

Trump's 'America First' opportunity for India



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Piggybacking on Trump's US is a guaranteed path to Brazil's decline.



US President Donald Trump (Photo: AP)

Tensions at last week's Nato summit in London reflect underlying doubts about the leadership and commitment of US President Donald Trump to trans-Atlantic security. Mr Trump's insistence that the United States "cannot continue to be the policeman of the world" causes trepidation in European nations, Japan and South Korea, which are dependent on American security and economic guarantees. But his abandonment of the liberal international order also presents a historic opportunity for independent rising nations like India, Turkey, Brazil and Nigeria to fill the vacuum being left by a tired US. These countries have strong anti-colonial traditions and ambitions to transform and lead their regions in the wake of Mr Trump's "America First" apathy and an expansionist China.

If Mr Trump's disinterest in multilateral coalition-building to check Russia is troubling its Nato allies in Europe, his intent to pull American troops out of Afghanistan and his indifference about countering China in the Indo-Pacific region by rallying the US' strategic partners in Asia, are reasons for disquiet in India.

India has tried a workaround by networking with liberal internationalist elements within the Trump administration and in the broader American polity. External affairs minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar's remark that his job was "to convince the American system that we have common interests" makes an obvious distinction between Mr Trump and his isolationist populist faction on one side, and the permanent American "Deep State" on the other.

Still, manoeuvring within Mr Trump's "two-track presidency" is not enough for India, which fears an increased jihadist threat from a crumbling Afghanistan and worries about China's encroachment around its natural sphere of influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is investing diplomatic energy in bringing India's all-weather partner Russia back into the Pacific and deepening military cooperation with France in the Indian Ocean. He is also strengthening endogenous small group coalitions in Asia with the Asean member states and Japan to try and stem the tide of Chinese influence. Simultaneously, Mr Modi has attempted rapprochement with China through risk-reducing "informal summits" with President Xi Jinping.

Since Mr Modi cannot count on the populist Mr Trump to stabilise Afghanistan, he is also looking to combine forces with Central Asian countries and Iran as part of India's planning for a post-American scenario in Kabul.

In the Middle East, Mr Trump's recent chaotic order for US troops to exit northern Syria was a boon to America's Nato ally Turkey, but the long estranged Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan was not totally satisfied. He apparently flung Mr Trump's letter admonishing him, "don't be a fool", into the dustbin and warned that Turkey would never forget this insult.

Following that, Turkish forces and allied Arab militias which invaded northern Syria committed war crimes against civilian Kurds, openly defying Mr Trump's verbal threat to "totally destroy and obliterate the economy of Turkey".

The tragedy in northern Syria illustrates dramatic changes in the US-Turkey alliance under Mr Trump and how the US President's overturning of prior American policies in the Middle East have left Mr Erdogan scrambling.

Mr Trump's populist approach to the Middle East is a double-edged sword that threatens Turkey but also opens possibilities for it to step up as a regional leader. But this chance is going wasted under Mr Erdogan, whose foreign policy has degenerated from the early halcyon days of "zero problems with neighbours" to problems with all neighbours today.

Turkey has erred under Mr Erdogan by earning the enmity of its neighbouring countries. Seventeen years in power have closed the authoritarian Mr Erdogan's mind to the virtues of coalition-building with Arab, Persian and Jewish powers. His shift to a hardline anti-Kurdish stance also limits what Turkey can reap from the Trump dividend. Leadership change in Turkey will be necessary before it can lead again in the Middle East.

In Latin America, Brazil has swivelled from being a wary competitor of the US to a willing junior partner of Trump's America, thanks to the uncanny ideological camaraderie between Mr Trump and President Jair Bolsonaro. The "Trump of the tropics" is trying to redefine Brazil in a far-right image inspired by Mr Trump. He has sought to reverse Brazil's time-tested foreign policy model based on South-South cooperation, which had positioned Brasilia as a leader among developing countries.

Piggybacking on Mr Trump's US is a guaranteed path to Brazil's decline. Like in Asia, China is rapidly advancing its footprint in Latin America, but Mr Trump lacks the appetite or long-term vision to counter it. Mr Bolsonaro is alarmed by China's encroachments in the Western hemisphere but turning to Mr Trump will not solve Brazil's strategic predicament.

Mr Trump's rhetorical swipes against the dictatorship in Venezuela are driven by domestic American political calculations. If Mr Bolsonaro believed he could tag team with Mr Trump and usher in regime change in Venezuela, it was a bad bet. Mr Trump will never commit the US to any foreign regime change operation if it costs the American taxpayer's money or troops.

So, the onus is on Brazil to return to the South-South approach and to retake the lead it had in Latin America as an independent and self-reliant power. Mr Bolsonaro himself is a far-right populist and will not go that way. Much depends on other more sagacious factions within his administration, as well as Brazil's civil society and intelligentsia, to regain its lost glory in the region.

In Africa, Mr Trump is plainly disinterested. He has cut foreign development assistance and pulled back troops from hotspots on the continent. His neglect and racist stereotyping of Africans have serious implications for Africa's number one economy and most populous country, Nigeria.

President Muhammadu Buhari is realising how Nigeria cannot rely on the US any more for its geopolitical and economic rise. Be it tackling jihadist extremism of the Boko Haram or other groups menacing the Sahel region, counterbalancing France in the La Francophonie zone of West Africa, or securing greater market access and trade privileges globally, Mr Trump's US is not a catalyst for Nigeria.

Under President Buhari, Nigeria is refocussing on the rest of Africa to build its leadership potential instead of looking to the West for assistance or intervention. Mr Buhari is pursuing the dream of Nigeria enabling "Pax Africana" — an Africa that is self-reliant to solve its problems. In 2017, Mr Buhari took the initiative to put together a regional coalition to overthrow the Yahya Jammeh dictatorship in Gambia and oversaw its transition to democracy.

Yet, domestic governance challenges have held back Nigeria from leading the continent. The long delay in Nigeria signing up to the African Continental Free Trade Agreements was a disappointment. Mr Trump's populist foreign policy should be the trigger for Nigeria to assume greater responsibilities to stabilise Africa.

The solution to a withdrawing and isolationist US under Mr Trump is not a return to a single global order under a revived US interventionism or a new Chinese order, but "post-American" regionally-based multiple orders.

America's retreat from upkeep of the international system stems from the clash between Mr Trump's "nationalism" and the liberal "globalism" of the US establishment. But the key to the multipolar world lies in tracking "regionalism" and regional powers, none of which are perfect but all of whom are staring at a rare window of opportunity created by Mr Trump. They must rise to the occasion.