

From Order to Chaos: What Made Geopolitics Return?

Written by Ali Mammadov

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ALI MAMMADOV, JUL 6 2024

In recent times, there has been a notable resurgence in discussions surrounding “the return of geopolitics,” particularly in light of the emergence of conflicts across the globe. This terminology denotes a transition from a phase characterized by diminished emphasis on security and strategic considerations to one marked by their primacy. Presently, there is a discernible shift towards competitive dynamics, notably in security realms where outcomes tend to be zero-sum in nature, engendering heightened stakes and intensified competition among states. This trend, often referred to as the “New Cold War,” has raised concerns regarding its potential escalation into a major conflict in the foreseeable future.

Nonetheless, an underlying yet consequential flaw resides within the phrase “return of geopolitics.” It presupposes a temporary absence of geopolitical aspirations in the preceding era, insinuating a voluntary adherence to an orderly state of affairs among nations, only to suggest a resurgence of geopolitical maneuvering at present. However, the reality is that such ambitions have persistently existed. They were, to some extent, veiled and curtailed by legal frameworks, norms, and power equilibrium, rather than completely dormant. States devised nuanced strategies to evade perceptions of non-compliance, and even when breaches occurred, efforts were made to portray them as imperative actions. In the prevailing global milieu, geopolitical ambitions are conspicuously manifest, with legal frameworks often perceived merely as instruments to further these ambitions. A fitting analogy would liken this scenario to a caged beast, whose escape becomes feasible as the constraints of its enclosure gradually weaken over time. It is the constraints themselves that restrain the beast. For instance, presuming that Russia’s interest in Ukraine only emerged in 2022 or that Israel’s intent to intervene in Gaza materialized solely after October 7th would be incorrect. These inclinations have long existed, albeit mitigated by the constraints of the international order. However, the efficacy of these constraints, imposed by international norms, has notably waned.

The fundamental inquiry revolves around why the most chaotic period of the decade is only now and how the containment of the metaphorical beast within its confines faltered. Four years ago, a pandemic ravaged the world, claiming over 7 million lives and imparting substantial blows to economies worldwide. Presently, two full-fledged conflicts unfold concurrently in Eurasia and the Middle East, with disorder encroaching upon order with increasing intensity each passing day. The principal drivers behind this global instability encompass the ascendancy of China and the transition to a multipolar world order, exacerbated economic conditions on a global scale, burgeoning populism, and the erosion of confidence in international norms. It is important to recognize that the structure of the global order inevitably yields periods of instability from time to time—a facet inherent to the international arena characterized by competing interests among its actors. The only main difference now is that the current chaotic phase has been subject to a protracted and relatively successful deferment compared to historical precedents. Nevertheless, the erosion of the post-Cold War order did not transpire abruptly in recent years; rather, it constituted a gradual process spanning a considerable duration.

Age of Terror

While the origins of the present global instability can be traced back further, one of the pivotal events that significantly impacted the global order was the 9/11 attacks perpetrated by Al Qaeda. Subsequently, in 2011, the United States embarked on a global War on Terror in response to these attacks, entailing heightened military engagement in regions geographically distant from its own borders. This event engendered both adverse and beneficial

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consequences, contributing to the postponement and hastening of the resurgence of geopolitics. Initially, the War on Terror galvanized global unity against a common adversary embodied by terrorism, thereby diverting attention towards counterterrorism efforts and temporally deferring geopolitical aspirations. However, historical precedent suggests that unresolved conflicts invariably culminate in deferred confrontations. For instance, during the Nazi occupation of Europe, the shared menace prompted unity between the Soviets and the United States, yet post-war, the Soviets emerged as a formidable power, and communism posed a substantial threat to the US. Analogously, the War on Terror postponed overt strategic rivalries while affording China an opportunity to bolster its capabilities. Notably, the preoccupation with counterterrorism efforts primarily affected the US and its allies, providing less-engaged states with an advantageous window to enhance their capacities. Consequently, the War on Terror deferred direct great power competition while laying the groundwork for heightened competition in the long term.

Moreover, during this period, the United States launched a military intervention in Iraq with the objective of deposing Saddam Hussein from power, driven by concerns over the potential threat posed by the Iraqi dictator to its strategic interests in the Middle East. This intervention not only diverted attention and deepened US involvement in the region but also dealt a significant blow to the international order that the US itself had painstakingly constructed since the conclusion of World War II. Particularly contentious was the manner in which the decision to invade Iraq was made, eliciting disapproval from numerous international actors, a sentiment likely to endure for the foreseeable future. The Bush administration's unilateral decision to proceed with the invasion, absent endorsement from other major powers within the United Nations, including Russia, China, and even France, underscored a perceived disregard for established international protocols. This unilateral action, seen as a breach of international law by many, was especially notable considering the US's status as an embodiment of international norms. Consequently, the violation of the norms by a prominent advocate undermined their intrinsic value. This demonstrated that transgressions of legal frameworks were not as consequential as previously believed. The apprehension regarding the repercussions of flouting international law had hitherto served as a cohesive force preserving the international order. Nevertheless, during this period, smaller nations continued to rely on the Western bloc, notably the US and its allies, for economic and security assurances. The US remained the predominant unipolar power, imposing considerable costs on those contravening established norms. This served to postpone significant geopolitical tensions in other regions. Nonetheless, this episode would linger in the collective memory of major and smaller states in the years to come.

Age of Illusion

Legal frameworks and established norms were not the sole determinants in preventing significant geopolitical tensions among major powers for a long time. The era spanning from the 1980s to the 2008 financial crisis is widely regarded as the peak of globalization. According to data from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), this period witnessed a surge in liberalization, characterized by the dismantling of trade barriers, the establishment of the World Trade Organization (WTO), substantial increases in global capital flows, and the evolution of a more intricate financial system. While initial reactions to globalization were mixed, with some foreseeing economic prosperity and others expressing concerns over potential job displacement, the overall outcome proved largely successful. Globalization engendered new opportunities, facilitated enhanced trade, and contributed to a decline in extreme poverty rates. The expansion of the global middle-income class, often seen as a cornerstone of democratic societies, created avenues for increased civic pressure on governments for more accountable governance. Though globalization did not uniformly benefit all segments of society and even inflicted hardships on certain groups, the prevailing consensus suggests that the majority experienced tangible advantages from its effects.

Nonetheless, the collapse of Lehman Brothers in 2008 precipitated a financial meltdown in the United States, which swiftly disseminated throughout the global economy, significantly undermining its stability. This episode laid bare a sobering reality about globalization: it rendered the world increasingly susceptible to financial crises. Even a localized financial upheaval in the US had far-reaching repercussions, resulting in the loss of employment for approximately 30 million individuals worldwide and impeding global trade. What compounded the severity of the crisis was globalization's role as a contributing factor, with cross-border capital flows exacerbating the housing market turmoil. Termed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as the era of "slowbalization," this period is characterized by protracted deceleration in economic activities, including capital movements and trade, ultimately fostering the emergence of anti-globalization factions.

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Opposition to globalization gradually extended beyond economic concerns; it encompassed an ideological stance against liberalization in any form. Globalization facilitated increased global mobility, enabling individuals to travel the world more freely despite stringent visa regulations in certain regions. Consequently, global travel surged compared to the pre-globalization era, leading to heightened immigration rates worldwide. Immigration, in itself, yielded certain benefits. It fostered greater diversity, exerted a positive influence on global capital flows, and provided predominantly Western nations with access to cost-effective labor, thereby bolstering their economies. However, this phenomenon evoked discontent among certain factions in the West, particularly far-right groups, who perceived immigrants as the “other,” attributing them with the responsibility for usurping opportunities and exacerbating societal challenges. Initially, this perspective was not pervasive during the initial phases of immigration waves; it resonated with specific segments but did not enjoy widespread consensus.

Nonetheless, with the escalation of immigration rates, the far-right gained traction in promulgating this notion more effectively. A growing number of individuals found the narrative appealing, attributing disruptions in their local socioeconomic fabric to immigrants. The financial crisis contributed to this trend, operating as a dual catalyst. While the crisis originated in the West, its repercussions were felt more acutely by non-Western, economically disadvantaged nations. While the West possessed mechanisms to partially alleviate the crisis’s impact, these mechanisms proved less effective in other regions. Consequently, citizens of non-Western countries felt compelled to seek opportunities in the US or Europe to improve their economic prospects. Additionally, globalization contributed to economic downturns in Western countries, further fueling the perception that immigrants were depriving native populations of opportunities. In this climate of economic uncertainty, the scapegoating of immigrants by the far-right gained traction, offering a convenient outlet for societal grievances in the absence of tangible avenues for change.

Anti-globalization sentiments proliferated rapidly in various regions for similar reasons, compounded by an additional factor. Among non-Western populations, anti-globalization sentiment became synonymous with anti-Western sentiment. Any association with the West, particularly the United States, became increasingly stigmatized, particularly in the aftermath of the US intervention in Iraq. The invasion catalyzed the emergence of extremist terrorist factions in the Middle East staunchly opposed to American influence. The aftermath of events like the Arab Spring and ensuing civil conflicts, notably in Syria, further provided fertile ground for the emergence of new militant groups such as ISIS. Consequently, individuals from the Middle East espousing anti-Western ideologies found themselves compelled to seek refuge in Western nations for improved living conditions, exacerbating the cultural and ideological divide between immigrants and native Western populations.

The convergence of immigration concerns with the fallout from the financial crisis heightened the appeal of populism across the board. There was a pervasive tendency among people to harbor negative sentiments towards outsiders and to advocate for isolationist policies for their respective nations. This mindset rendered populist leaders particularly appealing. Crucially, it rendered the mobilization of populist constituents for military endeavors more likely. This relationship was symbiotic: populist individuals gravitated towards leaders espousing similar sentiments, while elected populist leaders, in turn, exploited these sentiments to foster further animosity towards perceived outsiders and promote a narrative of national exclusivity to consolidate their power. The earlier elections of politicians Giorgia Meloni, Boris Johnson, Geert Wilders, and the recent popularity of the far-right in European elections, were all symptomatic of these dynamics. The Brexit referendum, which profoundly reshaped Europe’s security and economy, also stemmed from this confluence of factors.

Age of Uncertainty

In 2019, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic emerged as a pivotal moment, profoundly influencing the ongoing global trend of populism. With a death toll surpassing 7 million and triggering the most severe global recession in recent memory, the pandemic exacerbated existing economic hardships and significantly impacted mental and emotional well-being. Individuals became less empathetic towards one another, perceiving fellow humans as potential vectors of disease transmission. Moreover, the pandemic exacerbated pre-existing tensions between local populations and immigrants. As the Covid-19 virus was introduced to most countries via travel and immigration, locals began to perceive outsiders as threats, fostering increased xenophobia worldwide. In certain regions, this trend manifested in extreme forms and precipitated a surge in racially motivated violence. For instance, reports

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indicate a notable increase in racially motivated violence in Slovakia during the pandemic. The United States experienced similar challenges, with incidents of racially motivated violence becoming more prevalent. Although the immediate effects of the pandemic may have subsided, the enduring trauma it inflicted upon humanity remains palpable.

At the time, all nations were fully preoccupied with addressing internal matters to curb the spread of the virus. Concurrently, in the United States, electoral proceedings were a significant factor diverting attention inward. The confluence of rising populism, the faltering global economy, the relative diminishment of US influence, and the expanding multipolar landscape created a conducive environment for the reemergence of geopolitical ambitions. As previously noted, these ambitions had perennially existed, awaiting opportune circumstances when constraints were sufficiently relaxed.

The pandemic not only redirected global attention towards China due to its status as the virus's originator but also afforded China an opportunity to capitalize on the situation. Despite initial negative perceptions associated with the virus's origins, China orchestrated a substantial Covid-19 diplomacy campaign, distributing Chinese-manufactured vaccines to various regions ahead of Western-developed vaccines. Moreover, the economic repercussions of Covid-19 underscored the extent of global trade dependence on the Chinese economy. China presently accounts for approximately 17% of global GDP, a figure expected to increase to around 20% within the next five years. Concurrently, China is bolstering its military capabilities. Whether China's intentions are benign or malign for the international order, the ascent of significant powers has historically posed a perceived threat to dominant powers. The perceived threat posed by China to the United States, coupled with the competitive economic and, at times, military measures undertaken by both parties, has contributed to global disorder. In fact, it could be argued that ongoing conflicts in regions such as Ukraine and Gaza are microcosms of broader great power rivalry. However, the primary disruption stemming from China's ascent lies in the emergence of a multipolar order, empowering smaller powers. Whereas the United States, as a unipolar power, formerly dictated global norms and alliances, smaller powers now exhibit greater assertiveness in charting their own paths. Nations such as Brazil, India, and Turkey are asserting their independence in aligning with great powers, while even traditional US allies like France prioritize reducing dependency on the United States and forging close ties with China. Moreover, powers like Russia are emboldened to assert larger geopolitical ambitions, confident that the existence of a rising China alone serves as a deterrent to potential direct US intervention.

Since at least 2008, it became evident that Russia would not hesitate to resort to the use of force if countries it perceived to be within its sphere of influence sought to align with the Western security bloc. In April of that year, NATO deliberated over Georgia's aspirations for NATO membership, a development that marked a significant turning point leading to escalation. Four months later, Russia provided military support to separatist movements in Georgia, resulting in a major territorial dispute that continues to impede Georgia's acceptance into the Western security bloc to this day. However, this conflict imparted a crucial lesson to Russia: the efficacy of international law enforcement was not as formidable as previously believed. Even engaging in the most egregious violation of international law, namely the invasion of another sovereign state, failed to elicit substantial punitive measures from the international community.

As previously discussed, the US invasion of Iraq that took place in spite of the international disagreement, had already signaled a destabilization of the international order. Subsequently, the toppling of Qaddafi in Libya by US and allied forces in 2011 was perceived by powers such as Russia and China as manipulation of the United Nations and international norms for strategic advantage. These actions were seen as encroachments on state sovereignty by them. Moreover, it became increasingly apparent that the liberal international order was fundamentally realist in nature, where power held precedence over morality. This lesson was additionally underscored for Russia in 2014 when it annexed Crimea, facing only limited sanctions that did not significantly weaken its position. With a less strict view of the international order and bolstered by the growing multipolarity, Russia seized the opportunity to assert its larger claim over Ukraine in 2022.

The situation with Israel reflects similar dynamics. Israel likely had long-standing intentions to conduct a full-scale operation against Hamas, with the October 7th attack presenting a strategic opportunity. Previous sporadic attacks

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in Gaza and efforts to strengthen ties with Arab states suggested Israel's hesitation to recognize Palestinian statehood while attempting to placate some of the neighboring Arab nations and prevent their hindrance. However, it raises the question of why such a full-scale invasion of Gaza and the deadliest attack by Hamas happened now, rather than earlier. The deeper reason also partly lies in the evolving multipolar world order. When the United States held a dominant position in the region, a significant attack by Hamas on Israel was deterred by the overwhelming power of the US. With the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the consequent reduction in American influence in the Middle East, and the rise of other rival powers, launching such an attack became somewhat more feasible for anti-Israeli forces. After all, despite Hamas having a long history of conflict with Israel, the October 7th attack was unprecedented in its scale and intensity. Furthermore, the key driver of the upheaval is not solely the US and China themselves; rather, it is the growing multipolarity and the resulting distractions in global disarray. In a world already fraught with chaos and where international norms are no longer strictly adhered to, actions taken do not appear to be the primary disruptors of order.

A Tale as Old As Time

In Chinese cosmology, the yin and yang symbolize the interplay between order and chaos. Each yin phase is succeeded by a yang phase, and vice versa, representing a cyclical pattern inherent in nature. While yin denotes contraction, yang signifies expansion, and this duality is ubiquitous in the natural world. Crucially, neither of these phases is inherently positive or negative; they are simply part of the natural rhythm. Similarly, the international order operates according to a similar principle. Periods of chaos are succeeded by periods of order, and vice versa, in a natural progression. Random conditions create fertile ground for disruptions to occur, thereby fostering further chaos, eventually culminating in the establishment of order out of necessity, given the human intolerance for prolonged disorder. However, what exactly constitutes "order"? Order is established to curb the unrestrained exercise of power by dominant groups. Yet, for order to materialize, there must exist a controlling force that surpasses the power wielded by members of the order. In hierarchical social contexts, in most cases, group members acquiesce to authority figures not necessarily out of genuine preference for order, but rather due to their lack of sufficient power to resist. Disorder arises when the less powerful entity attains a level of power comparable to or surpassing that of the controlling force. This presents a dilemma for those subjected to control: either continue to submit to the previously more powerful entity or challenge its authority, inevitably leading to disorder.

States fully adhere to the law only when the enforcement mechanism is collectively as potent as they are. For instance, if a state is aware that an independent and significantly superior enforcement authority would militarily counter its actions and potentially jeopardize its own survival, it would refrain from violating the law. However, this resolution is likely impractical because any enforcement mechanism would ultimately rely on states themselves for funding or military support. Therefore, in a world characterized by conflicting interests, economic fluctuations, innate human tendencies toward violence, and shifting power dynamics, chaos is unavoidable. The prevailing hope is that each instance of chaos is likely to be succeeded by some kind of order. The crucial question remains whether states will cooperate in establishing this order peacefully.

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