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The Age of Complacency

Sleepwalking Into the Dream of Endless Peace

June 2026

To those who built the world I inherited, and to those who will inherit the world we leave behind.

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The collapse of the Soviet Union created one of the most extraordinary concentrations of power in modern history. For the first time in generations, the United States and its allies operated in a world without a serious peer competitor, producing a strategic environment so unusual that many increasingly came to regard it as normal.

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Success changed our incentives. While geopolitical competition faded and globalization accelerated, Western governments, businesses, and institutions increasingly optimized for efficiency, prosperity, and integration, often at the expense of resilience, industrial capacity, and long-term strategic preparedness.

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The world after 1991 was not history's endpoint but a temporary anomaly. A generation that was raised during an unusually favorable era came to mistake it for the natural progression of world order.

Introduction

I was born in 2001, at what now appears to have been the height of the post-Cold War era. The Soviet Union had already been gone for a decade, the United States stood alone as the world's dominant power, globalization was accelerating at an unprecedented pace, and technological progress seemed to promise an increasingly connected and prosperous future. In Greece, my home country, optimism was everywhere. We had recently entered the Eurozone, preparations for the 2004 Olympic Games were underway, living standards were rising, and the prevailing belief was that the future would be richer, more integrated, and more stable than the past. To my generation, large scale conflict felt like it belonged to the history books.

Then February 24, 2022 came. Like millions of others, I woke up to headlines announcing that Russia had invaded Ukraine. I remember following the news obsessively for weeks, watching footage of armored columns, missile strikes, and civilians fleeing their homes, while feeling a level of uncertainty that I had never experienced before. For the first time in my life, a major war between states did not feel like a chapter from a history textbook or a distant conflict occurring somewhere beyond the edge of the developed world. It felt immediate and more importantly, it forced me to seriously confront the possibility that the world I believed I had been born into did not actually exist. What if many of the assumptions that had shaped my understanding of the future rested not upon permanent realities, but upon a temporary and historically unusual moment in time?

The more I studied and observed our world in the last four years, the more that question refused to go away. What if globalization was not eliminating competition, but merely changing its form? What if economic integration could coexist with geopolitical rivalry? What if the stability of the post-Cold War era reflected a unique distribution of power rather than the permanent evolution of the international system?

The defining mistake of the post-Cold War era was not a policy error, a military decision, or a diplomatic failure; it was the misreading of history. An exceptional period of peace, prosperity, and Western dominance subtly came to be viewed as normal, while competition, scarcity, and geopolitical rivalry were increasingly

treated as relics of an earlier age. This essay examines how that assumption emerged, why it proved to be so persuasive, and why the world that is now taking shape looks far more familiar to history than many expected.

Let's start at the beginning.

I. The birth of the Unipolar Moment

On Christmas Day in 1991, Mikhail Gorbachev gave a televised speech announcing his resignation as President of the USSR and the Soviet flag was lowered from the Kremlin for the final time. For a major part of the twentieth century, the Soviet Union had stood as one of the two poles around which international politics revolved, with its military power stretching across Eurasia, its ideology influencing movements internationally, and its rivalry with the United States shaping almost every major geopolitical event of the post WWII era. However, when the Soviet state finally collapsed, it happened with remarkable speed. A major global superpower that had appeared permanent only a few years earlier suddenly disappeared, leaving the United States in a position that few great powers in history had ever enjoyed.



Figure 1: The New York Times December 26, 1991. Front Page.

The significance of this moment extended far beyond the borders of the former Soviet Union. The collapse of America's principal rival created a strategic environment unlike any that had existed in the modern era. Previous great powers had always operated in the presence of competitors. Some notable examples are the British Empire that spent much of the nineteenth century managing the ambitions of rival continental powers and the Imperial Germany, which confronted a coalition of major European states determined

to prevent its domination of the continent. Even at the height of its influence, the United States had measured itself against the Soviet Union. After 1991, however, no comparable challenger existed. The American military spending dwarfed that of its potential rivals, its navy controlled the world's most important maritime routes, its financial system sat at the center of the global economy, and its alliances spanned across Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. For a brief period of time, the United States occupied a position of dominance that was historically extraordinary.



Figure 2: The End of the Cold War. US President George Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev formally recognizing the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Source: World Socialist Web Site (wsws.org), published by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).

The problem with extraordinary circumstances though is that people rarely recognize them as such while they are living through them. A period of stability increasingly stops appearing exceptional and instead becomes the baseline against which everything else is measured. However, there was nothing normal about the strategic environment that emerged after the fall of the USSR. Previous generations of American leaders had spent their entire careers confronting peer competitors. They understood a world defined by balance-of-power politics. They understood deterrence, containment, arms races, and spheres of influence. In contrast, the generation that followed inherited an unusual international order, in which no serious challenger existed to contest the Western preeminence.

Share of Global GDP

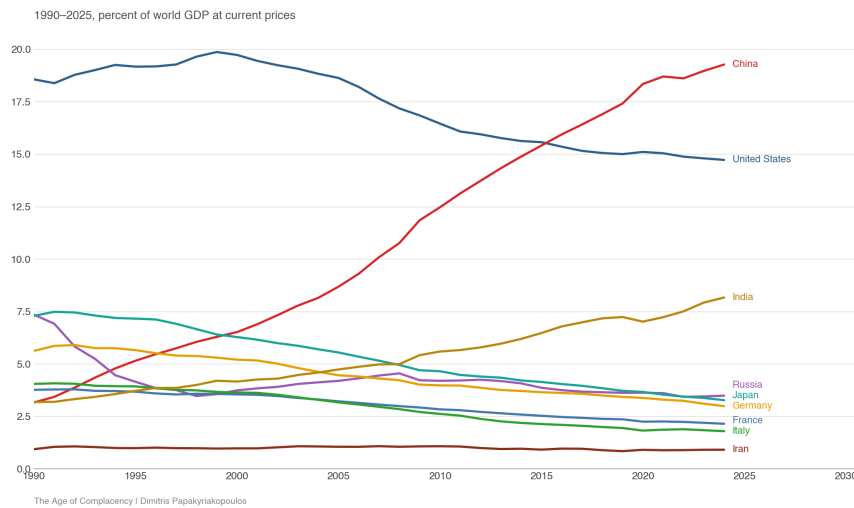


Figure 3: The Distribution of Economic Power from 1990-2025.

Source: World Bank. World Development Indicators.

The distribution of global economic output from 1991-2000 reveals the extent of this western dominance. In the years following the Soviet collapse, the United States remained the central pillar of the world economy. While Japan entered a prolonged period of stagnation and Russia struggled through economic collapse, the American economy continued to expand. China was growing rapidly, but it remained far from challenging the economic scale of the United States. Combined with the economic weight of Western Europe, the broader Western alliance accounted for a substantial share of global output, technological innovation, and financial activity.

Power, however, is never measured solely in dollars, since historically, wealth has often proved to be fleeting. The states that shape international orders are not simply those that generate prosperity, but those that possess the abilities to protect it. And the extraordinary nature of the post-Cold War order was nowhere more evident than in the military dominance that emerged after 1991.

Military Spending

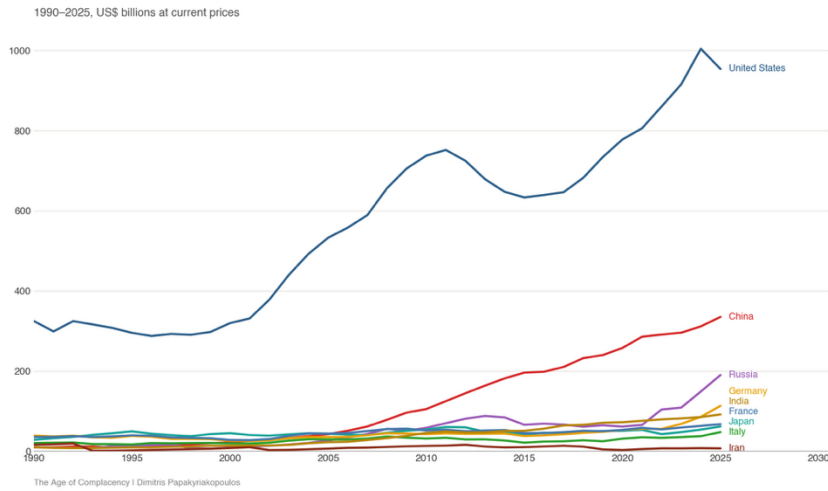


Figure 4: Military Budget of Selected Leading Nations from 1990-2025.

Source: SIPRI Military Expenditure Database.

The military imbalance of the post-Cold War era was unlike anything most strategists had previously experienced. The United States spent more on defense than multiple major powers combined. Its navy operated across every ocean, its air force possessed capabilities that competitors struggled to replicate (or sometimes to even fathom) and its defense industrial base remained unmatched in sophistication and scale. When American forces were deployed abroad, they did so with a level of logistical reach that no other state could ever approach.

The Gulf War offered a glimpse of this reality and to observers around the world, the conflict appeared to reveal a new model of warfare. Precision-guided weapons struck targets with astonishing accuracy, satellites connected forces across vast distances and advanced aircraft operated with a degree of effectiveness that seemed almost futuristic. The war was brief, decisive, and overwhelmingly one-sided. For many policymakers, America appeared to be pulling further ahead of its potential adversaries in both technological and military power.



Figure 5: US Air Force aircrafts of the 4th Fighter Wing (F-16, F-15C and F-15E) fly over Kuwaiti oil fires, set by retreating Iraqi forces during Operation Desert Storm.

Source: Wikipedia Commons.

By the early twenty-first century, many political leaders, business executives, academics, and ordinary citizens had spent their entire adult lives inside a world shaped by overwhelming Western dominance. This may have been the most important consequence of the Unipolar Moment as it encouraged people to confuse a particular distribution of power with the natural course of history. What had been created by geopolitical circumstances progressively came to be viewed as an enduring feature of the international system. The longer the period lasted, the stronger this assumption became. Success reinforced confidence, confidence shaped expectations and expectations influenced policy. This is what we are taught in Computer Science as confirmation bias.

This shift in perception would ultimately prove more consequential than any single policy decision. The greatest legacy of the post-Cold War era was not merely the expansion of globalization or the spread of liberal institutions. It was the gradual emergence of a set of assumptions about how the world worked. Competition appeared less important than cooperation. Economics appeared more important than geopolitics. Efficiency appeared more valuable than resilience. Military power seemed increasingly secondary to technology, finance, and trade. Don't get me wrong, these assumptions were not irrational, in fact in many respects they reflected the realities of the moment. However, they were built upon a geopolitical environment that was itself unusual, and perhaps even temporary.

The story of the last three decades is therefore not simply a story about Western success. It is also a story about what success can do to societies. Victory removes pressures. It changes incentives, alters priorities. Most importantly, it reshapes expectations about the future. The end of the Cold War did not merely transform the international balance of power, but it instead transformed the way an entire generation thought about power itself.

II. From Victory to the Great Relaxation

The greatest consequence of the Unipolar Moment was not military dominance, economic prosperity, or even ideological confidence; it was the gradual disappearance of urgency. Throughout history, competition has imposed discipline upon societies as states operating in dangerous environments are forced to make difficult choices and invest in capabilities whose value may not become apparent for years or even decades. They maintain stockpiles, preserve industrial capacity, sustain military readiness, and accept inefficiencies that would appear irrational under normal market conditions. Competition enforces preparation because the cost of being unprepared can be catastrophic. My mother used to tell me when I was little that if you fail to plan, you eventually plan to fail.



Figure 6: First launch of Space Shuttle Columbia. The April 12 launch at Pad 39A of STS-1, just seconds past 7 a.m., carries astronauts John Young and Robert Crippen into an Earth orbital mission scheduled to last 54 hours, ending with unpowered landing at Edwards Air Force Base in California.

Source: NASA.

For a big part of the twentieth century, Western societies lived under these pressures, since the possibility of major conflict shaped political priorities across the industrialized world. Back then, industrial capacity was viewed not merely as an economic asset but mostly as a strategic one. Defense expenditures were justified not because war was inevitable, but because deterrence required preparation. Policymakers understood that resilience often carried costs, and they accepted those costs because the consequences of failing to do so were very clear. The experiences of two world wars and a decades-long Cold War further reinforced the belief that security required investment long before a crisis had even emerged.

The end of the Cold War altered this calculus. With the Soviet Union disappeared and no peer competition, the balance of power appeared settled. The threats that had justified decades of military expenditure and strategic planning seemed increasingly distant and for the first time in generations, Western governments found themselves operating in an environment that appeared unusually

secure. As the perception of danger continued to fade, the incentives facing governments, businesses, and societies began to change.

This transformation was not the result of a single policy decision or a coordinated strategy. There was no declaration that the age of competition had ended. No government announced that resilience would become less important than efficiency, nor did corporations openly argue that strategic considerations should be subordinated to economic ones. But at the same time, across institutions and industries, decisions increasingly reflected precisely these assumptions. What emerged was not a deliberate abandonment of preparedness, but a gradual adaptation to a world in which preparedness seemed less necessary.

One of the clearest manifestations of this shift was the pursuit of what became known as the peace dividend. For nearly half a century, Western governments had devoted enormous resources to maintaining military capabilities designed to deter the Soviet Union. Once that threat disappeared, many questioned whether such expenditures were still necessary. Their argument that resources previously allocated to defense could instead be directed towards healthcare, education, infrastructure, and social programs was quite compelling. If the world had become safer, why should we continue behaving as though it had not?

Military Personnel

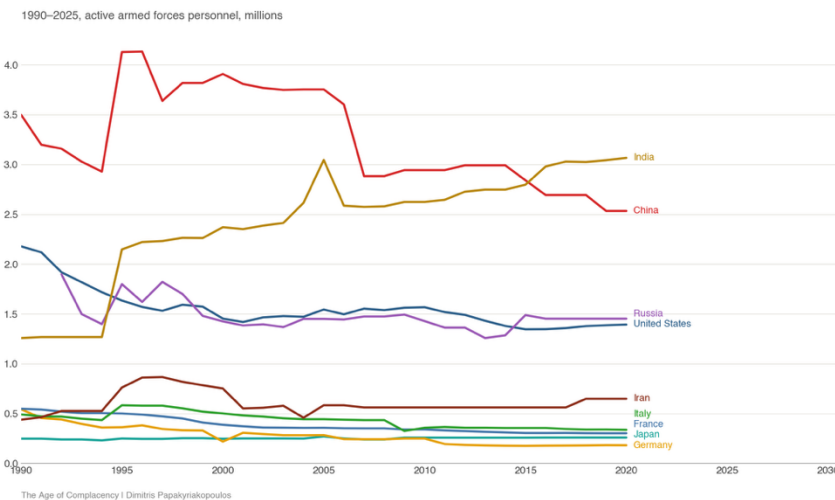


Figure 7: Military Personnel among Selected Leading Nations from 1990-2025.

Source: The Military Balance, International Institute for Strategic Studies.

The reduction in military manpower across much of the Western world reflected this new reality. Armed forces became smaller, more professionalized, and increasingly optimized for limited interventions rather than large-scale mobilization. Governments were rationally responding to a strategic environment that appeared significantly safer than the one their predecessors had faced. Over time, however, these decisions contributed to the erosion of capabilities that previous generations had considered indispensable to national power. The same logic extended to the defense industrial base itself. In 1993, senior Pentagon officials convened the chief executives of America's largest defense contractors at a now-famous meeting that became known as the "Last Supper." The message was pretty clear that post-Cold War defense budgets would no longer support the existing industrial structure, and many firms would have to merge, consolidate, or disappear altogether. The resulting wave of consolidation dramatically reduced the number of major defense contractors and reflected a broader assumption of the era that the demands of great-power competition were receding and that the vast industrial capacity built during the Cold War was no longer necessary. At the time, these decisions appeared prudent and economically rational. In retrospect though, they also revealed how deeply and desperately the expectation of lasting peace had become embedded within the West.



Figure 8: The Pentagon, headquarters of the United States Department of War (previously known as the Department of Defense), taken from an airplane in January 2008.

Source: The Pentagon.

The same logic extended beyond military institutions. After the 1990s, economic globalization accelerated at an extraordinary pace. Advances in transportation, communications, and information technology created opportunities for unprecedented integration, corporations reorganized themselves around global supply chains, production shifted to regions offering lower costs, inventories were reduced, redundant capacity was eliminated, and industries that had once been largely national became increasingly international.

Trade as % of GDP

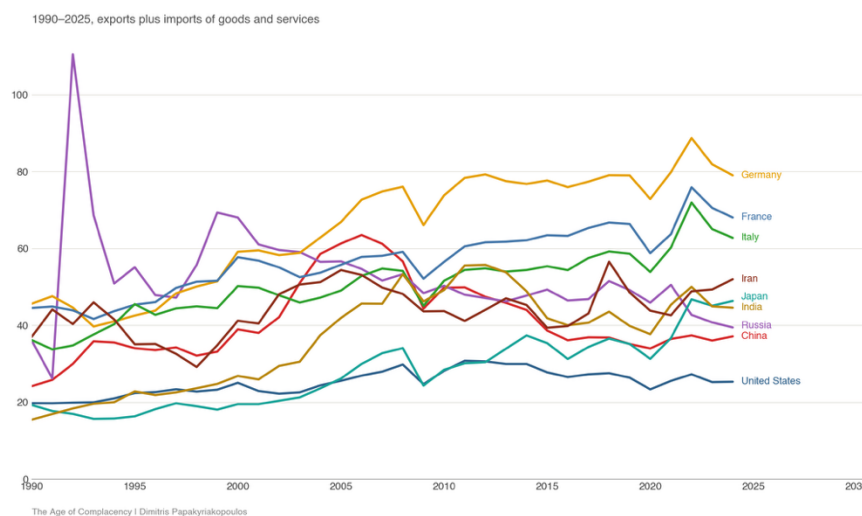


Figure 9: Trade as a Percentage of GDP of Selected Leading Nations from 1990-2025.

Source: Country official statistics, National Statistical Organizations and/or Central Banks; National Accounts data files, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD); Staff estimates, World Bank (WB).

To many observers, globalization appeared to validate the assumptions of the time. Trade expanded rapidly, economic growth accelerated, and consumers benefited from lower prices and greater access to goods. Moreover, developing nations experienced remarkable gains in prosperity and the world seemed to be moving toward deeper integration and greater stability. But more importantly, globalization appeared to provide evidence that competition itself was changing, since prosperity would encourage cooperation, and markets would achieve what diplomacy had often struggled to accomplish. Economic interdependence was expected to reduce the likelihood of conflict and nations that traded extensively with one another would have too much to lose from confrontation.

The appeal and logic of this argument is quite easy to understand. The evidence seemed compelling, and for a time the results appeared to support it. But we failed to see that this assumption contained a critical flaw. Economic integration does not eliminate geopolitical competition, but it changes its form. While many Western societies increasingly viewed globalization through the lens of efficiency, other states continued to view economic development through the lens of power. Industrial capacity, technological expertise, manufacturing capability, and control over strategic industries remained sources of national strength, even if many in the West had begun to regard them primarily as economic variables rather than geopolitical ones. A great example for this is the changing nature of the American economy.

US Manufacturing Employment

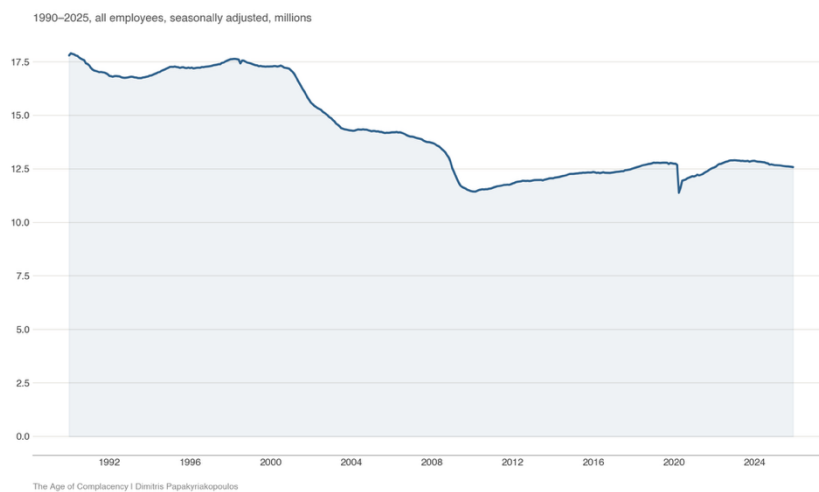


Figure 10: US Manufacturing Employment Statistics from 1990-2025.

Source: FRED Graph Observations. Federal Reserve Economic Data, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis.

The decline in manufacturing employment in the United States was driven by multiple factors, including automation, productivity gains, and globalization and any serious analysis must acknowledge the role played by each. But regardless of the precise balance among these causes, the United States was becoming less directly connected to the industrial foundations that had underpinned much of its twentieth-century power and this transformation was often celebrated as evidence of economic progress. Advanced economies were expected to move away from manufacturing and toward services, finance, technology, and other knowledge-intensive industries. To be fair, there was some

considerable truth in this perspective, as it was evident that the American economy remained innovative, dynamic, and extraordinarily productive.



Figure 11: Tank manufacture (Chrysler). These are partially completed M-3 tanks, twenty-eight ton steel giants being turned out at the huge Chrysler tank arsenal in Detroit. The camera was directed toward the end of the three main assembly lines. Mass assembly methods developed in automobile manufacture are used. Note overhead cranes for heavy parts.

Source: United States Library of Congress' Prints and Photographs division.

But the root of this problem starts the moment the strategic implications of industrial capacity receive less attention than its economic implications. You see, factories are more than just places where goods are produced. They are national repositories of expertise, engineering talent, supply networks, and production knowledge. Industrial ecosystems generate capabilities that extend far beyond employment figures, and they provide the foundation upon which both economic and military power are built. Once these capabilities fade away, rebuilding them can be costly, time-consuming, and in some cases extraordinarily difficult.

The irony of the period is that many of the decisions that reduced resilience appeared entirely rational when viewed in isolation. Why maintain excess production capacity if it was rarely used? Why preserve redundant supply chains when global markets offered cheaper alternatives? Why stockpile materials that might never be needed? Why sustain military capabilities designed for threats that appeared increasingly unlikely? Each decision could be justified on

its own terms but taken together, however, they incrementally reshaped the strategic foundations of the Western societies.

The defining characteristic of the Great Relaxation was not weakness. The West remained extraordinarily powerful throughout this period. Its economies continued to grow, its militaries remained technologically advanced, and its institutions retained immense influence. The issue was that Western societies adapted themselves to a world in which major geopolitical competition appeared increasingly unlikely. Governments optimized for efficiency, businesses optimized for cost reduction, supply chains optimized for productivity, and political systems increasingly focused on domestic concerns. The possibility that these assumptions might one day be tested seemed unrealistic or far-fetched to policymakers in Brussels and Washington.

Unfortunately, history tends to exploit precisely those assumptions that societies stop questioning. The post-Cold War order had been built upon a particular distribution of power, which was sustained by military superiority, economic dominance, and favorable geopolitical conditions. The challenge was that many of these changes occurred subtly and were visible only when viewed over decades rather than years. During the same period that Western societies were becoming more comfortable, more efficient, and more dependent upon globalization, new centers of power were starting to emerge elsewhere. What appeared to be an age of permanent stability was, in reality, a period of transition. Beneath the surface of prosperity and integration, the foundations of a new geopolitical era were already being laid.

III. Competition Never Disappeared

While Western governments were harvesting the peace dividend, consolidating defense industries, and reorganizing their economies around the assumptions of globalization, the rest of the world was not standing still. The same decades that witnessed the Great Relaxation in the West witnessed the accumulation of power elsewhere. New industrial centers were emerging, military capabilities were being modernized, regional ambitions were expanding, and geopolitical actors that many had regarded as peripheral to the future of international affairs were quietly

positioning themselves for a different world than the one envisioned in Western capitals.



Figure 12: The Rise of BRICS.

Source: iStock images.

The irony is that many of these developments occurred not in opposition to the post-Cold War order but because of it. The liberal international system generated extraordinary prosperity, accelerated technological progress, and expanded global trade to levels previously unimaginable. But while doing so, it also redistributed economic capacity, transferred industrial production, and created opportunities for ambitious states to accumulate wealth, technology, and influence on a scale that few had anticipated. The very forces that appeared to confirm the triumph of the Western model were simultaneously reshaping the global balance of power beneath the surface.



Figure 13: President of Russia Vladimir Putin and General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party and President of China Xi Jinping made statements for the media following the Russian-Chinese talks in March 2023..

Source: Press Statements by President of Russia and President of China.

For much of this period, these changes attracted surprisingly little attention and unfolded little by little, often concealed by the broader success of the international order itself. A new industrial park in eastern China was not viewed as a geopolitical development. A pipeline carrying natural gas into Europe was seen primarily as an economic project. The growth of Iranian influence across the Middle East appeared to be a regional concern rather than a strategic one. North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons was often treated as an isolated problem rather than evidence of a larger reality. Considered individually, these developments seemed manageable, but as I have stated earlier, the collective consideration of all these together revealed something far more consequential. In other words, policymakers in the West focused too much on each tree separately and failed to take a look of the boarder forest.

The return of history did not arrive in a single dramatic moment, but it emerged incrementally through a series of realizations. Initially, that globalization could strengthen rivals as well as partners. Second, that economic dependence could create vulnerability as well as prosperity. Third, that states would continue to pursue power even when doing so imposed severe economic costs. And perhaps most importantly, the realization that many of the forces that had shaped international politics for centuries had never disappeared at all.

Merchandise Exports

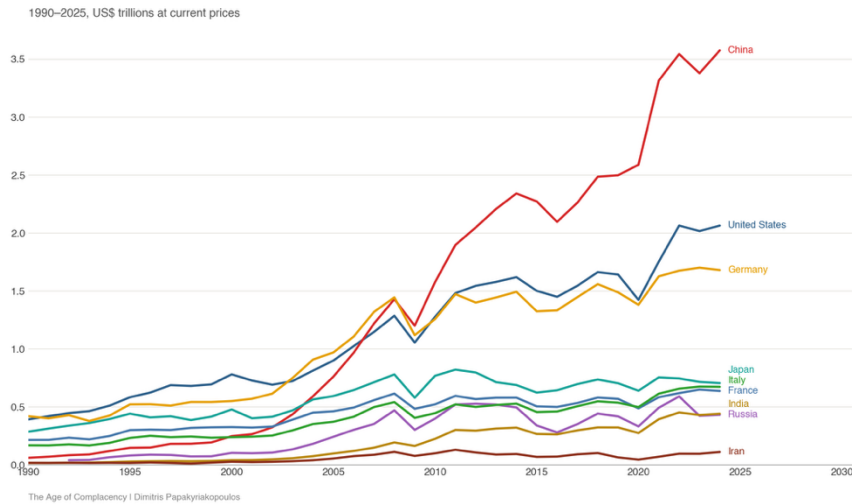


Figure 14: Exports (Merchandise) by Selected Leading Nations from 1990-2025.

Source: World Trade Organization (WTO).

One of the central assumptions of the post-Cold War period was that the economic integration would eventually transform geopolitical relationships. As China opened its economy and joined the global trading system, many policymakers believed that prosperity would encourage convergence with the existing international order, greater trade would produce even greater cooperation, economic development would reinforce political moderation and in general, integration would reduce rivalry.

Instead, globalization ended up welcoming with open arms the creation of the industrial foundation of a future competitor. Over the following three decades, China became the manufacturing center of the global economy, as Western corporations shifted production abroad in pursuit of lower costs and greater efficiency. This started a chain reaction of developments, such as supply chains increasingly concentrating in Chinese factories and industrial capabilities accumulating at a rapid pace. The result was that China did not only become an export powerhouse, but a nation possessing vast manufacturing capacity, growing technological sophistication, and an increasingly modern military. The architects of globalization in Davos believed they were integrating China into the existing order, while in practice, they were helping build the industrial base of a state capable of challenging that order.



Figure 15: Robotic Manufacturing Plant in China.

Source: iStock images.

If China revealed the unintended consequences of globalization, Russia revealed the limits of economic statecraft. For much of the post-Cold War era, Western policymakers grew increasingly confident in the ability of markets, sanctions, and financial pressure to influence state behavior. Economic power appeared more relevant than ever, while traditional geopolitical competition seemed increasingly constrained by interdependence. Access to global markets, international finance, advanced technologies, and investment flows was expected to provide powerful incentives for cooperation and equally powerful disincentives for confrontation. To state this clearly, the assumption was not that military power had become irrelevant, but that economic tools would increasingly shape the behavior of states in ways that reduced the likelihood of a major geopolitical conflict.

However, the invasion of Ukraine brutally exposed the limits of this thinking. Economic sanctions imposed significant costs on Russia, such as disrupted trade, restricted access to technology, constrained financial activity, and imposed substantial pressure on the Russian economy. But they failed miserably to achieve their primary objective, which was to prevent military action. More importantly, they reinforced a historically repeated lesson that states are often willing to absorb extraordinary economic costs when pursuing objectives they regard as vital to their security, identity, or strategic position. Financial power remained an important instrument of statecraft, but it proved incapable of fully

replacing hard-power deterrence. So, allow me to say that the expectation that economic incentives alone could constrain geopolitical ambitions was revealed to be overly optimistic.

The conflict between Ukraine and Russia also exposed a vulnerability that had been quietly accumulating for some decades. In pursuit of efficiency, affordability, and reliable supplies, a big part of Europe had become increasingly dependent on Russian energy exports and a lasting mutually beneficial commercial relationship suddenly acquired strategic significance. After the start of the War, pipelines became instruments of influence and energy became a new means of leverage. The same interconnected systems that generated prosperity were proven that could also generate vulnerability and instead of eliminating power politics, globalization had simply provided states with new mechanisms through which power could be exercised.



Figure 16: Lubmin, Mecklenburg-West Pomerania, Germany. Gas pipes, connections, equipment and pressure reducers at the site of Gazprom's Nord Stream 2 Pipeline landing in Germany.

Source: iStock images.

The lessons of Ukraine extended beyond sanctions, energy markets, and military deterrence. More broadly, they challenged the notion that technological progress and economic integration were steadily reducing the importance of geography itself. Perhaps the clearest reminder of this reality lies not in Europe, but in the waters of the Persian Gulf, where the Strait of Hormuz, a narrow maritime corridor only a few dozen miles wide, continues to have influence over the global economy.



Figure 17: LPG tanker ship moving through the Strait of Hormuz.

Source: iStock images.

The Strait of Hormuz is a narrow maritime passage connecting the Persian Gulf to the wider world. Despite its modest size, roughly a fifth of globally traded oil passes through it. This means that a regional power such as Iran, which lacks the industrial capacity of China and the conventional military strength of the United States, possesses the ability to influence energy markets far beyond its immediate neighborhood. Past periodic tensions, military confrontations, and threats to shipping in the region have repeatedly demonstrated how actions taken by Tehran can affect energy prices, financial markets, and economic activity across the globe. The recent confrontations involving Iran, Israel, and the United States are perfect examples of the reality that instead of diminishing the importance of location, globalization has heightened it, allowing thus states that occupy key positions within international networks to project influence far beyond what their material capabilities might otherwise suggest.

The age of globalization carried a powerful assumption that states that remained outside the international economic system would progressively become weaker, poorer, and less relevant. North Korea was widely expected to serve as a primary example of what isolation looked like in an increasingly interconnected world. But over the following decades, despite years of pressure, diplomatic isolation, and economic restrictions, North Korea not only survived but successfully developed a growing nuclear arsenal and increasingly sophisticated missile capabilities. The regime demonstrated that security concerns, ideological commitments,

and regime survival can outweigh economic incentives and that hard power can be heavily resilient.

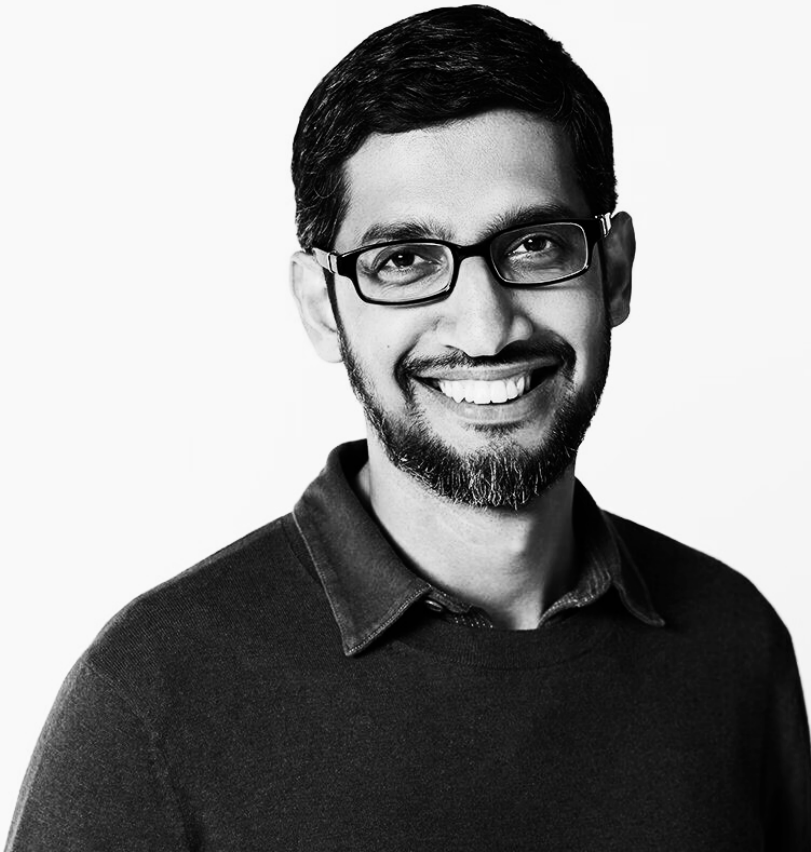


Figure 18: Leader of North Korea and Chairman of the State Affairs of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea Kim Jong-un during Press statements following Russia-DPRK talks in 2024.

Source: Kremlin.

Even countries that were not directly challenging the Western order pointed towards a broader transformation in the global distribution of power. India represents perhaps the most important example and unlike China, Russia, Iran, or North Korea, India is not best understood as an adversary of the Western system. Its significance lies on the emergence of new centers of economic, technological, and human capital outside the traditional core of the Western world. The growing influence of Indian talent can be seen throughout the global economy, including in leadership positions at some of the world's most important technology companies with figures such as Sundar Pichai at Google, Satya Nadella at Microsoft, Arvind Krishna at IBM, and Shantanu Narayen at Adobe symbolizing a broader shift that extends far beyond individual success stories.

Figure 19: Sundar Pichai, CEO of Google.



The clearest sign that the era of unquestioned Western dominance is ending is not that the West underestimated China, Russia, Iran, or any other individual rival. It is that it mistook a temporary condition for a permanent one, interpreting the absence of serious competition after 1991 as evidence that competition itself was disappearing, and treating the stability created by overwhelming Western dominance not as an achievement requiring continuous maintenance but as the natural state of the international system.

However, the forces that have shaped history for centuries never disappear simply because they become less visible. Industrial capacity continues to determine what nations can produce, military power continues to determine what they can defend, geography continues to determine which positions offer an advantage and which create vulnerability, and national interests continue to shape the behavior of states more reliably than ideals, institutions, or aspirations. The world continuously changes, technologies evolve, and economies become more interconnected, but the underlying logic of power remains resistant to these transformations. The rise

of new challengers therefore does not mark the beginning of a new era, but the end of an illusion that reminds us that history has a habit of correcting those who mistake exceptions for rules.

IV. Back to History's Default Settings

Every age develops a theory about itself. Most people never articulate that theory explicitly, but it shapes their expectations, influences their decisions, and defines the limits of what they believe is possible. As this theory becomes more deeply embedded, it begins to shape not only how people interpret the present, but also how they imagine the future. Conditions that persist for long enough cease to appear contingent and instead come to seem inevitable. The patterns of the present are projected forward, temporary circumstances are mistaken for enduring trends, and historical exceptions come to be viewed as rules. It is precisely in these moments, when assumptions and theories become most deeply embedded and least likely to be questioned, that societies become vulnerable to surprise.

The extraordinary stability of the post-1991 world encouraged the belief that the major forces which had shaped previous centuries were losing their relevance. Economic integration appeared to be replacing geopolitical rivalry, global markets seemed more important than national borders and military power increasingly appeared secondary to finance, technology, and trade.

These beliefs did not emerge from ignorance, but from success. The post-Cold War era was, by many measures, one of the most successful periods in modern history. International trade expanded dramatically and technological innovation transformed societies at an extraordinary pace. Furthermore, hundreds of millions of people escaped poverty and large portions of the world experienced a degree of prosperity and stability that would have seemed astonishing to previous generations.

The problem was not that the West misunderstood the present, but that it misunderstood the nature of it. The conditions that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union were treated as the beginning of a permanent historical trajectory rather than as the product of a particular geopolitical moment. The unprecedented concentration of Western power that characterized the 1990s and early 2000s

quietly faded into the background of public consciousness. Because the order appeared stable, many forgot to ask what had made it stable and because competition seemed absent, many assumed it had just disappeared.

Winston Churchill, a figure I greatly admire, famously said that the farther backward you can look, the farther forward you are likely to see. Throughout the centuries, states have competed for power, security, influence and resources, and the natural norm was that economic relationships exist alongside strategic rivalry rather than replacing it. Through time, the actors change, the technologies change and the institutions change, but the underlying dynamics always display persistence. Nations continue to pursue their interests. Power continues to matter. Geography continues to matter. Industrial capacity continues to matter.

The central argument of this essay is not that history has suddenly returned. In an important sense, history never left. The rise of China, the resurgence of Russia, the reemergence of industrial policy, and the growing emphasis on resilience are not evidence that the world has become abnormal, but that the world is behaving as it normally has throughout most of the recorded history. What was actually unusual was the brief period during which many believed these forces had become less important than they truly were.

The post-Cold War era should therefore be understood not as the destination of history but as an exception within it. It was a period during which a unique distribution of power created conditions that appeared both stable and self-sustaining. The United States faced no peer competitor, and the Western alliance remained economically and militarily dominant. Globalization expanded under the protection of an order that few seriously challenged, and these conditions encouraged a generation to believe that the future would largely resemble the present. The age of complacency emerged not because the Western societies became weak, but because they adapted themselves to a world that appeared unusually secure.

But that world is changing. The strategic environment of the twenty-first century increasingly resembles the historical norm rather than the historical exception. Competition between major powers is returning, industrial capacity is once again being viewed

strategically and governments are rediscovering the importance of supply chains, energy security, critical technologies, and manufacturing resilience. The assumptions that defined the post-Cold War era are finally being tested by realities they were never designed to confront.

Whether the West succeeds in adapting to this new environment remains largely an open question and the answer will depend upon decisions made over the next decade. The years we experienced for the last three decades were not the end of history, but a pause in a much older story. The task facing the West today is not to preserve that pause indefinitely, but to understand what comes after it. Only by recognizing the exceptional nature of the world we inherited can allow us to begin preparing for the world that is emerging in its place.

More to follow...

