

Danger is lurking in all corners of the globe



New US national security adviser John Bolton. Picture: Oliver Contreras/SIPA USA

The world is experiencing more dangerous geopolitical tensions, across more regions than at any time since the Cold War ended three decades ago. The informed view in those heady days was that liberal democracy was spreading to every corner of the planet. A new era of global peace and cooperation was dawning. But it has not quite worked out that way.

Instead, as the outgoing US National Security Advisor, Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster said in his final speech before departing his post, we are once again “engaged in a fundamental contest between our free and open societies and closed and repressive systems. These revisionist powers are attempting to undermine our values, our institutions and way of life”.

The countries to which McMaster was referring are clear. Russia, where Vladimir Putin is desperate to preserve his autocratic rule by aggressively pushing back against the democratic world. And a rising China, which uses coercion more subtly to get its way and to generate economic growth whilst maintaining totalitarian control.

McMaster’s description equally applies to a growing number of disruptive regional powers. They are often aligned with Russia, in the case of Iran, Syria and, increasingly, Turkey, or China, like North Korea. It also encompasses regimes corroding the democratic world from within, such as Viktor Orbán’s Hungary.

The blame for the danger and destruction these regimes are causing primarily lies with them. But the circumstances they are exploiting to spread their malign influence are partly a product of the West’s mistakes, complacent greed and abdication of responsibility.

The situation opened up by this failure of Western leadership increasingly

resembles a free-for-all. Rising powers and brutal tyrants are seizing the opportunity to pursue their own narrow, sometimes even personal, interests whilst threatening global security.

As so often, perhaps the most alarming current flashpoint is the Middle East. The West was discouraged by its difficulties and failures in Afghanistan and Iraq. Consequently, it failed to support the region's people adequately when they rose up during the 'Arab Spring' against the dictators who had oppressed them for decades.

In some countries, notably Egypt, the outcome was a slide back into the grimly authoritarian governance from which they briefly emerged. Syria, meanwhile, imploded, creating a chamber of horrors that is perilously close to generating a much wider conflict.

It is easy to forget now, after the rise and fall of ISIS and the endless atrocities committed by the Assad dictatorship, with Russian and Iranian connivance, that the Syrian conflict began as a peaceful uprising by its people. Tragically, the time for intervening to aid their success has long passed. The challenge now is to impose some essential rules and order, whilst avoiding a widespread war.

The long-established laws of war exist to prevent already horrific situations degenerating into outright barbarism. These rules have repeatedly been broken in Syria by Assad and his Russian backers. They have consistently and deliberately targeted civilians, hospitals and medical personnel, using banned chemical weapons in the process.

Military action by the West and its allies to enforce these international laws and protect civilians is overdue, justified and essential. Closely targeted bombing raids on Syrian government and military installations will reduce their capacity to commit more atrocities. It should be made explicitly clear that more actions will follow if Assad's breaches of international law persist. We must prevent further war crimes in Syria and re-establish the rules before they become totally discredited.

Back channels should be used to inform Russia about these impending attacks. As happened with the very limited bombing of a Syrian air base President Trump ordered last year after one of Assad's chemical weapons attacks on his own people, the Russians will step aside. For all its bluster, Russia knows direct

conflict with the militarily superior West would be disastrous for it.

Having re-established a position of strength and some boundaries, the West and its allies would be better-placed to pursue intensively a Syrian peace agreement with the other international parties involved. Everyone, including Russia, shares an interest a settlement, however imperfect, in preference to all-out war.

A peace deal is also essential to prevent the wider regional conflict that is close to erupting. Israel sees itself as a nation that has always had to fight for its survival. There is no circumstance in which Israel will tolerate having heavily armed forces from Iran dedicated to its destruction entrenched on its borders with Syria.

Israel has already killed a number of Iranian military personnel during raids against military bases in Syria. At some point the Iranians will feel compelled to react. A solution urgently needs to be found before this escalation occurs and draws in Iran's other regional rivals, such as Saudi Arabia.

Achieving an agreement on Syria will be difficult. It may become impossible if the Trump administration rips up the nuclear agreement with Iran. Doing so will prove that the hardliners in Iran who opposed the deal were right to argue that Washington's word is worthless. They will then argue that the US cannot be trusted enough to warrant making any other agreements with it.

Tearing up the Iran nuclear deal will have a similarly negative effect on the prospects for an agreement with North Korea. Why would the North Koreans enter into an accord, if the Americans have just shown that they might renege on it a couple of years later? There are strong suspicions that the North Koreans have no real intention of pursuing a denuclearisation agreement anyway. The experience of the long-running 'Six Party Talks', which collapsed in 2009, is instructive. Back then, the North Koreans would superficially engage in negotiations whenever they needed time to make progress on their nuclear programme or relief from sanctions pressure. Once they had secured what they needed, they would simply break off the talks.

Pyongyang and its Chinese backers may see the forthcoming summit with the US as an opportunity to exploit Trump's inexperience and vanity to prompt him to withdraw American forces defending South Korea and Japan. In return, they would offer some minor concessions on the North's nuclear programme that Trump could dress up as a victory.

This strategy would be in keeping with China's methodical expansion of its influence over East Asia. It is engaged in a constant process of seizing territory in the South China Sea, whilst cajoling and threatening other nations in the region to bring them into its orbit and diminish Western influence. In the case of US allies such as Taiwan and Japan this strategy is fraught with risk. Any miscalculation could trigger a conflict.

While the forthcoming US-North Korean talks are preferable to the headlong rush to war that was building up until a few months ago, their other potential danger lies in Trump's reaction if he feels he is being strung along. His new National Security Advisor, John Bolton, has long advocated military action against North Korea. Bolton would be happy to see the talks fail and to stoke Trump's fire and fury instead.

As if the many troubles around the world were not enough, the West is also facing threats from within. Governments such as those in Poland and Hungary are corroding the democratic standards of Europe. The "illiberal democracy" touted by Hungarian President Viktor Orbán curbs judicial independence, shuts down free media, harasses opposition, stirs up racism and eliminates minority rights. As such, it is not democracy at all, 'illiberal' or otherwise, and it breaches the requirements for EU membership.

This review of current global threats is far from exhaustive either. Others such as extremist Islamist terrorism are temporarily in abeyance due to the weakening of Al-Qaeda and ISIS. But the danger has not been definitively ended and will resurge unless its underlying causes are addressed.

Fiendishly complicated though it is to deal with all of these problems at once, solutions and tools to manage many of them are at hand for the West. Terrorism is essentially a particularly potent crime problem. Painstaking, well-resourced police and intelligence work is the best way to tackle it, supported by occasional surgical military strikes against the leaders of terrorist organisations. Long-term solutions lie in improving the political stability, economies and education systems of the regions where it thrives, such as parts of the Middle East and West Africa.

Orbán and his cronies rely heavily on EU funding to sustain their countries' economies and fill their own pockets. Such funding can be stopped. Ultimately, suspension from the EU must be considered for countries that deliberately flout

the membership rules for years on end.

Putin's Russia claims to want greater respect as a global power and for its interests to be taken into account. It can have that via its membership of the UN Security Council and revamping of consultative mechanisms like the NATO-Russia Council. It can also be regularly reassured that the West is not pursuing regime change in Moscow. That is something it could not directly achieve anyway, even if it intended to.

But Moscow cannot have these things at the price of bullying its neighbours, destructive invasions of other countries, perverting our elections and endangering our citizens by launching assassination attempts with radioactive and chemical materials on our streets.

Compelling Russia to stop those acts of aggression requires deterrence. Traditional military and modern cyber defences need to be boosted to make clear that any action will be met with a firm response. But the Kremlin kleptocracy's biggest weakness is financial. Extensive sanctions freezing and seizing the dubious wealth Putin and his cronies stash around the world is the best way to influence their behaviour.

China shares Russia's neurotic fear of interference in its internal affairs and the pair are often aligned. But China is a different matter. Rather than disrupting the global order, China seeks more influence over it, proportionate to its new weight and wealth. Accommodating a big rising power has proved difficult throughout history. But it can be achieved through patient and meticulous diplomatic engagement to build confidence and understanding and avert confrontations before they occur.

Rather than a lack of means to tackle many of these challenges, the West's biggest problems are willpower and leadership capacity. Previous mistakes have caused too many to refuse to countenance military action and deterrence, even when doing nothing leads to more chaos and suffering.

Particularly in the case of Russia, too many influential Europeans are still greedily addicted to profiting from the ill-gotten wealth of oligarchs and corrupt politicians, while turning a blind eye to how this undermines our societies, economies and rule of law. Others, known in Germany as *Putinverstehers* ('Putin understanders' or 'sympathisers'), bizarrely believe the best way to deal with the

Russians' misconduct is to indulge them further.

Aside from those weakened by greed and complacency, the West is suffering from a crisis of leadership at the worst possible time. French President Macron shows promise but is inexperienced and heavily occupied with reforming France. German Chancellor Merkel is waning and her country's history means it will be a long time yet before Germany is comfortable leading international security initiatives. Most worryingly, when great statesmanship is badly needed the US and the UK can only offer Trump and the Brexiters.

As General McMaster said: "The victory of free societies is not predestined or inevitable."

The West, and its allies around the world, urgently need to rediscover the will and leadership to "advance our values and defend our way of life". Like dogs smelling fear, the planet's crackpots and despots are currently sensing weakness and running amok. The imminent danger that they will bring us all crashing down with them needs to be addressed immediately.

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Source: <http://www.theneweuropean.co.uk/top-stories/former-diplomat-paul-knott-dangers-across-the-globe-1-5473134>

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