



By: *Ferry Biedermann*

Trump and the forces of chaos are meant to keep you in a constant state of anxiety



Even now, it's still probably premature to declare the end of Western liberal democracy, the way Francis Fukuyama in 1992 (in)famously trumpeted its dominance in his book, *The End of History and the Last Man*.

Yet, it is very clear that liberal democracy and the international rules-based order are on the backfoot, to say the least. The consequences for global stability in the short- to medium-term are, however, not unequivocally apparent because it's complex to untangle cause and effect.

Not only the triumph of Donald Trump in the US but also a clutch of other election results around the globe this year, though not all, seem to point at the ascendancy of the idea of the strongman, even if democratically elected.

A slew of surveys over the past few years has also pointed at the growing support for strongmen among younger generations around the globe, and a decline in support for democracy.

In the UK, for example, a [report](#) by the centre-right thinktank Onward, noted that between 1999 and 2022, "Support for military rule among 18-24-year-olds has risen fivefold (from 7% to 44%), while support for a strongman leader has more than doubled (from 25% to 60%)."

This stands in stark contrast to older generations that oppose both strongmen and military rule. Even having to write something that would have been so obvious for most of the West's post-WWII history, brings home how momentous this shift is.

While young people's ideas might evolve over time, the trend is clear and can be expected to affect global politics for decades to come.

The desire for strongman leadership

The reasons behind these developments might be manifold, from growing inequality and

receding economic prospects, whether real or perceived, to shifting social hierarchies, gender disparities, existential and ecological angst, social media, online culture and more.

Anecdotally, having reported from conflict areas in the Middle East for a stretch, I have seen the desire for strongman leadership peak, perhaps unsurprisingly, at times of spiking violence and insecurity.

The mechanism behind this might seem obvious, yet it's not always clear how fear, anxiety, polarisation and anger interact to affect populations faced with conflict and extreme instability.

The world has become a more violent and insecure place over the past decade or so, breaking a trend towards more stability

In any case, Western democracies, especially in Western Europe and North America, cannot objectively be said to be facing such issues at the moment. They are, in the immediate sense, at peace and on the whole enjoy falling crime rates.

Yet, the world has become a more violent and insecure place over the past decade or so, breaking a trend towards more stability that had started after the end of the Cold War in the 1990s. The number of armed conflicts has [risen](#) markedly again, starting in 2010 (See [Our World in Data, War and Peace](#)).

This rise has held true both under Democratic American presidents, Obama and Biden, and under Trump. While the latter was in power, two consecutive years did show a dip - only for conflicts to spike again in 2020, the last year of his first term.

Western democracies feel besieged

Europeans especially, might be forgiven for feeling anxious because of wars on their

borders, both in Ukraine and across the Mediterranean, in the Middle East. Among the consequences for the continent are the periodic uptick in migration and the spike in energy prices in 2022.

Yet, they do not suffer the direst consequences of war, at least not yet. And the US does not even come close to being in the same position, especially since its withdrawal from Afghanistan and, mostly, from Iraq.

Even so, many Western democracies appear to feel besieged, under threat, anxious. Often, this can be explained through the fear of losing a dominant international position, whether economically or geo-strategically.

This unease also seems to be fanned both by their own extremist and/or populist factions as well as by authoritarian actors abroad.

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All the talk of Russian election interference, for example, might in itself have contributed to a feeling of dread and anxiety among parts of the electorates, both in the US and in Europe.

The interference doesn't even have to be significant as such in order to effectively contribute to a generalised atmosphere of polarisation, anger and fear. Paradoxically, those are exactly the conditions in which anti-democratic ideas thrive.

Highly destabilising events such as the assassination **attempt(s)** against Trump, will in this context be more significant than, for example, Harris taking over from Biden.

Harris in the final weeks overly focussing on Trump as a danger to democracy, served the same paradox as above, by only increasing the overall sense of unease.

Creating a febrile atmosphere of uncertainty

Internationally, creating a febrile atmosphere of uncertainty, while partly only serving as background noise during an American election, also serves the same purpose.

Thus, Netanyahu intensifying Israel's belligerence in the closing weeks of the election campaign, is also likely to have had an overall unsettling effect helping Trump, on top of, clearly, putting Biden and Harris in a political bind.

Looking once more at Russia, the **presence** of North-Korean troops on the frontline with Ukraine, which came out of nowhere during the final weeks of the US election campaign, is exactly the kind of news that will increase fears of global conflict and thus unsettle electorates.



A Trump-imposed temporary pacification of the Middle East is not unthinkable, albeit one that will lopsidedly favour Israel - Abraham Accords Ceremony 2020

This on top of the steady drumbeat of other provocations coming out of Russia, whether it is the stationing of nuclear weapons in Belarus or the constant background noise of Russian interference in other countries, from Moldova to Georgia and beyond.

The position of China, the biggest challenger to the West in many ways, appears to be more ambiguous. But carrying out aggressive manoeuvres around Taiwan in October, for the second time this year, only contributes to the

same unsettling background noise.

While in the long term, the accumulation of tensions and the proliferation of nationalist, belligerent strongmen will almost certainly have a destabilising effect on the world, in the short- to medium term, some of these tensions might actually abate.

A Trump-imposed temporary pacification of the Middle East is not unthinkable, albeit one that will lopsidedly favour Israel.

Even Russia, seeing Trump back in the White House, might feel less need to stoke international feelings of unease with ever more outlandish schemes. It can also afford to wait and see how badly Trump will let down Ukraine, before pouncing.

In the final analysis, it is not as if strongmen, populists and other destabilising global actors were kept in check during the Biden interregnum, although we'll never know how much worse things could have been.

The jury is still out, but Trump seems much more a symptom of the decline of liberal democracy and the international rules-based order, than a cause of it.

Even if he doesn't accelerate widespread international instability in his coming term, the world is still in for a hell of a ride, certainly in the medium- to longer-term. We'll have to learn to live with whole new levels of anxiety.