

I am not Playing Cards - Knud Erik Jorgensen



Perhaps the current power-political situation, despite its many facets, is not that complex but rather simple. Hence, here follows an attempt at adhering to Einstein's advice: *everything should be kept as simple as possible but not simpler.*

Did we not teach our students all these years about the dynamics of alliance systems in changing configurations of polarity? Did we not teach, in every IR Theory 101 course, how under the conditions of multipolarity, alliances tend to be more fluid and reversible? If we consider politics within the NATO alliance, the USA is not the first country to demonstrate less than convincing commitment to the alliance and get away with such behaviour. The main difference between

those 'fluid' countries and the USA is that the USA used to play a role as the primus inter pares (first among equals) within the alliance and was accepted as such by other members of the alliance. After demasking activities during and after the 2024 election, the wannabe King abdicated his country from the role yet demanded a personal coronation, if not the Nobel Peace Prize. The USA has now de facto retired from the role it played since 1945. What was the response of the other members of NATO? Having lost their American pacifier (Yoffe 1984), they appear predominantly baffled, though the outcome has been in the cards [since the Soviet Union disappeared](#). Did not Secretary of State James A. Baker III declare about the wars in former Yugoslavia, saying "We do not have a dog in that fight." Yet the Clinton administration reversed the policy and came to the rescue. As Clinton's Assistant Secretary of State, Richard C. Holbrooke, declared, "It was a profound miscalculation"..."At the end of the Cold War, we had a brief amnesia attack about our national interests in Europe. We had linked them solely to the Soviet threat. [But history came back and bit us, in Yugoslavia.](#)" However, the amnesia attacks returned on both sides of the Atlantic and became ever stronger. On the European side, it is conveniently forgotten how Secretary of State Hilary Clinton's mission statement contained four pages on Asia and four lines on Europe. About the first Trump administration, it was, to use Holbrooke's words, "a profound miscalculation" to believe that it was somehow comparable to a passing headache.

Enter an article from 2013, Patrick Buchanan's, "[Is Putin one of Us?](#)", and we leave the clinical predictions of likely behaviour a la polarity studies behind. We now enter a world of ideology and culture wars, a move that prompts Buchanan to suggest similarities if not congruence between, on the one hand, Putin's anti-liberal stance on morality and values and, on the other hand, American paleo-conservatives. Hence, Buchanan points to a transnational community of cultural-political values. Four years later, the New York Times reported that [Buchanan revealed himself as the first Trumpist](#). Perhaps we can use the Polish concept of the układ to characterize the transnational community of values. While it specifically refers to Polish nobles who betrayed their country by allying themselves with Catherine the Great, it may help explain the joint sponsorship by Putin and the Trump administration of European bed fellows: the AfD in Germany, The Five Star Movement in Italy, the National Rally in France (and the like). It may also help explain why the quintessentially liberal European Union is

perceived as an enemy by Moscow, the Trump administration, and their European political-ideological allies. The by far most compelling study of the transnational movement is tellingly entitled [The Reactionary Internationale](#). It is a movement that shares many features yet comes in different national colours. The following feature applies to the Polish case but seems universal: “It is not ‘nationalism’ in the traditional sense but something less coherent, more akin to a mood than an ideology - [a narrative of righteousness, victimhood, and self-pity from which anyone can pick their prejudices as they see fit.](#)”

Abandonment often appears together with the concepts of entrapment and free-riding. The three types of alliance behaviour are the stuff alliance politics is made of. Therefore, all three concepts are useful to understand the current dynamics of politics within NATO, but they also have wider applications. Thus, we might be witnessing the US abandonment of not only a prospective member of NATO but also of NATO as a whole, including undermining European governments and key strategies such as nuclear deterrence. With Elon Musk suggesting that the USA should leave NATO (and the UN), abandonment is a timely concept. Presumably, US abandonment was high on the agenda of the recent summit in London. Sovereign countries have been abandoned before. The Diriyah Palace in Riyadh is different from the Rheinhôtel Dreesen in Bonn and also different from the Livadia Palace in Yalta. Yet, somehow, events at the Diriyah Palace seem comparable to meetings at the Rheinhôtel Dreesen, meetings where Czechoslovakia was carved up in 1938, and comparable to the Livadia Palace, where Europe, if not the world, in 1945 was divided into spheres of influence. As in 1938, the world was promised “peace for our time” (Neville Chamberlain), and, likewise, it is well-known that the Yalta agreement was followed by 40 years of Cold War, characterized by a runaway arms race and proxy wars throughout the world. A case of entrapment could be if Europe were lured into joining US hostility towards China. While entrapment in the logic of power politics 101 or in the Reactionary Internationale’s war against the rump-liberal West for Europe is not an option, abandoning the crusade is. In principle, it is also an option to talk the language of power that former EU High Representative Josep Borrell spoke about but did not practice, for instance, signalling an interest in alignment with China. Would it be a genuine interest or just being part of preparing a deal?

Conquest by force has become the new normal, not in international law but practiced on a daily basis in the South China Sea, in Russia's near abroad, and several places elsewhere. The behaviour might occasionally trigger condemning diplomatic declarations but, in most cases, only limited punishment. In this regard, Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait remains an exception to the rule. Someone in the Trump administration might have read Jean Baudrillard and convinced POTUS to rhetorically simulate conquest by claiming Canada, Greenland, Panama, and Gaza. Of course, it could also just be a peacock opening its feathers, believing it is mating season.

Exit voice, loyalty. The three concepts were made popular by the economist Albert O. Hirschmann, who demonstrated their applicability to a range of social affairs (e.g. economic, political, and more). Members of NATO have so far predominantly been exceptionally loyal to the organization, though throughout the years they were not only loyal but also engaged in voice behaviour. Until now, only France has left part of the organization, prompting NATO almost 60 years ago to move its headquarters from Paris to Brussels. Specifications of NATO territory enabled the USA to avoid becoming embroiled in European colonial wars, and the Europeans could avoid entrapment in cases of American warfare around the world. If Europeans were free-riding concerning defence spending, Americans were free-riding in terms of expecting absolute loyalty. The Europeans and Canadians would not only not leave but also support whatever came out of Washington. MAGA-US seems eager to disrupt the traditional keys to NATO politics yet also seems eager to overestimate its own grandeur and underestimate the degree to which abandonment can be a double-edged sword. Whether the US exit strategies concerning the WHO, the UNHRC, and UNESCO are confined to these organizations or the first round of a wider assault on the multilateral system remains to be seen. Instead of multilateralism, authoritarian great powers tend to prefer unilateralism or bilateralism, not least because the latter strategies reduce what has been called the great power of small states.



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