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Whither Asia in a Multipolar World of Trump 2.0?

By Warren Fernandez

SYNOPSIS

Multipolarity is the word being bandied about to describe the new world order that is unfolding amid major geopolitical changes pushed by United States President Donald Trump. The big question is how he will play his cards on China. Two scenarios are plausible; neither of them reassuring about the security implications for Asia.

COMMENTARY

A new world order is emerging, with geopolitical convulsions not seen in decades. But no one knows the shape it will take or how it will unfold.

Multipolarity, though, seems to be the word tripping off the tongues of politicians and pundits everywhere, including US Secretary of State Marco Rubio. There has been ominous talk of the three great powers, the United States, Russia and China, carving up the planet into spheres of influence, much like the Oceania, Eurasia and Eastasia of George Orwell's chilling novel, *1984*.

Not everyone is on the same page when it comes to espousing multipolarity. As the Munich Security Report 2025 noted recently, "visions of multipolarity are also polarised. This makes it increasingly difficult to adapt the existing order peacefully, avoid new arms races, prevent violent conflicts within and among states, allow for more inclusive economic growth, and jointly address shared threats like climate change".

Indeed, a multipolar order raises many questions: How would this trio of powers relate to one another? As equals? Would Russia and China agree to be subordinate to the US or each other?

And even if such a triumvirate could settle into an uneasy entente, each eyeing the other warily while exerting influence within their respective spheres, would rival power centres and alignments not emerge? Just how many poles might there be in a sphere?

Witness Europe, where the dismay and disarray as countries recoiled at the thought of coming under Moscow's domination has [prompted a rush to ramp up defence spending](#), with the United Kingdom, France, and Germany stepping up to forge a new framework for the continent's defence. Still, even if the money could be found in a hurry, major gaps in munitions, men, and military know-how could take years to close.

Asia's Dilemma

The challenge for Asia will prove even more acute, given the troubled histories among its nations and the dependence on the US as a neutral balancer in the region. Even so, in its absence, it is hardly likely that Japan, India, South Korea, or Australia will simply sit back and acquiesce to falling under China's sway. While they might lack the heft and resources of superpowers, they do have agency and could reach for some alternative security arrangements to push back against any would-be regional hegemon.

While it might be hard to envisage what these might be at this stage, new versions of the QUAD or AUKUS, both of which emerged unexpectedly not so long ago and partly in response to an over-assertive China, are likely to be thrown up. Might Tokyo float once again its idea for an Asian NATO, with or without some American backstop? Or perhaps, as India's Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar told *The Financial Times* in a recent interview, looser non-treaty arrangements might be preferable, unlike the post-1945 defence pacts. "You have comfort, you have commonalities. It's more like a club... The treaty-based concepts are typical of the old order. The new order is something more flexible", he said.

The impetus for such collective security arrangements will be strong as the implications of Mr Trump's new "me-first, mercantilist, might-makes-right" approach are stark: NATO's Article 5, premised on all members standing together against foreign aggression on any one of them, is up in the air. So, too, is the separate and somewhat different Article 5 of the US-Japan security pact, which pledges American support in the event of a foreign attack on Japan. No doubt, as the world reeled in shock and horror at Mr Trump berating his hapless Ukrainian guest in the Oval Office for "not having the cards" and "gambling with World War III", officials in Tokyo and Taipei were looking on anxiously.

Big, Beautiful Deal or a Face-Off?

Against this backdrop, the biggest bets on the table will be over how Mr Trump plays his hand on China. So far, he has been keeping his cards close, and presenting his best poker face, prompting China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi to lament his "two-faced" approach to relations. While he has slapped two rounds of 10 per cent tariffs on China's imports to the US, this is far short of the 60 per cent bandied about during his campaign, perhaps to signal a desire to strike a deal. China, too, has responded in a measured way, if only to keep the deal-making game going.

Two scenarios are plausible; neither of them is reassuring.

In the first – call it the “big, beautiful bargain” approach – Mr Trump pushes for a headline-making deal with Beijing. He threatens to ratchet up tariffs to demand more investments from China in the US, and access to its markets, not least to reward the business leaders who backed him.

In exchange, he would offer Beijing what it most prizes – a pledge not to support any move by Taipei to break away from the mainland. Having tried to woo the Taiwanese through trade and threats to no avail, China would welcome any move to stem the drift and keep what it sees as a renegade province within its grasp. Indeed, this would be seen as a great victory for Beijing, worthy of Sun Tzu’s art of winning a war without firing a shot, a triumph of strategy over force. President Xi Jinping might choose to play along if only to bide time for further economic progress towards the inevitable day when China surpasses the US. The big nagging doubt in his mind, though, would be whether the capricious US leader could be trusted to keep his word.

While such a deal might be welcomed for maintaining the peace and status quo in the region, it would also send shockwaves throughout Asia, not least in Taipei and Tokyo. Talk is already emerging in Seoul, and more quietly in Tokyo, of the need to consider hitherto unthinkable options if the US can no longer be relied on against nuclear-armed China, Russia or North Korea. As David Brooks noted sardonically in a recent New York Times column: “As America withdraws its security umbrella, nations around the world, from Poland to even Japan, will conclude that they need nuclear weapons. What could go wrong?”

An alternative – call it the “face-off” scenario – is no less troubling. This sees Mr Trump heeding calls from anti-China hawks to stand up to Beijing, and back Taipei’s long-cherished beliefs in democracy and self-determination. Doing so might run against Mr Trump’s businessman and “I-am-a-peacemaker” instincts. While he might not relish such a military face-off, given the nuclear risks, he will loathe being seen capitulating to China or going down in history as the president who “lost Taiwan” and, with it, the most dynamic economies of Asia.

Uncharted Waters

Which of these scenarios is more likely? It’s hard to say, given Mr Trump’s penchant for being unpredictable. Indeed, we might even end up with a bit of both. He might be tempted to initially push for a grand bargain, which he believes only he could pull off. But this is likely to require great diplomatic skill, beyond bluff and bluster, as well as much patience, neither of which is his strong suit. It also calls for goodwill on all sides, which will be in short supply as tensions over trade wars mount. As the talks drag on and the cards stack up, outcomes might be left to chance and circumstances, putting ties to the test.

Deja vu? Yes, we have been here before. Recall the hype and hope, sound and fury, over several rounds of talks with Pyongyang, which ultimately signified nothing. Or the first Trump trade deal with Beijing, signed to much fanfare in January 2020, which gave way to ugly name-calling over the “China virus”, with Mr Trump reaching for the

old bogeyman as his polls ratings declined amid the fallout from the COVID-19 outbreak. In both cases, where Mr Trump began is not where he ended up.

So, it is best not to be overly swayed by talk of geopolitical carve-ups or place big bets on what lies ahead for Asia in a new world order under Trump 2.0. We are in uncharted waters, with neither maps nor signposts to any clear destination. There could still be storms and surprises ahead, throwing up new threats but also possibilities.

Amid the welter of sound bites and tweets from the White House, it would be wise not to assume much method to the madness. Mr Trump's moves seem more tactical than strategic; trial balloons floated to see where these go. He is unabashed about walking back the talk when needed, with geopolitics seen as a parlour game for the high and mighty. Fifty days on and counting, the odds of a stable and sustainable world order emerging over the next 50 or 500 looks slim.

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