Feature Article The end of postwar order?: Europe's struggle with Trumpism and nationalism, and Japan's strategic choices Shigekazu Kusune (Professor Emeritus, Kanazawa University, Japan)

1. Introduction

In an era marked by the erosion of the postwar liberal order, the international community finds itself increasingly unable to prevent or resolve violent conflicts, even as large-scale atrocities unfold in plain sight. The United Nations, constrained by structural limitations and the political will of its most powerful members, has often failed to hold perpetrators accountable especially when those responsible are allied with, or members of the Security Council. Democratic states, once seen as the bastions of human rights and multilateral cooperation, are now exhibiting authoritarian tendencies: turning a blind eye to rights violations, slashing humanitarian and development aid, neglecting global health responsibilities, and backpedaling on climate commitments. Under the guise of protecting national interests, governments erect economic barriers, impose unilateral tariffs, and retreat into economic nationalism undermining the principles of a globalized economy and fomenting systemic instability. Simultaneously, rising military expenditures, the weakening of cooperative frameworks, and the deepening of socioeconomic inequalities are reshaping the global landscape. Democratically elected leaders increasingly adopt autocratic styles of governance, leveraging populist support to justify anti-democratic behavior. Moreover, the algorithmic manipulation of public opinion through social media has profoundly distorted electoral processes, exacerbating polarization and accelerating the shift toward a fragmented, multipolar world. The internet was initially perceived as a vehicle for democratization, offering humanity an unprecedented tool through which all individuals could articulate their opinions and thus advance the realization of genuine democracy. However, it has now come to function as a mechanism that erodes democratic norms and actively contributes to the ascendancy of populism.

2. Erosion of democracy

Authoritarian tendencies are no longer the exclusive preserve of traditionally autocratic states. Even within democratic polities, disillusionment with the protracted nature of reform through established democratic procedures has led to the strengthening of such tendencies. This phenomenon is observable not only in conventional authoritarian regimes but also across countries such as those in Latin America, the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, and Japan. Consequently, the number of states that may be properly classified as "democracies" continues to decline. Nationalism, the pursuit of national interest, and ethnocentric populism-manifested in the rise of right-wing movements and anti-immigrant sentiment across Western societies—are casting a shadow even over the conflict in Ukraine. Elections in the age of the internet have at times hollowed out democracy from within, weakening voices calling for human rights and global peace. Societies are becoming increasingly fragmented, and socioeconomic disparities are widening. Calls to rectify these injustices are often suppressed. The discourse of "putting one's own country first" is growing louder, asserting that there are no resources to spare for poverty or war in other nations. When President Trump of the United States—a superpower in both economic and military terms—demanded that NATO members and allied states should increase their defense spending, many responded by dramatically expanding their military budgets and investing heavily in weapons systems and advanced aircraft development. The expansion of defense budgets inevitably results in the curtailment of funding for social welfare, pensions, aid to developing countries, and refugee support. In the postwar era, priority was increasingly accorded to environmental conservation, the prevention of global warming, and poverty alleviation. The United States, in order to assist Israel, unilaterally deployed the 30,000-pound bunker-buster weapon known as the "TRU" against Iran's nuclear facilities—despite the fact that the United States and Iran were not formal belligerents in a state of war. It must be added that by issuing advance warnings prior to the strikes, the United States sought to reduce human casualties, particularly among nuclear scientists. In response, Iran likewise provided prior notice before launching attacks on American military bases in the Middle East, thereby limiting U.S. casualties. The United States even expressed words of gratitude toward Iran for this self-restraint. While such gestures inevitably contained elements of political theater, Washington nonetheless made a statement drawing an analogy between these operations and the atomic bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. From the perspective of the Japanese public, this was a profoundly unacceptable metaphor; yet no protest was heard from Japan, often characterized as a "vassal state" of the United States.

Trump, under the banner of "America First," sought to fundamentally restructure the international system by leveraging the United States' overwhelming economic and military might. Those who refused to comply faced economic sanctions, high tariffs, and even the threat of military force. The United States was long regarded as a bastion of democracy. It is profoundly disheartening, then, to witness how the very country that Alexis de Tocqueville once praised for its democratic ideals is, in the 21st century, undermining the international order, resorting to intimidation, and exhibiting a political orientation disturbingly aligned with the authoritarian leadership of Russia's president. One might reasonably assume that it is the American people themselves who are most astonished to have chosen such a president. We ought to recognize the naiveté of having unquestioningly believed that the world's most powerful nation would always safeguard our prosperity and security.

In his second term, President Trump has issued a flurry of executive orders, effectively sidelining the U.S. Congress and centralizing decision-making within the executive branch. This approach has not only reshaped American society and politics, but has also fundamentally disrupted the global frameworks of economic activity, production, democracy, peacebuilding, development assistance, and conflict resolution. Established systems for promoting peace—such as trade regimes, financial institutions, tariffs, defense cooperation, peacekeeping operations, insurance structures, United Nations-led development aid, and multilateral treaties—have been abruptly altered. The United States, leveraging its overwhelming economic and military power, has intensified its demands on long-standing allies and exerted pressure on the international community through economic coercion and strategic intimidation. This shift includes unilateral claims to natural resources and territory, as well as attempts to revise geographical nomenclature, signaling a disregard for established international norms and collaborative governance.

In response to the United States' coercive posture, several allied nations have hastily begun increasing their military expenditures, with some even reinstating conscription. It has not been long since the post-Cold War era—a period marked by détente between East and West and a fleeting optimism that such a history had reached its end—yet numerous regional conflicts have since erupted. Among them, the most destabilizing has been the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council wielding veto power. In retaliation, EU countries imposed sanctions on Russia, including the exclusion of the Russian ruble from the SWIFT international payment system and a reduction in

imports of natural gas and oil. However, these measures were significantly undermined by the refusal of major economies such as India and China to participate, rendering the sanctions largely ineffective.

As a consequence of Trump's "America First" doctrine, foreign workers, immigrants, refugees, and international students have been increasingly marginalized or expelled from the United States. The broader rightward shift in the politics of advanced democracies has similarly been accompanied by a surge in anti-immigrant and anti-foreigner rhetoric. Media coverage disproportionately emphasizes crimes committed by foreigners, while propagandistic claims that immigrants are "stealing jobs" from citizens serve as electoral tools for rightwing parties. Trumpism is structurally rooted in this same political logic. The election of President Trump would not have been possible without the substantial support of individuals who share his worldview. The ideology of "America First" is by no means exclusive to Trump himself. The slogan "Make America Great Again" (MAGA), which evokes nostalgia for a perceived golden age and anxiety over the United States' relative decline in global standing, has been employed by various political candidates across party lines. At the Munich Conference in 2025, Vice President J. D. Vance's speech and reactions asserted that the "most urgent challenge" confronting Europe is the issue of illegal immigration. In this context, it is important to recognize that such populist-nationalist rhetoric is not unique to the United States. In Japan, for example, political parties have adopted similar slogans, such as "Take back Japan," which resonate with nationalist sentiment. These figures have also gained electoral support by appealing to antiimmigrant sentiments. Such broader global patterns, in which nationalist and xenophobic appeal, serve as effective tools for political mobilization in democratic societies.

The European Union represents the sole political entity capable of counterbalancing nuclear powers such as Russia, the United States, and China, each of which seeks to reshape the global order in accordance with its own strategic interests by leveraging energy resources, military capabilities, and economic influence. Yet the Union's capacity to act with coherence is circumscribed by its very nature: it comprises twentyseven sovereign member states, and decision-making within the framework of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) remains bound by the unanimity rule. This procedural constraint has long rendered collective action cumbersome and has, in turn, prompted proposals for the introduction of Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) in order to enhance institutional efficiency. Despite these structural impediments, the Union derives considerable strength from its capacity to deepen democratic governance. In contrast to the political systems of individual nation-states, where a government that commands a simple parliamentary majority may determine policy unilaterally, the EU has institutionalized a decision-making architecture predicated upon negotiation, the reconciliation of diverse

interests, and the elaboration of binding rules. The European Parliament, the European Commission, and technocratic representatives dispatched by the member states engage in deliberative processes through which divergent national priorities are mediated and common policies articulated. This stands in stark contrast to political contexts wherein a single prime minister or president may restructure the bureaucracy to advance narrowly circumscribed national interests.

The Union's institutional capacity for deliberation, compromise, and collective rule-making is itself a manifestation of democratic practice. Moreover, the carefully considered decisions that emerge from this process possess a persuasive authority that extends well beyond the borders of the Union. In this respect, the EU's distinctive strength lies in its ability to transform internal diversity into a source of legitimacy and external influence, thereby projecting a form of power that is uniquely grounded in democratic consensus.

3. America's credibility in Europe plummets

The United States has demonstrated a degree of affinity with President Putin, pressuring Ukraine to cede the occupied territories of Crimea and the Donbas region to Russia. As a condition for continued support to Ukraine, the U.S. demanded exclusive rights to develop Ukraine's rare earth resources—an arrangement that President Trump promoted as a peace proposal. Persistently urging Ukraine to make concessions while unabashedly aligning with a pro-Putin stance, the U.S. also unilaterally imposed increased military spending obligations and high tariffs on its allies. These actions have accelerated Europe's drift away from American influence, reinforcing a growing conviction within Europe that it must assume responsibility for its own defense. On April 26, 2025, during the funeral of Pope Francis-who had long advocated for world peace—a remarkable diplomatic encounter took place. Presidents Trump and Zelensky, together with UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer and French President Emmanuel Macron, held an impromptu meeting, underscoring the shifting dynamics of international relations. The United States has suspended the provision of satellite imagery to Ukraine as of March 8. This raises serious concerns about whether such an action can be deemed acceptable under current international norms. Such an action may constitute a violation of international humanitarian principles, as it deliberately impairs Ukraine's right to selfdefense and endangers civilian lives through the withdrawal of critical intelligence support.

While significant domestic opposition to President Trump persists within the United States, the summit convened with President Vladimir Putin in Alaska on August 15 (U.S. time) appeared largely devoid of substantive diplomatic engagement and instead exhibited the characteristics of a performative spectacle imbued with propagandistic intent. The staging of the encounter itself provoked immediate civic resistance: demonstrators, many bearing Ukrainian flags, mobilized at the site to signal both solidarity with Ukraine and repudiation of Trump's

gesture toward Putin.

From an analytical standpoint, Trump's decision to reintroduce Putin—an individual formally indicted by international judicial bodies for war crimes—into the realm of international diplomacy may be interpreted as an act of symbolic legitimation. Such a move suggests not merely a tactical miscalculation but potentially a deeper political indebtedness or structural vulnerability vis-à-vis the Russian leader. In this sense, the encounter transcends the realm of conventional diplomacy, assuming instead the contours of symbolic politics, whereby the performative dimension of engagement operates to normalize the presence of an authoritarian actor in the global arena. The episode thus illustrates the tension between domestic contestation and the international legitimization of figures who stand accused of gross violations of international law.

In a YouTube address entitled A Sad Moment in American History, Senator Bernie Sanders sought to counter what he characterized as the falsehoods propagated by President Trump. In his remarks, Sanders underscored that European assistance to Ukraine amounts to nearly three times that provided by the United States, thereby challenging Trump's narrative of disproportionate American burden-sharing. He further expressed deep frustration at the apparent affinity between President Putin and Trump, framing this relationship as emblematic of a broader threat to democratic governance and the integrity of liberal institutions.

4. Information manipulation

It has been widely alleged that the Russian government endeavored to exert influence over the United States presidential election in favor of Donald Trump through the systematic deployment of fabricated news narratives. The production of such disinformation is frequently outsourced to specialized agencies, which operate on a remunerative basis and provide services tailored to political manipulation. The capacity to orchestrate large-scale opinion management, to foment hostility against political actors, and to erode the credibility of journalists has been markedly facilitated—both in efficiency and in cost—by the affordances of digital technologies and online communication platforms.

These campaigns are not confined to national boundaries but may be transacted across jurisdictions, thereby acquiring a transnational character. Repetitive dissemination of partisan viewpoints is effected not solely by human agents but also by automated programs (bots), whose algorithmic design enables the mass reproduction of identical messages. Through the instrumentalization of websites and social networking services, disinformation operatives construct interlinked digital ecosystems intended to maximize circulation and visibility. Moreover, propaganda is algorithmically amplified by the deliberate exploitation of search engine optimization (SEO) mechanisms, ensuring the prioritization of manipulative content within information hierarchies.

Consequently, ordinary citizens—when engaging in con-

centrated searches for perspectives on contentious news topics—are rendered highly susceptible to exposure, whether consciously or unconsciously, to these artificially engineered sites. The outcome is an epistemic environment in which public discourse is increasingly shaped by orchestrated disinformation rather than authentic deliberation.

In the contemporary digital information environment, a growing proportion of the public has abandoned traditional newspaper subscriptions, instead engaging in non-linear and algorithmically mediated navigation of online platforms. Upon selecting a single news item, users are subsequently directed—via recommender algorithms—towards an iterative cascade of articles exhibiting congruent ideological framings. This phenomenon fosters an informational ecosystem characterised by homogeneity and self-reinforcement, thereby engendering epistemic closure and exacerbating the risks of political polarization.

The implications of such dynamics are particularly acute in the context of hate speech. As illustrated by Christopher Wylie in his disclosures concerning Cambridge Analytica, the aggregation of social media engagement data-most notably Facebook "likes"—enables the psychographic profiling of individual users. Through the deployment of predictive analytics, such profiling facilitates the microtargeting of content to individuals assessed as susceptible to attitudinal modification, thereby exerting measurable influence on electoral behaviour. Simultaneously, algorithmic feedback loops ensure that users who actively seek particular categories of information are increasingly presented with content that mirrors, rather than challenges, their pre-existing cognitive frameworks. These processes are operationalised through programmatic advertising and algorithmically optimised message delivery, reinforcing ideological insularity.

Consequently, individuals who eschew traditional journalistic consumption in favour of social media-based "information shopping" become disproportionately exposed to nationalist and racially prejudicial narratives. From the perspective of cultivation theory, repeated exposure to such narratives—even when extreme—can gradually shape perceptions of social reality, fostering the internalisation of such content as objective truth. In this manner, algorithmically mediated information environments not only fragment the public sphere but also recalibrate the cognitive schema through which individuals engage with political and social phenomena. Moreover, by exploiting search engine optimisation (SEO) techniques, these networks maximise the propagandistic impact of such content, ensuring its elevated visibility within algorithmically curated information environments.

To delegate the resolution of the war between Ukraine and Russia to bilateral dealings between Moscow and Washington represents a profoundly flawed and normatively indefensible approach. The United States, despite its provision of military aid to Ukraine, is not a belligerent in the strict sense; its involvement is primarily mediated through the profits of its

military-industrial complex rather than through direct exposure to the costs of war. By contrast, it is the European Union and its member states that bear the humanitarian and political consequences of the conflict. It receives millions of Ukrainian refugees and provides the most sustained support to Kyiv. To facilitate the rehabilitation of Russia within the international community, even as it devastates Ukraine's infrastructure and perpetrates mass atrocities against its population, amounts to the normalization of aggression and the undermining of fundamental principles of international law. Such a course of action is less an exercise in peacemaking than an indication of the extent to which President Trump appears indebted to President Putin, thereby raising grave concerns about the erosion of accountability and justice in the global order.

5. Xenophobic movements in historical and contemporary perspective

Foreign workers, immigrants, refugees, and international students are being expelled from the United States. The suspension of visas for international students and foreign researchers in the country should not be viewed merely as the product of President Trump's personal frenzy, but rather as symptomatic of deeper currents of "Trumpism" embedded within American society itself. The broader rightward drift in the politics of advanced democracies reflects similar dynamics: crimes committed by foreigners are disproportionately highlighted, while right-wing propaganda exploits the narrative that foreigners are "stealing" domestic jobs. Such exclusionary rhetoric translates directly into electoral gains. Indeed, Trumpism could not have taken hold without the support of a large constituency already inclined toward such thinking. Ironically, during the COVID-19 pandemic, foreign laborers were hailed as "essential workers," yet they are now once again subject to vilification and exclusion.

The history of humankind, extending across approximately eight million years, is characterized by continuous divergence, extinction, and hybridization among ancestral lineages. From long before the establishment of political states, interbreeding across groups was the norm, and human communities extended their living spaces across continents, adapting to climatic shifts, glacial retreats, and the challenges of mobility. With the emergence of tribes, states, and later empires, patterns of displacement—whether in the form of enslavement, labor migration, refugee flows, or exile—became embedded in the global historical experience. Human movement, far from being an aberration, thus constitutes a structural feature of social development.

In the modern era, however, a paradox emerges. Countries such as the United States, many European nations, Australia, and Singapore—societies built upon successive waves of immigration—now confront the rise of xenophobic and exclusionary movements directed at foreign populations. Within the European Union, the Schengen system enshrines freedom of movement for labor and study, yet nationalist and nativist sen-

timents increasingly mobilize against precisely these flows. In the United States, itself often described as the archetypal "immigrant nation," the politics of exclusion has reasserted itself through populist rhetoric, restrictive immigration policies, and the stigmatization of migrant communities. Japan, historically more ethnically homogeneous, which represents precisely the kind of myth engendered by nationalism, has likewise experienced a rapid increase in foreign residents, accompanied by growing debates about national identity and cultural cohesion.

This phenomenon may be understood as part of a broader dialectic between globalization and identity politics. On the one hand, economic interdependence and transnational mobility generate multicultural social realities; on the other, such transformations provoke anxieties about cultural dilution, economic competition, and the erosion of national sovereignty. Xenophobic movements thus represent a form of nativism, a political strategy that seeks to mobilize collective insecurity by positing a pure, authentic, or original national identity threatened by external "others." In this sense, the persistence of anti-foreigner campaigns reveals not only the enduring salience of identity politics in an era of globalization, but also the contradictions inherent in societies whose prosperity has been historically predicated on migration and diversity.

6. Demographic decline, migration, and the myth of ethnic homogeneity in Japan

Across advanced industrial countries, declining birth rates constitute a structural demographic challenge, leading governments to permit, and in some cases encourage, the inflow of foreign populations. This acceptance is not solely grounded in the pragmatic need for labor, but also derives from commitments to humanitarian assistance, the reception of refugees, and broader international obligations. Within Japan, the discourse surrounding migration has been historically complicated by the persistence of the "myth of ethnic homogeneity" - a notion long advanced in political and cultural narratives, yet profoundly undermined by contemporary genetic research.

The sequencing of the human genome has revealed that individuals categorized as "Japanese" possess diverse genetic lineages reflecting centuries of admixture and migration. Research conducted by Japanese scholars participating in the team of Svante Pääbo—awarded the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 2022—has demonstrated that the ancestry of the Japanese population can be broadly classified into three lineages: the Jōmon-affiliated group, most prevalent in Okinawa; the Kansai-affiliated group, dominant in western Japan; and the Tōhoku-affiliated group, concentrated in northeastern regions. Within this distribution, the Jōmon lineage accounts for approximately 28.5 percent in Okinawa and 18.9 percent in Tōhoku, whereas the proportion in Kansai is significantly lower, at 13.4 percent.

These findings carry important implications for the interpretation of Japan's early state formation. The relatively lower proportion of Jōmon ancestry in Kansai suggests a historical dynamic in which migrants from the Korean Peninsula, arriving across successive centuries, played a decisive role in shaping the population structure of central Japan and, by extension, the foundations of the Yamato polity. This genetic and historical evidence also provides a plausible explanation for the close linguistic affinities between Japanese and Korean languages, both of which belong to the same language family and exhibit structural similarities traceable to shared ancestral communities

Moreover, in northern Japan there exist the Ainu people, and the genetic composition of the Japanese population is not merely the result of intermixing with them. Contemporary Japanese also carry a small percentage of genes inherited from Neanderthals and Denisovans. Neanderthals are interbred with the closely related Denisovans inhabiting in the Ural Mountains. Neanderthals as well as the Denisovans are now extinct hominin species; yet, their genetic legacy persists and is detectable even within the Japanese genome. From this perspective, xenophobic movements, as well as ideologically constructed notions of a homogeneous "Japanese identity," discourses on the alleged cultural supremacy of the Japanese, or exclusionary slogans such as "Japan First," are fundamentally refuted by genetic evidence. Although tendencies to reject foreigners are also observable in China and South Korea, the existence of vast Chinese and Korean diasporic communities in the United States should remind us that such attitudes are tantamount to spitting into the sky, only to have it fall back upon oneself.

This phenomenon contributes to a deeper understanding of the tribal conflicts, racial antagonisms, anti-immigrant movements, and religious confrontations that continue to plague societies across the globe. It underscores the imperative of embracing a cosmopolitan perspective that recognizes all human beings as members of a single community sharing the same planet. From this vantage point, discrimination grounded in religion, culture, or skin color must be regarded not merely as misguided, but as a profound violation of the principles of universal human dignity and human rights.

7. On U.S.-Japan frictions

My decision to embark on research into mass media was prompted by the U.S.-Japan trade frictions of the late 1970s and early 1980s. At that time, the discourse of the "Yellow Peril," which had first emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, resurfaced in the context of trade disputes. In an attempt to curb Japan's growing exports, the yen was sharply appreciated (to 68 yen per dollar). Yet, even under such conditions, Japanese products continued to dominate global markets, which led to accusations that Japan was excluding foreign goods through invisible means, a claim encapsulated in the charge of "non-tariff barriers." The principal points of contention then—much as in recent years—were the export of Japanese automobiles to the United States and the import of agricultural products, particularly rice. In response, Japan undertook voluntary export restraints on automobiles, while also

expanding local production within the United States. Regarding agriculture, rice was the most contentious issue. Japan conceded to the principle of minimal access, agreeing to import rice without any tax; however, in order to preserve domestic price levels, the imported rice was diverted to use as livestock feed and deliberately withheld from distribution in Japanese markets. What is striking, some fifty years later, is that President Trump has revived precisely the same set of issues.

8. Japan's strategic alignment with the European Union: Soft power and postwar dependency

In the contemporary international order, Japan's most natural partner is the European Union (EU). The imperative of our time is to mobilize the distinctive forms of soft power possessed by both Japan and the EU in order to safeguard global peace, stability, and sustainable development. Unlike the United States, whose foreign policy in recent years has increasingly emphasized unilateralism under the banner of "America First," the EU embodies a model of governance rooted in multilateralism and normative power. Its policy-making process is constrained not by the will of a single dominant state, but by deliberation, persuasion, and institutionalized checks on veto power. Although certain member countries adopt pro-Russian or right-wing nationalist orientations, the Union as a whole, represents the most deeply entrenched zone of parliamentary democracy and party politics in the world. Even post-Brexit Britain is now normalizing relations with the EU, underscoring its indispensability.

The EU thus stands as the only viable countervailing soft power to the United States. From the Russian war in Ukraine, to the nuclear question in Iran, to the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, the EU's role as a stabilizing actor is indispensable. Japan, for its part, must contribute to this endeavor by positioning itself as a reliable provider of global public goods peace-building, poverty alleviation, food security, and access to medical care. In doing so, Japan would not only enhance its international legitimacy but also expand its capacity for influence in global governance forums.

At a moment when the United States increasingly exhibits the characteristics of a rogue superpower—undermining climate accords, retreating from multilateralism, and proclaiming protectionist nationalism—Japan must resist the temptation to echo this inward-looking rhetoric with its own version of "Japan First." Instead, Japan should frame its international role around the principles of collective security, sustainable economic development, and global environmental stewardship. The regressive environmental policies of the United States make the EU the most suitable partner for Japan in addressing transnational challenges such as climate change and ecological degradation.

Japan cannot afford to remain a passive observer, merely "monitoring" developments in Washington while avoiding open critique. This year marking the eightieth anniversary of Japan's defeat in the Second World War offers an opportune moment for self-reflection. Despite economic strength and global engagement, Japan's political psychology remains shaped by the legacies of the postwar occupation systema dependency manifested in symbolic rather than substantive gestures of independence, such as ritualized visits to the Yasukuni Shrine. Genuine autonomy will not be achieved through such posturing. Instead, Japan must demonstrate its independence by articulating principled positions—even when they run counter to U.S. policy. Only by doing so can it earn the trust and respect of the international community and take its place as a credible co-architect of a rules-based global order.

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