

# GEOPOLITICS EXPERT SAYS WORLD “MORE DANGEROUS” THAN ANY OTHER TIME IN PAST 30 YEARS

FALL FORUM 2021: SHAPING THE NEW NORMAL

By: Randy Myers

The world is full of geopolitical risks—a belligerent North Korea with nuclear aspirations, China and its willingness to break international conventions to become a dominant global economic and military force, Russia’s expansionist-minded president ... the list can grow quite lengthy. And worrisome. According to government affairs and geopolitical risk consultant John Sitolides, a principal with Trilogy Advisors LLC and consultant to the U.S. Department of State’s Foreign Service Institute, “the world today is more complex and more dangerous than at any time in at least the last 30 years.”

Speaking at the Stable Value Investment Association’s 2021 Fall Forum in October, Sitolides attributed the fraught environment largely to the way China is proceeding with its efforts to reclaim what it believes to be its rightful and “historic natural role” as the world’s leading economy—a position it held, he noted, for approximately 1,800 years up until the 1800s. The problem, he continued, is that China’s Communist Party, which controls every aspect of life in that country in a way that is anathema to the West, isn’t content to share prosperity within the existing rules-based international order. Rather, it wants to displace U.S. and Western influence in Asia and the larger Pacific region and is willing to trample on what the West views as responsible or lawful norms of international behavior in pursuit of those goals. As part of its strategy, China has, under its Belt and Road initiative, been investing in infrastructure projects around the globe, often lending to foreign governments on predatory terms that have left them dependent on China’s goodwill. When at risk of not meeting China’s financial terms, Sitolides said, these countries may be forced either to forfeit assets or to support China at the U.N. and other international organizations.

Meanwhile, China has effectively declared the entire 1.4 million square miles of international waterways in the South China Sea to be “essentially a sovereign Chinese lake,” Sitolides said, and is installing offensive military installations there. That’s problematic, he warned, because the global economic growth and abundant energy supplies the world has enjoyed over the past few decades has been premised on U.S.-protected free and open international shipping lanes.

Elsewhere, much as it has done with Hong Kong, China wants to control Taiwan, which produces the bulk of the world’s most advanced microprocessors. China also aims to become the global leader in many of the world’s most advanced technologies and the international standard setter for them.

All these developments put growing pressure on the U.S. to maintain and nurture strategic partnerships not only with its traditional European allies but also its friends in the Asia-Pacific region like Japan and Australia and, increasingly, India. India is en route to surpassing China as the world’s largest country by population and also is the world’s largest democracy. “India, I believe, is going to be strategically a very



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important partner of the United States, and it won't be a junior partner," Sitalides said, adding that China-India competition will dominate geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific theater in the years ahead.

Europe itself remains somewhat unsettled, Sitalides noted, with Russia maintaining energy dominance over the region and outgoing German Chancellor Angela Merkel's long-ruling Christian Democratic Union suffering a large defeat in recent national elections.

Amid all these competing issues, the U.S. and its Western allies also must continue to manage terroristic threats emanating from the Middle East, especially in the wake of the U.S. pullout from Afghanistan, which in addition to raising concerns about future global jihad also could lead to a significant new migration of refugees into Europe. Also on the watch list: Iran, a leading state sponsor of terrorism, and North Korea, which is no friend of the U.S., and both have nuclear ambitions.

Apart from geopolitical risks, the West also is grappling with disruptive economic forces around the globe. These include rising energy prices, backlogs in international shipping in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic that are stalling commerce, and continued troubling levels of carbon emissions, especially in China. There's also the fallout from global warming to contend with, including the warming of Arctic waters along the Russian frontier, where China is seeking to establish new shipping lanes and capabilities. The West also must contend with the fact that most of the world's readily accessible rare earth minerals are located in China.

Afghanistan, interestingly, is believed to have massive stores of untapped rare earth minerals, Sitalides noted, but the question is, who if anybody will extract them? And if someone does, will they do it in an environmentally friendly manner?

In response to questions from the audience, Sitalides declined to speculate on the future of NATO but acknowledged that it doesn't have uniform levels of commitment from its member nations across Europe. He dismissed the idea that France would leave the European Union. While the geopolitical challenges facing the West are significant, Sitalides suggested that should any country initiate hostile acts against the West, he believes the U.S. would find its allies ready to join it in responding to the threat.