

Trump 2.0 and the Revenge of Geopolitics

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Study group dates. Each session will be on a Thursday between 2:30pm and 4pm. The second semester dates will be February 13th, February 20th, March 6th, March 20th and April 10th. I will be available for office hours following each session.

Outline. People over 30 grew up in a world in which globalization and economic integration were presumed to be humanity's chief driving force. People in your age bracket are emerging into a far less optimistic era in which confusion, risk and uncertainty have displaced the so-called Washington consensus that had prevailed since the end of the Cold War. Trump's return cements that.

This study group will look at what this more dangerous and competitive new global era means for the future of the west, the survival of US democracy, the risk of war and US-China decoupling, and what the original Cold War between America and the Soviets can tell us about the new one between the US and China.

The goal of this study group is to help you understand the radical uncertainty of the world into which we are headed. We no longer have the luxury of ignoring geopolitics. To paraphrase a famous thinker: "You may not be interested in geopolitics, but geopolitics is interested in you." I will invite prominent guest speakers to one or two of the sessions to help stimulate the discussion. I include reading material for each session. I will also pose a couple of questions that I would like you to think about in advance.

My background. I am the chief US commentator and columnist for the Financial Times based in DC. Previously I was Washington bureau chief, New Delhi bureau chief, Philippines correspondent and capital markets

editor. Between 2000 and 2001, I was speechwriter to the US Treasury Secretary, Larry Summers in the Clinton administration. I am the author of three books – *In Spite of the Gods: The Rise of Modern India* (2006), *Time To Start Thinking: America and the Specter of Descent* (2012), and *The Retreat of Western Liberalism* (2017). My next book in May 2025 is a full life biography of Zbigniew Brzezinski, one of America’s leading Cold War Strategists (Simon & Schuster). I appear regularly on MSNBC, CNN, BBC and other major broadcasters. Since I will be covering and commenting on the 2024 US presidential election, and the global implications of its aftermath, this is also an opportunity to evaluate and critique the traditional media’s coverage of elections and foreign policy in an age of social media. I will share what I write throughout the semester. I will provide fuller reading lists and questions for students a week before each session. They are in bold.

Session 1 (Thursday February 13th). Why geopolitics is back.

The somewhat naïve expectation that the rest of the world would become more like us – the west in general, America in particular – has died. What used to be called “great power competition” is now the norm again and will be for the indefinite future. Trump often likens the world to a jungle, in which the US is the largest predator. Some trace the end of Pax Americana further back to Washington’s response to the 2001 attacks on the Twin Towers – the 2003 Iraq war and the war on terror overreach. Another break point was the 2008 global financial crisis, which exposed the stagnant prospects of much of the western middle class and lit the fuse for Trump’s populist backlash. It also discredited the Washington consensus. Whatever the date, nobody disputes that America’s unipolar moment is over along with many of the ideological precepts that went with it – free trade, increasing integration, the spread of democracy, and the end of ideological competition. **What will a post-American world look like? Does “liberal international order” any longer make sense as a concept?**

This is the longest essay I'll give you to read – Francis Fukuyama's famous/infamous "The End of History" – but it is well worth your time. His essay continues to be cited as often as it was when published in the summer of 1989. It will help you understand the case that was once the consensus that now everyone loves to trash.

https://www.jstor.org/stable/24027184?read-now=1&seq=2#page_scan_tab_contents

Fareed Zakaria's 2008 book, *The Post-American World*, supplanted Fukuyama and also entered the vocabulary alongside *The End of History*. This New York Times review gets its essence:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/11/books/review/Joffe-t.html>

And to bring us up to date a final reading from earlier in 2024 by Anne Applebaum in the Atlantic on how autocracies are making common cause against the west:

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2024/06/china-russia-republican-party-relations/678271/>

My essay on the FT making Trump the newspaper's "person of the year" in 2024 – not an award – outlines the roiling uncertainties around Trump's agenda: <https://www.ft.com/content/553a1655-36c5-48ad-9d1e-fffd28bd1756> This was controversial. It is worth emphasizing that Time Magazine made Hitler its person of the year in 1938, Stalin in 1939, Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979, and Putin in 2007.

Session 2 (Thursday February 20th). The New Cold War and the risks of US-China decoupling.

The Biden administration said it was "derisking" the US economy from China but was unable to draw a clear line between that and full-blown "decoupling". Trump, on the other hand, is aiming for "decoupling". The suspicion in DC is that China wants to supplant American hegemony. The fear in China is that America wants to keep it permanently down and ring-fenced. Both paranoias are partly true and self-feeding. We are

in a new Cold War. We will discuss whether there is any plausible non-military end in sight for this mother of all great power struggles. **Can the US and China reach a stable “G2” world? Is globalization dead?**

Joe Biden’s US national security advisor, Jake Sullivan, gave this seminal speech in April 2023 on how to counter China with his “foreign policy for the middle class”. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/04/27/remarks-by-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-on-renewing-american-economic-leadership-at-the-brookings-institution/> There will be some continuity under Trump.

I wrote about that theme the week before Sullivan spoke – “The new Washington Consensus” <https://www.ft.com/content/42922712-cd33-4de0-8763-1cc271331a32> My colleague Martin Wolf also wrote about how America is feeling “buyer’s remorse” for the world that it built: <https://www.ft.com/content/77faa249-0f88-4700-95d2-ecd7e9e745f9>

The Economist recently summarized the boomerang effect of Washington’s attempt to shut down Huawei – and how it’s now going from almost-out to rapidly growing purely on a Chinese supply chain. <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2024/06/13/americas-assassination-attempt-on-huawei-is-backfiring>

Finally, Dmitri Alperovitch in Foreign Policy on “How the US can win the new cold war”. <https://time.com/6971329/us-china-new-cold-war/>

Session 3 (Thursday March 6th). The geopolitical impact of Trump 2.0.

Trump sees the world as a jungle and the US as the largest predator. He respects other predators and has little patience for small and medium-sized powers. We have seen early signs of this in his threats to reoccupy the Panama Canal and annex Greenland. Great power competition is driven by a mix of relative economic and military power, nations’ diplomatic effectiveness (including their ability to form alliances), and the stability and character of their political systems. Trump does not

believe in alliances. His return also puts a question mark over the future of US liberal democracy. Trump is neither a conventional “realist” nor an “isolationist”, though he exhibits strands of both. In his peculiar style of great power mercantilism, Trump harkens back to Andrew Jackson in early 19th century America, and contemporary strongmen, such as Russia’s Putin, Turkey’s Erdogan and India’s Narendra Modi.

Session 4 (Thursday November 14th). Can the west survive as a coherent idea?

Trump openly denigrates the very idea of the West. But what is the West? Europe and the US are largely on the same page about Russia’s threat to Ukraine. But they are very far from forging a common stance on China – and are never likely to do so. The West is a tired concept that has lost force from within. Do western “values” have any legitimate meaning in today’s world?

Session 5 (Thursday November 21st). What we can learn from the original US-USSR Cold War on how to navigate the new Cold War between the US and China.

America won the first Cold War comprehensively. An economically stagnant Soviet Union – essentially the Russian empire in Marxist clothing – peacefully unraveled into its constituent nationalisms. Putin called the dissolution of the USSR the “greatest geopolitical tragedy of the 20th century.” He is now trying to reverse some of that. The US contest with China is very different. China largely inhabits its historic borders and is a powerful economic force. Unlike the ideological Cold War with Russia, US-China rivalry is likely to persist regardless of the political character of China, or the US. Bipolar world might be a better framework to view our future than New Cold War.