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SYNOPSIS

There was relief in Munich when the United States Secretary of State Marco Rubio delivered a more diplomatic speech about the US' willingness to work with Europe to reassert Western dominance in the world, in sharp contrast to the pointed lecture by US Vice President J.D. Vance at the same event last year. Still, the underlying message was clear: shape up and get with the American programme to remake the West, and the global order, or risk being left behind as the US presses ahead on its own. Yet, as history shows, global orders are rarely shaped by design, and the outcome could turn out quite different from what President Donald Trump might have in mind.

COMMENTARY

It is permanent. A rupture, not a transition. So declared shocked leaders in response to the announced plan of United States President Donald Trump over Greenland.

Thankfully, this appears to have been aborted, at least for now. Relief greeted Trump's announcement at Davos last month that the US would not use military force to seize Greenland. While the thought that Trump might not ultimately resort to having things his own way, as asserted by the international media, is comforting, this respite might be short-lived. Besides, Greenland is just a part of Trump's broader attempts to reshape the world as we know it.

Likewise, there was applause, and some were even on their feet when US Secretary of State Marco Rubio finished his speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2026. This reflected their relief at the more emollient "we are a child of Europe" tone, rather than a reprisal of the undiplomatic "Europe's challenges are of

your own making" lecture delivered by US Vice President J.D. Vance a year ago on the same stage.

Still, despite the differences in delivery, there was no mistaking the underlying message. Effectively, the US top diplomat was making plain to his European audience that Washington expected them to shape up and get with the American programme to remake the West, in order to assert its primacy in the world.

The irony is that in attempting to reshape the world order, the forces unleashed could give rise to alternatives quite different from anything Trump might have in mind.

The late US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger had a term for the likes of Trump – "revolutionary chieftains". These were radical and revisionist leaders, from Napoleon to Hitler, driven by historical angst, or what the author Robert Kaplan calls "Shakespearean forces", the inner demons that sway powerful leaders. Such figures upend the order and stability Kissinger believed essential to global equilibrium. He probably never imagined such a person inhabiting the White House in Washington.

So, what lies ahead?

Ironically, the US has been busy undoing the G1 world – the unipolar order that it led, and benefitted from for decades, at a time when China seems neither ready nor willing to step up as global hegemon.

For a time, some envisaged a G2 world, in which rival powers competed fiercely but collaborated selectively to ensure systemic stability and avoid catastrophe.

There were also hopes that China might emerge as a responsible stakeholder in a rules-based global system, following the paths of Germany or Japan, growing richer and stronger, but remaining part of an interdependent system with the US at the helm. On this basis, US leaders welcomed China into the World Trade Organisation in 2000. Free trade, it was believed, would liberalise China, with economic development driving political and social change, culminating in Francis Fukuyama's "End of History".

Few Asian leaders suffered from this delusion. Indeed, Singapore's founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew often warned that while global integration would benefit China and the world, it was naïve to assume China would become a Western-style liberal democracy. Instead, China would modernise on its own terms, prioritising stability and the collective interests of society over individual rights and freedoms. A rising China would also inevitably seek to revise international institutions and norms created when it was weak.

Wisdom lay in the prevailing powers managing China's transition as smoothly and equitably as possible. Unfortunately, Lee's message was drowned out in the so-called "Asian values" debate of the 1990s and cast as an attempt to bolster authoritarian tendencies. A more historically and culturally nuanced understanding of how the Sino-US relationship might evolve could have mitigated the deep sense of betrayal and mistrust now prevalent in Washington.

So, in recent times, there has been much talk about an emerging multipolar order, with a less globally minded United States seeking a “grand bargain” with China and Russia, each managing affairs in their respective spheres while coordinating to maintain a new G3 order among them.

Recent US defence strategy papers have signalled this. These point to an administration in Washington focused on controlling the Western Hemisphere, avoiding costly foreign entanglements and “forever wars” that have sapped the US economy. The upshot of this, however, is to narrow its focus, reducing the global hegemon to a regional chief instead, thereby making America “small again”. Others will take note and respond.

Many questions arise: How would such a triumvirate relate to one another? As equals? Or is it also “America First”? Trump flits effortlessly between contrary positions, at times deferential to his peer powers, and asserting primacy at others. Nor is it clear why Beijing and Moscow would agree to take their dressings from the US, or yield influence in the areas it seeks to control? Why would other countries, from Japan to India, Indonesia, Egypt and South Africa agree to fall under the sway of a regional hegemon?

Europe offers a cautionary tale. In the face of Russian aggression and American ambivalence, Britain, France, Germany, Poland and others have rushed into a defensive huddle – a classic posture of hegemonic denial – ramping up defence spending and collaboration. Even so, NATO chief Mark Rutte has told European leaders to keep dreaming on if they harbour hopes of going it alone without the US. Indeed, the challenges of conjuring up sufficient money, munitions, and men to do the job would be immense, fiscally and politically.

Similar challenges – dreams or nightmares? – lie ahead for Asia. These could prove even more unsettling, given the fraught histories among its nations and the heavy reliance on the United States as the neutral balancer in the region.

In the face of such uncertainty, a more plausible outcome might be a more fluid and flexible framework of shifting coalitions of the willing – call this a Gx world, where x is a variable – with countries coming together on specific issues of common interest.

As Professor Hal Brands notes in *The Eurasian Century: Hot Wars, Cold Wars and the Making of the Modern World*, such an order will “approximate variable geometry – arraying free world nations into multiple smaller groupings that exert decisive influence in crucial areas, from semiconductor supply chains to undersea warfare. If Nato was the model for alliance building in the 20th Century, AUKUS is the model for the twenty-first”.

Some examples of such minilateral groupings include the Quad security arrangements, or the 14-member Future of Investment and Free Trade (FIT) Partnership, initiated by Singapore. India’s Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar has hailed such flexible arrangements as the way forward: “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”. Similarly, Canadian PM Mark

Carney was feted for his Davos speech, pointing to such a scenario in which middle powers act with agency to safeguard shared interests.

Still, global orders do not emerge by theoretical design, nor do they follow the best-laid plans. The First World War gave rise to the League of Nations, which failed to prevent a second, more devastating conflict.

History ebbs and flows, rarely unfolding in straight lines, advancing instead through shocks and surprises – “events, dear boy, events”, as a British prime minister once noted. The 20th Century saw conflicts and wars, hot and cold. The transition to a new order in this century is likely to be no less turbulent and unpredictable.

Many uncertainties lie ahead. Ageing leaders in autocratic states such as Russia, China and Iran, or North Korea, with no clear indication of who might succeed them or how. Rising polarisation and the drift towards electoral extremes in the United States, France, the United Kingdom and Germany. Looming tensions in the Middle East, the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea could spark flare-ups that spiral beyond the control of leaders. Emerging technologies and the consequent demand for chips, energy, water, or rare earth minerals could fuel conflicts.

How these and other developments play out – and how leaders and electorates respond – will shape the world order that will emerge, for better or worse. As Prof Brands cautions: “There is no guarantee that history takes the path of progress. … Don’t assume that the awful costs of great-power conflict will deter everyone from waging it”.

So, for the foreseeable future, expect a messy global order that is fluid, improvised, flexible, and inchoate, with countries, big and small, seeking to exercise some agency to shape their shared destiny. This muddling through reflects a pragmatic, agile approach to accepting the world as it is, rather than how we might wish it to be.

Still, the key questions that remain are whether such a fluid, improvised, flexible and inchoate global order could be stable or durable, and, more importantly, up to the task of tackling the critical challenges of our times – from the rise of AI to the climate crisis – without the backing of, and collaboration among, the major powers of the day. Such a world order is likely to be one fraught with instability, risk and uncertainty.

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