



A World in Motion: The United States and the Remaking of the Global System

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By Peter Frankopan

SYNOPSIS

Trump's second presidency has accelerated a decisive rupture in the post-1945 order. Tariffs, coercive diplomacy, and conflict escalation have all been deployed with the aim of enabling the US to reshape global systems to its advantage. This marks the end of Pax Americana and ushers in an age of instability, characterised by energy shocks, food insecurity, and renewed state conflict. This requires governments around the world to conduct urgent reassessments of national resilience.

COMMENTARY

Since President Donald Trump took office for the second time in January 2025, the news cycle has been dominated by one thing: President Trump. The decisions, comments and actions of the leader of the world's most powerful country have antagonised, inflamed, outraged and amused the rest of the world. With the emergence of economic coercion, the rendition of Nicolás Maduro and the attacks on Iran last June, and then starting again on 28 February, the world seems to be facing a set of problems that not only appear unique but are existential. Most, if not all of these, seem to be springing from one place: President Trump's White House.

As such, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the world is changing not only quickly but definitively. In a ministerial statement in March 2025, before "Liberation Day", when sweeping new tariffs were announced by the US not only on rivals and competitors but also on long-time allies and partners (and even on uninhabited territories like the Heard and McDonald Islands), Singapore's Prime Minister Lawrence Wong was already noting the scale and extent of the challenge of facing up to the reality of an emerging new order.

Since 1945, said the PM, the US had been “the anchor for the free market economies of the world. It championed free trade and open markets and led efforts to build a multi-lateral trading system”, which “ushered in decades of global growth and stability”. As well as enabling trade to flourish, this architecture “lifted millions out of poverty...and contributed to America’s own economic strength”. However, the economic, diplomatic and military stance that Trump had adopted in the first few weeks since taking office, “is not reform. It is rejecting the very system it created.”

A year later, that analysis looks prescient. For all Trump’s talk about being worthy of the Nobel Peace Prize, the reality is that uncertainty after uncertainty has been unleashed by the change in direction the US has embraced. Assessing why it has chosen to do so – and whether this amounts to recklessness or high strategy – is worthy of a longer piece than is appropriate here. What is telling, though, is that the US is seeking to reshape the world not in its own image – as it has broadly tried to do since 1945 – but rather to its own advantage.

That has major implications for understanding and preparing for the years and decades ahead. As Minister for Foreign Affairs, Dr Vivian Balakrishnan put it in an extensive interview in March of this year, the period following the Second World War enabled an age of globalisation, prosperity, innovation and growth. This “would not have happened”, said the FM, “if it had not been for” what he called the *Pax Americana*. We are now in a new era, he said, “whether you like it or not, objectively, this period has ended.”

The realignment of the global jigsaw provides not only the opportunity but the necessity to reconceptualise what will emerge as a new order takes shape. It is hard not to be reminded of the words of the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci, who wrote almost exactly a hundred years ago, at a time of similar upheaval in the pieces of the puzzle, not only in Europe and the Soviet Union but across many parts of Africa, Asia and the Americas too. Seeing through the clouds of uncertainty was not easy, he wrote, at a time when “the old is dying, and the new cannot be born.”

Ironically, some of this has become clearer as the crisis in Iran and the Gulf has deepened. As FM Balakrishnan noted just a few weeks into the war, the confrontation between the US and its ally Israel on the one hand, and Iran on the other, meant that the “entire global economy has been taken hostage and we will all pay a price on hostilities.”

Quantifying those prices is now an urgent concern for ministries around the world. The first is the challenge of dealing with energy shocks – an issue in which not all countries are equal; those with effective energy independence are not only less exposed to shocks, but also able to benefit from a situation of upheaval and disruption.

Second, there are knock-on effects on calorie provision: the dependence of agriculture on Gulf states for urea, ammonia, and fertiliser, and the interruption to shipping, mean that crop yields will be lower in the next growing season and perhaps

in those after that as well. That does not just mean price inflation, but in worst-case scenarios, it could mean an interruption of supply.

Third, what we have seen with Iran, in Gaza, in Ukraine – and in other arenas too, such as in South Asia and even in parts of South East Asia, where there have been military confrontations between ASEAN states (namely Cambodia and Thailand) – is clear evidence that the age of state-on-state violence is quickly becoming normalised. Part of this will accelerate as competition for finite resources becomes more acute.

A good example is the Indus Water Treaty, signed in 1960 and one of the first major transboundary water treaties registered with the United Nations. Often cited as a signal success of Cold War diplomacy, the agreement risks being torn up. “I would like to tell the younger generation how this country was ruined”, said Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in May 2025. The treaty had been “badly negotiated”, he said, and needed revision, or erasure. India would no longer respect the terms of the treaty, said Federal Home Minister Amit Shah a few weeks later: “We will take water that was flowing to Pakistan to Rajasthan by constructing a canal”, with the result that “Pakistan will be starved of water that it has been getting unjustifiably.”

For Singapore, and for others, this is a time of uncertainty; but also one in which minds need to focus even more clearly than usual on national resilience across every sector – and on defence to digital, from water to food supply, from how to navigate a world where the rule of law is increasingly seen as a luxury rather than a necessity. Much to think about, then, in a time of change.

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