

Historical Phases and Transitions

by George Friedman - April 22, 2022

I have said before that 1991 was the year one era ended and another began. In 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed and the Maastricht treaty was signed. Operation Desert Storm occurred and the Japanese economic miracle collapsed. The previous era had been dominated by the Cold War, a global ideological and strategic confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States. Most global events fit somewhere in that paradigm.

The new era's essence was contained in the European Union, which emerged out of the fear of yet another European war and the belief that war was obsolete and that the global system was now primarily about economics. This era had other dimensions as well. Desert Storm energized Islamic fundamentalism and triggered decades of war on terror. Japan's decline made room for China's rise. The new era was not about the potential for nuclear war in the bipolar struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union, but rather about the decline of national boundaries and the primacy of international trade.

In my view, the Russian invasion of Ukraine signals a new era, whose shape is not yet clear. Obviously, war has returned as a primary factor, but perhaps more important, the use of economic warfare by the United States and the resurrection of Cold War institutions signal a new way of using economics – from faith in global economics enriching the world to the use of global economics as an instrument of war. This must be preliminary because we have seen only Ukraine and perhaps COVID-19 as indicators of this shift.

Human life is built on patterns: birth, childhood, adulthood, reproduction and exit. If the life of one human being is orderly in its broad outlines, it seems to me odd to think the life of human society would be random. So, I spend perhaps too much of my time looking for those patterns, a field theory of humanity. In looking at 1991, and what is unfolding now before us, I decided to try to take a quick hand at parsing human history for the past 200 years or so. Below you have my first, and likely half-baked, cut at this. Its use is not in simply finding order in history, although that has importance. Its potential use might be that in finding order, the wrenching and psychologically destabilizing blows dealt out by shifts might be mitigated. Of course, such grandiose thoughts must follow the question of whether the order I am presenting is real or simply an illusion I have created, with boundaries that are clear only in my head. I don't normally present minimally thought-out ideas (some might argue

with that), but in this case I thought it might have some value. It is something I have been playing with for some time, but it seems particularly significant in 2022. I have not tried to include the transitional events as I did in 1991 but simply to identify transitional points.

This is focused heavily on Europe, with minimal mentions of other continents, but that is because global history was forged and dominated by Europe for the past 200 years or so, transiting to other countries as drivers only in later epochs.

Five Epochs of History Since 1789 and the Emerging Sixth

1. 1789-1858 (69 years): Republicanism challenges the kingdoms of Europe

This epoch begins with the French Revolution and the rise of an attempt to reshape Europe into a single entity. A culture emerged of nation-states liberally governed, with the decline of the old European political and social order.

2. 1858-1914 (56 years): European empires dominate the globe

1858 marked the establishment of the British Raj in India and a definitive point in which much of the world, already under European intrusion and assault, found itself enveloped in European imperialism, where previously there were assaults but no systematic imperial system. Where France defined the previous epoch, Britain defined this one.

3. 1914-1945 (31 years): Europe tears itself apart, U.S. emerges

This epoch was dominated by European wars that resulted in the emergence of the United States as a dominant economic and military force, and in the collapse of the British imperial system.

4. 1945-1991 (46 years): Two ideologies of the Enlightenment become geopolitical

This period was dominated by the U.S.-Soviet struggle centered on Europe but fought globally. The global fear was of nuclear war, but the global reality was that the American economic and technical model dominated much of the world, supplanting the culture of European imperialism.

5. 1991-2022 (31 years): American triumph and the fantasy of global peace and prosperity

6. 2022-????

When we look at the prior epochs, we are struck by discontinuity. European self-absorption is replaced by European obsession with the world. European obsession with the world is replaced by European subordination to the United States. The ideological military confrontation of the Cold War is replaced by a globalist ideology.

In separating the epochs, it is not simply that a conflict ended and a new power emerged but rather that the fundamental reality of the world changed. The most important thing about the Cold War was not U.S. victory but the creation of an entirely new conception of the world. Beginning with the French Revolution, the certainties of the world shifted dramatically every generation or two.

If this is true, then defining which country rises or falls, while necessary, is insufficient. If the Ukraine war defines the end of the fifth era, a return to a multi-generation cold war between the United States and Russia as a defining principle of the epoch is the least likely outcome. The end of the Cold War resulted in very different players playing a very different game.

I keep looking at the sequence, and I realize that each epoch was a fundamentally different reality. And what is most startling is the speed at which it evolves. When I look at other times, shifts on this order after one or two generations don't happen. Now it appears with regularity. Some would guess it is technology, but I don't think so. Technology has a base in the Enlightenment, and enlightenment is an unhappy culture, always yearning for something new and better. Technology is simply part of this culture.

The crucial point is that within an epoch there is an overarching theme that is constantly repeating itself. In the fourth epoch, there was the Cold War, the third European and global wars. The fifth saw the decline of nations in favor of economics. The difference between epochs is striking and sudden. If I am right, we are just over the threshold to the sixth epoch, whose shape might be discernable if this model becomes far more comprehensive and significant. In looking at the model, these elements seem obvious and hold no secrets. But it is obvious because we all know this history and have not looked carefully under the hood. I am trying to find the latch on the hood, still far from the careful look. First thoughts, long mumbled about.

Author: George Friedman

[Read more from this author on geopoliticalfutures.com](https://geopoliticalfutures.com)