

Trump—More Like Gorbachev Than Deng?

Revolutionary Changes in Communist and Capitalism Systems as Triggers of the World's Geopolitical Reconfiguration

Rein Müllerson

Rein Müllerson

Institut de Droit International in Geneva (2013–2015)
President

Scopus AuthorID: 8550150900

E-mail: rein1@live.co.uk

Address: C/o IHEID, Chemin Eugène-Rigot 2, Case postale 1672, CH-1211 Genève 21, Switzerland

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Since the beginning of the millennium, much has been said and written (including by the author of this article, see Müllerson, 2021; Müllerson, 2023) about global social and geopolitical changes. Yet two amazing books—by Emmanuel Todd, French historian and demographer, and Peter Turchin, Russian-born American founder of cliodynamics (an approach that combines history, sociology, anthropology, and archaeology with mathematical modeling)—provide an even deeper insight into the current developments (Todd, 2024; Turchin, 2023). These two rather different books made me see much more clearly some striking similarities, as well as differences, between

Deng Xiaoping's successful reforms in China, Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* and *glasnost* policies in the Soviet Union that ended with the collapse of the superpower, and Donald Trump's triumphal return to power in 2024. In 2019-2020, during Donald Trump's first term in office, I paid attention to some similarities between the revolutionary changes in the world's three biggest states and the roles played by their very different leaders—Deng Xiaoping, Mikhail Gorbachev, and Donald Trump (Müllerson, 2021, pp. 146-167).

Following Trump's reelection in 2024, three milestones can be delineated in the global revolutionary changes with the following dates: 1978, 1991, and 2024, associated with the names of the three leaders above. 1978 marks the beginning of China's gaining great-power status after centuries of stagnation, civil wars, and humiliation by Western nations; 1991 symbolizes the end of the bipolar world, the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the USSR, Russia's loss of great-power status, and the beginning of a short unipolar moment; and 2024 may mark, besides Russia's resuming its great-power status, the beginning of the U.S.'s transition into the category of a normal great power devoid of any exceptional standing of a "hyperpower," and the consolidation of a multipolar and polyphonic world.

RIDING THE WAVES OF HISTORY IN THE RIGHT TIME AND PLACE

Georges Malbrunot, a Grand Reporter of *Le Figaro*, in an article on Iran, quotes an anonymous Iranian intellectual who deplores that, unfortunately, President Rouhani of Iran, though a reformist leader, was "not Iranian Gorbachev; at best he could become our Deng Xiaoping" (Malbrunot, 2015). There is something disturbingly distorted in the idea that Michael Gorbachev was a more successful reformer than China's Deng Xiaoping. One needs just to compare today's China and Russia, and their respective economies and influence in the world to see the difference. Such a myopia may be explained by the dominant Western narrative asserting that there is only one correct way of life, one appropriate political and economic system—liberal democracy and free markets. The policies pursued by Deng Xiaoping of China and Michael Gorbachev of the Soviet Union not only changed the history

of their countries, but they also transformed the world's geopolitical structure. However, while the West wholeheartedly welcomed Gorbachev's policies that led to the collapse of the "evil empire," it became increasingly worried about Deng's legacy that has ultimately made China an economic superpower claiming a due place for itself under the sun.

Comparing the revolutionary situations in China before Deng, in the Soviet Union before Gorbachev, and in today's West (primarily in the United States), one should remember that the reasons for them were quite different. Communist revolutions, first in Russia and later in China, were utopian experiments of addressing real problems of their political, economic and social systems, including capitalism's consubstantial feature—the enrichment of the minority at the expense of the majority. The geopolitical factors—the First World War in the case of the Russian Empire and the Second World War in the case of China—played a catalyzing role, supportive of these experiments' "success." However, communism as a remedy against capitalism turned out to be a medication that kills the patient, though not immediately.

Violence necessary to enforce the utopian communist ideas (which were meant, according to Marx, for highly developed European societies, not for Russia or China), and the inefficiency of collectivized and centralized economies tarnished these experiments almost in the bud. To avoid something like that happening in their countries, Western elites made compromises with their oppressed majorities. Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal in America and the emergence of social democracies in Europe saved the Western world from the "specter haunting Europe."

Therefore, both revolutionary changes—evolutionary and successful, at least so far, in China and radical and unsuccessful (except for some positive consequences of the collapse of the authoritarian rule) in the Soviet Union—were seen as a natural return of the "prodigal sons" into the fold of the dominant system. This triumphant West started, with reckless confidence, expanding its way of life all over the world. However, quite soon it became clear that a great part of the world was unable or unwilling to accept it and that the two

former communist giants, while rejecting their old communist way, refused to obediently follow the only remaining superpower. In the 1990s, Russia made an attempt to become more like the West but failed miserably. The disappearance of the ideological rivals did not remove the problems of the capitalist system, but were simply obscured by the flaws in the main rival's ideology and practices.

Moreover, some of these problems were even aggravated by globalization, initially welcomed by Western, and not only Western, elites. As Daron Acemoglu, a 2024 Nobel laureate in Economics, put it succinctly: "Over time, as American democracy has increasingly fallen short of delivering on its core promises, the Democratic Party has contributed to the problem of catering to a narrow, privileged elite. To restore its own prospects and America's signature form of governance, it must return to its working-class roots" (Acemoglu, 2004). Easier said than done, particularly as the concern for the working class has been rather exceptional than natural for both U.S. political parties. In Europe, the political and economic problems, mostly self-inflicted, are even deeper.

Peter Turchin writes about four structural drivers of instability that may cause revolutionary situations: popular immiseration leading to mass mobilization potential; elite overproduction resulting in intraelite conflicts; failing fiscal health; and weakened legitimacy of the state as well as geopolitical factors. However, he stresses that "for large, powerful empires, geopolitical factors tend to be of reduced importance. Such states tend to be too big to be affected by what their neighbors do, and social breakdown within them is generated by internal forces. To borrow from Arnold Toynbee, great empires die not by murder but by suicide" (Turchin, 2023, p. 30). This is true. The Soviet Union collapsed mainly due to its internal contradictions.

China, contrary to what happened in the USSR, was able to change the course under reformist Deng Xiaoping, who not only saved the country but also created the foundation for his nation's becoming a great power on a par with the U.S. Both Deng and Gorbachev at some point understood that 'business as usual' would be disastrous to their respective countries. Professor Weiwei Zhang of Fudan University,

former Deng Xiaoping's interpreter, reminisced that after the May 1989 meeting in Beijing with Mikhail Gorbachev, the Chinese paramount leader had, in the circle of his advisers, characterized the Soviet leader as naïve and weak.

There are reasons to agree with this assessment, although had Gorbachev been tougher and less humane, the result would have been the same, but much bloodier. So, what works for China does not necessarily work for Russia. Gorbachev understood that the Soviet political and economic model was not viable and had to be reformed. In that he bore a resemblance to Deng Xiaoping, who had come to a similar conclusion about the Chinese system a decade earlier. But here the similarities end.

Deng knew what he wanted and slowly but surely, sometimes using ruthless means and methods (e.g., pitilessly suppressing the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests), moved towards the goal of making China great again. Although the Tiananmen Square protestors' desire for democracy and liberties may have been genuine, it was also naïve. Even if the authorities had tried to satisfy the students' demands, the chances for a liberal democracy in China would have equalled to zero. Yet one thing would have been certain: it would have heralded the end of the Chinese economic reforms and growth.

Gorbachev, on the contrary, rather naïvely believed in the possibility of Swedish-style socialism in the Soviet Union and in the sincerity of American promises not to move NATO an inch to the east. In the 1990s, Gorbachev's nemesis Boris Yeltsin continued his predecessor's policies in the "new Russia," creating a country ruled by oligarchs, where the majority of the people became even poorer than they had been under the Soviet system.

Peter Turchin is right suggesting that both Chinese and Soviet economic, social and political crises as well as Deng's effective reforms and Gorbachev's unsuccessful attempts to save the country were dictated mainly by internal factors. Similarly, Trump's current efforts to make America great again is a response to American domestic problems. However, all these processes show that when a big and powerful (even if potentially) country goes through a deep

crisis affecting all societal strata, then not only its neighbors, but the whole world will be affected. This reminds me of the title of the book by French diplomat and intellectual Alain Peyrefitte: *When China Awakes... the World Shall Tremble* (Quand la Chine s'éveillera... Le monde tremblera¹) (Peyrefitte, 1973). Thus, the world's geopolitical picture will no longer be the same.

Of course, a major change of society to the extent that also has global effects requires not only an extraordinary (not necessarily in the positive sense of the word) person at the helm of the state but also a big enough country to experiment with.

Donald Trump's presidency shook both the country and the world. Although the American economy during his first term was doing fine, the growth rates were much higher than in Europe and the number of the unemployed were much lower than in the Old Continent (until COVID-19 hit the world), the beneficiaries were mainly those who had always been better off. Nevertheless, Donald Trump's coming to power proved useful in that it exposed the controversies and antagonisms of American society. Similar things are happening in Europe, which shows that Donald Trump was not so much the product of the current turmoil but rather a catalyst that accelerated the arrival of the unavoidable crisis that may (or may not) be followed by recovery.

Trump has indeed deeply disturbed the anthill of American domestic and international politics so that not only Democrats but also many Republicans, particularly during his first term, rebelled against their President. This infight has revealed that there have never been significant differences between Democratic and Republican elites. Hillary Clinton, epitomizing the Democrats' corrupt politics, lost the 2016 presidential election not because of some foreign interference but because the rift between the political and economic elites, on the one hand, and the American people, on the other, had become all too obvious. Externally, she was a perfect example of 'liberal interventionists' who differ too little from hawkish 'neocons' who were running the show under the Republican presidency of George W. Bush. Therefore, Barack Obama's "enlightened" worldview

¹ These words are attributed to Napoleon Bonaparte.

is closer to Donald Trump's basic instinctive approach to many foreign policy issues (though not all) than to Hillary Clinton's foreign policy preferences.

Trump's unpredictable and erratic foreign policy steps made it clear to some U.S. allies that blindly following the self-proclaimed leader of the "free world" is not necessarily good for them. Trump's politically incorrect tweets and statements forced those who had fought him on the Capitol Hill and in the liberal media to leave behind their own political correctness, which has, like Orwell's doublespeak, so far rather effectively covered the true face of American elites.

Peter Turchin writes in his 2023 book: "To understand why Donald Trump became the forty-fifth president of the United States, we should also pay less attention to his personal qualities and maneuvers and more to the deep social forces that propelled him to the top. Trump was like a small boat caught on the crest of a mighty tidal wave" (Turchin, 2023, pp. 13-14). Turchin explains that this tidal wave is not at all unique for the U.S.: "As our model predicts, the extra wealth flowing to the elites (to the proverbial '1 percent', but even more so to the top 0,001 percent) eventually created trouble for the wealth holders (and power holders) themselves. The social pyramid has grown top-heavy. We now have too many 'elite aspirants' competing for a fixed number of positions in the upper echelons of the politics and business. In our model, such conditions have a name: elite overproduction. Together with popular immoderation, elite overproduction, and the intraelite conflicts that it has engendered, has gradually undermined our civic cohesiveness, the sense of national cooperation without which states quickly rot from within" (Ibid, p. xii). As Tucker Carlson wrote in his 2018 book with a self-explanatory title *Ship of Fools: How a Selfish Ruling Class Is Bringing America to the Brink of Revolution*, "happy countries don't elect Donald Trump president. Desperate ones do" (quoted by Turchin, 2023, p. 216). This could also be said about the 2024 election, since the Democrats have learned nothing from their 2016 defeat.

I wrote before that it was possible that Trump's presidency would be a blip in American history and things would return to 'business as usual.' Hardly so. Although Trump's presidency will not extend for more than

the four years allocated to him by the voters, his legacy could be felt for many years ahead (Müllerson, 2021, p.159). In this respect, one would wonder what Henry Kissinger had in mind when in the summer 2018 interview to *The Financial Times* he somewhat enigmatically opined: “I think Trump may be one of those figures in history who appears from time to time to mark the end of an era and to force it to give up its old pretences. It doesn’t necessarily mean that he knows this, or that he is considering any great alternative. It could just be an accident” (The Financial Times, 2018). These words of the grand consigliere of American diplomacy made me reflect on whether Donald Trump would be an American Deng or an American Gorbachev. In my opinion, the role of the 45th and 47th U.S. president and his legacy in history may be rather like that of Michael Gorbachev. While Gorbachev marked the end of the Soviet era, Deng also set in motion processes leading to a new era for China and, eventually, for the whole world.

Trump, being a ruthless, wily businessman, has nevertheless been rather naïve in politics and ignorant in international affairs. And this, notwithstanding his some rather good instincts, could be due, at least partly, to the very fact of being a novice in politics, particularly in world affairs. What is NATO for, if the Cold War was declared to be over? Why to continue seeing Russia as an existential threat, while it is China that is threatening the American dominance? Are uncontrolled migration and the rise of Islamist extremism not becoming global problems?

Of course, foreign policy based on personal instincts has its flip side. If these were only the erratic decisions and tweets of the U.S. President that disturb the American and the whole Western mainstream, Trump’s impact would not be so great. Trump’s action and statements were amplified by the feverish hostility of his opponents in Congress and mainstream media. To get rid of their hated enemy, they were ready to tear down their own house. Moreover, in their frenzy they did not care about endangering international peace. Already in 2018 American political scientist Micah Zencoff wrote in the article *Democrats Will Regret Becoming the Anti-Russia Party*: “When a political party increases its animus towards a foreign country—believing that this will enhance its own popularity—it introduces second-order effects

that can manifest themselves years later. It creates a voting bloc of Americans who become socialized to hate a foreign government and, by extension, its citizens. It reduces the motivations and complexities of that government to a simplified caricature of anti-Americanism or just plain evil. More broadly, it engenders hostility between the United States and foreign countries, which makes cooperation over shared problems difficult and rapprochement unimaginable” (Zenco, 2018).

Reading these words in 2018, I hoped that this dangerous infight might clear the ground for new people, who might adopt policies, both for the country and the world, that would differ from those of Donald Trump as well as from those of his fieriest opponents amongst the American political and media elites. Obviously, four years of his presidency were too short a period to mark an end of an era.

Donald Trump, like Gorbachev, can, to use Henry Kissinger’s insightful observation, “mark the end of an era and to force it to give up its old pretences.” However, like Gorbachev, he has not shown any new vision that would meet the aspirations of American society, which indeed has a great potential. Like Gorbachev, Trump does not know what he is doing and what his legacy would be.

Of course, whatever Trump’s legacy, the United States will not disintegrate like the Soviet Union. The USSR’s collapse had much deeper causes than Gorbachev’s naïvety or weakness. However, as Gorbachev cleared the way for the rebirth of Russia and reconfigured the geopolitical map of the world that had outlived its “use by date,” so Trump’s policies may accelerate the coming of a world where a balance between different centers—America, China, Europe, India, Russia, and potentially some others—will, sooner rather than later, replace the historical anomaly where one center seeks to control the whole world. A world without America, China or Russia is impossible, while a world against any one of them is suicidal.

RETURNING INTERNATIONAL LAW TO REPLACE THE RULES-BASED ORDER

Wolfgang Friedmann of Columbia University, one of the 20th century’s greatest legal minds, predicted in the 1960s a trend towards bifurcation

of international law into the law of coexistence, the law of cooperation, and the law of integration (Friedmann, 1964). Whereas the first corresponds to the traditional inter-state international society where states, their sovereignty and independence from outside interference prime, the latter would correspond more to what Friedmann believed to be an emerging world society where not only or not even so much states but also individuals with their rights and various other entities, including supranational ones, would be influential actors. Since then the development of international law has indeed diverged.

In Europe, instead of international law we have the EU law—the law of integration. And human rights are no longer—and not only in Europe but across the world—a matter exclusively within states' domestic jurisdiction. We even have international criminal courts and tribunals, although their functioning has so far shown that mechanisms that work rather well within states have relatively limited, sometimes even distorted, effects when transplanted into the domain of international relations.

We live in a world that has become Lockean in some places but remains Hobbesian in many other regions, or, as Robert Kagan has written, "Americans are from Mars, Europeans are from Venus" (Kagan, 2003). If in Europe the law of integration, even supranational law, has indeed emerged, the wider—Hobbesian—world where men from Mars act still needs stricter observance of the law of coexistence with its principles of respect of sovereignty of states notwithstanding differences of their political and economic systems, non-use of force, and non-interference in domestic affairs. The latter principle seems to be the most important since its violations have often led to the use of military force either as a follow-up to insufficient interference or with the aim of countering such interference.

Today, notwithstanding Kantian hopes prevailing at the end of the Cold War, the world is more and more revealing its Hobbesian characteristics. Maybe, instead of following Kantian instincts it would have been better at the turn of the centuries to concentrate our efforts on taming Hobbesian reflexes. In terms of international law, it would have meant that those principles and

norms that belong to the so-called law of coexistence, to use Wolfgang Friedmann's terminology, such as respect of sovereign equality of states, non-use of force, and non-interference in domestic affairs should retain and even reinforce their role. For many decades, the West has used and abused human rights concerns by interfering in domestic affairs of states, whose internal political or economic systems and particularly whose role in international relations were seen in the West as contrary to Western interests, without having any positive impact on human rights in target states.

Since the end of the bipolar world, such interferences have not only intensified but have become legitimized as 'humanitarian interventions' or as a means of 'promoting democracy.' And once again with no positive results. In February 2014, U.S. Senator John McCain expressed American support for the opponents of the Ukrainian authorities, while then Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and Geoffrey Pyatt, the then U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine, discussed in a telephone conversation, that was later leaked, the composition of Ukraine's new government. It all ended very sadly for Ukraine. However at the end of 2024, European diplomats, once again, participated in opposition rallies on the streets of Tbilisi against the government of Georgia, and the European Union incited the rebels to continue their protests.

I believe that not all is lost. We should work towards a realistically achievable state of international relations where no state, or a group of states, would impose its visions and values on the whole world. The main role of international law should be the prevention and resolution of misunderstandings, tensions and conflicts between states without trying to impose uniformity on differing societies. This simply does not work. Moreover, it is counterproductive.

True, arrogance and recklessness of a superpower (and especially a hyperpower) cannot be tamed or controlled only by international law. There has to be another superpower or a coalition of great powers to bring to senses a triumphalist superpower running amok. Already in 2004, Martti Koskenniemi noted that "to apply Schmitt's description of the new *Nomos* [law] to the behavior of the Western powers in Kosovo and Iraq, the 50-year interlude may be explained by the Cold

War having prevented a full-scale moralization of international politics. Ironically, then, for a century, the Soviet Union may have taken the role of the Schmittian Katechon—the restrainer of the coming of the Antichrist” (Koskeniemi, 2004, p. 493).

One of the effects, or side-effects if you will, of the relative balance of power was certainly that it put limits on the use of force in international relations, and not only between the two superpowers. The emerging multipolarity would not only create better conditions for the functioning of international law and relatively peaceful world. It could also be beneficial for the power that has tried to perpetuate its hegemony. Aris Roussinos is right when he observes: “Just as the bipolar order of the Cold War world, by restraining liberalism’s inherent tendencies to radicalization and hubris, made the Western world safe for a tempered and moderate liberalism, so may the multipolar world we have entered save liberals from their own excesses. Beset by confident rivals abroad, and by the disenchantment of their voters at home, liberals will once again have to learn restraint” (Roussinos, 2024).

With any luck, Donald Trump’s second round in power may contribute to cooling down the British and other European leaders’ missionary zeal, although it is not so much the personality of the U.S. 47th President that matters as the revolutionary situation in the United States and the changing geopolitical and geo-economic configuration of the world.

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