, or even later the Roman, had now little influence on decision-making, as empires supplanted city-states ideas such as those of the ‘Stoics’ and the ‘Cynics’. Men and women realised that their lives would no longer be the same again. Their adherents followed the beliefs of *apatheia* (stoics) or the power of objective unemotional and clear judgment or *eudaimonia* (cynics), which was freedom from false belief, mindlessness, folly and conceit. However, they did not throw up their hands in despair. They began by obeying the law not passively but with active assent. Men, women and nations adapted to the changes. Eventually political thought flourished and kept evolving up to our day, empowering humanity, and even if ever so incrementally, improving the quality of our life. We must hope that the process will repeat, and we must place our trust in that hope.

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