Comment 01 / 2026 www.csm.org.pl

The World in the *Interregnum*

CENTRUM STOSUNKÓW MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH
CENTRE FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Prof. Charles A. Kupchan

Senior Fellow and Director of European Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, Professor of International Affairs at the School of Foreign Service and Government Department at Georgetown University.

Antonio Gramsci, writing from a fascist prison cell in the 1930s, famously observed that "the crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born." In such an interregnum, he warned, "a great variety of morbid symptoms appear." Few descriptions capture the present moment more accurately. The international system stands at a historical inflection point: one era is clearly coming to an end, while the shape of the next remains uncertain. What fills the space between is instability, unpredictability and mounting tension.

The “morbid symptoms” are visible across the globe. Liberal democracy is stumbling in countries once assumed immune to such regression. Great-power rivalry has returned with force. The globalised economy is no longer merely decoupling but in some places fracturing outright. Beneath these developments lie tectonic shifts—deep structural forces that are pushing the world into a prolonged interregnum.

A Global Power Shift Without a Buy-In

The first shift is a redistribution of global power on a scale not seen for centuries. To find a comparable moment, one must go back to the early 1700s, before the West achieved material and ideological dominance. At that time, India and China together accounted for roughly half of global wealth. That balance changed dramatically as Europe underwent capitalist and industrial revolutions, soon followed by North America. From roughly 1815 onward, Northwestern Europe and the United States sat at the forefront of global history.

Even the Cold War did not fundamentally disrupt this Western predominance. The Soviet Union was a serious competitor, but it never approached parity with the United States, let alone the West as a whole. At its peak, Western countries controlled close to 80 percent of global wealth. When the Cold War ended, many assumed that a unipolar moment had arrived—one in which Russia, China and others would gradually be integrated into a liberal, rules-based order. That assumption proved misplaced.

By 2025, power is shifting decisively back from West to East and from North to South. The countries rising in the global hierarchy are not buying into the existing system. Russia and China, in particular, increasingly view the liberal order as a smokescreen for Western hegemony and are openly seeking to overturn it. Much of the global South—never convinced it truly benefited from that order—now sympathises with calls for systemic change. Nations that are gaining influence increasingly seek autonomy rather than leadership, flexibility rather than responsibility. As a result, the system drifts toward dispersion of power without the stabilising effect of shared expectations about order.

Looking ahead to 2050 or 2060 underscores the scale of the transformation. Of the traditional Western powers— the United States, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Italy and Japan —only one is projected to remain among the world's top ten economies: the United States, expected to retain roughly 20 to 25 percent of global GDP. China, India, Indonesia and other rising economies from the global South are set to leapfrog much of the West. As power diffuses, the world becomes harder to govern.

The emerging system is best described as "globalised multipolarity." While current tensions may appear bipolar—pitting the West against Russia and China—the defining feature of the system is that many states are choosing neither side. Instead, they are hedging. India exemplifies this approach through what Prime Minister Narendra Modi calls "multi-alignment": cultivating close ties with Washington, Beijing and Moscow simultaneously. This strategy is not unique. Turkey, Brazil, South Africa, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Indonesia are all playing the field, enabled by new options created by China's expanding global presence.

From Industrial Stability to Digital Disruption

A second, equally profound shift is unfolding alongside this geopolitical rebalancing: the transition from the industrial era to the digital age. The political consequences are far-reaching. Digital technology—"ones and zeros"—has hollowed out the social contract that sustained industrial societies. Communities built around manufacturing have withered, leaving deep social and political scars.

In earlier periods of industrial change, economic dislocation was often absorbed over time through transitions within the same communities. Digital disruption, by contrast, breaks that continuity, offering little prospect of recovery tied to place or profession. This helps explain why economic decline today more readily translates into political radicalisation rather than adjustment.

Across the American heartland, once-stable towns struggle to survive. Former industrial centres have lost their economic anchors, their main streets and even their schools. Automation has reshaped labour markets, eroding middle-class livelihoods and polarising politics. States once defined by moderation now exhibit sharp urban-rural divides, with educated, urban centres leaning heavily one way and deindustrialised regions another.

The political centre has largely collapsed. Republicans have moved sharply to the right, while Democrats remain ideologically fragmented. Electoral outcomes increasingly reflect regional and cultural fault lines rather than national consensus.

History offers a sobering warning: when major shifts in the global balance of power coincide with profound socioeconomic disruption, instability follows. The last time this occurred—during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—the result was two world wars. Avoiding a similar catastrophe requires managing the transition from the old order to the new without triggering a Third World War.

Trump as Symptom, Not Solution

Donald Trump's rise is inseparable from these transformations. He is both a product and an emblem of an old order that failed to deliver for large segments of the American electorate. His appeal rests on a powerful sentiment: too much world, not enough America. Decades of costly foreign interventions—attempts to remake Afghanistan or Iraq at enormous financial and human expense—left many Americans asking why resources were spent abroad while infrastructure at home decayed.

Trump's response was blunt: "America First." End foreign nation-building, confront China over trade, and impose tariffs. While deeply controversial, this agenda resonated with voters who felt abandoned by globalisation and digitalisation. Nearly half of the American electorate remains white and without a college degree, often working low-wage service jobs. For many, Trump appeared to understand their grievances.

Against this backdrop, foreign policy came to be interpreted primarily in domestic terms. Military interventions abroad were increasingly seen not as strategic necessities, but as proof that national priorities had grown disconnected from everyday economic concerns. Trump's rhetoric drew its strength from translating international engagement into the language of lived economic experience.

In that sense, President Trump delivered a needed wake-up call to a political establishment—Democratic and Republican alike—that had underestimated the erosion of living standards for working Americans. He also challenged an overly rigid ideological framing of global politics. Viewing the world solely through the lens of democracy versus autocracy made diplomacy harder, not easier. Engagement with adversaries became taboo, even when dialogue was essential.

President Trump's efforts to end the war in Ukraine, re-open channels with China, and address immigration controls reflect a recognition that previous American foreign policy had drifted out of sync with domestic appetite. Strategic overreach had created a dangerous mismatch between ambition abroad and political support at home.

Demolition Without Design — and What It Means for Europe

Yet Trump's flaws are equally structural. He excels at demolition, not construction. He is dismantling an old order without offering a coherent vision of what should replace it. There is a real risk that, in the process, he could weaken America's greatest strategic asset: its network of alliances and partnerships. Unlike China, the United States has friends. That advantage is easily squandered.

Tariffs represent a second, potentially fatal miscalculation. They will not resurrect American manufacturing. An economy in which 80 percent of workers are employed in services cannot be turned back into an industrial powerhouse. Instead, tariffs function as a hidden tax, steadily raising the cost of living—especially for the very voters Trump claims to champion. As prices rise and social protections erode, political support is likely to fracture.

Perhaps most troubling is the broader transformation of America's role in the world. By eroding democratic norms at home and embracing a purely transactional approach abroad, the United States risks becoming a "normal" power—no longer guided by an aspiration to reconcile idealism with realism. For a country built on a sense of exceptionalism, this shift is deeply unsettling and unlikely to endure.

This shift carries immediate consequences for America's allies. The challenge lies less in adapting to a clearly defined doctrine than in navigating persistent uncertainty about U.S.

direction. As signals oscillate between involvement and retrenchment, cooperation increasingly serves to contain risk rather than to advance a shared strategic project.

So for Europe, the lesson is clear. The Trump era is a detour, not a permanent destination. It does not herald an irreversible abandonment of alliances or international responsibility. While future American presidents may not return to the Atlanticism of the past, they are likely to rediscover the value of partners as force multipliers.

The prudent course for Europe is therefore to play the long game: remain engaged, avoid open confrontation, and work pragmatically with Washington—even when cooperation is uncomfortable. Patience, tenacity and strategic realism will be required. The interregnum will not end quickly. But navigating it wisely may determine whether the next order emerges through adjustment—or catastrophe.

Prof. Charles A. Kupchan

CENTRE FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Centre for International Relations (CIR) is an independent, non-government analytical centre established in 1996 which deals with Polish foreign policy and the most important issues of international politics. CIR is active in research, education and publishing, organises conferences and meetings, and participates in international projects in collaboration with similar institutions in many countries. CIR creates a forum for debate and exchange of ideas in matters of international politics, relations between states and challenges in the global world. CIR's activities are addressed above all to local-government officials and to entrepreneurs, as well as to officials of the central administration, politicians, diplomats, political scientistsand the media. In 2014, CIR was again recognised as one of the best think-tanksin East-Central Europe in the study "The Leading Public Policy Research Organisations in the World" conducted by the University of Pennsylvania.

Centre for International Relations I ul. Ogrody 24, 03-994 Warszawa I +48 608 593 632

www.twitter.com/CIR_CSM www.facebook.com/CIR.CSM

CENTRUM STOSUNKÓW MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH CENTRE FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS