

Musings ... Friend > enemy > frenemy?

by Neil Cairns

It seems that for the first 51 of my 58 years, the world was, very naively, “simple” to understand. Being born some 20 years after the most cataclysmic war in history, we grew up understanding that, broadly speaking, there were groupings of countries that were friends.

Despite their idiosyncratic differences, they “got on” with each other, trusted each other and traded with each other. I perceived that there was a “good guy” grouping, let’s call them the orange group, and a “bad guy” grouping, say, the purple group, and then a bunch of rats and mice countries that either didn’t matter on a global scale, or were unwilling vassals of the oranges or purples.

This was our “normal” world, and nations had special relationships that transcended differences over day to day issues. A significant aspect of what was missing from this childlike view was an understanding that the whole edifice was underwritten by the post war, absolute global dominance of US military power, and more specifically US naval military power, whose power projection facilitated global Maritime trade.

Uncle Sam, the boss man of the oranges, strode the world stage – demanding, and being accorded global leadership roles of virtually every multinational decision making entity and, largely footed the bills which went with that role. The big uncle spoke softly but carried a very big stick. Everybody knew that, and like it or not, those were the rules to be obeyed.

The result was a global economic climate which was relatively stable, predictable and accommodating. Oranges knew that other oranges wouldn’t stab them in the back, that they could coexist, and everybody could benefit, even if it meant give and take on issues.

Ironically even the purples and others could benefit from the stability because the reaction of the opposition was predictable and could be determined and relied on. The relationships between the parties defined the rules and boundaries. International Treaties, especially around security, were negotiated and relied on even when the parties sometimes might have a spat with their fellow signatory. The baby boomer generation, who grew up and worked under this “normal” predictably, became the wealthiest generation in history. The share markets thrive when the world is stable, and businesses can make long term plans for expansion and profit.

Imagine that in 2017, the new leader of the oranges decides one day that all of the above is no longer valid, and that nearly 80 year old relationships and commitments no longer matter, and security guarantees which The US had given could no longer be relied on. It took a mere 7 months for the likes of Australia, Japan, and India to conclude a mutual defence pact to, somewhat feebly, contain the purple dragon boss who was growing in power and aspiration by the day.



The likes of Taiwan, the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, South Korea, and New Zealand were thrown into the vacuum left by the absent power. Into that space the dragon delightedly leapt, speeding up the fortifications in the South China Sea, forging relationships with Pacific Island states, and even negotiating the presence of a massive naval base immediately off Australia's northern shore.

In Europe, the unthinkable happened when US commitment to NATO was no longer a given. (It is undoubtably correct that many NATO members, particularly Germany, had not met their financial commitments to the alliance – to their own economic advantage – but the US enjoyed complete military control of the hierarchy of NATO and sold vast amounts of weaponry into the alliance).

Overnight, relationships disappeared and every issue for discussion between nations and the US became purely transactional. Transactions between peers can be negotiated. Transactions between behemoths and minnows are imposed, and the behemoth never loses. Bilateralism was replaced with the bizarre situation in which the US could be your country's dearest friend on items of trade 1-100 and be imposing tariffs or sanctions on trade items 101-200. The result? Shock, paralysis and mayhem on the global stage. (Go and check on what your investments did between 2017 and 2021 for anyone not American). All of this in 4 years...

But then in 2020 Uncle Sam takes his Ritalin and sanity returns, (I'm not saying by a great or even good US President, just sanity), and at his first speech says that he's sorry that he was grumpy for the past 4 years, but that it's all ok now and we can, must, WILL go back to how things were before said grumpiness. The world breathes a sigh of relief, the aberration has passed and something akin to stability and predictability returns. Frenemies kiss and make up and try to forget what just happened...

... but it only lasts for 4 years, before derangement on a vastly more dangerous scale re-emerges, and doesn't just return to his isolationist, US win all in every instance transaction mania – he doubles down in every facet. Not only making things transactional, but dictatorial, and systematically destroys the administrative structures and institutional knowledge that facilitated the way the US functioned, internally, and in its relationships with the world at large.

The US keeps company with global nobility like Russia, Belarus, and North Korea in voting in the UN while hosting absolutely disgraceful Mafia-like shakedowns in the Oval Office. The mayhem sown in Trump's first term could be unwound, (after 4 years), because the vestiges of the structures that supported the former system remained largely intact. This time it looks like the ultimate disruptor has learned from his former errors and is determined that vestiges will not remain.

In the meantime, the minion countries fumble helplessly and wait for a future which they are not in a position to create, but only to react to. Will this all flip flop again in four years' time and then again four years after that? How does the world even contemplate planning for that eventuality?

Make absolutely no mistake, the post-World War 2 epoch which we all knew as our normal is irrevocably ending right before our eyes, right now. Those who celebrate this, presumably have insight into something that no rational other person has, because our future is being determined by someone for whom anything other than a win on his terms is an intolerable outcome. As said above, behemoths don't negotiate, they dictate.

The orange group is now a singular orange..... a megalomaniacal, pseudo fascist, ill-informed, convicted felon, orange.

Oh, and the vacuum, and the purples and the dragon.....