The World HandCOV'd: Challenges and Scenarios for U.S. Foreign Policy

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Key takeaways

- The pandemic has highlighted numerous problems that will be constraining U.S. power in international relations. They include the expanding competition with China, soft power losses, economic challenges and growing contradictions in American society;
- The outcomes of the weakening of the U.S. and other major powers will not be chaos and disorganization, but growing internal instability, which may entail the emergence of new failed states, followed by the involvement of external forces in their breakdown;
- Three hypothetical scenarios look probable: a new cold war, a grand bargain and a return to soft containment. The latter seems most realistic;
- Each of these scenarios might carry costs for Eastern Europe, yet the soft containment one appears preferable.

The SARS-CoV-2 virus is dangerous not so much because of the direct damage done to living cells, but because of the accompanying complications that it triggers. The overall health status of the affected body is what matters, alongside chronic diseases and susceptibilities. The impact of the pandemic on global politics is somewhat similar: the lockdown and economic disruption exacerbate the accumulated contradictions and

problems. From this perspective, the pandemic hit the U.S. at a bad time in terms of both its domestic political landscape and the foreign policy it has adopted in recent years. The active yet chaotic and hazardous game with opponents and partners that Donald Trump picked as his strategy can bear fruit only in certain conditions. Achieving success requires a robust economy (in 2017–2019, the U.S. economy grew at a rate of 2%–3%), as well as readily available reserves, fast response capability, confidence and an image of success.

This is no longer the case, though. In 2020, the U.S. economy is expected to contract by at least 5%-6% (some predict it would plummet by 20%); unemployment rate hit the record 14.7% in April and continues to grow. The government will channel at least USD 2.2 trillion to bolster the economy, while limiting reserves apportioned for external initiatives. The ability to respond fast in the international arena has been critically undermined by the snowballing problems domestically, whereas the image of success has sustained the hardest blow since the 1970s — the country will take several years to recover.

This is not the first time the U.S. has been depressed all the way to a level it has to review its foreign policy. The previous revision happened relatively recently, in 2008–2009. However, the situation currently at hand is distinct in some aspects that should be considered separately.

Competition

The relationship between China and the U.S. is as sour as never before, with Washington's increasingly shrinking leverage over Beijing.

China will definitely not become the next only world power, there being numerous political and even cultural obstacles to this. It is hard to disagree with Zbigniew Brzeziński's argument made in the early 1990s: "*once the American leadership begins to fade, America's current global predominance is unlikely to be replicated by any single state*." But the Chinese economy is already comparable to that of the U.S. in nominal terms (USD 14 trillion vs. USD 21 trillion), and in PPP terms it has surpassed it. Referring to itself as the global leader in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. has provided over USD 700 million worth of foreign aid, whereas China has announced the allocation of USD 2 billion over the next two years. Figures will certainly change and become nuanced, but for the first time since the weakening of the USSR in the mid-1980s, the U.S. has faced both a crisis and a comparable competitor internationally. Although it appears that the U.S. will remain the world's leading power when the dust settles down, it will be increasingly difficult for it to maintain its global leadership.

Public schism and debate on progress

U.S. society is far from internal consolidation and cohesion, and the pandemic and upcoming elections will only contribute to internal confrontations. Controversies should not be exaggerated, and the political system is far from a collapse, no matter what individual commentators have to say, but it is hard to view Joe Biden, let alone Donald Trump, as the bedrock for national consolidation. This creates a rather feeble framework for the country to confront external challenges. In this respect, the situation is a lot worse than after 2008, when Barack Obama, a sort of "candidate of hope", was elected amidst the crisis.

Since the end of World War II, with the possible exception of the 1970s, the decade hit by crises, the image of the U.S. has almost always been invariably associated with progress and development. Whilst the USSR was breaking down, the U.S. economic model manifested its indubitable superiority; the military operations in Iraq or Kosovo could be widely condemned, but the U.S.' technology dominance was unquestionable. Washington contrived to maintain this image after 2008.

Now that the pandemic has broken out, the situation is no longer unambiguous. The U.S. leadership had long underestimated the threat, and the health system and other services have uncovered many issues. The U.S. has yet to demonstrate its visible leadership, in terms of both medicine and crisis management. Thomas Barnett once called the U.S. "the DNA of the modern world", "the modern source code of globalization", the archetype that is copied, either directly or indirectly, virtually ubiquitously — from fashion to the operation of individual companies. The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic made it clear that the U.S. is far from being a role model to look up to and copy. This is yet another difference from the situation observed throughout 2008–2009.

Obviously, the U.S. will recover from the crisis in a weakened state. So will all other nations. However, the above factors may imply a markedly more pronounced weakening compared with the aftermath of the downturn of 2008. What consequences could this have for international politics?

Chaos or Fragmentation

The onset of the pandemic, the ensuing wave of economic crisis, the pressures of the physical discomfort caused by lockdown arrangements that have affected hundreds of millions of people around the world make sure there is no shortage of apocalyptic predictions of the impending chaos in international relations. Hundreds of analysts

anticipate that the weakening of the U.S., China, the EU and regional powers will lead to the crippling of the international order, and the world will plunge into a "war of all against all".

This is not what is going to happen, though. The chance of interstate clashes is quite slim. There are not many countries in the world that are able and willing to fight in times of crises. The main challenges will be associated with internal political stability of individual states, rather than the soundness of the world order. Since 2008, we have seen almost no examples of direct interstate clashes, but we have a rather long list of civil wars and conflicts, followed by proxy wars with the involvement of external forces. Libya, Yemen and Syria are the few roughest examples. Ukraine pretty much belongs to this list as well.

The outcomes of the weakening of the U.S. and other major powers will not be chaos and disorganization, but fragmentation and atomization. The chief political challenge of the post-COVID-19 era will be growing internal instability, which may entail the emergence of new failed states, followed by the involvement of external forces in their breakdown. This should be treated as the main negative impact of the weakened U.S. on global politics in the coming years.

An important distinctive feature of the world order after the 2008 crisis brought about by the weakening of key actors was the emergence of "small empires" in the international political arena. Because the rate of economic recovery varied in various countries, there was a brief rise of certain regional states that sought to fill the void, expand their political influence, and sometimes even outline their respective areas of dominance. Turkey and Russia are the most typical examples, but we can also name Iran, Saudi Arabia, Venezuela and others.

Similar processes can be anticipated in the world after COVID, which is perceived as another challenge to international politics. Nevertheless, the expansionism of regional powers is likely to be much more modest than in the previous decade. Firstly, regional powers will also be weakened by the crisis, and many of them already suffer from deep internal issues that were inconspicuous twelve years ago. Secondly, all projects of "small empires" have de facto failed.

Three scenarios for the U.S. foreign policy

What can we expect from the U.S. policy in the international scene in the coming years? Below are the three likeliest scenarios.

A new Cold War

Tensions between the U.S. and China are so intense that many authors are already arguing about the possibility of a full-scale Cold War. Such a scenario is possible, but unlikely. Wars, including cold wars, are rarely initiated during economic crises. The Cold War evolved against the backdrop of economic growth in the 1950s and 1960s, whereas the recessionary 1970s were marked by a détente. Incidentally, the Vietnam War (1965), operations in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) all started on the wave of economic recovery.

The U.S. is now highly vulnerable to any extended confrontation. Most importantly, it is impossible to compete successfully without the active engagement and mobilization of allies and partners; however, the status of collaboration with allies and partners, just as all institutional links between Washington and other countries, is unfavorable. This is true for most cases, if not for all.

A Big Deal

The deeper the crisis, the higher the likelihood of a "big deal" between the U.S. and China, despite the current improbability of this scenario. It is unlikely, of course, that the world will come all the way to establishing the G2 (U.S.–China), and that such a "deal" can be sustainable and trust-based, but it could defuse the crisis and coordinate efforts to overcome it. Perhaps it would open up new opportunities for the development of American isolationism and promotion of a foreign policy that does not rely on traditional allies.

A big deal would not imply that the world will be divided into areas of influence (this is hardly possible anyway with the contemporary organization of global processes and international politics), but rather constitute an accord on the rules of cooperation and confrontation.

Soft containment and the development of institutions

If the development of the modern world primarily presupposes an increase in uncertainty, then the return of the United States to the promotion of international institutions and the soft containment of its ideological and economic rivals would mean a way to reduce such uncertainty. It would largely be a return to the "traditional" foreign policy that has evolved since the end of the Cold War. Only Trump and, in some respects, George Bush dared to depart from this course. This scenario is the one that seems the likeliest.

Implications for Eastern Europe

One way or another, the crisis will weaken the U.S. enough for it to lose some interest in the international agenda and refocus on domestic issues. This does not mean an inevitable winding up of all programs, let alone another withdrawal of the U.S. from Eastern Europe, as happened back in 2008–2009. The U.S.' conflict-ridden relations with Moscow will not allow this to happen. Planned programs will be implemented, and partnerships will remain in place. However, East European countries will have to rely more on their own strengths and expect a lower interest in their challenges. This will not happen immediately but will be noticeable within one or two years.

It seems that the region as a whole is ready for this. The lessons and mistakes of 2014 are still fresh. The key countries are mobilized against possible military and political threats, and a visible review of the political status quo is hardly conceivable in the near future. Only Moldova looks vulnerable due to numerous internal problems.

As is true for all global politics, the main threat to the region comes not from external forces and confrontation between them. New conflicts are unlikely, provided that the relevant states maintain their internal stability. Just as on the global stage, the main threat to the region will be posed by the increase of internal tensions, and the main objective will be to attract positive attention.

A ***new Cold War*** will not result in anything good. It is obviously the worst possible scenario for the region. Countries will have to make choices and spend resources on purposes that are not fully comprehensible in the context of national and regional interests. Eastern Europe will be a peripheral scene of operations in such a war, but it will scarcely avoid serious costs and even greater marginalization from the positive global policy agenda. Extended confrontation will inevitably weaken Euro-Atlantic institutions and cause the partners' irritation with the U.S. For Belarus, this scenario will almost inevitably mean stagnation in its relations with Washington.

A ***Big Deal***. A lot will depend on the nature of the deal, but on the whole, this scenario envisages the U.S. least interest in the region. Higher tensions and excessive spending will be avoided, and so will be the need to continuously make choices. However, the expansion of a positive agenda is unlikely, either. Uncertainty in the region will keep growing. It is also likely that Euro-Atlantic institutions will weaken due to the loss of interest in them. At the same time, given the low baseline level of the Belarus–U.S. relationship, positive dynamics may remain.

Soft containment and development of institutions. While the first two scenarios set a new perspective with its consequences being unpredictable, the third option can be regarded as "conservative." Although the U.S. interest in the region will still decrease, this scenario envisages a gradual promotion of Euro-Atlantic cooperation both with allies and partners (including with Belarus) and the overall consolidation of the existing political configuration with no initiatives to alter the status quo.

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