

C RAJA MOHAN WRITES: FROM DAVOS TO NAM, UNRAVELLING OF THE OLD WORLD ORDER, THE END OF PEACE

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: NAM and its relevance

Three summits this week — one in Davos, Switzerland and the other two (NAM and G77) in Kampala, Uganda — point to the shifting terrain of global politics in 2024. The world's rich and powerful in Davos and the underprivileged in Kampala have a shared problem — dealing with structural changes in the international system. The old slogans — on globalism in Davos and collectivism of the Global South in Kampala — are no longer credible or sustainable. The summits also highlight the contrast between the agendas of India and China.

The annual gathering at Davos is tempered by the recognition that renewed great power conflict and economic nationalism have upended the [apple](#) cart of globalisation. The back-to-back summits of the Non-Aligned Movement and the G77 in Kampala may find that the renewed political euphoria about the Global South is insufficient to deal with the challenges and opportunities of the changing world order.

But first to the 'Davos Man', the moniker of the globalist elite that has shaped the world since the 1990s. The Berlin Wall collapsed in 1989, and the Soviet Union in 1991. The end of the Cold War was followed by a period of relative harmony within the great power constellation dominated by the US. On the economic front, the so-called Washington Consensus heralded an era marked by the free movement of capital, goods, services, and labour across borders.

The era also saw the redistribution of global economic activity to take advantage of cost differentials and policy permissiveness. Markets and efficiency were the new mantras for the ruling elites worldwide. New political ideas of global governance matched this economic transformation. They were rooted in the conviction that supra-national institutions that transcend sovereignty were necessary to manage the growing economic integration of the world as well as collective threats like climate change.

The world that the Davos Man made in the last few decades has begun to unravel. The long peace between major powers has ended with the war in [Ukraine](#). If the West could not address the political resentments of post-Soviet Russia, it is finding it even harder to cope with the ambitions of a rising China. The new alliance between Russia and China has presented the West with the greatest challenge since World War II. If the war in the heart of Europe has dramatically undermined the journey towards an integrated world, the mounting tensions in East Asia driven by China's muscular regional policies and a revitalisation of US alliances in the region have added to it. Meanwhile, Israel's war on Gaza, the Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping, and the US bombing of Houthi bases in Yemen highlight the dangers of a wider war in the vital Middle East and its devastating consequences for the world.

Well before these conflicts began to disrupt global economic flows and fragment the world order, the Davos Man's worldview was under attack as too elitist. The sweeping globalism of the Davos Man inevitably produced a nationalist reaction. The attempts to impose a new climate change agenda triggered the so-called "greenlash" within Western societies. But the coup de grace to the world that Davos made came from the principal champion of globalisation — the US. In the 2016 presidential election, [Donald Trump](#) mobilised the brewing resentments in America against free trade in general, China's weaponisation of economic interdependence in particular, global

institutions, immigration, and climate activism to storm into the White House. Trump's tenure at the White House decisively moved the US away from the Davos agenda. [Joe Biden](#)'s election as US president in 2020 did not reverse this agenda. While the Democrats returned to supporting global institutions and actions to mitigate climate change, they reinforced Trump's policies on "fair trade" and limiting exposure to China. Biden has sought to rework the global economic order, reducing the reliance on markets, developing industrial policies, attending to the interests of workers, jobs, and communities, restructuring global supply chains that focus on resilience rather than efficiency and reforming the WTO and the global development institutions.

Trump, who is seeking reelection, is promising to go back to the agenda that junks globalism in favour of nationalism. It also involves shredding the climate change agenda, restoring fossil fuel production, limiting immigration and raising tariffs on imported goods. Given the growing chances that Trump will be president again, the challenge for Davos is to cope with a rapidly changing world that no longer conforms to its traditional agenda.

The problem of change is equally demanding on the NAM and G77 agenda. The renewed political enthusiasm for the Global South in the international discourse does not easily translate into practical outcomes for both these institutions, which have a long history of proclaiming solidarity and collective bargaining but limited accomplishments. The weight of both NAM and G77 has been undermined by the rise of regionalism across the Global South. Regional institutions like the Association of SouthEast Asian Nations and the African Union are today more consequential than the NAM or G77. Groupings like the BRICS now have co-opted some of the traditional agenda of NAM and G77 and have a greater political impact. The presence of Russia (once seen as part of the North) in the BRICS muddies the old North-South framework.

China was never part of NAM or G77 but actively engages with both forums. As the world's second-largest economy and the principal challenger to the US-led world order, China today presents itself as the champion of the Global South. Several initiatives, including the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI), and Global Security Initiative (GSI) reflect Beijing's determination to mobilise the Global South in rearranging the global order on Chinese terms.

India's current political emphasis on the Global South is about reclaiming its traditional role in the NAM and G77. For both China and India, the challenge is to adapt to the structural shifts in the global order while seeking greater influence in the Global South. Meanwhile, there are new possibilities for major countries in the Global South to exploit the renewed great power contest for elite or national benefit. Countries occupying critical locations or having vital natural resources have significant leverage to negotiate individually with the great powers.

China and India will be represented at the ministerial level in both Davos and Kampala. In Davos, both will make a pitch for a greater engagement with the Western capital. However, there is a crucial difference in their objectives. While China's ambition is to revise the global economic order, India's focus is on integration and reform. In Kampala, Beijing will present itself as an alternative to the current order built by the US, while India sees itself as a bridge between the North and the South.

The writer is a contributing editor on international affairs for [The Indian Express](#)

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