

Leaders | The end of the post-1945 order

## Donald Trump has begun a mafia-like struggle for global power

But the new rules do not suit America



image: The Economist/Getty Images

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The rupture of the post-1945 order is gaining pace. In extraordinary scenes at the UN this week, America sided with Russia and North Korea against Ukraine and Europe. Germany's probable new chancellor, Friedrich Merz, warns that by June NATO may be dead. Fast approaching is a might-is-right world in which big powers cut deals and bully small ones. Team Trump claims that its dealmaking will bring peace and that, after 80 years of being taken for a ride, America will turn its superpower status into profit. Instead it will make the world more dangerous, and America weaker and poorer.

You may not be interested in the world order—but it is interested in you. America's Don Corleone approach has been on display in Ukraine. Having initially demanded \$500bn, American officials settled for a hazy deal for a joint state fund to develop [Ukrainian minerals](#). It is unclear if America will offer security guarantees in return.

The administration is a swirl of ideas and egos but its people agree on one thing: under the post-1945 framework of rules and alliances, Americans have been suckered into unfair trade and paying for foreign wars. Mr Trump thinks he can pursue the national interest more effectively through hyperactive transactions. [Everything is up for grabs](#): territory, technology, minerals and more. "My whole life is deals," he explained on February 24th, after talks on Ukraine with Emmanuel Macron, the French president. Trump confidants with business skills, such as Steve Witkoff, are jetting between capitals to explore deals that link up goals, from getting Saudi Arabia to recognise Israel to rehabilitating the Kremlin.

This new system has a new hierarchy. America is number one. Next are countries with resources to sell, threats to make and leaders unconstrained by democracy. Vladimir Putin wants to restore Russia as a great imperial power. Muhammad bin Salman wants to modernise the Middle East and fend off Iran. Xi Jinping is both a committed communist and a nationalist who wants a world fit for a strong China. In the third rank are America's allies, their dependence and loyalty seen as weaknesses to exploit.

Territory is up for negotiation, detonating the post-1945 rules. Ukraine's boundary may be set by a Trump-Putin handshake. The borders of Israel, Lebanon and Syria have been blurred by 17 months of war. Some outside

powers are indifferent to this. Yet Mr Trump has eyed up Gaza, as well as Greenland, and in any Sino-American talks, Mr Xi could bid for territory, too, for example offering to limit exports in return for concessions on Taiwan, the South China Sea or the Himalayas.

Haggling over the economy goes far beyond tariffs to embrace a fusion of state power and business. That signals a retreat from the idea that commerce is best governed by neutral rules. Bilateral discussions between America and Russia, Saudi Arabia, Taiwanese executives and Ukraine include oil output, construction contracts, sanctions, Intel plants, the use of Elon Musk's Starlink satellite service and a desert golf tournament.

The new dealmakers claim their approach will benefit the world. Mr Trump argues it is also in America's interest. Are they correct? Both Mr Trump and leaders in the global south are right to say that the post-1945 order had decayed. When diplomacy stagnates, unconventional ideas can work—think of the Abraham accords between Israel and some Arab states.

Yet it is a leap from there to using dealmaking as an organising principle. The complexity is overwhelming: Saudi Arabia wants a defence deal to deter Iran, which America may grant if it recognises Israel. But that requires Israel and the Palestinians to endorse a two-state future, which Mr Trump rejected in his plan to bring peace to Gaza. Russia wants oil sanctions lifted, but that could cut Saudi Arabia's income and increase India's bills. And so on. Meanwhile, when borders are contestable wars will follow. Even giants like India may feel insecure. Because Mr Trump views power as personal rather than anchored by America's institutions, he may find it hard to persuade his counterparts that agreements will endure—one reason he is no [Henry Kissinger](#).

The world will therefore suffer. What Mr Trump does not realise is that America will suffer, too. Its global role has imposed a military burden and an openness to trade that has hurt some American industries. Yet the gains have been much greater. Trade benefits consumers and importing industries. Being the heart of the dollar financial system saves America over \$100bn a year in interest bills and allows it to run a high fiscal deficit. The foreign business of American firms is worth \$16trn. Those firms thrive abroad because of reasonably predictable and impartial global rules on commerce, rather than graft and transient special favours—an ethos that suits Chinese and Russian firms far better.

Mr Trump believes that America can partially or fully abandon Europe and perhaps its Asian allies, too. He says it has a “beautiful ocean as a separation”. However, wars now involve space and cyberspace, so physical distance offers even less protection than it did in 1941, when Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor ended America's isolationism. What is more, when America wants to project hard power or defend the homeland, it depends on allied help, from the Ramstein airbase in Germany and Pine Gap signals station in Australia to missile-tracking in Canada's Arctic. In Mr Trump's world, America may no longer have free access to them.

Advocates of dealmaking assume that America can get what it wants by bargaining. Yet as Mr Trump exploits decades-old dependencies, America's leverage will rapidly fall away. Sensing betrayal, allies in Europe and beyond will [turn to each other for security](#). If chaos spreads, America will have to deal with new threats even as it has fewer tools: think of an Asian nuclear-arms race in a system with weak American alliances and weaker, or broken, arms control. At a dangerous time, friends, credibility and rules are worth more than a quick buck. Congress, financial markets or voters could yet persuade Mr Trump to walk back. But the world has already started planning for a lawless era. ■