

Why strongmen are wrong to loathe Europe

TO THE HARD men who run America, China and Russia, Europe is soft and thus doomed. The contempt of Presidents Donald Trump, Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin is broad and deep.

Denouncing people for their ancestry, Trump lieutenants portray the presence of even second-generation migrants as evidence of Europe committing civilisational suicide. The European Union's need to seek a consensus among 27 countries is used by America, China and Russia to play divide and rule. An EU-China trade conflict looms, as Europeans panic about Chinese exports putting locals out of work. In response, The Telegram hears, Chinese envoys have been urging Europe to learn from America. In the envoys' telling, Mr Trump hit China with tariffs last year but was punched back, harder. As a result, America now respects China. That refers to China's threats, in 2025, to curb shipments of vital rare-earth minerals. The implicit message is blunt. China beat Mr Trump. Just who do Europeans think they are?

China is losing patience with European demands to stop its companies supplying Russia's war machine. Ukrainian drones are also full of Chinese components and China turns a blind eye to that, Chinese officials have told European governments. They prod: How far do you want to push export controls?

Europe's vulnerabilities were on display at the Stockholm China Forum on June 4th and 5th. A closed-door gathering of political and business leaders, officials and scholars from America, China and Europe (meaning the EU, Britain and a few other Western countries), the forum is co-hosted by Sweden's foreign ministry and the German Marshall Fund, a think-tank. This columnist has attended the forums since 2008. This was one of the bleakest.

After China successfully intimidated Mr Trump with rare-earth controls, America secured a fragile truce backed by threats of tariffs and chip-export controls. EU markets

provide some leverage, but it cannot easily be used, because of economic dependencies on China, and economic and security ties to America.

As the US-China tech contest speeds up, Europe is falling further behind. In Stockholm, Chinese participants called Europeans too “comfortable” to compete. One gave a real-world example: a European executive at a Chinese tech company told his boss that a crushing workload was endangering his marriage. “Oh dear,” said the Chinese boss. “You clearly have the wrong wife.”

Yet amid the gloom, a contrary thought struck this columnist. Just maybe, in this age of radical uncertainty, Europe’s softer, more consensual approach to work and politics may prove useful.

Mr Trump, Mr Xi and Mr Putin see a world shaped by power—and the will to use it. The American and Russian presidents endorse a global order in which “peace” is secured when weaker countries submit to the strong. Both condemn Ukraine for defending itself against Russia’s unprovoked invasion. China is more mealy-mouthed, but when its diplomats accuse the West of provoking and prolonging the war by ignoring Russia’s legitimate security interests, they are using the same logic.

Might-makes-right views of international relations have their equivalent in domestic politics. Countries worldwide are succumbing to the winner-takes-all doctrine of majoritarianism. At first glance, that looks like democracy, as power is wielded in the name of a legitimate, law-abiding majority. But in such systems, minorities and dissenters enjoy few or no rights. The offer to citizens is one of conditional safety, if they stay on the right side of a majority-minority dividing line.

To be sure, America, a fractious but functioning democracy, is vastly freer than China and Russia, both of them tyrannies of the majority. But like Mr Putin and Mr Xi, Mr Trump treats politics as winner-takes-all. To different degrees, each behaves as if the state serves the interests of a single ruling party, demonising opponents as enemies within.

Strongmen boast of earning legitimacy by being efficient and effective. The sheer unpredictability of the future will test that claim. When rulers put their trust in power, rather than in laws and treaties, they are betting on staying strong. Mr Trump, Mr Putin and Mr Xi are all risk-takers, seemingly tempted by dangerous adventures from the

Middle East to Europe's eastern frontiers, or the Taiwan Strait. Nobody can confidently predict the relative strength of America, China and Russia in five or ten years.

Thanks to AI and other disruptive technologies, dividing lines between economic winners and losers are about to move wildly. Nobody knows which industries will vanish or flourish, or what sort of education will make people employable. In such an age, who can be confident of belonging to a "good" majority that plays by the rules, and so deserves to be safe?

Coalition-building, as the world is turned upside down

It is easy to mock Europe, with its unsustainable welfare systems and long holidays. But there was nothing silly about its embrace, after 1945, of consensual, rules-based politics. The continent's many castles were not recently built by tourism ministries. They testify to centuries in which Europeans settled disputes by fire and sword. History taught Europeans to fear tyrannical majorities. Time and again over the ages, lines moved. Without inalienable legal rights for individuals, belonging to the wrong religion, social class or group spelled sudden ruin, exile or worse.

Europe has problems. But there are scenarios in which its bet on rules pays off. America may elect a president who tries to serve the whole country, and not one political tribe. An America that is open to diverse cultures and views could ally with Europe to counter China's and Russia's predatory ways. Hard men may not own the future. Perhaps consensual politics will help keep citizens from panicking. Softness may not spell Europe's doom just yet.