**Geopolitics In the Time of Corona**

*COVID-19, A Watershed Moment for the Future International Order*

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September XX, 2020

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We currently live in the Pax-Americana Epoch, a period of historically unprecedented international stability and cooperation led by American leadership and global diplomacy. Or at least we did. Now the Coronavirus—and its geopolitical ramifications—threaten the very global order that has maintained international peace ever since World War II. With global trade and international investment flows dropping to their lowest levels in the modern era, these secular forces beg the question: Will the COVID-19 Pandemic mark the end of globalization?

While it might not seem obvious to the casual observer, the novel Coronavirus has accentuated and exacerbated the numerous underlying political and economic forces present in American and global society since the end of the Cold War. The result is potentially massively destabilizing with the capability to permanently fracture the current international order. Trends in leadership around the world demonstrate the rise of dangerous demagoguery; country-level politics show alarming rates of nationalism; the ordinary citizenship has moved towards populism; and global interconnectedness as measured through international travel, trade and investment have fallen to alarming levels. These developments were not caused by the Coronavirus, but its tumult has thrown these movements into a fever pitch.

The resurgent voices calling for isolationism, protectionism and a fragmented international system stand starkly in contrast with the globalism championed by our past leaders throughout the Pax-Americana period. Hence, a dynamic tension is brewing: on one end, those who favor continued globalization and international integration, and, on the other extreme, those who favor sub-national and provincial policies. With the pivotal 2020 US election hanging in the balance, it appears that the Coronavirus has delivered a watershed moment in world history, the result of which may well determine the global order for the coming epoch.

**How Did We Get Here?**

Even before the end of the world’s last major watershed moment, World War II, our global leaders prepared for a new international economic and political infrastructure. During the summer of 1944 in a small town in New Hampshire, signatories from more than 40 nations created the Bretton Woods System, a financial architecture to moderate and modulate international capital flows, world development and the global business cycle, as well as creating novel international institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to maintain global equity and stability. This international financial infrastructure was an unprecedented success and, as a result, the world emerged from the ravages of the Second World War stronger and more unified than ever. Global standards of living skyrocketed, even as the world split into the American protectorates (the ‘First World’), the Soviet sphere of influence (the ‘Second World’), and those nations too nascent in their development to be affiliated (the so-called ‘Emerging World’).

**The Pax-Americana**

At the end of 1989, the Berlin Wall—the physical, if not symbolic, barrier separating the American from the Soviet spheres—fell ushering the world into a new epoch. When the USSR collapsed less than two years later, the world unofficially entered the Pax-Americana, a period of unique international peace overseen by the globe’s single remaining superpower, the United States. As Francis Fukuyama famously prognosticated, it was the [‘end of history’](https://www.nytimes.com/1989/10/22/magazine/what-is-fukuyama-saying-and-to-whom-is-he-saying-it.html) marked by a reigning peace. In these authors’ opinions, nothing could have been further from the truth.

Instead, the perceived magnificence of the late 1980’s, 1990’s and early 2000’s—as represented by unstoppable bull markets on Wall Street, large income gains on Main Street and dramatic military victories around the globe—masked a mounting and hidden turbulence. Rising inequality, massive deregulation and poor social policies exasperated American racial, educational, and competitive divides on the domestic front; blighted US diplomatic policies hurt American influence abroad. The ramifications of those maladapted policies are clear today: the Black Lives Matter movement is now justifiably protesting for greater racial equity, the demand for gender equality has reached a crescendo and the income gap between the wealthy and destitute has diverged to some of its widest points. The novel Coronavirus Pandemic of 2020 did not create these challenges—it merely exposed them. The dramatic economic and political inequities of the Pax Americana revealed the period for what it really was: a modern-day ‘Gilded Era.’

**The Rise of Nationalism, Populism, Demagoguery and International Isolationism**

Since the late-1980s, the ‘American Dream’ has continued to become more elusive. According to the Federal Reserve, the [share of wealth](https://www.federalreserve.gov/releases/z1/dataviz/dfa/distribute/chart/#range:1989.3,2020.1;quarter:122;series:Net%20worth;demographic:networth;population:1,3,5,7;units:levels) held by the top 1% of Americans has steadily increased from approximately 23.5% in 1989 to approximately 32.7% in 2019; meanwhile, the share of assets held by Black, Hispanic and other minorities has remained largely stagnant throughout. In addition, traditional avenues for advancement have become even more unattainable; using data from US News & World Report, between 2000 and 2020, [annual tuition](https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/paying-for-college/articles/2017-09-20/see-20-years-of-tuition-growth-at-national-universities) at private universities increased 154%, and, at public universities, it rose a staggering 181% for out-of-state students and an eye-watering 221% for in-state students. These statistics are just the tip of the iceberg for the United States’ decay during the Pax-Americana: healthcare costs have increased vastly over inflation, infrastructure investment has fallen to some of its lowest levels in a century and the urban-rural divide has widened to some of its highest levels.

While United States economic and social policies have largely failed domestically, they have fared even worse internationally. Attempts at democratization, ‘hearts and minds’ campaigns and cultural imperialism has left much of the world feeling exasperated at best—and antagonized at worst. As a result, today our allies are rethinking their relations with America in record numbers. These secular forces of inequality, inequity and injustice both at home and abroad of have led to powerful undercurrents both in America and around the world spawning nationalism, populism, demagoguery and international isolationism.

Nationalism is the new de facto foreign policy for many nations around the world; even the global hub of the United Kingdom has altered its international stance as represented by the now infamous [Brexit](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/22/business/international/brexit-referendum-eu-economy.html) decision. If nationalism is now the de facto foreign policy, then populism has become the de facto choice domestically; for example, Donald Trump emboldens his base against the [‘radical left’](https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1271252020473638912) in America, Viktor Orban routinely invokes [‘Christian’ culture](https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/10/31/the-regression-of-viktor-orban-hungary-europe/) in Hungary, and Vladimir Putin regularly castigates [Western liberalism](https://www.ft.com/content/670039ec-98f3-11e9-9573-ee5cbb98ed36) in Russia. Meanwhile, despite ersatz calls for greater leadership by the people, demagogic leaders around the globe have only further cemented their control; for instance, China’s Xi Jinping has essentially asserted himself as [‘President for Life’](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-43361276), and Russia’s Vladimir Putin has [done the same](https://www.vox.com/2020/7/2/21311144/putin-russia-vote-president-2036). Finally, new calls for international isolationism resound from [Brazil](https://www.vox.com/2018/10/31/18042510/bolsonaro-brazil-foreign-policy-venezuela) to right here in [America](https://www.ft.com/content/4bbe8761-81a7-4734-8e1b-3ddfeedcf273), effectively dislodging a massive cornerstone from the international architecture established at Bretton Woods.

**Why This Is So Dangerous**

Just over 100 years ago, a similar confluence of nationalist, populist, demagogic and isolationist forces were brewing throughout Europe. Territorial disputes, new rivalries, militaristic leaders and declining international integration set the tinder; the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand lit the fire ablaze. The result was the most destructive conflict the world had yet known, World War I. Although impossible to prognosticate another world war, one cannot help but notice the similarities in the secular forces today to the confluence of events that led to three decades of unprecedented turbulence a century ago (World War I, the Great Depression, and World War II). Instead of suggesting the world is heading towards World War III, these authors suggest that the world is perhaps at the dawn of a new era of global history—an epoch heralded by the nations best able to emerge from the Coronavirus Pandemic.

**The End of an Epoch: A New World Order?**

Now firmly into the 21st century, rising international threats abound. Relations between the world’s reigning super power, the US, and its greatest emerging rival, China, have led numerous pundits to posit the foundations of a new [Sino-American Cold War](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/22/world/asia/us-china-cold-war.html). Rather than a unipolar—or even a bipolar—world, the global diplomacy instead appears multipolar. If true, a multipolar world, with spheres of influence spread between numerous powerful nations, could be even more destabilizing. Finally, the rise of climate change degradation, increasing natural disasters, exacerbated strains on resources, and—now—the risk of pandemics all add further challenges to an already quite challenged world.

It’s in this grim national and international context that the 2020 US Presidential Election is situated. This selection could be the most pivotal in a century. Almost as a perfect reflection of the dynamic forces currently battling in America for the future political and economic supremacy, Donald Trump and Joe Biden serve as bulwarks of their constituencies. Trump’s politics are well known: American first, overtly xenophobic, coyly racist and centered on ‘working man’ economic opportunities. Biden’s are less known but appear firmly grounded in the precepts of the Democratic party: internationalist, progressive, politically correct and economically directed by the elite. Merely a cursory re-reading of their philosophies sounds of polar opposites, and, as a result, the US is firmly positioned at cross-roads: continue down the path of Donald Trump towards a more nationalistic state, or, retreat from the current regime’s conservative policies, towards an ostensibly liberal agenda? The choice of the US electorate could well decide not only America’s direction, but for the world as well.

**Conclusion: The Dawning of a New Age**

We are at a watershed moment in world history. With the dynamic and dangerous secular forces of nationalism, populism, demagoguery and isolationism swooning, the 2020 US Presidential Election appears as a proxy for the direction of the coming global order. Continue down the current conservative direction heralded by Donald Trump and strong-man leaders around the world, or pose an about face and return to the liberalism championed by Joe Biden and the Democratic elite? The stakes could not be higher and, just like in World War II when global leadership transitioned from the United Kingdom to the United States, perhaps the Coronavirus will offer a new reckoning in global supremacy from the US to China. Only time will ultimately tell—but this American election could be the signal demonstrating the direction of the global order for the New Age.