



Time and Tide Wait for None: (Mis) understanding the Changing Dynamics of World Order

Richard Higgott

February 2026

THE AUTHOR



RICHARD HIGGOTT is Distinguished Professor of Diplomacy, Brussels School of Governance; Visiting Fellow, Robert Schuman Centre, European University Institute and Emeritus Professor of International Political Economy, University of Warwick.

While it was not always the case, contemporary international political analysis (IPA) tends to have a very limited shelf life in the second quarter of the 21st century. In the summer of 2025, I produced a 15,000-word report for LSE IDEAS and the Friedrich Naumann Stiftung entitled *From Globalisation to Geopolitics: The Changing Dynamics of World Order* (Higgott, 2025). Those who read it, and those present at its autumn 2025 launch events in London and Brussels were generally of the view that it was a very good analysis of the trials and tribulations facing the contemporary order. As I write this policy brief, the changing trends identified in the report remain salient; what has left it behind is the speed and magnitude of change

The dominant narrative of the dynamics driving both the thinking about, and practice of, world order has changed dramatically. Put simply, when we talk about world order we are now predominantly interested in geopolitics and security, and only secondarily economic globalisation. The centrality of the language of globalisation that dominated the last quarter of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st has given way to a focus on the geopolitics of great power competition and strategy, and all that implies for how we now manage world order.

This discussion is not simply an academic debate but one that casts massive policy shadows over the everyday practice of world politics, impacting billions of people in their daily lives. A fairly non-controversial argument. But this argument was not developed in the academic abstract. Rather it was embedded in a comprehension of the empirical context of the behaviour of the USA, its president and the other great powers – as we moved from that brief era of unipolar US hegemony that prevailed for a couple of decades after the end of the Cold War into the immediate era where our understanding of world order needed to be fundamentally re-imagined.

Here we must resist the easy clichés of popular imagery. We are not living in, or moving toward, the age of ‘the Second Cold War’, ‘the new bipolarity’ or ‘a multipolar world’. These epithets are used too loosely. There is no managed transition from one formal order to another. We are in a turbulent interregnum of transformation, but with no promise of immediate resolution as the so-called liberal order continues to unravel. Yes, there

is a binary element to the 'post-liberal' order, and yes, it is reflected in a growing contest between the USA and China. But this contest is, at best, ill-disciplined, giving rise to a bifurcated order with permeable boundaries. There is no tight ideological bi-polar divide comparable to that of the Cold War. Players (both North and South) other than the two great powers are also now significant actors. States no longer cleave automatically to one of these two great powers. Non-great powers, especially from the now very salient – if confusing – 'Global South' are just as likely to hedge in their relationships between the great powers on an issue-by-issue basis as they are to bandwagon or balance – instinctively or ideologically – with one or the other majors.

So far so good. This picture was emerging prior to the return of Donald Trump to the presidency of the USA in 2025. But the 47th president brought an uncertainty and rapidity of change to world order greater than initially imagined by even the most pessimistic of observers at the time of his election. Much 'taken for granted' thinking about the norms, practices and institutions of world order was being challenged. But that was last summer, and the order had not yet been shaken to its core. This new order can be characterised as a 'back to the future' moment in which Donald Trump and Xi Jinping (as revisionists) and Vladimir Putin (as a spoiler) – along with other so-called strongman leaders – play old fashioned transactional great power geopolitics as they go about their business of trying to consolidate their respective spheres of influence. Donald Trump's presence and behaviour make him the newest member of that band of 'strongman leaders', changing the conduct of international relations and diplomacy.¹

BUT THAT WAS THEN

So, at a general level, the 2025 report was indeed sound. It was couched in deep, respectable, and cautious scholarly analysis. But that was the very essence of its weakness. As a mode of analysis, this was far too conservative. The report simply did not stand the test of time. On the observation of Trump 2.0 the report failed to reflect just how radical his regime might become. It assumed the old order was indeed in crisis but not, with the necessary reforms, beyond salvation, but it was wrong: The old order *is dead*. If Putin and Xi's goal had been to undermine trust in the United States on the world stage and end a US-dominated Western rules-based order, they needed to do nothing other than stand back while President Trump simply pursued his reckless agenda. He did not simply do this; to use the sadly popular American epithet, he 'doubled down' on it. His behaviour, short of that of the 20th century fascist leaders, is without precedent.

¹ Strongman leadership is mostly studied historically; see Rachman (2022) and Ghat (2020). Little attempt has been made in the contemporary international relations literature to study it psychologically. See also Higgott and Reid (2020).

The death of the order was confirmed at the 21-23 January 2026 Davos meeting, the zenith of Trump's foreign policy denouement to date. Backed up by his behaviour of the previous three months – notably the intervention in Venezuela and the bombing of the 'drug traffickers' – and his constantly disparaging and humiliating approach to trans-Atlantic allies – captured in the rhetoric of the Greenland bullying, the increasingly erratic recourse to tariffs and the highly personalised nay saying of NATO and its members – Trump's Davos speech effectively put a torch to any residual trust European leaders might have had in the US. Notwithstanding that Trump blinked on the question of Greenland, the European leaders' response to his peevish and rebarbative behaviour towards them has seen their strongest push back and policy recalibration to date.

Perhaps the report's saving grace lies in the fact that its suggestions for the future were nicely captured in the presentation by the poster-child of Davos 2026, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney. Moving beyond his dark theme of 'Rupture', Carney went on to look at what we might call the 'great power alternatives' to world order to be found in the potential of 'middle power' plurilateral coalition building, counterbalancing and hedging – as opposed to traditional band wagoning with the great powers. The recognition of the potential of a Europe less wedded to the trans-Atlantic alliance, the role of both traditional and developed middle powers such as Australia, Canada, the Nordics, South Korea and Japan and the powerful 'swing states' of the Global South (India, Brazil, South Africa, Indonesia, etc) was where the future organisation of world order lay for Carney and it was also where the future lay in the IDEAS/Naumann Stiftung Report.

But let me end with a cautionary note. Such an approach might temper the (white) nationalism and isolationism (note the withdrawal from 66 international organisations) of Donald Trump's USA. And it might be a second springtime for the idea of the 'middle power' in the theory and practice of international relations.² But we have been here before. After the end of the Cold War, we set great store for several years in the potentially beneficial role of the 'good international citizenship' of middle powers only for it to fall by the wayside until the last couple of years. Of course, such argumentation will also be subject to the vicissitudes of time but perhaps with a longer shelf life than six months. ■

2 The popularity of the concept of middle power is largely journalistic. It has waxed and waned since the end of the Cold War. For an analysis of its resurgence, see Shinn, Alden and Higgott (2026). Tellingly, a book I co-authored over 30 years ago (A. F. Cooper, Richard Higgott and Kim Nossal, *Relocating Middle Powers: Australia and Canada in an Evolving World Order*, Vancouver: UBC Press, 1993) has some 1200 citations since first published. The largest annual count of those citations came in 2025!

REFERENCES

- Ghiat, R. B. (2020) *Strongmen: How They Rise, How They Succeed, How They Fail*. Profile Books.
- Higgott, R. (2025) *From Globalisation to Geopolitics: The Changing Dynamics of World Order and their Implications for the EU*. LSE IDEAS. Available at: <https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/publications/Research-Reports/From-Globalisation-to-Geopolitics-The-Changing-Dynamics-of-World-Order-and-their-Implications-for-the-EU>.
- Higgott, R. and Reid, T. (2023) 'Strongman Leadership and Limits to International Cooperation', *Global Policy*, 14 (3), pp. 451-63. Available at: <https://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/articles/global-governance/strongman-leadership-and-limits-international-cooperation>.
- Rachman, G. (2022) *The Age of the Strongman: How the Cult of the Leader Threatens Democracy Around the World*. Penguin Books.
- Shinn, J., Alden, C. and Higgott, R. (2026) 'Re-imagining middle powers in an age of global transformation', *Global Policy* (in press and forthcoming).



THE LONDON SCHOOL
OF ECONOMICS AND
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■

A Unique Programme in Strategy Designed for Decision Makers

LSE IDEAS, a centre for the study of international affairs, brings together academics and policy-makers to think strategically about world events.

This one-year **EXECUTIVE MASTERS PROGRAMME** is at the heart of that endeavour. While studying in a world-leading university you will be able to learn from top LSE academics and senior policy practitioners.

The programme will sharpen your ability to challenge conventional thinking, explore new techniques for addressing risk and threats, and coach you in devising effective strategies to address them.

Residential and non-residential options allow students to learn while holding demanding positions in the public, private and non-governmental sectors.

Right from the first week I was able to apply the lessons I had learnt to our operational and policy work and to coach my teams to look at issues differently.

– **Dame Karen Pierce DCMG**
UK Special Envoy to the
Western Balkans, Former
UK Ambassador to the
United States

CONTACT US

ideas.strategy@lse.ac.uk

+44 (0)20 7955 6526
lse.ac.uk/ideas/exec



LSE IDEAS is the LSE's foreign policy think tank. Through sustained engagement with policymakers and opinion-formers, IDEAS provides a forum that informs policy debate and connects academic research with the practice of diplomacy and strategy.

The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not represent those of the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) or LSE IDEAS. This publication is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, the author(s) and LSE IDEAS should be credited, with the date of the publication. While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the material therein, the author(s) and/or LSE IDEAS will not be liable for any loss or damages incurred through the use of this publication..

LSE IDEAS

Floor 9, Pankhurst House
1 Clement's Inn, London
WC2A 2AZ

+44 (0)20 7107 5619
ideas@lse.ac.uk
lse.ac.uk/ideas