

THE AUSTRALIAN

With NATO and Putin, Trump's cleaning up after Obama

HENRY ERGAS THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM July 20, 2018



Illustration: Eric Lobbeke

In a widely acclaimed column in last weekend's *The New York Times*, Bret Stephens argued that Donald Trump's foreign policy aimed at one result and one result only: "The collapse of the liberal international order", even at the cost of leaving America hated, feared and alone.

That outcome would "be gratifying to Trump's sense of his historical importance", and it would also suit Russian President Vladimir Putin, "who knows that an America that stands for its own interests first also stands, and falls, alone". But it would be a "historical disaster", demeaning "the democratic ideals that America once embodied", and reducing the US to a mere bully.

Stephens's is no voice in the wilderness. On the contrary, during the course of the past week the invective hurled at Trump became a torrent of abuse, in a crescendo that reached a peak after his press conference with Putin.

Yet there is one thing none of his critics has been able to say: that the US President's view of the situation America and its friends and allies confront is fundamentally incorrect.

Nor could they. For it is an undeniable reality that by the time Trump came to office, the “liberal international order” was not even a shadow of its former self — it was a ghost whose death was barely disguised by the din of its rattling chains.

No purpose would be served by recounting its downfall. Suffice it to note that the final blow was delivered by Trump's predecessor, who will be remembered as one of the few US presidents whose foreign policy left every region of the world in worse shape than it was when he came to office. Exuding an air of Olympian superiority, Barack Obama allowed much of the Middle East to be reduced to rubble, while framing a nuclear treaty with Iran whose flaws are recognised by even its staunchest supporters.

Paralysed by his failure to follow through on the “red line” he set for Bashar al-Assad, he created a vacuum that invited Russia's resurgence as a regional military power, while standing impotently by as the Syrian tragedy unfolded.

Nor did Obama rise above indecision in dealing with China. And on international trade he was scarcely better. Placing greater priority on climate change, he steadfastly refused to spend political capital on rebuilding support in his own party for an open trading system or on preventing the Doha Round from becoming the first multilateral trade negotiations to crumble, as they did in 2016.

But no one could dispute Obama's skills when sanctimonious rhetoric was required. While struggling to communicate with the Democrats' traditional blue-collar constituency, he had a natural rapport with Europe's political elite, who have elevated euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness to an art form.

Little wonder then that during his presidency the US and the EU formed such a powerful choir lauding the “liberal international order” they were doing so much to discredit.

That Trump is cut from a different cloth is obvious. Temperamentally, his attraction is to the strongmen — be it Russia's Putin, Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban, or Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu — who, in nurturing a direct relationship with their base, make bluntness a crucial feature of their persona.

Their objectionable features are apparent, as is their hostility to democracy; but if they are such successful politicians it is at least partly because their message has the ring of truth. So too with Trump. Who, for example, could dispute Trump's claim that the Europeans “free ride” on America's defence spending? After all, since Lyndon Baines Johnson in 1966, every US president has deplored Europe's refusal to shoulder its share of the military burden.

The difference is that Trump has convinced the Europeans that his threats are credible, with the result that the latest opinion polls show rising public support for greater defence spending, even in Germany.

Equally with China. When the Clinton administration approved China's accession to the World Trade Organisation, it claimed China would speedily and permanently liberalise its trade and investment regime. Instead, under President Xi Jinping, China has veered into mercantilism, repeatedly breaching the rules it committed to in 2001.

As those breaches occurred, Obama filed the right complaints, as did the EU; but it is only now, in the face of Trump's punitive tariffs, that China's ruling caste has shown even the slightest willingness to consider changing course.

And so finally with Russia. As of December, Putin will be the second longest lasting ruler of Russia since the fall of the tsars, and he seems likely to remain in power for years to come; to believe global issues can be resolved without engaging with him is an infantile delusion.

Yes, Putin meddled in the US presidential election, just as the US was, and remains, heavily involved in the domestic politics of Russia's immediate neighbours.

And yes, the Democrats' incessant focus on those ham-fisted efforts riles Trump, who believes — quite understandably — that their main goal is to undermine his legitimacy. Smouldering with rage, he readily allows himself to be provoked into foolish denials.

That Trump's denials, the howls of protest they unleash and his subsequent backdowns are cringe-worthy hardly needs to be said. But it is equally certain that they are a sideshow. Ultimately, what matters is whether a working relationship is restored between the two countries, as Trump has sought to do.

Trump's instincts on those basic issues have therefore been vastly superior to those of his critics, who focus on his every slip with the spot-beam of pure hatred. To say that is not to excuse his many errors of judgment, including his misconceptions about international trade. Nor is it to minimise the myriad dangers his approach involves.

But Machiavelli was right that politics holds no safe options — only ones that are more and less unsafe. And Machiavelli was also right that the prince, if he is to protect liberty from its foes, may have to choose being feared over being loved, as love is fickle while fear endures.

That fear, however, should not be the terror of unpredictability and arbitrariness. Rather, as Machiavelli stressed, its handling demands leavening the ferocity of the lion with the cunning and intellect of the fox.

So far, Trump has shown that he knows how to be a lion. Now, as the consequences begin to be felt, he must show more of the artfulness of the fox.

The world he inherited offers him few pathways to success and many roads to failure; whether he can find the wisdom to navigate the risks that creates will determine his legacy, and our future.