

Change and Continuity in Global Politics

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Coverage of foreign affairs tends to focus on change, specifically how events change a country, a particular region or the world. We have been told that the end of the Cold War, the attacks of September 11th, Bush's decision to go to war in Iraq, the global economic crisis, the emergence of China as a global power and a few other events in the last twenty years have changed everything about the world.

All of these events certainly had significant impacts on the world, or on part of the world, but focusing too much on how events like September 11th changed the world only tells one side of the story. This is exacerbated by a media and punditry that focuses often overstate the impact of political events. The other side of the story, that even world changing events are usually as much about continuity as change, does not get as much attention, but is also important. Ignoring this continuity, or focusing on the changes to a degree that precludes an understanding of the continuity is a mistake.

To use a dramatic example, it has become broadly understood that September 11th changed the world, initiated a new era in global affairs and was one of those moments that bifurcate history into before and after. In a very literal sense this is true because all events change the world in some ways, but that is not what pundits and analysts mean when they discuss the impact of September 11th. In a more serious way, the effect of September 11th was profound. It reoriented American foreign policy making fighting terrorism a top priority. It was the worst attack on American soil since Pearl Harbor, raising concerns in the US about our vulnerability to future attacks and about whether or not the US was still the hyper-power it was following the Cold War.

The economic downturn which began in late 2008 was also viewed as having a similarly holistic and dramatic impact on the world. It destroyed the wealth and retirement funds of millions, caused some economies like Iceland's to collapse entirely while dealing a major blow to other economies including, for example, Russia. The downturn raised enormous doubts about the international financial system as well as in the American economic model which had spread to most of the world during the two decades preceding the crisis.

This is, of course, the way we have come to understand both September 11th and the financial crisis, but there is more to the story than that. An equally accurate way to understand September 11th is that on September 10th, 2001 there were large numbers of Muslims angry about American foreign policy, some of whom were willing to take up violence to show their anger; the U.S. was the most powerful country in the world, but countries such as China and Russia were beginning to exert substantial regional influence; the U.S. military was the strongest in the world, but had encountered challenges in fighting unconventional foes. All of this remains true after September 11th.

In a similar vein, the global economic system before the economic crisis was characterized by risky economic behavior, troubling disparities between the wealthy and the poor, global economic inter-dependency, while Americans wrestled with huge personal debt and economic uncertainty. While the global economic downturn made all these things worse, it did not introduce these things for the first time.

Smaller events such as the end of apartheid, the Color Revolutions, the Georgia-Russia war or both recent wars in Israel are often described as having a game-changing effect regionally, but it is more frequently the case that these events change everything and change nothing. Following Israel's wars in 2006 and 2008, for example, negotiations between the Palestinians and Israel were very difficult, Palestinian anger contributed to a constant terrorist threat facing Israel, Israeli politics were highly polarized and most of the world, other than the U.S., viewed Israel as a pariah. This had all been true, for years, and would have almost certainly have remained true had the war not happened. The same type of story can be told about the other events as well.

The point here is not to argue that nothing ever changes; that is not the case. The recent wars involving Israel have made the problems worse, but that is more a difference of degree than of kind. The global economic downturn has had effects that are extremely far-reaching and unprecedented, but is simultaneously a continuance of the economic problems much of the globe has faced for decades.

Sometimes, however, events need to be viewed not in terms of what they change, but of what they do not change. In the next years if Iran gets nuclear weapons, domestic instability grows in China or more European economies collapse, the analysis will instantly focus on how this has changed the political world and the challenges we face. That is the natural reaction, but it is not always the most useful or balanced one. Continuity is less exciting, but it is equally important and often provides a more useful approach to understanding events.