International Relations

Things that may interest you

- The breakup of several countries is conceivable. Some might split, merge or be taken over, by agreement, conflict or necessity. Nations' legitimacy and viability is becoming an issue.

- Warfare is shifting from armies to freelance contractors, militias, special, robotic and cyber forces, eroding nations' traditional military relevance. Conflicts will arise over spheres of influence, water, resources and supply-lines more than territory. Unless peace dawns.

- Apart from powers such as China, India, USA and possibly Europe and Russia, geopolitical dynamos by 2050 might well be Indonesia, Brazil, Mexico, Nigeria, Kenya, Turkey, Egypt, the Philippines, Colombia, Iran and Vietnam, all with significant populations and economies.

- Future politics is less about right and left and more about openness or resistance to change – to some extent a worldview struggle. Though openness is also inconsistent and preferential.

- Technological, ecological, social and cultural soft-power will likely override economics and military hard power as deciding factors in the geopolitical sphere by the 2030s-40s.

Today a multiplicity of issues is in ferment, unearthing geopolitical vulnerabilities that could lead the world into a complex, debilitating and confused morass of issues later on unless dealt with soon. We have not fully recovered from Cold War bipolarity: when the USSR collapsed, the world slotted into an American-led holding pattern, but the overall trend now is to move away from superpower

primacy toward regional powers, alliances and, perhaps before long, political unions. When USA stumbled around 2008, a proliferation of emergent events posed the question, *who now calls the shots?* More has been uncorked than first was understood and it will take decades to iron out.

- *First*, relationships are changing between rising and declining superpowers, all nuclear armed. Relatively, in terms of fundamentals, USA, Russia, Europe and Japan are subsiding and China and India are rising. This reorientates international relations, affecting many interdependencies and alliances. In particular, the distancing of Europe, Asia and Latin America from USA and the growth of Chinese influence is fundamentally rearranging the global landscape.

- *Second*, regional powers are vying for influence in their own areas (for example, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey in the Middle East) in the relative vacuum created, creating a new middle level of global power and counterbalancing the influence of great powers.

- *Third*, frictions are simmering between some countries for a variety of localised and unresolved historic, resource- and population-related reasons – examples are Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, Egypt and Ethiopia, Colombia and Venezuela, or India and Pakistan.

- *Fourth*, independence movements and tensions are rising within nations – Kurdistan, Xinjiang, Palestine, Catalonia, California, Myanmar, Nigeria, UK, Mali and Yemen.

- *Fifth*, unease between smaller and bigger countries – such as between China and its neighbours over the South China Sea, or Russia and Ukraine, or USA and Mexico.

- *Sixth*, a weakness of transnational power highlights a need to upgrade the United Nations (particularly by removing the right of single powers to veto Security Council actions).

- *Seventh*, pressing global problems concerning climate and the environment, the Persian Gulf, the Arctic, trading rules, the orbits of bigger powers, governance in Africa and power shifts in the Middle East are acting as stressors in international relations.

Altogether, this is a mighty and complex fermentation. The danger is that the world lapses into a confusion of tensions, diverting attention from the bigger transnational issues at hand. It presents a profound option to avoid resorting to conflict or stand-off and to do things differently, avoiding a global slide into a plethora of complex, drawn-out geopolitical situations.

Global power

Geopolitically, nationally and locally, the key question is: *who decides?* Domestic politics are ever more subject to volatile bursts of public opinion, some pertinent and inspired, some venting frustration, some manipulated by the media or by political or military interests. These symptomise an underlying socio-political tension, bringing a risk of chaos and also a potential for change. Governments of all shades – democratic, authoritarian, populist, military and dictatorial – face legitimacy, consent and delivery problems. Little is clear-cut and simple any more.

This shifts the geopolitical tectonic plates. The global reach of former great powers is narrowing, and each power is becoming responsible for its own patch – for example, USA has lost traction in the Middle East which, being in Russia's 'near abroad', makes Russia a new arbiter in the region. China is becoming the minder for East Asian affairs, and India, Pakistan and Iran for Afghanistan.

A problem with international relations is that they lie beyond public influence – the agenda is determined over people's heads, behind closed doors, lacking democratic oversight and often dominated by military-industrial, intelligence, business and background interests. This leads to outcomes that are not necessarily best for humanity as

a whole. At the UN, the Security Council five permanent members (P5), chosen back in the late 1940s, make the big decisions while the General Assembly of all nations is limited in influence – though it could assert itself more than it does. World power is likely however to broaden over time, with marginal increases in accountability, and the action of lesser nations in concert could force the issue – though this has complications since countries have different and varying needs and allegiances.

This brings up the question of subsidiarity: *should national sovereignty or global governance be the foundation of world power?* National self-determination is important but if it holds back the world or jeopardises other countries, or if rulers break international agreements or judgements, or oppress their people in ways that affect or disgust other nations, should the international community be able to impose its standards and will? Military interventions are now less acceptable, sustainable, affordable or conclusive. How should the international community form a consensus, to avoid domination by the big powers, the P5 or vested interests? Few countries dare broach such questions, yet bold world-sized decisions will be needed – the success or failure of the international system rests on these. A failure could be catastrophic.

By osmosis and on a *de facto* basis, power is devolving both upwards toward the global level and downwards toward more local, provincial levels – nation states are becoming more marginalised as legitimate seats of power. This shows particularly in the EU, where the regions need greater autonomy, yet four levels of governance – local, regional, national and European – are too many, and the traditional nation states need to give way to the evolution of a three-level 'Hundred Region Europe' to correct democratic deficits. But vested interests in bigger nations are strong.

Today's movements for ethnic and regional autonomy are significant since the rather draconian geopolitical changes needed this century require consent, support and input at street level and

need to serve local needs. Democratic deficits and power imbalances need repair. While power surreptitiously devolves up and down, nations' tendency to avoid acknowledging newly-developing power arrangements is leading to the possibility of an avalanche of events in which a rapid geopolitical rearrangement becomes imperative, whether by design or by accident. Old patterns of national sovereignty, exceptionalism and non-compliance are becoming obsolete and obstructive faster than nations are happy to admit or adjust to.

A dangerous gulf yawns between national, short-term, narrower interests and wider, transnational, longterm priorities. Each country is variously confused over its priorities: short-termist national self-interest still prevails but the longer-term precedence of transnational priorities is escalating. This gap opens up over key issues such as climate change, the law of the sea or of space, migration, the Arctic and Antarctic, or spheres of influence, and it will grow bigger. Nations' best interests are shifting toward conforming with global priorities – the price of not doing so is rising.

Bridging this gulf involves revitalising the UN, its constitution and powers, and UN reform is a critical issue. As things stand, the UN cannot finance itself, act autonomously, override sovereign national interests or even reform itself without individual nations' instigation and agreement. Without reform, by default the world becomes guilty of terrible derelictions of duty that we see regularly in the news today. If this problem is left until an emergency arises, there is a danger that the pooling of national sovereignties to build a new, collaborative transnational order is poorly considered, forced, piecemeal or skewed.

Nations

One further global vulnerability is the underlying dysfunctionality of many nations. Regional and metropolitan power, movements

seeking autonomy or independence, problems of governmental legitimacy, delivery and representativeness, and the expanding role of online social networking, transnational NGOs, non-state actors, migration, trade and other boundary-crossing issues all eat away at national authority. Arguably this applies to around half of the world's nations. Those with elites that assert national unity most strongly are well worth looking at – drummed-in patriotism is in a way a sign of weakness in national identity and legitimacy.

With the upward and downward power shift mentioned earlier, many nations' relevance is not yet a critical issue but it is likely to become so, perhaps in the 2020s-30s, when rapid implementation of urgent global measures becomes pressing or when democratic deficits and legitimacy emerge as volcanic public issues. Today's international system is dogged by its past: maybe it is a system unfit for purpose in the 21st Century.

Many nations do have an emotional or identity-based relevance to their inhabitants, but this is weakening in favour of regional or metropolitan allegiances and organisational realities. Formed by conflict, conquest, colonialism, marriage, elite manoeuvring, treaties and quirks of history, many nations are there simply because they are there. Socio-economic changes are bypassing customary power structures and we now approach a critical stage. The international system stumbles toward a reluctant redesign, developing a need to rearrange jurisdictions and to adjust to emerging *de facto* realities. This can threaten national elites, some social sectors and older generations, arousing sticky and complex tensions, trust and identity issues, yet it is unlikely to go away because of that.

Meanwhile, there is the matter of war. Warfare obstructs progress in most important issues. While explosions, damage and atrocities take place, international cooperation is weakened, humane values and sensitivities are hardened and nations feel insecure and defensive. But war, except for the narrow interests who gain from

it, is slowly losing its value as a means of handling tensions. Soft power is gaining traction, particularly because of trade relations, and through the game-changing agency of China with its geopolitical strategy of persuasion and economic dependency-building.

Relative to world population size, human losses in conflict are declining significantly – though, over the last century, deaths and injuries have shifted disastrously from mainly combatants to mainly non-combatant civilians. Meanwhile environmental, trade and infrastructural losses are escalating. As yet the UN has insufficient teeth to prevent conflicts and the onus rests on superpowers and regional powers to contain or stop them – and on the UN and the NGO sector to clean up the mess. Military methods clash with other global pressures and priorities – climatic, environmental, humanitarian and economic – and conflict-reduction is now no more a moral ideal, more a pragmatic global functionality issue.

Democracy and Social Control

We stand on the threshold of a weighty choice between the exercise of democratic people-power or high-tech, superintelligent mass-control systems run by unaccountable forces such as those in Silicon Valley. Democracy is preferable to most people, yet democratic maturity – a society's capacity over time to handle complex situations and make impartial, difficult decisions – is still weak. Government is an executive interface between the public and the powers-that-be – market-makers, financiers, oligarchs, establishment figures, moguls, mandarins and military-industrial interests. It tends to lean toward the powers that be, and democracy is limited to a periodic limited-choice vote that prevents the public from gaining true democratic experience. This deficit prepares the ground for technological control systems, over which the public feels it has little control.

Meanwhile, authoritarian control systems in which government and the powers-that-be are aligned, have their own shortfalls – it depends on who is in control, what their aims are, on their competence and whether they successfully maintain public acquiescence and read the times correctly. Instinctively people don't like mass-control systems, yet some authoritarian regimes do demonstrate that they can deliver results, think broadly, pursue longterm strategies and control the agenda – except, of course, when events overtake them. People-power meanwhile depends on social coherence, solidarity, maturity, pluralism, communication and a capacity to face big questions, achieve workable results and sometimes make sacrifices. The need to deal with large-scale problems thus tilts the world toward background control systems and authoritarian regimes.

The virtue and the curse of such control systems is that indeed they do control people and resources. This involves not just states but also corporations such as Alibaba, Tencent, Google, Amazon, Apple and Facebook, each of which generates so much money that they become significantly independent financial actors as well as controllers of data and artificial intelligence. We are creeping unwittingly toward a digital control system led by Silicon Valley, China, India, Russia and the 'Five Eyes' intelligence network (US, UK, Canada, Australia and NZ). Privacy, freedom and transparency are meanwhile issues that many people set aside for another day, and that day will come, probably in the 2020s-30s. Freedom is under threat, easily eroded, lost by public omission and commission. That loss is scooped up by algorithms and artificial intelligence. Ultimately the indifference or the consent of majorities will determine the direction of travel in this and many related arenas. The core issue is: *do people exist for the system* or *does the system exist for the people?* Does fear of chaos make us surrender to top-down control? How serious are we about freedom and democracy? Belatedly, these questions will rise up the agenda in coming decades.

Possible futures

If the world is to enter the 22nd Century in good shape, we need to look at the question of transition from a competitive toward a more cooperative model of global functioning, by resetting customary short-term self-interest to favour longterm human and environmental priorities. Unfolding events will oblige this and the urge to survive will increasingly drive it. There is also the tension of global-scale priorities and human-sized local concerns: how this contradiction plays out rests on unknowns such as the subjective decisions of leaderships and on social consent, acquiescence or resistance.

Geopolitics is by nature a large-scale issue, difficult for many people to encompass and participate in. But we are all involved and affected, and a number of geopolitical possibilities are worth contemplating since it helps us place the news we read into a wider context. Here is a review of foreseeable geopolitical scenarios for the coming decades:

Global integration. Unfolding events, strained resources, failing states, cross-border challenges, and environmental and economic crises could force the world to integrate further, strengthening international law and compliance while instituting UN reform and making binding multilateral agreements. Intensifying events could push things this way since friction and diplomatic failure or disintegration could be more painful. It would need good leadership, forward ideas and a few game-changing events to make it work, because globalisation has since 2008 lost much of its shine. Developing facts could oblige such a change, especially if the world economy deflates and climatic, environmental and other issues go critical. This would be an historic step.

Multipolarity. We are now in new territory: the relative subsidence of USA and the rise of China are reconfiguring things. Other nations might have to align with either power or with

another grouping. A binary superpower system is conceivable, though the balance of power would not last long since the longterm fundamentals of China's and USA's positions will continue changing in China's favour. Such a binary polarisation is likely to cause other powers, including Europe and India, to step up, creating a multipolar great power configuration. Multipolarity creates a kind of order though it subordinates most nations' needs to the sway of big powers. A substitute for global governance, its value depends on powers' priorities and agendas. Yet it does reduce the variability and complexity of competing geopolitical priorities and claims. Global power-projection is now increasingly expensive and troublesome – USA is, after all, the world's biggest debtor nation – and the capacity of big countries to sustain such policing power in future is debateable. So a multipolar configuration would be the next best option, in a big-power context.

Trilateralism. By the 2030s, China, Russia, Europe, the Middle East and possibly India could form a Eurasian bloc; the Americas could form a bloc – though Latin America has an historic distrust of USA; and Africa, more populous and developed than now, could form a third bloc. The most likely is the Eurasian bloc: China's Belt and Road project is advancing, building powerful economic and institutional alternatives to the former Western-dominated order. It would make Eurasia the world's dominant bloc. This would prompt a response from countries that are not involved – they would either become orbital to or resistant to Eurasian dominance. Much depends on China's capacity to maintain its friendships and on USA's capacity to avoid losing its own. The big question affecting the world's future is whether these blocs would be competitive or collaborative and whether any rivalry were soft-power or military based.

Continental blocs. To disperse global superpower primacy and deal with dysfunctional nations and continent-wide challenges,

new blocs or unions could arise in Latin America, MENA (Middle East and North Africa), SE Asia, Central Asia, Africa and South Asia, to complement China, USA, India and EU. It would represent a hard-headed response to multiple global challenges and to the insolvency or breakup of some states – poorer and indebted states and those experiencing legitimacy issues or domestic frictions. Such blocs could be constructive or problematic in balancing power, yet they are a logical solution and a way of creating a global balance of power.

Stalled Engines. There is a possibility of global downturn as major economic powers turn inward or lapse into wasteful superpower rivalry. Nations and regions retract into isolationism and trade and cooperation dwindle. Global issues remain stalemated or unaddressed. Conditions deteriorate, bringing about complex outcomes as the climate changes, food and supplies dwindle and insecurity and conflicts gain momentum. A global crisis resulting from this could lead to political corrosion and a sorry future, but also the experience of downturn and its consequences could later lead to a revival of international cooperation, configured differently from before.

Regions of order and chaos. Strong countries form coalitions to maintain trade and order and deal with those environmental, migration and conflict issues they're able to deal with, while letting uncontrollable areas drift. Megacity-regions could gain prominence as nodes of prosperity and order, even fortresses of stability. The poorest 'bottom billion' grows larger, some areas become zones of poverty or resistance and other areas come under criminal, militia, kleptocratic, political, religious, experimental or chaotic systems. Richer areas fend off threats from unstable regions while also depending on them for resources. Global issues struggle to progress. Trade and aid falter, migration and supply-line issues escalate. Environmental and economic conditions deteriorate, poverty and hardship increase and in some areas state

organisation collapses. The world becomes harder, more unstable and cruel, with mounting problems that defy resolution.

Breakdown and conflict. The world degenerates into conflict and insecurity with some 'fortress' countries and alliances holding firm, while shifting and deteriorating conditions pertain across much of the world. China, Russia and Europe or other combinations could form alliances while the rest of the world is tumultuous. The global agenda is hijacked by conflict, smuggling, black markets, opportunism and chaos. Trade and international law disintegrate. Many people have to fend for themselves, leading to some successes and many tragedies. Later, faced with a downward spiral of events and a weariness with insecurity, some areas could pull together and a movement could grow by late century for urgent global cooperation and revival.

Networked world. A tech-driven cultural shift emerges in the 2020s-30s, reflecting the sharing, collectivist, circular-economy values of Millennials and the growing involvement of artificial intelligence. Megacities, corporations, NGOs, non-state actors, ethnic and social groups bypass increasingly dysfunctional nations, governments and institutions. They form networks of pooled interest, seeking to resolve pressing global issues by innovative, doable means and through relatively informal crowd-supported initiatives. While posing difficulties, this flexible hyper-structure forms the basis of a new global order which evolves over a few decades. Majorities join in or acquiesce since this configuration delivers the goods in ways that nations failed to do.

Potential game-changers

While the above scenarios outline future global possibilities, the progression of geopolitical trends could be affected by critical black swan events such as the following, some of which, for better or worse, could profoundly affect the way things go.

- *Conflict or nuclear war* breaks out between USA and China or India and China, or between smaller flashpoint states such as Israel, Pakistan, Iran or North Korea;

- *Serious economic, ecological or technological crises, or a pandemic or mass migrations* could exert a critical pattern-shifting effect on the geopolitical landscape;

- *Influential leaders promoting conflict*, competition for resources, national exceptionalism and deterioration in international relations make things difficult for everybody;

- *Influential leaders with game-changing ideas*, exemplary moral standards, integrity and popular appeal shift the agenda progressively, engaging support, mobilisation and change;

- *A bottom-up consensus for change*, sparked by critical situations, poignant events or geopolitical gridlock, could arise from an alliance of small-to-medium nations;

- *Disasters, or several in succession, could shock the world* into adopting fundamentally new strategies through multilateral diplomacy;

- *Computer hackers or non-state actors cause a systems breakdown* or strategically threaten key systems unless certain positive objectives are met – this could be positive or negative;

- *Popular movements, political landslides, revolutions, migrations or shifts of public opinion* cause a change of mindset and consensus, obliging progressive or regressive change;

- *Artificial intelligence, digital technologies and control systems* bring about far-reaching changes. The first to develop AI could gain an overwhelming advantage.

Whatever becomes the case, events in the 2020s and 2030s will decide what happens around mid-century. Global issues could turn critical, leaning toward breakdown, grinding complications or systemic change and revival. Or a shift of values and culture could

change the geopolitical context, shifting the world agenda in a different direction from now. A clash of priorities between climatic-environmental-human issues and business-systemic-military interests lies before us. Critical to this will be the values and expressed choices of Millennials and particularly of women.

The current geopolitical framework of sovereign nations will come under test, prompted by relentlessly advancing trends in technology, development, political power, climatic, environmental and resource issues, disease, migration, demographic and economic change. At present, things could go in any direction. The coin is spinning in the air but the direction of travel might become clearer by the end of the 2020s or during the 2030s.

Much hangs around steps taken toward effective global-scale governance or cooperation, accompanied by a possible reorganisation of nations and local power. The alternative is some sort of breakdown and, on the whole, a difficult time planet-wide. The consent, participation and acquiescence of the public will be a critical factor, and an open question remains whether this is achieved through a ground-level public awareness and mobilisation or through a more coercive authoritarian system. Though issues such as nuclear arms, climate change, migration and pandemics are often noted as the top concerns for the coming time, socio-political developments could become even more critical than these.

Interesting links

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