

In an era of sweeping change

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We live in an era in which tectonic shifts are taking place in different spheres, coinciding, influencing and feeding into each other. It is one of those junctures in history when time speeds up and the things around us start to change at a pace we simply cannot keep up with.

Let's start with geopolitics. For some years now, we have been witnesses to the transition from an essentially unipolar world in which the hegemony of the United States was unquestioned, though certainly not absolute (see Afghanistan and Iraq), to an emerging multipolar system. China is now the pre-eminent and still rapidly-rising power, while other middle or major powers are also aspiring to play a role in the new world order.

President Trump returned to the White House last year and managed to set a barrage of developments in motion in a matter of months—something powerful political leaders have been unable to do in years. Behaving like an absolute monarch, he has imposed radical changes both within the United States and beyond its borders. It looks more like a regime change and less like a routine rotation of power in a democratic state. Transactional relations in foreign policy, where the lines between public and private (or personal) interests are often blurred; diplomacy conducted through personal envoys; threats issued in every direction against adversaries, friends and allies alike, and occasionally upended by the president himself.

After all, President Trump does not discriminate, as long as you fall into line. And to date, it has mainly been the leaders of China and Russia who have shown no inclination to comply—hence the respect they enjoy from the US president. So Might makes Right coupled with the logic of spheres of influence: they are starting to supplant international rules and institutions, while Europeans struggle to grasp what has hit them. The American president considers European leaders as weak leaders who do not know what they want. He might not be entirely off the mark.

Globalisation in its liberal form, as we have experienced it for almost three decades, is in its death throes. Economic relations are being weaponized, while Politics is asserting its primacy over Economics. We call this geoeconomics. Tariffs are returning to the economic and diplomatic arsenal. Industrial policy has made a comeback, but it takes a serious state apparatus to exercise it. Some countries have it, others don't. Europe, for its part, is scrambling to find the means and the funds to implement a European industrial policy in the absence of a European state. The task is proving extremely difficult in practice, however. Some people consider it a pipe dream.

Global supply chains are being directly impacted and undergoing a transformation as Chinese exports deepen their penetration of Western markets. The US and Europe are reacting to save their industries, also on security grounds. Still, the Chinese have powerful cards to play: they now have advanced technology and lead the field in multiple sectors. They also maintain a stranglehold on critical minerals and rare earths. President Trump learned this lesson late and in a politically painful way.

We are also in the throes of a major technological revolution that is set to radically change the way we live and work. It holds out the promise of enormous capabilities that stretch—and often defy—the imagination of most. But it also poses serious risks to *inter alia* civil liberties and democracy. Who will hold the reins? Will private or public interests prevail? The former speak in the name of freedom (and usually mean their own unbridled freedom at the expense of others), while the latter invoke the common good to protect the many. And all this at a time when the concentration of power and wealth in the hands of a few continues unabated. In the US, the alliance between the economic oligarchy and political power is more powerful than ever. Private companies and states are participating in the technology race, while Europe can seemingly only watch on from the stands. The EU did try to assume the role of referee through its legislation, but the Americans are trying to relegate the bloc to the sidelines.

The artificial intelligence revolution is following close on the heels of the digital revolution. Its initial impact is already plain to see both in production and the labour market, especially for young people trying to break into it for the first time. The stock markets, especially in the US, are also dancing to the AI tune. Is this just another bubble (at least in part), and if so, when is it likely to burst? The outcome of the November mid-terms in the US will hinge on how the answer to that question plays out in the months ahead.

Across most of the planet, political leaders (still) agree that climate change poses an existential threat to humanity. In words at least, though ever less in actions. Here too, the impact of Trump's return to the White House is being felt beyond the United States. The US president considers climate change a hoax and is pulling every lever to encourage fossil fuel extraction at the expense of renewable energy sources, seeking to boost American exports in the process. The pressure on those outside the US is considerable.

The European Commission, with the support of several Member States including Greece, is starting to backtrack on the targets set for the green transition. Though, to be honest, it's not just the Trump factor that's at work here. The industrial and maritime lobby, together with a large part of the European public who are refusing to foot the bill, are pushing in the same direction. How to share the cost of the green transition remains the big question. And as the necessary measures are delayed, the disasters caused by extreme weather events become ever more frequent.

Future generations will pay dearly for our refusal or inability to tackle this major issue. Indeed, they are already holding us to account. Though there are some who seemingly still fail to understand why younger generations are either abstaining from Politics or turning to anti-systemic parties or movements. And if only climate change were their only reason for doing so...

Change, Instability and Uncertainty are the keystones of our era. To which we can add two more: Insecurity for the vulnerable, whose numbers continue to increase, and Inequality pushing more and more people into the precariat. What will emerge politically from this volatile mix is hard to predict. For now, the Far Right and its ideological offshoots—rooted in nationalism and authoritarianism—is in the ascendant in many countries around the world.