

But has America really got all the cards?

Lord Howell of Guilford , for ten years chair of the Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, first chair of the Lords International Affairs Cttee ,and Minister of State in the Foreign Office 2010-2013, opens the crucial debate; 13.03.25- House of Lords

My Lords, I am grateful in advance to those who have kindly agreed to participate in this debate—at least, I hope I stay grateful when I hear them. I am especially looking forward to the maiden speech of the noble Lord, Lord Pitkeathley of Camden Town, which will follow immediately. We will all listen with the greatest interest, in view of his wisdom and experience.

We are at an extremely dangerous moment in history, when the issue is the survival of world order of any kind. Some of the wisest minds, not just in America but on both sides of the Atlantic and around the world, tell us we are at the edge of an abyss. One of the best-selling books in America has been Robert Kaplan's *The Coming Anarchy*. It was published more than two decades ago, but some would say this anarchy, in international affairs, has already arrived very promptly.

This is a new world in which we have to make our way, guard and protect ourselves more strongly than ever, contribute to others, set examples, define our purposes, and preserve our unity. We can forget about it all going on in faraway countries of which we know nothing; it is all very near, on our doorstep. Forget even the language of East and West, as though they were split into two halves of an orange, the idea so favoured by American academia, or the patronising concepts of North and South, developed and developing, all implicitly dividing the world between them and us—now an utterly flawed approach in this multipolar age.

How can that idea make any sense at all any longer when scores of countries, aspiring to liberal values in their own ways and not wanting to be beholden to either of the 20th-century hegemony, America or China, are not in the Atlantic West at all? They are in the East, the South and all around the world. They call themselves the neo-non-aligned, which in fact is most of the world's 191 nations, large and small. The danger to Ukraine is the danger to them. What is happening is not just a European issue, as some seem to think. What they want in this digital age is not great power bullying, but independence and freedom from being put in ideological boxes or spheres of influence. As Boutros Boutros-Ghali, the former UN Secretary-General—a man I much admired and who was much underestimated—once said, everyone needs a country to love. That is one message to guide us through the labyrinth in the digital age, in direct contrast to all the talk from a past era of the great powers fixing it, of blocs to align with, or of spheres of influence to conform to.

Forget too all the patronising talk about tilts to the Indo-Pacific, or pivots to Asia and the developing world, as though we are doing them a favour. That is the language of the past, when might was still seen as right and the West thought it was the master of the world. Forget about the historic confrontation between capitalism and socialism that much preoccupied the last century, when even Russia and China now have their own twisted forms of capitalism, even if they do not admit it. That debate is over too, and another one has begun on how to make liberal market capitalism—our sort—far more stable, far fairer and much more widely shared, and how to escape its massive unpopularity, especially among the young. Capitalism, for us, ought to be not a defeat but a matter of victory.

I believe we can compare this age with the printing press revolution of the 14th century, the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution all rolled into one—although, of course, it is coming far faster and affects a far greater number of the world's people on a far bigger scale than ever before. Among other things, it has changed the nature of international influence and pressure. We call it soft power, or some do, although, of course, it goes along with hard military power and smart power—the mix of the two. This House of Lords can claim a lot of credit for opening up this debate with our seminal report of March 2014, *Persuasion and Power in the Modern World*. It certainly seemed to have an impact on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, which promptly set up a department to supervise soft power.

We are, as a consequence of our policy blindness, still suffering from a gross underestimate of the future importance to us of the Commonwealth network: the best and largest soft-power greenhouse of all, with some of the world's fastest-growing economies among its members. This becomes the ultimate kind of association, both of peoples, professions, institutes and Governments, and of the comity of nations which a common language, with a common culture embedded within it, sustains and nourishes. No binding treaty is needed for the basic voluntary atmosphere of friendship and instruction that lies behind it.

Under past and present Governments, there has been some distinct and welcome progress in our repositioning journey—joining organisations such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, for example—although the cost of that has been getting policy with our European neighbours badly wrong. Relations with greater Europe are a neighbourhood, common-sense problem. It is plain sense that we must stay on the best possible relations with our continental neighbours—all of them. Of course we must co-operate in dozens of sensible and practical ways, as I know this Government are trying to do and we saw attempted by the previous Government—not with great success. The European Political Community, of which we are an active member—in fact one of the leading members—could prove the gateway to a thousand constructive outcomes of European co-operation without getting too bogged down again in outdated Brussels procedures.

The ingredients to make all these new relationships and alliances work are trust and mutual respect, with a strong and agreed set of rules and commitments, but that is just what has gone missing. It is as if the new strongmen of the globe—Trump is one, Putin another and Xi Jinping a third—all want different rules and methods, their own, and all with the least possible restraints on their actions. In fact, it now looks as though even America's vaunted constitutional checks have gone on holiday, as the country is led into an outright trade war by one man's say-so.

Can we protect ourselves, with all this lack of trust and respect swirling around and across the Atlantic, pulling the world we knew apart? Does America have all the cards in the Ukraine situation, as its President seems to think? Do we, for example, hold a better and friendlier set of world connection than the USA does—or shortly will, if the Trump hallmark is grabbing Greenland, kicking Mexico and trying to swallow Canada, a nation that happens to a powerful member of the Commonwealth with King Charles as its constitutional head? That is disrespect for you—that is the language we have to talk—not to say bad manners as well.

Anyway, in a networked, hyperconnected and technology-dominated world we do have some cards, and by common consent the Prime Minister has played some of them, so far, with great skill. Mr Zelensky—caught in the firing line between President Trump and Vice-President Vance—also has a card or two, although, alas, he never had the chance, in the Oval Office train crash, to play them.

The list of issues which should make America pause before pursuing a course of playing the big nation 20th-century battalion game is a long one. Many other items not listed here arise, not least that great nationhood arises from serving the world, rather than overriding or threatening it. We shall see how Mr Putin responds to President Trump's latest threat about ruining Russia. Judging by his past performance, I do not think he will accept it very well, but we will see. Maybe he sees a gain for Russia in it; maybe he will go for it. To make America great again, it must be ready to serve freedom as it did in the past. At the moment, frankly, it is being led in the opposite direction.

We are not alone in facing this central challenge of the digital age with its contradictions and its transformative powers, which continue to unfold at a great rate, but we have a role emerging from the turbulence to replace the one we are alleged to have lost in the last century, with that famous put-down remark from Dean Acheson about having

“lost an empire but not yet found a role”.

We can pioneer popular social capitalist reform, which is the underpinning of stable democracy—neither works without the other. We can help rebuild the world institutions of the last century—as we helped to build them in the first place—with the UN very much included, to address climate change, the quandary of the world as super-mass immigration takes over and other 21st-century issues, such as worldwide energy transition.

We can construct and keep in daily or hourly use a dense world network, the densest ever in the hyperconnective age—with every old link, new tie and new nation on the face of the globe, especially our fellow Commonwealth members—always being ready to assist, guide and support. We can respond to populist pressure all over the world by clear democratic reforms here that keep all who wish in constant touch with a strong and trusted parliamentary democracy at work and in detail.

We can design our defences for employing the highest technology and safeguarding the civilian order and its supply chains as never before. We can boost enormously our reserves and the linkages between the military and civilian worlds. In the 1930s we kept our reserves at around 200,000 long before the war began; they are now at 37,000. The expansion must begin.

Crisis is opportunity We are in a very advantageous position to make the best of the present upheavals, with our global links, friends and experience, providing we build on the assets bequeathed to us. If we are smart and creative, there was never such a new dawn and clear horizon, for all the world's uncertainties, and never such an open sea for a nation such as ours. I beg to move.