**Geopolitics In the Time of Corona**

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

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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 dangerous with the capability to permanently fracture the current international political order. The 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.

These resurgent voices calling for isolationism, protectionism and a fragmented international system stand starkly in contrast with the globalism championed by our traditional 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 equitable global development and stability. This international financial infrastructure was an unprecedented success and, the result, in combination with American leadership through the Marshall Plan and other Allied programs, was a world that emerged from the ravages of the Second World War stronger and more unified than ever. Global standards of living skyrocketed, even as the world bifurcated 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 ‘Third World’).

**The Pax-Americana**

By the end of 1989 and the fall of the Berlin Wall, the physical—if not sympolic—separation between the First and Second spheres, the world was poised for a new epoch. When the USSR collapsed less than two years later, the world officially 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’ marked by a reigning peace.[[1]](#footnote-1) Or was it?

Instead, it appears that the perceived magnificence of the late 1980’s, 1990’s and 2000’s as represented by unstoppable bull markets on Wall Street, gains in personal income on Main Street and dramatic military victories in the Middle East masked a hidden global 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. With all of these deep-seated challenges fomenting beneath the surface, 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 this 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. The share of wealth held by the top 1% of Americans has steadily increased from approximately 23.5% in of 1989 to approximately 32.7% in 2019 according to data from the Federal Reserve.[[2]](#footnote-2) Meanwhile, the share of assets held by Black, Hispanic and other minorities has remained largely stagnant with White people holding nearly 84.0% of total assets.[[3]](#footnote-3) In addition, traditional avenues for advancement have become exorbitantly expensive and exclusive; between 2000 and 2020, annual tuition 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.[[4]](#footnote-4) And these statistics are just the tip of the iceberg for American decay: healthcare costs 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.

With economic and political opportunity so unequal, it’s no wonder …

* Since the 2000s, rising economic inequality, etc. have led to powerful undercurrents
  + Nationalism
  + Populism
  + Demagoguery
  + International Isolationism
* Give examples …

**[On the other hand, global public health is perhaps the best argument for global cooperation – and there has been a lot]**

**Why This Is So Dangerous [Or more generally what are the implications of an American return to isolationism]**

* < Same factors led to World War I >
* < Start with an opaque introduction to the factors that led to WWI, then say this isn’t know, it was 1914… >

**[And what are the implications for American and world politics]**

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

* Risings threats:
  + US – China Cold War?
  + Multipolar World: Emerging Markets, Russia and New Threats
  + Climate Change and Increasing Natural Disasters
  + Lack of trust – in the international system, our elected leaders and our neighbors
* This election might be pivotal
  + Donald Trump: continued retreat from the Pax Americana into isolationism
  + Joe Biden: Who knows?

In conclusion, we are potentially at a watershed moment. Just like World War II marked a transition in global leadership from the United Kingdom to the United States, perhaps the Coronavirus will offer a new reckoning in global supremacy. Only time will tell.

# Bibliography

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1. (Fukuyama 1992) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. (The Federal Reserve 2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. (The Federal Reserve 2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. (US News & World Report 2019) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)