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Book Guide

The World: A Brief Introduction

Providing readers with the essential background and building blocks necessary to make sense of this complicated and interconnected world, *The World* focuses on crucial history, what makes each region of the world tick, the many challenges that globalization presents, and the most influential countries, events, and ideas that shape the world and in turn shape our lives.

Summary

Like it or not, we live in a global era, in which what happens thousands of miles away has the ability to affect our lives. This time, it is a coronavirus known as COVID-19, which originated in a Chinese city many had never heard of but has spread to all corners of the earth. Next time, it could be another infectious disease from somewhere else. Twenty years ago, it was a group of terrorists trained in Afghanistan and armed with box cutters who commandeered four airplanes and flew them into buildings and claimed nearly three thousand lives. Next time, it could be terrorists who use a truck bomb or gain access to a weapon of mass destruction. In 2016, hackers in a nondescript office building in Russia traveled virtually in cyberspace to manipulate America's elections. Now they have burrowed into our political life. In recent years, severe hurricanes and large fires linked to climate change have ravaged parts of the earth; in the future we can anticipate even more serious natural disasters. In 2008, it was a global financial crisis caused by mortgage-backed securities in America, but one day it could be a financial contagion originating in Europe, Asia, or Africa. This is the new normal of the twenty-first century.

The World provides readers with the essential background and building blocks necessary to make sense of this complicated and interconnected world. It gives them the tools they need to become more informed, discerning citizens, better able to arrive at sound, independent judgments. While it is impossible to predict what the next crisis will be or where it will originate, *The World* provides a foundation that will allow readers to understand the basics and the choices for how to respond.

In short, readers of *The World* will become more globally literate, which is a must in this global era, as what goes on outside a country matters enormously to what happens inside. Even if we want to ignore the world, it will not ignore us. The choice we face is how to respond. We are connected to this world in all sorts of ways. We need to better understand it, both its promise and its threats, in order to make informed choices, be it as students, citizens, voters, parents, employees, or investors.

The World is divided into four sections. The first emphasizes history and is global in scope. Chapters are devoted to what is essential to know about the period of several hundred years leading up to World War I, the three decades from World War I to the end of World War II, the four-plus decades of the Cold War, and the current period.

The second section of the book begins with an introduction to the world writ large and includes chapters on six principal regions of the world: Europe, East Asia and the Pacific, South Asia, the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Americas. Each chapter explains the importance of the region, provides its core history, and explains its dynamics.

The third and longest section of the book addresses globalization and global challenges, including climate change, global health, terrorism, cybersecurity, development, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, migration, and trade. Depending on how well these challenges are managed, they can be a source of disorder or stability. This requires examining global governance in each of these realms.

A fourth and final section deals with world order, the most basic concept of international relations, as well as what brings it about and what threatens it. This part of the book delves into some of the principal sources of stability in the world, including the notion and reality of sovereignty, deterrence, the balance of power, alliances and less formal coalitions, and the role of international organizations, democracy, trade, and international law. It also assesses disorder in the world and ends with a discussion of what all this means for the current international era.

Discussion and Essay Questions

1. In what ways has life improved during the global era? In what ways has life gotten worse?
2. In *The World*, Haass argues the Middle East is the least successful region, while Asia and Europe are two of the most successful regions. Do you agree or disagree, and why?
3. What do you think accounts for the success (economic, political, social) of some regions and the failure of others? Which region do you think is best positioned to succeed in the coming decades? Worst?
4. What is the global gap? Use examples from the text to discuss where the global gap is present today and its consequences.
5. What is international order? Why does it matter? What are its prerequisites?
6. Why did the Cold War stay “cold”? Why did the competition between the United States and the Soviet Union remain bounded?
7. Some experts argue that the world is fundamentally more peaceful than it has ever been, pointing to the lack of major wars between countries. What do you make of this argument?
8. What is isolationism? In which periods of history was U.S. foreign policy defined by isolationism? Do you think the United States is becoming more isolationist now? Why or why not?
9. What is multilateralism? What are some alternatives to multilateralism? What are the advantages and drawbacks to multilateralism? Use historical examples to support your argument.
10. What are the differences among an economic migrant, an internally displaced person, and a refugee? In what ways are the distinctions blurry?
11. Why do countries trade with one another? What are the advantages and disadvantages of international trade? What are the types of barriers countries erect to manage trade? Do you believe international trade is a net positive for everyone?
12. What distinguishes terrorism from other forms of violence? Why is it hard to prevent terrorism? What can be done to address this challenge? Are there examples of terrorists who have succeeded in achieving their objectives?
13. Why do countries pursue nuclear weapons? What policy tools can be used to thwart their efforts?
14. What is climate change, what causes it, and what evidence is there for it? What can be done to address climate change?
15. What is globalization and to what extent can governments, international institutions, and individuals respond to, control, or limit its effects?
16. What is a noncommunicable disease and how does it differ from a communicable disease? Why are noncommunicable diseases a bigger problem now than they have been in the past? How should this issue factor into the global health agenda?
17. What is the democratic peace theory? What are its limitations?
18. What does it mean for a country to have an alliance with another? What are the prerequisites of a successful alliance? What are examples of alliances that have contributed to stability and order and those that have contributed to disorder?
19. How would you go about improving global governance in cyberspace? What standards or norms do you believe need to be upheld in cyberspace?
20. What is monetary policy? What are the advantages and disadvantages of having a relatively strong currency and a relatively weak currency? How can a central bank influence its country’s exchange rate?
21. What is self-determination? Should it be recognized as a right?
22. Define sovereignty and examine the origins of the concept, how it helped establish the modern international system, and how it has changed over the years, focusing on the responsibility to protect (R2P) doctrine and the idea of pooling sovereignty.
23. Define multipolarity, bipolarity, and unipolarity, using a historical example to illustrate each. Do you believe today’s world is unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar? Why?

Analytical Essays

1. What moment in history do you think most closely parallels the present? What lessons should we learn from that moment in history?
2. *The World* examines a multitude of long-term global and regional challenges. Imagine you are advising the president of the United States. Which issue would you recommend be put at the top of the agenda to address over the coming four years? Discuss why it is the most important issue to focus on initially, and how you would go about addressing it.
3. *The World* labels the era we currently live in the “post–Cold War world,” which describes where we have been but not where we are heading. In ten or twenty years, what new events do you think may arise that will change how we describe this era?
4. International relations has primarily been taught with a state-centric approach, assuming that the state is the most significant actor on the international stage. Is that a safe assumption in a global era? In what instances are nonstate actors (foundations, nongovernmental organizations, international organizations) just as important as, or even more important than, states? What could be done to increase their role?
5. Discuss one type of problem that global governance is not well-equipped to solve and what might be done to improve it.
6. Imagine you are advising the president of the United States. Which foreign policy challenge keeps you up at night due to its urgency? Why? What would you do to minimize the chance that this threat materializes?
7. American presidents are often termed idealists or realists based on their foreign policy priorities and objectives. Define idealism and realism and provide examples of American presidents who fit these molds. What are the advantages and drawbacks of each approach? Is one approach better suited to addressing today’s principal challenges than the other?
8. To what extent should countries respect each other’s absolute sovereignty? What are the costs and benefits of violating another country’s sovereignty, such as under the responsibility to protect (R2P) doctrine?
9. What do you believe are the best and worst aspects of globalization? Whom has it helped and whom has it hurt? Can anything be done to promote the positives of globalization and mitigate the negatives?
10. Which region should be the focus of U.S. foreign policy for the next one to two decades? What are the primary opportunities and challenges in this region? What should be the objectives of U.S. foreign policy in this region?
11. Some argue that the United States and China are destined to become locked in a new cold war. Do you agree? If the United States and China do end up in a new cold war, what might be the consequences for both countries and for the world?
12. What do you think accounts for the United Nations’ inability to play a more central role in promoting and upholding order? How would you reform the UN to allow it to increase its contribution to order?

Supplementary Materials

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Richard N. Haass, *A World in Disarray: American Foreign Policy and the Crisis of the Old Order* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017).

G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

Robert Kagan, *The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2018).

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Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1957).

Henry A. Kissinger, *World Order* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014).

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Richard Neustadt and Ernest May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (New York: Free Press, 1988).

Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Is the American Century Over?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015).

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