

# **As the US Government Joins “Team Authoritarian” -**

## **Here’s How to Maintain an International Rules-Based Order**

**John Austin (USA)**

## Executive Summary

To effectively counter economic competition, global security threats, and assaults on the rules-based global order from authoritarian nations, democratic allies must work together to build support and push the adoption and integration of two core national strategies: 1) building stronger domestic economies and strengthening democracy within nations—through large-scale inward [place-based investments in people, innovation and infrastructure](#)—but 2) [doing so in an allyshoring manner](#). Essentially baking a bigger economic collective pie and enhancing the economic heft of allied nations—through expanded trade, co-production and supply chain relations with countries with shared values and interest in strengthening the rules based international order. Now as the current US leadership animates the same authoritarian behaviors as leaders of China and Russia, seeking to quash internal dissent, undermine democratic institutions at home and attack democratic partners and allies across the globe, launch a mercantilist economic policy and values-free “might makes right” foreign policy, sadly the US now must be counted as authoritarian and similarly contained. By working together the family of rules and rights respecting nations can strengthen their own political and economic hand vis-à-vis a rising authoritarianism in order to protect a rules-based order.

## The US Takes an Authoritarian Turn

The US-led post-war international economic and political order that brought unprecedented prosperity to much of the world was built upon tenants of free trade, rule of law, and a competitive marketplace driving the economy, not state direction. It was also undergirded by a set of shared values. Values like freedom of expression, the protection of human and civil rights, self-determination, and democratic governance.

Now in castigating European democracies and undermining our own, appearing to side with Putin versus Ukraine, and unleashing a mercantilist global trade war, the Trump Administration seems to be joining ‘team authoritarian’. The US also seems to be adopting authoritarian China’s economic playbook. As Michael Froman writes in [Foreign Affairs](#): “Tariffs and protectionism, restrictions on investment, measures designed to drive domestic production: Washington’s economic policy suddenly looks an awful lot like Beijing’s policies over the last decade or so—like Chinese policy with American characteristics.”

## The Path Forwards for Democracies

There is a better path for the rest of the world’s democracies, than that of blithely accepting (or kowtowing) to the United States’ embrace of “illiberal” politics and

economics. Now is the time for leaders in Europe, the UK, to join with others in the Americas, Africa and Asia who share the values that undergird a free and prosperous international system, to lead the international coalition that stands up to the authoritarian axis—and successfully contains it—just as they did (with the US’ help) during the Cold War. This path also now (unfortunately) means standing up to pressure from the US. Not agreeing to Trump’s demands, but containing the US’ damage-doing, via tariffs and trade restrictions, to its own economy.

With the Trump Administration sending a clear message that Europe and other Asian allies are “on their own” the collective of democratic nations must not only prevent Trump from further undermining and fracturing the allied family nations—but to grow, enhance, and make the alliance even stronger.

As the US moves from friend to adversary, the UK and Europe have no choice but to rally themselves and other democratic nations (many of whom were also once US allies now being bullied by Trump, such as Canada, Mexico, even Japan) and work more closely to strengthen their individual and collective economies (as well as win more developing-world allies)—if they are to have the collective economic strength that brings political, military, and soft-power strength. Strength needed now to both counter China and Russia and push back against the US’ economic and political coercion.

Some in Europe and other (regrettably) former allies, given the US’ aggressive economic coercion, now feel forced to [re-consider what had been a useful turn away](#) from economic ties with China and Russia. A distancing driven by the clear manipulation of the open, free trade, and rules based international order by China for geo-political advantage, and the blatant attack on Ukraine and flouting of international norms by Russia. But this re-embrace of these two authoritarian regimes would be a mistake.

While difficult, there is a path to strengthen the collective hand of democratic freedom-loving nations in standing up to all authoritarians. It means leaning into—and putting a detailed plan of action forward for a new economic alliance of nations, based on [allyshoring](#). Allyshoring means enhancing international economic engagement, free trade, co-production and sourcing relationships with countries—not just in North America and Europe, but on all continents—who share similar values, and who want to strengthen rather than diminish a rules-based international trade and economic order.

Freedom-loving nations can effectively push back if they link arms economically across the globe. This means recognizing and leveraging the geopolitical economic realities:

1. Yes, the US has the largest and most dynamic economy on earth the which the [latest World Bank estimates](#) at \$27 trillion in annual GDP. An economy Trump is seeking to weaponize against friend and foe alike.
2. But taken as a whole the states of the European Union rank 2nd (ahead of China!) with an annual GDP of \$19 trillion.
3. The EU teaming up with just Japan (the 4th biggest with a national economy of \$4 trillion), and the UK (the 6th biggest at \$3.3 trillion) puts that bloc of nations on par with the U.S.

4. Add into this economic alliance Canada (#10 in the world at \$2.1 trillion), and Mexico (#12 at \$1.7 trillion), and many other countries eager to play in an open, rules-based capitalist system, and this new alliance has more economic heft than the US.
5. There are arguably a large number of additional nations with a self-interest to join the alliance, and continue to reap its economic benefits, including Australia (#13) and #14 South Korea, both at \$1.7 trillion annually; Thailand (#26); Singapore (#30), and the Phillipines (#33) all at \$.5 trillion in GDP.
6. Even Communist Vietnam (#34 in the world at \$.4 trillion in annual GDP) would likely want to continue to reap the benefits it has gained of participation in the open, rules-based international economic order.

This collective economic clout of remaining rules and rights respecting nations can be used to expand its own free trade and economies, while facing down (not giving in) to Trump's economic bullying. This economic influence and united front can also send a clear message of resistance to the authoritarian axis of China, Russia and (now regrettably) the US. (Find an excellent, and more detailed argument on the same theme from Canadian entrepreneur Jon Schell [here](#).)

## Europe Must Lead the Way

Europe in the form of the member states of European Union is the second largest global economic bloc after the US, and is home to the world's third, sixth, seventh and eighth biggest economies (Germany #3, UK, France and Italy at #6, #7 and #8). Even before Trump's election European leaders had the foresight to begin building their collective economic strength with trading partners. The EU's pathbreaking [Mercosur free trade agreement](#) between the EU, Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay, finalized in December 2024—would add another \$3 trillion dollars in economic activity into a new economic alliance. Now in the face of the Trump launched global trade war, and the US' isolationist retreat—Europe is working quickly [to engage in new free trade relations](#) to protect and enhance its position. Europe can lead the way in developing additional multilateral and bi-lateral free trade and economic alliances among the remaining international rules-respecting nations in order to enhance their collective prosperity and economic strength vis-a-vis authoritarians.

## Lessons Learned

After the rise and fall of Hitler's Germany, Germans appreciated too late that they had enabled and elected a rights-violating, anti-democratic dictator, and had not moved early enough to counter him at every turn. America should have heeded its own corollary lesson—it did reject the first 1930s isolationist and racist America First movement and went on rally allies to win World War II, via the Marshall Plan rebuild economies ravaged by war, and with its allies build out the West-led international economic and political system, and rules-based order. A regime that delivered much more in the way of economic opportunity as well as freedom of thought and expression than the alternative Communist model on offer to Europeans by the Soviets, which many at the time found attractive.

Only by once again building this kind of global economic alliance will the collective family of nations that want to contain authoritarianism gain the economic and political strength and concomitant leverage to do everything from continuing to help Ukraine defend itself, to effectively checking a somewhat [economically weakened China](#) in its designs on Taiwan, and countering China's and Russia's efforts to create dependent "puppet" dictators in the developing world.

Happily, there are still more nations and their leaders in Europe and elsewhere who believe strongly in an international order informed by the values of freedom, transparency, self-determination and rule of law than there are the "might makes right" of authoritarians. Now is the time for these nations to unite in common purpose.

## The Author



**John Austin** is a Fellow with the Academy of International Affairs - NRW and an Affiliated Faculty Member, University of Michigan.