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**THE GLOBAL ORDER  
AFTER COVID-19**

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

- I. INTRODUCTION ..... 2
  
- II. A LESS OPEN WORLD ..... 4
  
- III. A LESS FREE WORLD ..... 8
  
- IV. A LESS PROSPEROUS WORLD ..... 11
  
- V. RESURGENT NATIONALISM AND GREAT POWER COMPETITION ..... 12
  
  
- VII. CONCLUSION ..... 21

## I. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic is the most disruptive global event since the Great Depression and World War 2. At least 4.8 million people have been infected in less than six months; more than 300,000 have died, and many more deaths will occur even if effective vaccines or treatments are eventually developed. The economic costs are staggering: much of the world has fallen into recession, debt levels are soaring, and future growth prospects have dimmed. It is in some ways the first fully global crisis in human history, one from which no country can remain aloof.

Yet despite these far-reaching effects, the current pandemic will not transform the essential nature of world politics. The territorial state will remain the basic building-block of international affairs, nationalism will remain a powerful political force, and the major powers will continue to compete for influence in myriad ways. Global institutions, transnational networks, and assorted non-state actors will still play important roles, of course, but the present crisis will not produce a dramatic and enduring increase in global governance or significantly higher levels of international cooperation.

Instead, COVID-19 is more likely to reinforce divisive trends that were underway before the first case was detected. In particular, it will accelerate a retreat from globalization, raise new barriers to international trade, investment, and travel, and give both democratic and non-democratic governments greater power over their citizens' lives. Global economic growth will be lower than it would have been had the pandemic not occurred.<sup>1</sup> Relations among the major powers will continue the downward trend that was apparent before the pandemic struck.

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<sup>1</sup> In April 2020, the IMF forecast that the world economy would shrink by roughly 3 percent in 2020. See International Monetary Fund, "World Economic Outlook, April 2020: The Great Lockdown," at <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2020/04/14/weo-april-2020>

In short, the post-COVID-19 world will be less open, less free, less prosperous, and more competitive than the world many people expected to emerge only a few years ago.

## II. A LESS OPEN WORLD

After the Cold War, the United States led a sustained effort to spread democracy, open markets, the rule of law, and other liberal values as far as possible, in order to create a truly global liberal order.<sup>2</sup> U.S. leaders assumed that lowering barriers to trade and investment would maximize economic growth, encourage China and other authoritarian countries to evolve in more liberal directions, and produce a world of maximum prosperity and minimal conflict. This vision inspired the creation of the World Trade Organization in 1994, multilateral trade pacts such as the North American Free Trade Agreement, the enlargement of NATO and other U.S.-led security arrangements, and broad efforts to reduce financial regulations and facilitate investment abroad. Similar instincts drove the expansion of the European Union and the creation of the Euro in 1999. In this brave new globalized world, great power rivalries and ancient hatreds would be consigned to the dustbin of history, and people around the world were expected to focus on getting rich in an increasingly integrated world.

Although millions of people benefited from these initiatives, this appealing vision turned out to be overly optimistic. As a result, a broad backlash against “hyper-globalization” was underway long before the coronavirus emerged.<sup>3</sup> The 2008 financial crisis exposed the risks of greater financial integration, inequality continued to rise in much of the developed world, and job losses in some sectors fueled skepticism about the

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed description and critique of this effort, see Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2018), chaps. 1-3.

<sup>3</sup> For an insightful and balanced critique of “hyper-globalization,” see Dani Rodrik, *Straight Talk on Trade: Ideas for a Sane World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

broader benefits of free trade. Globalization may have brought enormous benefits to the lower and classes in the developing world and the top “One Percent” in the industrialized West, but lower and middle classes in the U.S. and Europe did not gain as much and some segments of the population lost badly.<sup>4</sup>

These developments helped trigger a wave of resurgent populism, culminating in 2016 with Britain’s decision to leave the European Union and the election of Donald Trump in the United States. After repeatedly castigating the trade arrangements negotiated by Democratic and Republic presidents alike, Trump abandoned the eleven-nation Trans-Pacific Partnership on his third day in office and either threatened or launched trade wars with many of America’s major economic partners. Even before COVID-19, these initiatives had led the United States and China to begin “decoupling” their tightly-linked economies.<sup>5</sup> Globalization was not over, but it was clearly on probation.

The broad backlash against globalization also involved growing opposition to the freer movement of peoples. Over the past decade, politicians who promised to erect walls and bar immigrants from abroad grew more and more popular, while leaders who tried to defend a more open order (such as Germany’s Angela Merkel) faced growing domestic opposition. The fear the foreigners were endangering local cultures and cherished traditions reinforced pro-Brexit sentiments in the United Kingdom, just as Donald

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<sup>4</sup> This was the chief insight of the so-called elephant curve, which suggested that lower and middle classes in the West had gained hardly very little from globalization. See Branko Milanovic, “Why the Global 1% and the Asian Middle Class Have Gained the Most from Globalization,” *Harvard Business Review*, May 13, 2016. Other economists have challenged this finding: see Caroline Freund, “Deconstructing Branko Milanovic’s Elephant Curve: Does It Show What Everyone Thinks?” *Peterson Institute for International Economics*, November 30, 2016, at <https://www.piie.com/blogs/realtime-economic-issues-watch/deconstructing-branko-milanovics-elephant-chart-does-it-show>

<sup>5</sup> See Keith Johnson and Robbie Gramer, “The Great Decoupling,” *Foreign Policy* (online), May 14, 2020, at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/14/china-us-pandemic-economy-tensions-trump-coronavirus-covid-new-cold-war-economics-the-great-decoupling/>

Trump's promise to "build a wall" on the border with Mexico and stop the flow of migrants and refugees to the United States was a major theme of his successful campaign for the presidency. Instead of encouraging the freer flow of goods, capital, and people, by 2019 influential states were building new barriers to all three.

Not surprisingly, the pandemic has reinforced these trends. COVID-19 has further exposed the economic risks of hyper-globalization, as tightly integrated supply chains proved vulnerable not only to shifting political conditions (e.g., the trade war), but also to a deadly virus. This problem was especially acute for masks, ventilators, and other essential medical supplies, but its impact was felt across the entire world economy. Relying on a single source because it was cheapest and locating factories where production costs were lowest made sense only if these connections were unlikely to be disrupted, and COVID-19 has shown how fragile they could be. Henceforth, both political leaders and corporate managers will be more inclined to sacrifice what U.S. trade representative Robert Lighthizer has called the "lemming-like pursuit of 'efficiency'" in order to increase the reliability of supply.<sup>6</sup> Or as Willem Buiter, former chief economist at Citigroup, recently put it, "just-in-time economics will give way to just-in-case economics, with multiple supply chains to ensure continuity in another crisis."<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, the pandemic is making states warier of relatively unrestricted movements of people. Countries all over the world closed borders to contain the pandemic, and one can expect more demanding travel regimes to remain in place once the outbreak is under control. Air and maritime travel will eventually rebound, but movements from one

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<sup>6</sup> Robert E. Lighthizer, "The Era of Offshoring U.S. Jobs is Over," *New York Times*, May 11, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> See Willem Buiter, "Paying for the Covid-19 Pandemic Will Be Painful," *Financial Times*, May 15, 2020.

country to another are likely to be more difficult, time-consuming, and expensive. The fear of contagion is likely to reinforce xenophobia and racism, signs of which are already apparent.<sup>8</sup> Die-hard opponents of immigration are taking advantage of the present crisis to impose stricter controls, further limiting the ability of people to relocate on a long-term basis.<sup>9</sup>

The bottom line: the high-water mark of international openness is behind us.

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<sup>8</sup> See Vivian Wang and Amy Qin, “As Coronavirus Fades in China, Nationalism and Xenophobia Flare,” *New York Times*, April 11, 2020, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/16/world/asia/coronavirus-china-nationalism.html>; and Suyin Haynes, “As Coronavirus Spreads, So Does Xenophobia and Anti-Asian Racism,” *Time*, March 6, 2020; at <https://time.com/5797836/coronavirus-racism-stereotypes-attacks/>

<sup>9</sup> In April 2020, the Trump administration issued an executive order suspending the issuance of permanent residency status (“green cards”) for sixty days.



### III. A LESS FREE WORLD

Authoritarian governments were enjoying a remarkable comeback even before the pandemic began. According to Freedom House, 2019 was the 14<sup>th</sup> consecutive year in which global freedom declined, and in 2017, the *Economist* magazine's annual *Democracy Index* downgraded the United States from the status of "full" to "flawed" democracy.<sup>10</sup> Chinese president Xi Jinping has continued to centralize control; Russian President Vladimir Putin seems intent on retaining power permanently, and Hungary, Poland, and Turkey have all veered in sharply authoritarian directions. The "Arab spring" that began in 2009 has become an "Arab winter," with the fragile shoots of democracy being crushed in Egypt, Syria, Bahrain, and Libya. The United States has ceased to be a steadfast champion of democracy, and President Trump often seems more comfortable with authoritarian "strong men" than with the leaders of America's democratic allies.

COVID-19 is strengthening these trends as well, at least in the short-term. When emergencies arise, freedom inevitably declines and even well-established liberal democracies adopt more authoritarian practices. When facing imminent threats, states impose censorship, conscript soldiers, take over key sectors of the economy, incarcerate citizens whose loyalty may be questioned, conduct greater surveillance over their citizens, and limit personal freedoms in countless other ways. After 9/11, for example, the United States (and some other countries) imposed new security procedures,

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<sup>10</sup> See *Freedom in the World 2019: A Leaderless Struggle for Democracy* (New York: Freedom House, 2020), at <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2020/leaderless-struggle-democracy>; and "Democracy Continues its Disturbing Retreat," *The Economist*, January 31, 2018, at <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2018/01/31/democracy-continues-its-disturbing-retreat>

expanded surveillance capabilities, and abandoned its traditional opposition to torture or targeted killings.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, the current pandemic is encouraging governments around the globe to impose strict limits on citizens' freedom, even when doing so brings the economy to a halt and puts millions of people out of work. In order to track and trace the spread of the disease, some countries are requiring residents to accept more intrusive digital monitoring. The government's role in stabilizing the economy has increased dramatically as well, even in pro-market societies like the United States where anything resembling "socialism" is anathema. A few leaders – such as Hungary's Viktor Orbán – have assumed nearly-unlimited emergency powers.

Governments will relax restrictions and relinquish some of these emergency powers as the crisis passes, but political opportunism and fears of a new pandemic could lead many states to leave some of their newly acquired capacities in place. In particular, governments of all sorts are likely to retain an enhanced capacity to trace and track their populations, and information about individual movements and social contacts will not always be used solely to maintain public health. In the post-COVID-19 world, Big Brother will be watching more closely than before.

Whether the overall responses to the pandemic will favor democracy or dictatorship in the long run is not yet obvious. Democracies have been thought to be better able to detect and respond to famines, pandemics, and other public health crises, largely because information tends to travel faster in open societies and leaders who are accountable to

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<sup>11</sup> On this general phenomenon, see Geoffrey R. Stone, *Perilous Times: Free Speech in Wartime from the Seditious Act of 1798 to the War on Terror* (New York: W. W. Norton 2004); and Laura K. Donohue, *The Cost of Counterterrorism: Power, Politics, and Liberty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

the public have greater incentives to respond quickly.<sup>12</sup> The lessons of COVID-19 are less clear, however: according to Rachel Kleinfeld of the Carnegie Endowment, “the record [as of March 2020] does not show a strong correlation between efficacy and regime type.”<sup>13</sup> New Zealand, Denmark, Germany and Australia responded effectively, but so did authoritarian rulers in Vietnam and Singapore. The United States, Great Britain, and Brazil performed poorly, along with the autocratic authorities in Russia, Egypt, and Iran. Although the world’s democracies may eventually turn out to have done better overall, the responses to date do not make a clear-cut case for the inherent superiority of liberal systems.<sup>14</sup> To the extent that this ambiguity continues, it will weaken efforts to promote greater freedom in the future.

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<sup>12</sup> See Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor, 1999), chap. 7.

<sup>13</sup> See Rachel Kleinfeld, “Do Authoritarian or Democratic Countries Handle Pandemics Better?” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 31, 2020, at <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/03/31/do-authoritarian-or-democratic-countries-handle-pandemics-better-pub-81404>

<sup>14</sup> For an argument suggesting the democracies have performed better, see Shlomo Ben-Ami, “Democracies are Better at Managing Crises,” *Project Syndicate* (online), May 20, 2020, at <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/democracy-or-autocracy-better-during-crisis-by-shlomo-ben-ami-2020-05>.

## IV. A LESS PROSPEROUS WORLD

The future world will be poorer than would have been the case had COVID-19 not appeared. The global economy is already in recession; emerging economies may require some form of loan forgiveness, and the growing barriers to trade and investment will slow a future recovery even more.

To be sure, a retreat to full-blown protectionism is unlikely. No country can easily afford to cut itself off from the rest of the world, and even large and diverse economies rely on international trade for a significant fraction of their national income.<sup>15</sup> Even so, a world that is less free and less open will also be a world where economic growth is sluggish and citizens of rich and poor countries lead less bountiful lives. Looking ahead, a major challenge will be figuring out how to maintain the underlying institutions of system of open trade and investment while avoiding the excesses that undermined the earlier era of hyperglobalization.

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<sup>15</sup> The United States is less dependent on trade than almost all other countries, but exports + imports still amount to about 27 percent of GDP. China's trade/GDP ratio is about 38 percent, Russia's is 50 percent, and Germany's is well over 80 percent.

## V. RESURGENT NATIONALISM AND GREAT POWER COMPETITION

The pre-COVID-19 world was also characterized by resurgent nationalism and growing great power rivalry. This trend was most apparent in the escalating competition between the United States and China, but it was also a key element in Britain's decision to leave the EU, the deteriorating relations between Russia and the West, the rising tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the rightward turns in Hungary, Poland, and Brazil, and the pro-Hindu nationalism of the Modi government in India. Instead of a world united by trade, digital communications, shared values, and cooperative institutions, the liberal order championed by the United States and its allies was already under siege.

In theory, a disease that threatens every human being would seem to be an obvious reason for states to cooperate more closely, out of a shared interest in saving lives and restoring normal social and economic life. There have been some encouraging developments along these lines, most notably the collaborative efforts of scientists around the world to understand the virus and develop effective responses to it. The European Union has made some noteworthy attempts to address the economic consequences of the pandemic, such as the European Central Bank's expanded public asset purchase program and a more ambitious Franco-German proposal for € 500 billion All-European recovery fund.

Yet national responses to the crisis continue to be guided primarily by self-interest. In May, the German Constitutional Court declared the ECB purchasing program to be unconstitutional, making it impossible for the Bundesbank to participate in the program

and placing its future (and conceivably the future of the EU) in some doubt.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, although the Franco-German proposal for a recovery fund was immediately welcomed by Spain and Italy (both of whom are in dire need of help), it faces serious opposition from the Netherlands, Austria, and the other members of the EU’s “frugal four.” To see this initiative as the precursor to a genuine European fiscal union seems premature at best.

Consistent with the Trump administration’s “America First” approach to global affairs, the United States has mostly gone its own way. Trump cut off U.S. funding for the World Health Organization in April and the United States declined to contribute to the vaccine research fund organized by the EU in early May.<sup>17</sup> Washington was not alone in remaining aloof, however: Russia, India, and China either failed to attend the video conference held to organize the fund or declined to contribute funds. Instead of coordinating global access to an eventual vaccine, wealthy countries are competing to secure their own supplies in advance, a policy some observers have dubbed “vaccine nationalism.”<sup>18</sup> As John Ikenberry and Charles Kupchan correctly noted, “the world seems headed towards growing division and national self-reliance.”<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, instead of joining forces to combat the virus, the United States and China are taking their rivalry to the next level. Although President Trump initially praised the

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<sup>16</sup> See Adam Tooze, “The Death of the Central Bank Myth,” *Foreign Policy*, May 13, 2020; at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/13/european-central-bank-myth-monetary-policy-german-court-ruling/>

<sup>17</sup> See Matina Stevis-Gridneff and Lara Jakes, “World Leaders Join to Pledge \$8 Billion for Vaccine as U.S. Goes It Alone,” *New York Times*, May 5, 2020.

<sup>18</sup> See Peter S. Goodman, Katie Thomas, Sui-Lee Wee, and Jeffrey Gettleman, “A New Front for Nationalism: The Global Battle against A Virus,” *New York Times*, April 10, 2020, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/10/business/coronavirus-vaccine-nationalism.html>

<sup>19</sup> See G. John Ikenberry and Charles A. Kupchan, “Global Distancing,” *Washington Post*, May 21, 2020.

Chinese government for “doing a very professional job” against the disease, the administration soon reversed course and tried to divert attention from its own errors by blaming China for the entire problem.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the White House’s signature effort to accelerate the development of a vaccine—dubbed “Operation Warp Speed”—explicitly prohibits the use of vaccines developed in China.<sup>21</sup> Washington has also escalated its campaign against China’s technological ambitions by denying Huawei and other Chinese firms access to advanced computer chips manufactured in Taiwan using U.S. software and other proprietary technology.<sup>22</sup> For its part, China has launched an aggressive diplomatic campaign to counter criticisms of its handling of the outbreak, going so far as to impose trade sanctions on Australia after its government called for an independent international investigation of the coronavirus’ origins.

Meanwhile, most of the conflicts and rivalries that predated COVID-19 continue unabated. The United States and Iran remain at odds, civil wars continue to rage in Libya, Syria, and Afghanistan, Indian and Chinese troops have recently clashed along their border, and Ukraine remains mired in a “frozen conflict” with Russia. Although the combination of the pandemic and plummeting oil prices seems to have encouraged Saudi Arabia to deescalate its war in Yemen, COVID-19 has not eliminated the competitive aspects of global politics.

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<sup>20</sup> Michael Crowley, Edward Wong, and Lara Jakes, “Coronavirus Drives the U.S. and China Deeper into Global Power Struggle,” *New York Times*, March 22, 2020.

<sup>21</sup> See Jon Cohen, “Unveiling ‘Warp Speed,’ the White House’s America-first Push For a Coronavirus Vaccine,” *Science*, May 12, 2020, at <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/05/unveiling-warp-speed-white-house-s-america-first-push-coronavirus-vaccine>

<sup>22</sup> See Ana Swanson, Edward Wong, and Raymond Zhong, “U.S. Is Using Taiwan as a Pressure Point in Tech Fight with China,” *New York Times*, May 19, 2020

For all of these reasons, the post-COVID-19 world will be less open, less free, less prosperous and more contentious than the world that immediately preceded it. What do these trends mean for the future world order?



## VI. THE FUTURE GLOBAL ORDER

Any system of interdependent states needs an “operating system”: a system of rules that helps states manage trade, investment, communications, the movement of peoples, the conduct of diplomacy, and host of other issues. The strongest states design, enforce, and modify these rules in order to advance or protect their own interests; for this reason, the order that prevails at any given time is invariably a reflection of the underlying balance of power.<sup>23</sup>

The rules, norms, and institutions that shape relations among states will be most effective when they are broadly legitimate; that is, when they are generally accepted and approved by most of the participants. If there are significant differences among the major powers, the balance of power is shifting, or the existing arrangements no longer serve some powerful states’ interests, however, then achieving consensus will be difficult and the resulting order will be less effective and durable. Under these conditions, cooperative institutions will be more limited in scope or confined to subsets of like-minded states.<sup>24</sup>

The defining feature of the post-COVID-19 order will be an intense rivalry between the United States and China. As the two most powerful states in the international system, each is bound to cast a wary eye on the other, simply because each has the greatest

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<sup>23</sup> See especially Lloyd Gruber, *Ruling the World: Power Politics and the Rise of Supranational Institutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>24</sup> During the Cold War, the economic institutions of the Western liberal order (e.g., the GATT, World Bank, International Monetary Fund, etc.) did not include the Warsaw Pact or Communist China.

capacity to threaten the other's core interests.<sup>25</sup> The two states would be rivals even if their domestic systems were similar; in this case, the obvious differences between America's liberal democracy and China's one-party state will provide fodder for hawks in both countries and exacerbate suspicions even more.

Moreover, their broadest strategic objectives are at odds. Consistent with its long-time commitment to preserving a rough balance of power in Eurasia, the United States will try to make sure that China does not become a "regional hegemon" in Asia.<sup>26</sup> To make it harder for China to project power and influence into other areas – and especially the Western hemisphere – the United States will seek to maintain close security ties with Japan, India, South Korea, Singapore, Australia, and a number of other Asian powers, so that China has to focus most of its attention closer to home. For their part, China's leaders would undoubtedly feel more comfortable and secure if their main rival did not have powerful military forces deployed near Chinese territory and did not maintain close alliances some of China's nearest neighbors. Accordingly, Beijing will try to undermine U.S. ties with its Asian partners and reduce the U.S. role in the region, much as the United States pushed the European powers out of the Western hemisphere at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The result will be an increasingly intense competition for power, influence and security, which will place significant limits on the scope and depth of global cooperation. As John Mearsheimer has explained in detail, the global order will be essentially "realist" in character, defined primarily by a more-or-less constant competition for power and

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<sup>25</sup> See John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011), chapter 10.

<sup>26</sup> The logic of this strategy is laid out in John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, "The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 4 (July/August 2016).

permitting only limited cooperation at the global level.<sup>27</sup> Cooperation will be broader and deeper within each of the two main powers' spheres of influence, leading to a global order segmented along regional and/or ideological lines.<sup>28</sup>

Taken as a whole, Europe is likely to be preoccupied by its persistent internal problems: slow economic growth, rapidly aging and shrinking populations, the continued popularity of far-right movements whose commitment to democracy is questionable, and the various problems emanating from countries nearby.<sup>29</sup> Absent the unlikely development of a "common foreign and security" policy, the EU will continue to "punch below its weight" in world affairs.<sup>30</sup>

But if Sino-American rivalry intensifies, the nations of Europe will face an awkward choice. Although most of them might prefer to remain neutral in the geopolitical contest between the two main powers and maintain close economic ties with both, they will not be able to remain neutral in the contest between the United States and China and continue to rely on U.S. protection. If Europe attempts to stay on the sidelines of the Sino-American rivalry, it will mean the end of NATO and Europe's nations will be forced to assume full responsibility for their own defense.

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<sup>27</sup> See John J. Mearsheimer, "Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order," *International Security* 43, no. 4 (Spring 2019).

<sup>28</sup> From an American perspective, it is unfortunate that neither the Trans-Pacific Partnership nor the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership were completed, as each would have helped align a number of important countries more closely with Washington.

<sup>29</sup> Economic and demographic conditions in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East will generate a steady flow of people seeking to migrate to Europe. Although most European countries could use a larger supply of skilled and unskilled labor, the negative political consequences of increased immigration should not be underestimated.

<sup>30</sup> For a discussion of some of these problems, see Stephen M. Walt, "Does Europe Have a Future?" *Foreign Policy*, July 16, 2015, at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/07/16/does-europe-have-a-future-stephen-walt-testimony-house-foreign-affairs-committee/>

Although the emerging world order will be essentially realist and competitive at its core, there are several areas where global cooperation is still badly needed, irrespective of the state of Sino-American relations. Post-COVID-19 efforts to shape a more positive future should concentrate on the following vital issues.

First and most obviously, all nations have a common interest in taming the coronavirus and developing better means to prevent or contain future pandemics. COVID-19 is just the latest in a series of dangerous viral epidemics in recent years – following HIV-AIDS, Ebola, SARS, and MERS – and we should expect new and potentially worse ones to emerge in the future. Instead of squabbling about the origins of COVID-19 and trying to “go it alone” in search a solution, the United States, China, and other nations should be working together to stop the current pandemic and developing global measures to make future ones less likely.

Second, the United States, China, and all the other major powers have a common interest in addressing climate change. Addressing this problem faces the usual dilemmas of collective action, but failure to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and halt the steady increase in average atmospheric temperatures is already having dangerous effects on human life and could have catastrophic consequences in the decades to come. Developing an effective global response will still require a lot of hard bargaining, but geopolitical rivalries should take a back seat to cooperation here as well.

Third, the United States, China, Russia, and several medium powers share a common interest in improving the security of the world’s nuclear weapons and fissionable material. Even if nuclear states continue to compete for “nuclear superiority,” (whatever that might be), they can agree on the need to discourage unauthorized use of a nuclear

weapon, the theft of a weapon or fissionable material by criminals or terrorists, or the acquisition of these weapons by more countries. Continuing the nuclear security agenda launched by the Obama administration and resuming programs akin to the earlier Nunn-Lugar nuclear security initiatives would be another desirable element in a future global order.

Lastly, human welfare will also be improved if the institutions shaping the world economy were refashioned on more robust lines. Major powers should continue to promote an international economic order that encourages openness within limits, one that allows individual nations greater latitude to control the pace of change and to preserve their own political values and “ways of life.”<sup>31</sup> Complex multilateral agreements that require all members to adopt “one-size-fits-all” rules take years to negotiate and are difficult to sell to publics back home. Moreover, forcing foreign countries to conform their domestic laws and customs to their trading partners’ preferences invites the kind of populist backlash that has undermined support for globalization in general, especially when such changes have to be implemented rapidly. As the global economy recovers post-COVID-19, more modest objectives may yield more popular and enduring results.

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<sup>31</sup> This is the chief recommendation made in Rodrik, *Straight Talk on Trade*.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Is this vision for cooperation within a fundamentally conflictive order too optimistic? Perhaps. But there are encouraging historical precedents. The United States and the Soviet Union were divided by profound ideological differences and engaged in a mostly zero-sum competition for more than four decades. They waged proxy wars that killed millions, kept massive nuclear arsenals at the ready to deter (and if necessary “win”) an all-out war, and saw the other as the embodiment of evil. Yet these two fierce rivals also managed recurring crises, jointly sponsored the 1967 Non-Proliferation Treaty, signed a series of bilateral agreements intended to reduce the risk of nuclear war) and jointly managed the Soviet Union’s unexpected collapse. They did so because they also shared important common interests, and these overlapping interests in some cases overcame the many issues that divided them. The global response to 9/11 and to the emergence of ISIS in 2014 offer additional instances where geopolitical and ideological rivals nonetheless collaborated to counter a common danger.

Whether the major powers will resist the urge to demonize each other and succeed in walling off those areas where their interests overlap remains to be seen. Although current trends are not encouraging, the ultimate outcome is not preordained. The post-COVID-19 world order will be competitive at its core, but the scope and intensity of that competition is a matter of choice.

Now as always, the future will be what we make of it.