

# Battening down the hatches

After Brexit and Donald Trump's election victory, the Western Establishment is taking no chances on its continued dominance and has moved to ensure that it still holds sway.

It was supposed to be the near-end of year period, preceding the Christmas and New Year break that was itself the prelude to the start of a brand new US administration.

However, any thoughts of slowing the pace or kicking up the heels for the coming holiday season would soon vanish for the standard issue Western ideologue. Anxieties grew particularly for the paranoid interventionist.

In late October, tough-talking Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, who just four months before was elected leader of a steadfast decades-long US ally, made a dramatic turnaround in his country's relations with China.

He praised and reportedly "embraced" Chinese leaders in Beijing, and cursed President Barack Obama along the way. In one fell swoop, he dumped his predecessor's confrontation with China over disputed South China Sea territory, and switched Philippine foreign policy orientation from the US to China.

Days later, Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak was also in Beijing to upgrade bilateral relations – another

rival claimant to maritime territory now supposedly in "Beijing's court." Then within a week, Duterte was in Malaysia, talking about common interests while appraising current trends.

Meanwhile, Republican non-interventionist and alleged "isolationist" Donald Trump won the US presidential election. Controversy over his personal issues aside, he wanted a radical change in direction by working closely and constructively with Russia.

Classic Western Cold Warriors went into panic mode. From liberal interventionists to reactionary neo-conservatives, they were in deep shock compounded by fellow ideologue Hillary Clinton's upset election loss.

Their ideological brethren in Europe and US-allied nations like Japan were in a similar emotional state. Some blamed the Brexit "contagion" for spreading anti-Establishment fervour across the Atlantic.

All felt a need to contain and neutralise this new mood. After all, major special interests were involved – they had much at stake in preserving confrontational approaches and promoting Cold War II.

Overwrought as it was, the situation created a momentum to transform the character of subsequent events – amounting to a diplomatic flurry of sorts.

Last weekend, European sentiments in Brussels were in full flood. Once more, EU member nations left it to tiny Belgium to express the common group position that it was time for Europe to explore ways to promote itself internationally if the US crutch were diminished or removed.

President-elect Trump had questioned the lead US role in Nato and unnerved relations with the EU, with both institutions based in Belgium. The future of the Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) pact with Europe was cast into doubt.

In Asia, prospects for the equally controversial and secretive Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) were similarly in question. Obama himself had given up on this "legacy" project of his by deciding against tabling it in his final lame-duck session.

But in a parting shot, Obama seemed energised in his final tour of Europe before retirement in January. What was supposed to be a farewell lap on the continent on

Thursday became a parade to rally the ideological troopers.

When asked about his would-be successor, Obama just said he was "cautiously optimistic." It was important to show optimism, especially with a foreign audience, but he still found reason to be cautious given his differences with Trump.

That was enough to get the mainstream media to crown German Chancellor Angela Merkel "the last powerful defender of liberal values in the West" to "lead the free world," as one major US news agency put it.

A problem with placing such a load on any single individual is that it may not last. Merkel herself is challenged domestically more than before by political rivals, critics and a public incensed by her open door policy to migrants and refugees.

Recent days have seen news headlines about "Merkel to take liberal lead" and "Obama to pass torch to Merkel" as if the Cold War was still raging. Interventionist ideologues would prefer that it still was.

News reports even made much of Obama's

# Era of new alliances and growing anxiety

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unusually long two-day stay in Germany, when his visits to other European countries were shorter. Evidently, passing the halcyon torch of liberty, democracy and free trade as the Western Establishment understands it needed more time.

Such anxieties in Asia over a changing of the guard in Washington, more specifically among Western allies in Asia, took a similar form.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe became the first foreign leader to meet President-elect Trump in New York on Thursday. Abe had concerns over Trump's handling of defence arrangements with Japan and the future of the TPP.

Calling Trump a "trustworthy leader," Abe said he felt "sure that we can build a relationship of trust." There was that element of optimism again in the midst of a foreign audience.

Back in Tokyo, the official line was that the meeting at Trump Tower was longer than usual so it had to be good. Abe wants another meeting with Trump to orientate the new president to his way of seeing East Asia, North Korea – and China.

Meanwhile, recent developments have assured China that its relations with the Philippines are clearly on the mend. Duterte has pledged to stick to Manila's new course, which would take all the six years of his term.

He has declared a new pro-China foreign policy while maintaining the Philippines' pro-US defence policy. Whether and how far that bifurcated concept can work before succumbing to its internal contradictions, if it does, remains to be seen.

Duterte has also announced a renewed era of friendship with the incoming US administration, seeing in Trump a kindred spirit in office. Trump's White House and the State Department will need to employ considera-

ble skills to navigate such narrow passages in today's unfamiliar Asia.

But all the fuss that accompanied Obama's final European tour and the events that followed it presumed something as yet unproven: that a Trump administration would be radically different and alarming.

This does not mean it is unlikely to be either radically different or alarming; rather, it could be significantly different without being worrisome.

Alternatively it could be familiar and disastrous, if neo-conservative leftovers from Bush II are allowed to distort Trump's agenda. If Trump's preferences hold, some US allies have started to adjust to the likely implications.

In Brussels, Italian Foreign Minister Paolo Gentiloni said that Europe had to attend to its own challenges without being too preoccupied with continuing to have the US looking over its shoulder.

In Berlin, Merkel said Germany was ready to pay more of Nato's cost as Trump wanted. This could easily double the current defence expenditure of 1.2% of GDP.

In Tokyo, Abe has increased Japan's defence expenditure since 2012 as part of plans to extend the role of its defence forces. However, that could trigger a series of reactions in South Korea and China owing to Japan's history of aggression in the region.

However, instead of Asian leaders vying for a spot on Trump's increasingly tight schedule, he should make it a point himself to tour East Asia to demonstrate interest, commitment and openness to establishing personal relations impartially with all – and to learn.

That may be a significantly different move for a new US president, and it would also be a start to more promising and reassuring times.

> Bunn Nagara is a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia.