

THE END OF EASY WORLD ORDER

A THREE-DECADE PERSPECTIVE ON THE FORCES
RESHAPING GLOBAL MARKETS



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BRENTHURST WEALTH MARKET INSIGHTS | JULY 2026

A WORD FROM THE MANAGING DIRECTOR

Dear Client,

Throughout my career, I have learned that uncertainty is not the exception - it is the environment in which successful investing has always taken place.

Today's world is evolving at an extraordinary pace. Geopolitical tensions, technological innovation, and shifting economic policies are reshaping the investment landscape, prompting many investors to ask what these changes mean for their financial future.

At Brenthurst Wealth, we believe the answer is not to react to every headline, but to remain focused on the principles that have always delivered long-term success - **disciplined investing, diversification and independent financial advice tailored to your personal goals.**

This investment review brings together insights and perspectives from leading global experts following the Ninety One Global Investment Conference held in June 2026. It explores the issues we believe matter most today, from global markets and retirement planning to tax efficiency and offshore investing. Our aim is to provide clear, relevant perspectives that help you make informed decisions with confidence.

Thank you for the trust you place in Brenthurst Wealth. We remain committed to helping you navigate an increasingly complex world while staying focused on what matters most - achieving your long-term financial objectives.

A professional portrait of Brian Butchart, a man with short brown hair and a beard, wearing a dark blue blazer over a light blue button-down shirt. He is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression.

Brian Butchart

Brian Butchart, CFP®

Managing Director | Brenthurst Wealth



THE END OF EASY WORLD ORDER

For three decades, investors could treat geopolitics as background noise. That era is over. A fragmenting world demands a new framework and a steady hand at the helm.

Attending the recent Ninety One global investment conference in London, provided an opportunity to meet, hear and gain perspective from some of the top fund managers in the world and high profile market commentators.

"We're in a world where every man is for himself. As an investor, you must understand each country's definition of national interest because that, not some global standard, will drive your returns."

Ninety One Global Investment Conference, June 2026

When historians look back on the early twenty-first century, they may mark 2025 as the year the post-Cold War consensus quietly gave up the ghost. **The rules-based international order – imperfect, contested, but broadly functional – that underwrote three decades of globalisation and relatively predictable financial markets is now in structural retreat.** In its place: a multipolar world where great powers jostle, alliances fray, and the national interest of each state, rather than any shared global standard, increasingly determines where capital can go safely and generate durable returns.

That was the bracing argument at the centre of the Ninety One global investment conference, where two of the most seasoned observers of global affairs – Mark Malloch-Brown, former Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations and latterly president of the Open Society Foundations, and Alec Russell, Foreign Editor of the Financial Times – convened to give investors a clear-eyed account of the world as it actually is, rather than as they might wish it to be. Their conclusions were sobering, occasionally counterintuitive, and directly relevant to every portfolio allocation decision being made today.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE OLD WORLD

To understand the disruption, one first needs to understand what is being disrupted. For much of the twentieth century, the world organised itself around two competing systems: a geopolitical balance of power in which alliances deterred aggression, and a colonial or semi-colonial economic model that secured supply chains and markets for industrial expansion. After the devastation of two world wars, the architects of the post-1945 order attempted something more ambitious – a rules-based system, embodied first in the League of Nations and then in the United Nations and the Bretton Woods institutions, that would govern international relations through law and shared norms rather than naked power.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 appeared to vindicate that project. The United States stood alone – politically, economically, and culturally dominant – and the world it had built seemed durable. As Martin Wolf wrote in the Financial Times on the eve of America's 250th anniversary, the US "not only possessed unmatched political, economic power, but embodied and admired values as constitutional government and freedom". The subsequent thirty years of globalisation, which China, ironically, leveraged more effectively than any other power to build its manufacturing empire, were underwritten by that American-led order.

That order is now fracturing. The question Malloch-Brown posed to the conference was stark: was the progress of the twentieth century a durable achievement, or merely a blip? Are we reverting to something closer to the nineteenth century – a world of competing great powers, with rules that bend to the strongest?



THE MULTIPOLAR MOMENT AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR CAPITAL

7%

SHARE OF WORLD
POPULATION LIVING IN
LIBERAL DEMOCRACIES,
PER V-DEM INSTITUTE

The evidence, these speakers suggested, points towards reversion rather than recovery. Russia had already stepped outside the rules-based system.

15%

POTENTIAL RETURN PREMIUM
FOR ADVISED INVESTORS
OVER A DECADE, PER
ROSENBERG RESEARCH

The United States, under its current administration, is actively dismantling the sinews of the international order it once built; withdrawing from multilateral institutions, weaponising tariffs as foreign policy, and attacking the rule of law, scientific leadership and alliance commitments that underpinned American power.

5%

NATO GDP TARGET FOR
DEFENCE SPENDING BY 2035,
UP FROM 2%

2.5×

MORE LIKELY TO STAY
INVESTED DURING
DOWNTURNS WITH
PROFESSIONAL ADVICE

China remains, in Malloch-Brown's framing, a "swing vote" – a nation that benefited enormously from the liberal trading system it now has the capacity to undermine.

For investors, this is not an abstract geopolitical conversation. The conference for 2026 observed that geopolitical competition has made global supply chains more brittle and introduced more frequent disruptions, generating higher volatility in both growth and investment returns. The classical economic logic of specialisation and frictionless trade, which powered equity markets for a generation, is being replaced by a logic of national security, strategic autonomy and regional fragmentation. Where capital goes next is increasingly a function of political geography, not just economic fundamentals.

The implications run deeper than headline risk. Alec Russell, drawing on his reporting from Washington, offered a pointed warning to investors tempted to treat the current American administration as a four-year aberration: whoever succeeds the current president, Democrat or Republican, will not restore the previous world. **The clock, he insisted, cannot be turned back.** The United States' withdrawal from global leadership is a structural shift, not a cyclical one. American foreign policy will become less unpredictable, but the underlying tectonic movement – the gradual abdication of the world-ordering role the US has played since 1945 – will persist.

"If you ask me which is the greater threat to Europe – Trump pulling out of NATO, or Chinese manufacturing? – I would say Chinese manufacturing. By a mile. And yet the press has it completely inverted."

Mark Malloch-Brown, Ninety One Investment Conference, 2026

THE CHINA MANUFACTURING SHOCK: THE STORY INVESTORS ARE MISSING

Perhaps the most important analytical contribution of the conference was Malloch-Brown and Russell's insistence on distinguishing between **noise and signal**. The dominant media narrative – tariff announcements, geopolitical posturing, day-to-day volatility – is, by design, a distraction. The signal, both speakers argued, is **China's rapid ascent into high-end manufacturing**.

Russell illustrated the point with a concrete example drawn from his reporting. A Shanghai businessman, who in 2019 was producing 20,000 specialist sensors used in electric vehicles to prevent electrical leakage and selling them at \$15 each, competing against Swiss and German incumbents priced at \$30.

By 2026, the same manufacturer was producing one million sensors annually and selling them for \$2. The Swiss and German competitors, Russell noted, no longer exist. This is not a story about cheap, low-end goods flooding markets; this is the second China shock, a wave of sophisticated, technology-intensive manufacturing that threatens Europe's industrial heartland in a way that NATO deployments do not.



China's structural advantage, both speakers agreed, is formidable. With three to four million engineers graduating annually - an order of magnitude more than the United States - the country possesses a human capital foundation for sustained industrial dominance. The investment implication is uncomfortable for those with concentrated European industrial exposures.

As Malloch-Brown put it, investors face a binary choice between a "subsidised museum economy" and genuine industrial competitiveness. Knowing which companies sit on which side of that divide requires **geopolitical literacy, not just financial modeling.**

EVERY MAN FOR HIMSELF: THE END OF MIDDLE-POWER COMFORT

One of the more striking shifts in analytical perspective that emerged from the conference concerned the fate of so-called middle powers, countries like South Africa, India, and Brazil that had hoped a multipolar world might offer them greater strategic freedom, a "pick-and-mix" foreign policy that could maintain productive relationships with both Washington and Beijing.

Russell, who had himself been attracted to that thesis a year earlier, reported that he had since revised his view. A senior Indian official he respects - someone who, in his words, views the world with "a clear, crisp perspective", unclouded by ideological loyalty - had put it bluntly: **the American-led international system is ending more abruptly than anyone anticipated, and the result is something closer to "every man for himself".**

The public goods that came with American hegemony - freedom of navigation, predictable trade rules, dispute resolution mechanisms - are beginning to erode. Countries that had taken them for granted are starting to understand what they are losing.

For investors allocating capital across emerging markets, this analysis has immediate practical consequences. Each country's national interest - how its government defines security, economic priorities, and acceptable risk - becomes the primary lens for assessing investability.

A global standard, or a universal framework derived from Western financial theory, is an increasingly insufficient guide. The investor who understands South Africa's geopolitical positioning, India's strategic calculus, or Nigeria's domestic political economy has a material edge over one who relies solely on index weights and earnings models.



AFRICA: IRRELEVANT, OR THE LAST FRONTIER?



Against this backdrop of an established world's fragility, **Africa presents one of the most complex investment questions of the decade.**

Malloch-Brown identified the central tension with precision: if labour remains a competitive advantage, Africa, with its extraordinary demographic momentum, is exceptionally well positioned. If, however, automation and artificial intelligence fundamentally transform the economics of manufacturing, rendering cheap labour irrelevant, Africa could find itself structurally excluded from the next phase of global industrialisation.

The story of Aliko Dangote's Nigerian refinery, flagged by Russell as an example of genuinely transformative African capital, illustrates both the opportunity and the paradox. A project of landmark ambition, it creates relatively few direct jobs because modern refineries are largely automated.

Africa's employment story, Malloch-Brown suggested, **is increasingly an informal one**, poorly captured by Western economic metrics and, therefore, **systematically mispriced by investors** who rely on conventional data.

South Africa's status as one of the world's top-performing bond and equity markets over the past year is a reminder that the continent's investability, when assessed through the right framework, can surprise.

WHY THIS IS PRECISELY THE MOMENT TO WORK WITH A PROFESSIONAL ADVISOR

The world that Malloch-Brown and Russell described - fractured, fast-moving, ideologically contested - is one in which the cost of analytical error is rising. The comfortable assumption that a diversified index portfolio, held passively, would deliver adequate returns in a stable globalised system is being tested. In a world of **"every man for himself"**, the returns to getting country, sector and thematic allocation right are increasing, and so are the penalties for getting them wrong.

This is precisely why the role of a professional financial advisor has never been more consequential. The value of advice has always been partly about access to better analytical tools and partly about behavioural discipline, preventing investors from making decisions driven by fear or euphoria, rather than by evidence. Both dimensions are heightened in the current environment.

Research from Rosenberg Research indicates that **investors who work with professional advisors achieve returns up to 15% higher over a decade, compared to those managing assets independently** – an advantage that derives not merely from market experience, but from the application of structured analytical frameworks to portfolio construction. More immediately relevant in volatile markets, clients working with professional advisors are 2.5 times more likely to remain invested during market downturns, avoiding the catastrophic compounding effect of panic selling at the bottom.

The behavioural dimension matters enormously in an environment deliberately designed to generate noise. As Russell observed, the current American administration openly acknowledges that creating noise – announcing tariffs one day, reversing them the next, gesturing toward geopolitical crises that resolve without incident – is a deliberate tactic.

The danger, for investors without professional guidance, is that they respond to the noise rather than the signal: selling quality assets in a moment of manufactured panic, or chasing momentum in sectors that benefit from short-term headlines rather than durable structural trends.

“The long-term threat is the one we lose sight of in the noise. And losing sight of the long term is the most expensive mistake an investor can make.”

Alec Russell, foreign editor, Financial Times

A QUALIFIED FINANCIAL ADVISOR BRINGS THREE THINGS THAT ARE UNIQUELY VALUABLE IN THIS ENVIRONMENT.

First, geopolitical literacy – the ability to translate macro-level shifts in the world order into portfolio-level implications, distinguishing between transient risks and those that are structural.

Second, emotional discipline – the capacity to hold a client to a well-constructed long-term strategy when every headline is screaming that the world is ending (or, conversely, that a new bull market is guaranteed).

Third, personalised calibration – the understanding that a shift toward regional fragmentation, rising defence spending, or the restructuring of supply chains creates very different implications depending on an investor's time horizon, tax position, existing exposures and income needs.

Research from the American College of Financial Services reinforces this: advisors who emphasise comprehensive financial planning over pure investment management are significantly better equipped to navigate uncertain markets.

Their clients are less anxious, less likely to make reactive portfolio changes, and better positioned to capture the long-term returns that markets ultimately deliver to those patient enough to stay invested.



THE SIGNAL IN THE NOISE

The world that Malloch-Brown and Russell described is one that rewards clarity of thought and penalises reactive decision-making.

The nineteenth-century-style power competition now reasserting itself globally is inherently unpredictable in its day-to-day manifestations, which is precisely why a disciplined, framework-driven approach to investment, guided by someone with the expertise to separate structural shifts from temporary turbulence, is so valuable.

The conference's broader arc, from the 2010 event timed around the World Cup to this year's gathering, tells its own story about the rhythm of history. In 2012, in Istanbul, the mood was of a new dawn: an inclusive global world in which emerging markets would rise together. A decade later, the same thinkers are describing a world of competing national interests, contested norms and fragmented trade.

Investors who anchored their portfolios to the 2012 consensus paid a price. Those who listened to the contrarian voices, who were told, that year, that the recovery would happen in the US, and who had the discipline to act on that insight and hold it, were rewarded.

That is, ultimately, what a great financial advisor does. Not predict the future - no one can do that in this world - but construct portfolios robust enough to survive surprises, positioned to benefit from the structural forces that are discernible beneath the noise, and managed with the long-term discipline that separates investors who build wealth from those who merely chase it.

The world is more complex than it has been at any point since the end of the Cold War. That is not an argument for paralysis. It is an argument for counsel.



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A person in a dark jacket stands on a rocky mountain peak, looking out over a vast, layered mountain range under a golden sunset sky. The scene is dramatic, with the sun low on the horizon, casting a warm glow over the distant peaks and valleys. The person is silhouetted against the bright sky, emphasizing their contemplative stance.

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