ROB DE WIJK

AMERICA AND US

HOW TRUMP'S REVOLUTION CAN MAKE EUROPE STRONGER

Uitgeverij Balans

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Foreword

At the beginning of 2025, in the daily international affairs podcast I co-host, I was asked what my predictions for that year would be. They were obvious: 2025 would revolve around Trump and his struggle against China. At the very least, we would have a repeat of what we had seen during his earlier term in office. The second Trump administration would also be better prepared and more consistent in pursuing what Trump himself did and didn't want. Trump's second administration would therefore have greater consequences than his first. But I too was surprised by how the 47th president went on to change the world.

In fact, I was outraged: the second Trump administration targeted not only China but Europe too. That was very strange. Normally, an American president confronting autocratic regimes such as China strengthens ties with like-minded democratic allies.

But Trump did exactly the opposite. He launched an attack on the European Union, saw European radical-right politicians as his allies and displayed clear sympathy for Vladimir Putin. By suspending his support for Ukraine, he played into the Russian president's hands.

No American president has ever betrayed his allies so thoroughly. In one fell swoop, the liberal world order that America itself created eighty years ago ended. As a result, Europe lost the foundations of its post-war prosperity and

security, creating a historically unprecedented situation.

How Europe should respond is the most important, perhaps even existential, geopolitical question it has faced since the Second World War. This book seeks to answer that question.

Introduction

Do you need an economist, a geopolitical expert, an America-watcher or a psychiatrist to explain the behaviour of the 47th president of the United States? One thing is certain: anyone who watches old television footage of a young Donald J. Trump will see that, as far back as the 1980s, he was already convinced that the rest of the world was trying to bleed his country dry. Just take a look at the 2 September 1987 issue of *The New York Times*. *The Washington Post* or *The Boston Globe* on that date will do as well. Trump spent 93.000 dollars on full-page adverts criticising Ronald Reagan's foreign policy. That same day, he was interviewed by Larry King on his influential CNN talk show. His words then are literally his words now: the world is laughing at us because other countries make us pay for their protection and give nothing in return. We Americans can't buy anything in countries like Japan, while over here they can buy up one thing after the other.

'It's ridiculous,' the real-estate developer thundered. It had to change. Nearly forty years later, he had his chance.

The way he went about it was, to put it mildly, unorthodox. Earlier presidents, such as Franklin D. Roosevelt, had also issued around a hundred executive orders in their first days, but the way Trump did it was new. By deliberately using them to create chaos, he tried to tear down the existing order so that he could build a new one on its ruins. The chaos was so great and his conduct so strange that I received emails from listeners and viewers suggesting that, rather than a psychiatrist, I should ask a developmental psychologist for an inter-

pretation. One email even included attachments meant to show that Trump had never matured beyond the level of a ten-year-old.

I prefer to interpret things from within my own discipline: international relations, and geopolitics in particular. In this book I will try to examine, from that perspective, what the consequences of Trump's policies will be for us Europeans. It may sound rather harsh, but what Americans do in their own country is up to them. Our problem is that when America changes, we have to adapt. Whether we want to or not.

That adaptation will have to be of historically unprecedented proportions. To understand why, we must go back to the birth of the world order as it existed until 20 January 2025. The impulse for that world order was given in 1941, when the American president Roosevelt and the British prime minister Winston Churchill met in the deepest secrecy between August 9 and 12 in Placentia Bay, Newfoundland. The British travelled on the battleship HMS Prince of Wales; the Americans arrived on the cruiser USS Augusta. Aboard these ships, a conference took place that would determine the course of history.

It was 1941, the Second World War had only just begun, and both leaders wanted to discuss how they could cooperate to counter the danger posed by Hitler. They also discussed what the world should look like after the war.

What matters for this book is that the two leaders reached agreement on the Atlantic Charter. In it, Roosevelt and Churchill set out their principles. Both countries would not seek territorial expansion and declared themselves opposed to territorial changes without the consent of the peoples concerned. They declared that they would respect the peoples' choice of government and wanted rights and self-government restored where these had been taken away by force. In doing so, they made clear that Hitler's conquests would not be allowed to stand.

Interestingly, both leaders declared that all countries should have access to raw materials on equal terms. They called for economic conditions that would bring greater prosperity to all, endorsed free access to the world's seas for all countries and supported the creation of a permanent global security order. On 24 September 1941, the principles of the charter were accepted at the London Conference by several European countries, including Belgium, Luxembourg, Greece, the Netherlands and the Soviet Union.

But after the war, the communist Soviet Union developed into an opponent of the West and could no longer subscribe to the principles of the charter. This left America as the unchallenged leader of the liberal world order. During the Cold War, America was seen by like-minded countries of the 'Western bloc' as the 'leader of the Western world'.

Placentia Bay also marked a profound change in the balance of power. Thanks to the first industrial revolution, which began in Great Britain at the end of the eighteenth century, the country had developed into a formidable economic and military superpower. But that began to change at the beginning of the twentieth century. New industrial powers emerged and the immense British Empire slowly crumbled. The centre of the next industrial revolution moved to America, where mass production took off. What remained was a 'special relationship' with America, a term Churchill first used in a speech in 1946. The term captured what Placentia Bay had in effect marked: the peaceful transfer of power from the British Empire to America.

This was remarkable because geopolitical shifts in power are often accompanied by violence. Harvard professor Graham Allison studied sixteen major geopolitical shifts for his book *Destined for War*. Twelve of them degenerated into wars. The transfer of power from the British to the Americans pro-

ceeded peacefully because it was a voluntary transfer within the 'family' of Western countries. The *Pax Britannica*, which began after the victory over Napoleon on 18 June 1815, definitively made way for the *Pax Americana*.

After the Second World War, the United States became a superpower that protected the peace and prosperity of the 'Free World'. Nearly all West European countries, as well as countries such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand, belonged to that Free World. They supported liberal economic and political values. Later, non-Western countries such as Japan and South Korea joined as well. As a result, it became less a Western world order than a liberal one.

Eighty years later, on 10 June 2021, the American president Joe Biden and the British prime minister Boris Johnson updated the Atlantic Charter to the new era. The world had changed profoundly over eight decades. Climate change and China's rise were now high on the agenda. In his book, Allison wondered whether the current shift in power from America to China would also proceed peacefully. This seemed unlikely because, unlike the United Kingdom and the United States before, the two sides now had conflicting outlooks. Like the Soviet Union before it, autocratic and state-capitalist China rejected the liberal order. This made China not only an economic and military adversary but also an ideological one. President Biden saw this and wanted to strengthen ties with allies. One of his initiatives was the 'Summit for Democracy', a series of partly virtual meetings that took place from 2021 into 2024 to unite democracies against autocracies. This was a logical step in a world undergoing rapid geopolitical change.

Biden's New Atlantic Charter was signed during the G7 summit in Cornwall. The agreement was meant to reaffirm transatlantic cooperation, which had been strained during

the presidency of Biden's predecessor, Donald Trump. The charter once again promised to protect democratic principles and international institutions and to adapt these institutions and international law so as to strengthen cooperation. This included respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as a renewed commitment to collective security, including nuclear deterrence and NATO.

THE LIBERAL WORLD ORDER

In the decades between the original Atlantic Charter and its 2021 successor, what became known as the liberal world order was gradually built. We now need to delve a little more deeply into it. The order was built on liberal political and social principles, such as respect for democracy, freedoms and human rights, as well as liberal economic principles such as the free-market economy and free trade. Over time, an international legal order also emerged, built on international institutions.

The *economic order* took shape at the Bretton Woods Conference of 1944. It was there that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank were created to regulate the world economy. Not long after, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) was created, which was replaced by the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995. These organisations were meant to increase prosperity by dismantling trade barriers. The underlying idea was that trade conflicts could lead to war.

The permanent system of *international security* referred to in the charter became the United Nations (UN). It was based on the concept of collective security. All countries would cooperate within it to safeguard international peace, security and prosperity. The victors of the Second World War were granted

a permanent seat on the Security Council and were allowed to veto decisions that would harm their interests. The UN Charter provided for 'regional arrangements' to safeguard peace and security. For Europe, this became NATO.

The UN Charter set out the rules by which countries were expected to conduct themselves and became a cornerstone of international law. Non-interference, recognition of sovereignty and the peaceful settlement of disputes became the guiding principles. They were supplemented by countless agreements and treaties, ranging from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and arms-control treaties to climate accords.

Taken together, these principles form the international legal order, designed above all to protect smaller countries from arbitrary action by great powers. Domestic rule of law is part of the liberal world order. The rule of law rests on recognition of democracy, rejection of 'might is right', and respect for minorities and dissenters. Classic European welfare states try to distribute wealth as well as possible.

The liberal world order was dominated by like-minded countries. During the Cold War, which lasted until 1989, the First World was the West, the Second World the communist sphere of influence, and the Third World the group of developing countries in the Southern Hemisphere. The First World was by far the most successful. The liberal order brought prosperity and peace. For Europe, a period of unprecedented economic development and stability began after the Second World War. America used its Marshall aid to help its allies back on their feet and demanded cooperation in order to distribute this aid more easily. In 1948, this led to the founding of the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation (OEEC), which, in turn, was the impetus for European integration that would ultimately lead to today's

European Union. The successor to the OEEC became the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), of which virtually all rich countries of the liberal world order are members.

Europe's security was guaranteed by America's commitment to NATO, founded under the 1949 Washington Treaty, or North Atlantic Treaty, as a collective defence alliance against the Soviet Union. This country had liberated Central and Eastern Europe from the Nazis during the Second World War, and supported communist takeovers there. The result was the division of Europe by what Churchill called an 'Iron Curtain' stretching 'from Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic'. This ended when the Berlin Wall fell on 9 November 1989, the Warsaw Pact was dissolved in 1991 and the Soviet Union collapsed later that year. It seemed like the definitive victory of the world order that had emerged fifty years earlier. This was a period of great optimism. War was relegated to the past and democracy had triumphed.

THE HEGEMON

After the collapse of Soviet communism, the 1990s opened a period of boundless globalisation and economic growth, with the United States as the global hegemon. It seemed a stable situation, but entirely in line with the theories of my field, it also provoked efforts to undermine American power.

From 2001 onwards, China tried to do so. It had just joined the World Trade Organization but did not abide by its rules. The Western world thought that by joining the WTO, China would become part of the liberal world order, but for Chinese leaders, economic growth took precedence over internationally accepted rules. Moreover, Western free-market dynamics did not align with Chinese leaders' views