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## Trump Brings More Chaos, but Not Necessarily More Danger

*By Han Fook Kwang*

### SYNOPSIS

*If America under Donald Trump fights with tariffs, not troops, is that really a more dangerous world? This commentary offers three reasons why it is not necessarily so.*

### COMMENTARY

It is conventional wisdom now to view the world as a more dangerous place because of President Donald Trump's plans to [remake America](#) and its place in the international order.

His aggressive style, making outlandish demands of other countries and threatening retaliatory action otherwise, has made everyone nervous about where it will all lead.

The bombshell of imposing punitive tariffs on almost every country, an unprecedented act he labelled "Liberation Day" for America, caused shockwaves with [stock markets plunging everywhere](#) and billions of dollars wiped out overnight.

When he then suddenly announced a [90-day pause](#) except for tariffs targeted at China (two days after the White House dismissed reports that he was considering such a moratorium as "fake news"), it only added to the sense of bewilderment and anxiety about where America was heading.

World leaders, policymakers, and commentators warn of dire consequences: the end of globalisation, the alliance of Western powers, the international order, and, ultimately, peace and stability.

They may well be right, and there will certainly be economic disruptions with job losses and perhaps even a [global recession](#).

But will it necessarily be a worse world than in the past when America and its allies waged wars and conflicts resulting in physical destruction and widespread loss of human lives?

When almost everyone is singing the same tune about the demise of the good old days and of the bad ahead, it is worthwhile to examine their claims critically.

So, here is a contrarian view, with three reasons why it may not be so, especially for those in the non-Western world.

### **Trump's Weapon of Choice**

First, for all his bullying and bluster, Donald Trump's weapon of choice appears to be [tariffs and economic sanctions](#), not bombs and missiles.

In fact, he is proud to claim that in his first term in the White House, he did not start any new wars.

If he stays true to this, it will be a significant departure from the America the world has come to know – and dread, if you happen to be at the receiving end of its military might.

Since World War II, the US has been involved in numerous wars: The Korean War (1950-1953), Vietnam War (1955-1975), Gulf War (1990-1991), Iraq War (2003-2011) and Afghanistan War (2001-2021), all of which combined resulted in millions of deaths and untold destruction in those countries.

Not to mention lesser conflicts involving America in Lebanon, Dominican Republic, Grenada, Panama, Somalia, Libya, and Syria.

All were fought in the Third World, which is good if you happen to live in the Western advanced economies.

But if you do not and a superpower flexes its muscles where you live, life can be terrifying.

Mr Trump's economic war appears more even-handed, targeting both developed and developing countries.

Even-handed is good news for the Third World, which has borne the brunt of America's wrath.

Tariffs and sanctions can lead to economic hardship, but from humanity's point of view, they are preferable to weapons of mass destruction.

If you tax what I sell to you (which is what a tariff does), I might sell less as a result or choose to do my business elsewhere, but if you send missiles my way, that's the end of the argument.

Mr Trump's latest on-off tariff actions show that waging economic warfare is very different from its military equivalent.

The foot soldiers are not infantry or artillery but ordinary people, businesses, and corporations with a much lower pain threshold and are likely to panic more quickly.

America will find out that there are no clear winners on the economic front and that much of the damage caused will be self-inflicted.

Whether it will make the US great again remains to be seen (though it is unlikely), but if the new America is less inclined to start military wars and expends its energies on economic ones, it might not be a bad outcome for the world as a whole.

### **Guarded Optimism**

It is a big if but there is a second reason for guarded optimism, and it has to do with America's internal war being fought on its own soil.

There is a ferocious battle going on in the US now as the new administration introduces [sweeping changes](#), taking on federal judges, civilian agencies, media, academia, civil rights groups, and of course, the Democratic Party.

The battle lines have been drawn on immigration, abortion, freedom of speech, gender policies, education, race, healthcare, and many other issues.

They are no longer merely matters of intellectual debate but have life-and-death consequences on those affected, as executive power is wielded through laws and agency action.

America is almost in a state of civil war, but like the external battle, fought, not with knives and guns (not yet at least) but with executive power, legal challenges, and civil action.

So, here is an intriguing question: If it is so embroiled in its internal struggles, will it have less time and resources to interfere in the affairs of others, resulting in a less dangerous world?

Which brings me to the third reason to be (slightly) more optimistic about the new world.

### **A Whole New World**

What will replace the old order that was dominated by the US and its Western alliance?

According to experts, it will be multipolar, with [China](#), Europe and Russia being the other major players, followed by middle powers such as India, Brazil and Indonesia, among others.

There will no longer be one global policeman setting the rules as America turns inward and demands more of others in sharing its security burden.

Is a multipolar world less dangerous than a unipolar one?

The answer depends on where you sit. If you were on the side of the sole superpower, you would likely call it benign, no matter how many wars it waged on others.

A multipolar world will be no different: Where and how you align yourself to the powerful will make a big difference to your state of war or peace.

It is too early to say whether such a world will be more dangerous than the existing one. Be wary of those who are too quick to declare that it will be.

India's External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, a seasoned operator often hailed as one of the world's best, put it well in a recent interview with the Financial Times: "The virtues of the old world were exaggerated".

It was, he noted, based on an outdated premise that was biased towards the victors of World War II, principally the US, and that the new multipolar world had to better reflect the realities of the new situation.

He is more hopeful about the future, and I think he may be right.

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*Han Fook Kwang was a veteran newspaper editor and is a senior fellow at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. This commentary was first published on [CNA](#) on 14 April 2025. It is republished with permission.*

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**S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore**  
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798