



Can Trump's America Still Police the World?

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By Duvvuri Subbarao

SYNOPSIS

President Donald Trump's quest to cast himself as "history's greatest peacemaker" sits uneasily with his "America First" policies that dismantled the foundations of US global leadership. His retreat from trade, alliances, and multilateral engagements undermines the very stability he seeks credit for preserving. The contradiction between his craving for the Nobel Peace Prize and his isolationist agenda exposes the limits of American exceptionalism – revealing a superpower that desires the glory of global policing without the burden of sustained global engagement.

COMMENTARY

Donald Trump didn't get the Nobel Peace Prize that he so volubly claimed he richly deserved for brokering peace around the world. To burnish his credentials for next year's award, he will probably engage in policing the world even more vigorously. But such an engagement sits at odds with his ideology of pulling America away from global trade and military alliances.

This raises two questions. How will he resolve this contradiction? And can an America retreating into isolation still muster the clout to broker peace?

The Contradiction at the Heart of Trumpism

For much of the past eight decades, the United States has been both the world's pre-eminent economic power and its self-appointed policeman. Its commitment to an open liberal order fostered a web of alliances, trade regimes and military partnerships that bound much of the world to Washington's orbit. But under Trump, that long-standing bargain is fracturing.

On the one hand, Trump's "America First" policy seeks to pull the US out of multilateral trade deals, restrict immigration, reduce foreign aid, and curtail military commitments abroad. He sees globalisation as a trap that enriches rivals and weakens American sovereignty.

On the other hand, Trump clearly relishes the idea of global grandeur – of an America indispensable to the world's stability, and of himself as the indisputable leader of that force. His obsession with the Nobel Peace Prize captures this tension perfectly. To be a global peacemaker, one must engage with the world. But his isolationist stance requires him to withdraw from the world.

That paradox will define not just his presidency but America's role in the world.

The Costs of Deglobalisation

Global policing depends on three forms of power: economic, institutional and military. Trump's America is undercutting all three.

First, by retreating from global markets – through tariffs, trade wars and threats to withdraw from institutions like the World Trade Organization, the US is forfeiting one of its most potent levers of influence. Economic interdependence once gave Washington tools to persuade and pressure simultaneously. It could offer market access or development assistance in exchange for alignment. When it steps back, others – notably China – step in.

Second, Trump's disdain for alliances and multilateral institutions has weakened the architecture that makes American leadership legitimate. The United Nations, NATO and the Bretton Woods system gave structure to US power. Without those institutions, Washington risks looking like a transactional hegemon rather than a stabilising force.

Third, Trump's desire to reduce America's global military footprint has created strategic vacuums. In Europe, that retreat emboldens Russia; in the Middle East, it leaves allies uncertain; in Asia, it raises doubts about America's reliability as a counterweight to China.

In short, the deglobalisation that Trump is vigorously pursuing makes the very project of global policing harder, costlier and less credible.

The Lure of the Nobel

Even during his first term, Trump insisted he deserved the Nobel after his summit with North Korea's Kim Jong Un, reminding audiences that Barack Obama "got it for doing nothing". Now, back in the Oval Office, he boasts about ending wars, brokering deals and being "the greatest peacemaker in history".

But brokering peace is not a performance. It is a process – painstaking, patient and often frustrating. Policing the world requires not just dominance but durability. It

entails the unglamorous task of negotiation, coalition-building and follow-through – qualities rarely associated with Trump’s governing style.

The Nobel committee, for its part, has been wise to separate transactional diplomacy from substantive peace-making. A handful of nominations from friendly governments may flatter Trump, but they do not erase the contradictions in his record: the attacks on multilateralism, his embrace of autocrats, and his disdain for global norms.

Can a Retreating America Still Lead?

History suggests not. The last time America succumbed to isolationism – in the interwar years of the 1930s – it discovered too late that distance does not equal safety. Global disorder has a way of breaching even the widest oceans.

Today’s world is even more tightly interconnected. Economic shocks, climate disasters, and cyberattacks rip through supply chains and digital networks at the speed of data. Pandemics don’t respect political boundaries. No nation, however large, can insulate itself.

For Trump’s America to police the world effectively, it must remain embedded in it – economically, diplomatically and institutionally. Withdrawing from trade while seeking to broker peace is like trying to steer a ship while abandoning the wheel. Influence cannot be exercised in absentia.

What This Means for Asia

Nowhere is this contradiction more consequential than in Asia. The Indo-Pacific has become the main arena of strategic competition between the US and China. Southeast Asia, including Singapore, has benefited from decades of relative stability underpinned by American power.

If Washington’s engagement grows erratic, regional states will be forced to adapt. Some will hedge between the superpowers; others may drift toward Beijing’s orbit. China, already the region’s dominant trading partner, will exploit every vacuum in leadership or legitimacy.

Singapore, with its pragmatic foreign policy and commitment to rules-based order, has long balanced between the giants. But a less predictable America makes that balancing act harder. The region’s security, trade and technology flows will depend increasingly on how well middle powers can coordinate to preserve openness in the absence of consistent American leadership.

As Singapore’s Prime Minister Lawrence Wong cautioned in a recent [interview](#) with the *Financial Times*, the world is entering a “messy and unpredictable” transition because America is withdrawing from its traditional role as the global insurer – the stabilising power underwriting openness and security. With no other country yet ready or willing to shoulder that responsibility, he warned, middle powers must prepare for a more fragmented and volatile order. For Singapore and its Asian neighbours, this means doubling down on regional cooperation and diversified partnerships to preserve stability amid uncertainty.

The Path Ahead

If America truly wishes to remain the world's peacekeeper, it must first restore the foundations of its power. That means reinvesting in alliances, recommitting to free trade, and rebuilding the institutional scaffolding of global order. It must rediscover the virtue of steadiness over spectacle.

For now, Trump's America craves the power and pelf of global leadership without the price of global engagement. That is not sustainable. The world's policeman cannot go into isolation.

And until the United States reconciles that contradiction, the Nobel Committee will likely keep its medal – and the moral authority it represents – out of Trump's reach.

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