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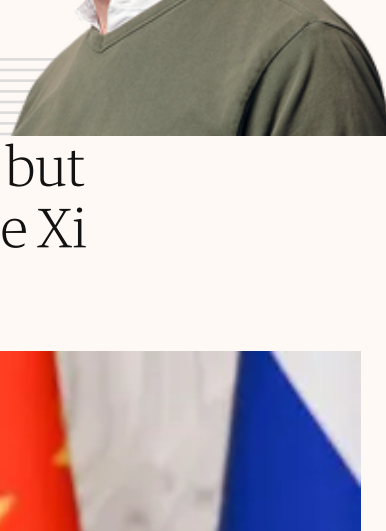
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The world still needs a policeman. Let's hope the US doesn't quit the job

Simon Tisdall



America's record at keeping global order is deeply flawed, but the only winners from its drift towards isolationism will be Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin



Chinese president Xi Jinping and Russian leader Vladimir Putin signed strategic partnership agreements between their countries in Moscow last week. Photograph: XINHUA/Xie Huanchi/EPA

American global leadership took a serious kicking last week. Politicians and pundits on both sides of the Atlantic queued up to condemn George W Bush's and Tony Blair's disastrous invasion of Iraq 20 years ago this month. At the same time, Congress moved to repeal the war powers act that enables a US president to launch military interventions abroad.

In Moscow, meanwhile, Xi Jinping, stringing along his Russian puppet, Vladimir Putin, proposed a new global order to replace the post-1945 US-led model. China's de facto dictator is generously offering to “stand guard” over the planet. In Xi's brave new world, subservience and surveillance replace shock and awe. Democracy takes a back seat.

That Iraq was a catastrophic, avoidable own goal is no longer plausibly disputed. Numerous prior warnings went unheeded. Yet similarly shortsighted are present-day attempts, from the far right and left, to use that debacle to discredit US-led interventionism in general and celebrate the consequent decline of American influence.

The Middle East shows what happens when the US disengages or drops its guard. The 2011 Iraq withdrawal foreshadowed a decade of terror and civil war in Syria, Iranian hardliners running riot, erstwhile Saudi allies on a killing spree in Yemen, Afghanistan sunk in betrayal and misery and Israel-Palestine in rudderless chaos.

“What would have happened if the US had failed to act after Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990?” asked veteran analyst Bill Schneider recently. “Most likely, nothing.” After Europe froze in horror, it fell to the US to lead a coalition to end the Bosnian war.

“When atrocities occurred in Cambodia, Rwanda, Congo and Darfur, the whole world – including the US – looked away. So nothing was done. The result was genocide,” Schneider argued.

To this list may be added Syria, where Barack Obama, burned by Iraq, failed to intervene in 2013 to stop the Assad regime's use of weapons of mass destruction. How ironic is that?

Evidently, the US often messes up. Yet do critics of American “hegemony”, deeply flawed, self-serving and arrogant though it undoubtedly is, really believe autocratic bullies such as Xi or war criminals such as Putin would do a better job as global policeman? Pull the other one, it has bells on.

Ideally, of course, a policeman should not be needed. But that, sadly, is not how the world is. An eternally divided UN security council cannot enforce its own rules and treaties. Regional organisations such as the EU, the African Union and Asean lack hard power when things fall apart.

Europe has performed better than expected over Ukraine. But without US president Joe Biden's intervention and almost \$77bn in US assistance, the war might have been lost by now. For all the talk of strategic autonomy, Brussels, as usual, looked to Washington for a lead. Germany refused to supply tanks to Kyiv unless Biden did so, too.

Neither Trump nor DeSantis shares Biden's view that the conflict is part of a wider struggle for democracy

One abiding mystery is why Putin, having occupied parts of Ukraine in 2014, did not launch his all-out invasion while Donald Trump was president. Given Trump's obsequiousness towards his Kremlin pin-up, his anti-Europe and anti-Nato phobias and his recycled “America first” ideology, Putin could well have got away with it.

He might yet, if Trump is re-elected. Doubts about America's world role are compounded by the resurgence of Maga-era isolationism – a growing worry for Ukraine and western democracies. Both Trump and Florida governor Ron DeSantis, joint favourites for the 2024 Republican presidential nomination, want to cut support for Kyiv – as do 40% of probable Republican voters.

Neither man shares Biden's view that the conflict is part of a wider struggle for democracy. Neither thinks it's a vital US interest. Trump, absurdly, claims he would end the war in “one day” by forcing Ukraine to surrender land.

For DeSantis, it's a mere “territorial dispute” or, to quote Neville Chamberlain, a “quarrel in a far away country, between people of whom we know nothing”. DeSantis, wilting under fire, has since rowed back a little.

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Isolationist sentiment is nevertheless rising among Republicans, of whom three-quarters support either Trump (40%) or DeSantis (36%), according to a CNN poll. Only 9% said foreign policy was a top priority.

A clear divide is opening up between the frontrunners and hawkish hopefuls such as former vice-president Mike Pence, former UN ambassador Nikki Haley and former secretary of state Mike Pompeo. All back the expansive, Reaganesque “shining city upon a hill” view of US global leadership. All are stuck on single figures in the polls.

“Donald Trump is many things, but he's not a Reagan Republican,” wrote analyst Ben Jacobs, dissecting a recent Trump tirade. “His speech represented a reversion towards a pre-second world war GOP, with doses of both populism and paleo-conservatism.” The big question, Jacobs argued, was how decisive America first isolationism may prove in 2024.

Republican divisions as the election approaches are an opportunity for Biden – and for Xi and Putin, too. The terrible twins will hope Trump-style isolationists prevail – and will use lies and disinformation to help them, as in 2016. Democrats, by upholding traditional postwar US global leadership, will hope to capture the political centre.

Yet Biden's bifurcation of the world into freedom-loving democracies and oppressive autocracies is too simplistic to meet coming challenges. A multipolar world and a more equitable balance of power – one not dominated and distorted by superpowers and dictators – must be the 21st-century aim. It's not only fairer, it's safer.

That's not to say US-led western intervention, under the UN's “responsibility to protect” rubric, should be abandoned as a policy of last resort. A perpetually disordered world will always need troubleshooters and peacemakers.

Better America than Xi, Putin and their ilk.

A year since it broke out, the conflict in Ukraine has changed the world, and the Guardian has covered every minute of it. Our reporters on the ground have endured personal risk to produce more than 5,000 articles, films and podcasts. Our live blog has been expertly updated continuously and comprehensively since the outbreak of Europe's biggest war since 1945.

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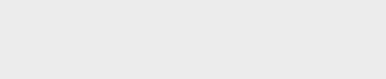
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